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P U B L I C   E N E M I E S  
Transience, Lyric, and Sociality in American Poetry

By

Christopher Patrick Miller

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree of  
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English  
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Designated Emphasis in Critical Theory  
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Committee in Charge:

Professor C. D. Blanton (Chair)  
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ABSTRACT

Public Enemies: Transience, Lyric, and Sociality in American Poetry

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A shadowy double to infrastructure expansion, resettlement, and urban development, the "transient" has long been a contradictory figure of permission and repression in imaginations of America, be it as Emerson's idealized "being-in-transience," the romantic freedoms of the "hobohebian," or the criminalized "stranger." What *Public Enemies* argues is that a crucial genealogy of thinking about transience and its antagonistic relationship to existing concepts of democracy has been carried out in the most local, seemingly private of scenes: lyric encounters between an "I" and a "you." While Walt Whitman was the first to put serial pressure on the relation between transient persons and lyric formation, a long history of twentieth-century poetic interlocutors—Robert Frost, Hart Crane, George Oppen, Robert Creeley, and Amiri Baraka—adapt his experiments in transient speech acts to challenge normative conceptions of personhood, masculinity, affiliation, publicity, and national belonging. To understand the social character and content of lyric speech, *Public Enemies* situates current debates in literary formalism and lyric theory within political, juridical, sociological, and queer theoretical accounts of transience in America. In turn, the project reframes a trajectory of modernist and postmodern American lyric poetry as both a critical and complicit interlocutor in defining who or what counts as a member of a democratic whole.

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## INTRODUCTION: Transience and Democratic Culture

[Vagabonds] have not committed any crimes. But their 'way of life' places them in a state that supposed *eventual* violation of laws: vagabonds are always virtual, anticipatory.... Their existence in 'virtuality' or 'potentiality' of misdeed makes them more threatening... than the more predictable criminal. Vagabonds are victims of dangerous heredity and carriers of the fatal germ of *dégénérescence*; 'contagious,' in both the medical and social sense of the term, they are the incarnation of a social illness that strikes not so much an individual as a family, a generation, a lineage.

Kristin Ross, *Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune*<sup>1</sup>

When Kristin Ross refers to the vagabond as a virtual figure, she is characterizing not just the various instabilities—formal, experiential, epistemological—Rimbaud made synonymous with Western modernism. She is also echoing the juridical history of reading transient persons as potential criminals. Vagabonds, loiterers, panhandlers have been historically classed into a general category of malingerers judged not necessarily for crimes committed but what crimes they will likely commit based on their perceived "state of being." In short, I don't have to see you breaking into that car, I only need to see you loitering near it. Such "idle rogues" were condemned for failing to prove a "visible means of support"—perhaps the most consistent phrase across British poor laws and the American vagrancy statutes that were largely adapted from them—as if a transient person not only had to prove how they stood, in the present, but how they could continue to support themselves and, by implication, the presumed family or other lives who relied on their regular wages, productivity, and social standing. On the other side of this speculative mode of judgement is the fact of a rather risky life, a life lived in widening gaps between experience and appearance.

If we read back farther into the economic and literary pre-histories of American settlement, too, we can see that transients were problematic not just because of their epistemological instability but because they were more prevalent during times of socio-economic transition. In the first volume of *Das Kapital*, Marx noted how an enormous surge in vagrant populations occurred in early modern England during the shift from feudalism to a petty bourgeois economy, provoking the stringent application of poor laws in order to deal with a sudden excess of "free" yet placeless peoples:

The proletariat created by the breaking-up of the bands of feudal retainers and by the forcible expropriation of the people from the soil, this free and rightless proletariat could not possibly be absorbed by the nascent manufacturers as fast as it was thrown upon the world. On the other hand, these men, suddenly dragged from their accustomed mode of life, could not immediately adapt themselves to the discipline of

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<sup>1</sup> Kristin Ross, *Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 57. Aside from being one of the best monograph studies of Rimbaud, Kristin Ross's book is also pivotal in attempting to think through the relations between socio-historical imaginations, spatiality, and poetic form. Ross's analysis builds off the spatial experiments of the Situationist International as well as the spatial theory of Henri Lefebvre. See: *The Situationists and the City: A Reader*, ed. Tom McDonough (New York: Verso, 2010) and the Marxist phenomenology of Henri Lefebvre in *The Urban Revolution* [1970], trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) and *The Production of Space* [1974], trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991).

their new condition. They were turned *in massive quantities* into beggars, robbers, vagabonds, partly from inclination, in most cases under the force of circumstances. Hence at the end of the fifteenth and during the whole of the sixteenth centuries, a bloody legislation against vagabondage was enforced throughout Western Europe. The fathers of the present working class were chastised for their enforced transformation into vagabonds and paupers. Legislation treated them as 'voluntary' criminals, and assumed that it was entirely within their own powers to go on working under the old conditions which in fact no longer existed.<sup>2</sup>

What stands out in Marx's description is this language of disciplining vagrants as willful anachronisms. They were not just out of step with existing modes of production but concepts of freedom that defined social and physical mobility. Since the intimate relationship between peasants and the "soil" they cultivated and resided upon had been severed legislation had to be created in order to force the redistribution of labor power, to *produce* transience.

In rendering vagabondage as a matter of choice, poor laws also had the likely unintended effect of substantiating vagrancy as a rebellion against the rhythms of modern life. Vagabondage came to be seen as not just a fateful exclusion but a mode of resistance to abstract promises of freedom that didn't also address the material conditions in which freedom can be exercised, particular *with* others. Even the term used by such legislation to characterize the state of transience—vagabondage—presents a complicated picture of agency, as it raises the question of what is disciplining what. "Bondage" would suggest a subjection to some external power beyond one's control while the root, "vaga," comes from the latin *vagari*, meaning to wander or assume an indefinite shape or pattern (as in "vague"). A transient is, quite literally, hard to place. It is this perpetual placelessness that is occasionally reframed as a style of living or a physical permission to transgress the very limits that have led to their impoverishment or dislocation.

Where transients are particularly useful to readers of literature and historical records are for indexing moments or places where existing descriptions of a social order break down. In *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation* (1991), Richard Halpern keeps running up against such images in the form of "the local rogues' gallery" as he thinks together the logics of "primitive" accumulation with early modern British literary form. While vagabonds were treated as a worthy of charity in the Middle Ages, the public attitude shifted toward these "rogues" from moral responsibility to one of: "indifference, suspicion, or fear, and instead of being given charity they were frequently persecuted or punished. They became, in a sense, the quintessential 'other' of English society."<sup>3</sup> Echoing Marx, Halpern describes the swelling populations of the vagrant poor following the shift from feudalism to mercantile capitalism as an "exaggerated image of *modernity*" itself:

If merchant's capital brought about a primary decoding of late feudal production in order to recode it in the sphere of exchange, the vagrant poor represented an absolute decoding, the decisive separation of the producer from the means of production. The dispossessed classes thus had a strongly anticipatory force; by 'mirroring' the decoding effects of capital in a way that overstepped the structural limitations of late feudal production they became a precocious and nightmarishly exaggerated image of

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<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1990), 896.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Halpern, *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation: English Renaissance Culture and the Genealogy of Capital* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 73.

*modernity*. They were a kind of volatile fluid, coursing irregularly through the social body and visible everywhere in it, representing the possibility of a total and anarchic breakdown of the existing social mechanisms of order and control.<sup>4</sup>

What I take Halpern to be arguing is not just that transients embody the violence and instability of capitalist dispossession but that they make visible, through their idiosyncratic movements, the failure of these intensive pressures to reproduce the conditions for production. They are a waking nightmare in the sense that their illogical, untimely, or undisciplined presence seems to insist on the unevenness of the present and its tendency toward perpetual crisis.

For all his optimism and presumed intimacy with everyone, we might forget that Walt Whitman contains many such images of exaggerated modernity, folding his rogues gallery into poems that are as much about the local failures of America to realize its democratic principles as they are chants of their success. Willful rogues and anachronistic personalities are not only seeded into *Leaves of Grass* (1855–1892) through his life-long revisions but also his critical prose works, particularly *Democratic Vistas* (1872) in which his signature optimism is tempered by a sense that, following the Civil War, American democracy has reached a sort of crisis point of internal contradiction between its socio-cultural ideals and a politics that mostly enshrines the right to profit over another. However, the tramp, vagabond, and loiterer—all deviant positions Whitman voices—do not *add up* to a unified underclass or proletariat but rather insist on their episodic, provisional, and often limited agency: "You will hardly know who I am or what I mean." Key, too, is the following line, in which the value of this impasse is affirmed as the condition of social health: "Yet I will be good health to you nonetheless." Health is displaced from a well-being "I" possess, as an autonomous agent within a stable social order, to a condition fortified between persons, persons who remain opaque to, yet contingent upon, one another. In my chapter, I contrast Whitman's interrogation of the democratic potentials and limitations of lyric address with opening of Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Experience" (1844), in which Emerson, the American philosopher most often associated with an idealist take on the transience of "being" as such, posits a rather tenuous first-person plural pronoun: "Where do we find ourselves?" If Emerson's "we" and Whitman's "I/you" are dialectical images of American modernity, they too are exaggerated, flickering ones, evoking a tenuous form of democratic fluidity based upon constant impasses between atomized figures. The persona so often extrapolated from Whitman's notoriously jaunty disposition and emphatic declarations is, in the end, neither a positivistic nor self-identical concept but a wager that lyric speech can sustain a more open-ended yet intimate relationality among strangers.

Each of the writers that I engage pursue, in both direct and oblique ways, the formal and social consequences that follow from Whitman's self-announcement as a lyrical vagabond. What constitutes "transience" for this genealogy of lyric construction is two-fold. On the one hand, these poets engage with actual, historical experiences of transience, experiences which emerges out of both the immediate contexts through which such implacable lives are rationalized as well as the long political, cultural, and legal history of regulating transient bodies and communities. On the other hand, these poets abstract transience into a series of poetic figures, rhetorical tropes, philosophical concepts, and styles of speaking, each of which relate transience to broader conversations within European phenomenology and existentialism, American pragmatism, linguistic philosophy, aesthetics, and theories of democracy. Where these two threads—abstractions of transience and the actual experiences of transient life—come into a sort of intimate tension is within the particular formal constraints of lyric speech, figuration, grammar, and syntax. We will track how these discrete

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Halpern, 74–75.



moments within lyrics shift, slip, or open up as they are developed across a series of lyrics, lyrics which often thematize moments of encounter between transient persons. Concepts central to our understanding of democratic sociality—personhood, autonomy, social belonging, political agency—are placed under incredible stress in order to see the ways they bend or break.

Though Hart Crane is the obvious next step when thinking about Whitman's transient legacy in American modernism, I follow up my first chapter on Whitman's lyrical wagers with a chapter on perhaps the most famous and popular lyric poet in American in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century: Robert Frost. Long known as an arch-individualist and adopted Yankee, I argue that both Frost's rustic persona and the itinerant rural characters of his lyrics, focus on the verbal and social consequences of transience, particularly as they manifest within his early portraits of rural New England economies in *North of Boston* (1914) and *Mountain Interval* (1916). Frost associates what he sees as the necessary and inevitable trespassing of property boundaries with the "drift" of metaphor and the tension between sound and sense in a line of verse. I close with a reading of Frost's final public lecture at Dartmouth College, "On Extravagance," in which an uncanny reading of Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) becomes the occasion for re-describing the project of poetry as a refusal of equivalency in exchange and, fittingly, a waste of money.

In the next chapter, I look at what happens to transience when it is made into a series of gestures, both popular and hermetic, in perhaps the most biographically transient poet of American modernism: Hart Crane. Crane's gleans his notion of transience not only through his re-writing of Whitman and his own experience cruising public parks and ports but in his intimate dialogue with perhaps *the* icon of transient life in popular culture, Charlie Chaplin. In *White Buildings* (1926), Crane adapts Chaplin's haphazard portrayals of domestic economies, heterosexual bonds, and itinerant labor into a series of excessive figures and speech acts that convey what he jokingly describes to Malcolm Cowley as the experience of living on the brink of "intelligibility." I then put this preponderance of transient figures in Crane's in dialogue with contemporaneous portraits of transient persons in the urban sociology of Nels Anderson and Robert Ezra Park as well as more recent theoretical accounts of queer sociality. Crane's lyrics show us what happens when the unintelligibility of transient life is insisted upon, including the highly mediated forms of violemuddle one's sense of how one belongs to a place or addresses one life to another.

In the next two chapters, I track transience through works that bridge modernist poetics with postmodern lyrical forms and postwar American life. Because so much of the social and political history of transience is consolidated in techniques and judgments of self-presentation, I develop a brief genealogy of "sincerity" in Western thought and compare this to the paradigm shift initiated first by Ezra Pound's writings on Confucius and later adapted by "Objectivist" poets Louis Zukofsky and George Oppen, paying sustained attention to Oppen's lyrical examples and daybook writings. In their hands, sincerity shifts from a quality or performance of self-consistency through which "person" and "truth" are aligned to a more structural process in which personhood is made contingent upon the materials in which a life is crafted, invested, or, ultimately, in sustained tension with. Sincerity becomes a means to challenge liberal narratives of individual, social, and historical progress toward democratic transparency. Though there is no shortage of thematic references to transient experiences in Oppen's biography, it is in his jagged lyric syntax and diminished voicing—"crying havoc with a small voice"—where the personal consequences of displacement and alienation are rendered most acutely. In dialogue with theories of "publics," I close by arguing that we should read Oppen's mode of "sincerity" as itself a minor form of "publicity," one in which the rarefied "talk" of "a people" reflects how far postwar American democracy was from accommodating such unaccommodated lives.

The final chapter takes up Whitman's original lyrical proposition of bequeathing one transient life to another in terms of a literary historical situation, focalized in the 1965 Berkeley

Poetry Conference in particular and the “New American” poetry scene more generally. Occluded throughout this genealogy are voices that speak back, a sort of combative inversion of a “you,” to the projective verse and vistas of these poets. Though LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka was included in Donald Allen’s generation-defining anthology and the conference designed to celebrate its publication, his ultimate absence is illuminating not just for what the anthology tells us about the limits to New American experimentalism but also as an occasion for how we read forms of historical and social correspondence that are not premised upon mutual understanding but rather continuous antagonism toward concepts of both self and other. Adapting Edward Said’s notion of contrapuntal reading to a model of literary history and affiliation, I read a series of Baraka’s correspondences, early magazine projects, *Dutchman* (1964), and books (*The Dead Lecturer* (1964) and *Black Magic* (1969), *against* the poetics of Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer, and Robert Creeley. I look closest at home we might read Baraka’s very public, political lyrics about the racialization of black experience in relation to Creeley’s more sinuously staged, privative doubts about the success of lyrical communication. I end with a consideration of how each writer played with notions of “magic” as not just models for poetic practice but as a means for describing the kinds of transpersonal agency that could give their oppositional, transient speech a social form.

Before we construct this genealogy, it is useful to step back and gain a broader historical and cultural sense of why transient life might be perceived as both an engine of change and an enemy to public life. In the first instance, I will specify exactly what I mean by democratic culture and how transience intersects with American concepts of democracy. Second, I will situate the work of these poets within a broader history of representing and regulating transient lives in America, including the place of transience in American philosophical style. Lastly, I will consider how the modes and models of transient speech enacted by these poets intersect with notions of lyric form and sociality.

## Democratic Culture

At the end as at the beginning the democratic method is as fundamentally simple and as immensely difficult as is the energetic, unflagging unceasing creation of an ever-present new road upon which we can walk together.

John Dewey, *Freedom and Culture* (1939)<sup>5</sup>

Like transience, democracy seems to be that thing that is always promised yet never takes on an actual, discernible form. Both presume a rather amorphous idea of an agency that is, in large part, contingent on wherever or however it is expressed. Of course democracy, unlike transience, is first and foremost a political construct, which Hannah Arendt would remind us developed out of an Athenian emphasis on people (*demos*) freely addressing each other in the public sphere of the political (*polis*). To think of democracy in terms of literary cultural traditions and practices, where speech acts are mediated by literary forms, publication histories, and various degrees of critical reception, would seem to be a category mistake. It would seem to conflate two things political philosophy has long sought to keep distinct: politics and society. Sheldon Wolin has argued that following Hobbes’s rigorous delineation of the political as an artificial authority constructed for common rule, philosophers like Burke, Comte, and de Tocqueville sought to restore the “myriad of social authorities” and “private loyalties” that shored up this more abstract authority governing

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<sup>5</sup> John Dewey, *Freedom and Culture* [1939] (New York: Capricorn Books, 1963), 176.

"publicly significant behavior."<sup>6</sup> In order to understand why people subscribe to or participate in certain notions of political authority in the face of radical political changes, including the French and American revolutions, they analyzed the "complex of non-rational 'prejudices' which disposed men towards obedience and subordination."<sup>7</sup> Burke developed his notion of the sublime out of metaphors that conflated affective life and political institutionality. However, within the tradition of liberalism that extended from Locke and into the English Utilitarians, society became a "shorthand symbol of all worthwhile human endeavor," encompassing everything that was not a more narrow notion of the political, now called "government," vested with the "coercion necessary to sustain orderly social transactions."<sup>8</sup> Our contemporary sense of democracy as a political process remains caught between these two directives: to think of social life as everything government is not but also to think of government as an extension of our social and emotional lives. To think of democracy as, in part, a cultural process, is to think not only of the emotional relations that shape our sense of a rule of law and political authority, but also to think of how techniques of representation can directly engage the limits of political coercion. This includes defining forms of "publicly significant behavior" that do not yet have a public to belong to.

Jurgen Habermas, in his history of the bourgeois public sphere, relegates literary discourse to a pre-public position, in that it imagines forms of political speech and association that hypothetically could generate new conditions out of which actually public discourse emerges. Following Habermas to the letter would mean that no poem, or literary journal, could be considered meaningfully public since both would lack the liveness of sustained debate that enables consensus to form. But perhaps the most famous outside observer of American democracy in its incipience, Alexis de Tocqueville, gives us another way to conceive of the relation between democracy and culture. For one, de Tocqueville described *Democracy in America* (1835) as both a social condition and a political "civilization" that, ideally, combine to generate an active citizenry that dictated the present and future of public life. The constitution served as a textual intermediary between an active citizenry and balanced legislative process.

What de Tocqueville feared, Sheldon Wolin has noted, is that society would be "overdemocratized" and that a majority would level distinctions "of status, wealth, and merit and impose uniformity of opinions."<sup>9</sup> Mass objectification of "public opinion" might limit "the public" to a merely reactionary construction to be mobilized by politicians and oligarchs alike, a crisis that Kierkegaard would chart in *The Present Age* (1876) and Freud would later pick up in *Group Psychology* (1920). American journalist and social critic Walter Lippman, in his caustic assessment of public discourse in American, *Public Opinion* (1922), coined the term "manufacture of consent" to describe the process by which a private interest uses strategies of censorship, propaganda, advertising, and political gerrymandering to disguise its self-serving projects as necessities for the public good. Shared across these disparate critiques of existing democracy is a notion that aesthetic representation is a vehicle through which not only a "public" is figured but also mobilized for specific ends. We are cultured in democratic life, in the sense that we communicate its principles by way of a history of its representations, its failures, and its successes.

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<sup>6</sup> Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 259–260.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>9</sup> Sheldon S. Wolin, *The Presence of the Past: Essays on the State and the Constitution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 78.

That de Tocqueville declared his project—ostensibly a study of the American penal system to fuel comparisons with French and other European models—to be a description of "the shape of democracy itself" is telling, as is his stated ambition to conceptualize this "new science" by way of illustrating the "inclinations, character, prejudices, and passions." In short, his work required a literary imagination.<sup>10</sup> It is also this turn towards the embodied forms of political participation that led de Tocqueville and others to naturalize social and political conditions, as if ideology were an extension of the geography and climate of the continent. Wolin notes how American politics were "natural rather than historical" for de Tocqueville because ideas of "civil association" were being imposed upon a land "without limits or boundaries and innocent of past inequities"—an ideological assumption as substantive and consequential as the "state of nature" thesis of social contract theory.<sup>11</sup> But this "naturalist" politics was attractive to de Tocqueville in part because he felt detached from European aristocracy and the nascent Republicanism of France. It was his lack "family or personal interest" in America, Wolin explains, that gave him a "natural and necessary affection toward democracy."<sup>12</sup> The experiment in social and political life America was undertaking seemed to be premised upon this impersonal, non-familial form of engagement whereby affiliations and affections can be remade on terms other than class, status, or creed—with the contradictions of slavery and eradication of the native population outstanding.

When Thomas Jefferson made his case for the robust moral, legal, economic, and political life in Virginia to the French delegate of Philadelphia in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1783), he made it by way of a series of naturalistic descriptions of climate, geography, and resources from which a historically unmoored people would take their resolute and idiosyncratic character. It was the expansive and diverse landscape that would guarantee the success of a transient "demos"—a "demos" based on rigorous delineations between pious settlers and nomadic aboriginals, slave trade entrepreneurs and chattel. Virtuous transient figures were formed against a dehumanized, naturalized background of structural violence and displacement, a dynamic that would resurface, uncannily, in the selective romances of American "frontiers" for the next two centuries. Pivotal texts in fleshing out the national imaginary of America, Perry Miller's *Errand into the Wilderness* (1956), Sacvan Bercovitch's *The American Jeremiad* (1978), Myra Jehlen's *American Incarnation: The Individual, the Nation, and the Continent* (1986), have long pointed to the dialectic between the geographical affordances of a so-called "wilderness" and representations of American character as both resolutely placed and exceptionally forward-thinking.<sup>13</sup> Puritan settlers envisioned their errant struggles as a sort of earthly pilgrimage of divine purpose, a purpose realized through wandering and displacement. It is hard, too, to miss the historical irony of the fact that many of the American

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<sup>10</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 19.

<sup>11</sup> *Presence of the Past*, 75.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>13</sup> Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1956); Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1978); and Myra Jehlen, *American Incarnation: The Individual, the Nation, and the Continent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986). Each of these texts links religious, political, and geographical versions of transience to "foundational" American concepts of individuality and nationhood. For a more recent analysis of the psychological and media techniques for organizing "wayward" individuals around normative concepts of being "American," see Lauren Berlant, *Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

“pilgrims” were in fact vagrants who had been deported by Britain to the colonies. Texts by poet-critics like William Carlos Williams *In the American Grain* (1925) and Charles Olson's *Call Me Ishmael* (1947) turn this mythical relation between land and life on its head.<sup>14</sup> Williams in particular responds to what he perceives to be a sort of foundational fear of Puritan ideology to concepts of wildness or wilderness, which he sees as an inversion of their own sense of homelessness and displacement. Laws of property based on proof of settlement and more staid forms of agricultural cultivation are, for Williams, a reflection of this residual Puritanical fear of transience. Olson notes how this shift was made in part by dissociation between temporal and spatial history, enabling Americans to identify with a freedom that entailed a pure extension in “SPACE”—even while it was tied to the earthly durations of colonialism and capital accumulation:

I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy. It is geography at bottom, a hell of wide land from the beginning. That made the first American story (Parkman's): exploration... Some men ride on such space, others have to fasten themselves like a tent stake to survive.<sup>15</sup>

By referring to the social life of democracy, I aim to describe a series of social practices that are not reducible to political analogies or strictly ideological formations. In a study that follows a similar chronological trajectory as my own, *American Experimental Poetry & Democratic Thought* (2009), Alan Marshall provides a compelling re-reading of American poetry in terms of a “visionary history” of democratic sociality. Whitman in particular offers Marshall with a counter to de Tocqueville's insistence on aristocratic hierarchy and his fear of everyone being seen as the same. Visibility and fluidity of encounter is precisely what curtails the diversity and historical agency de Tocqueville reserves for God's unifying perception. But his contradictory reliance on visual metaphors as both the failures of democratic relation and the enabler of self-understanding produces what Marshall calls his core methodological contradiction: “Tocqueville conceives of conceiving, of knowing and understanding, thinks of what we generally call epistemology, in predominantly visual terms. In other words he trusts his own eye while doubting the eye of democracy.”<sup>16</sup> Whitman's vision, on the contrary, treats others as they literally appear—strange, aberrant, generously opaque—while at the same time acknowledging how we diverge or differ from our appearances. This flexibility not only challenges the determinism of landscape or political order for national character but it also restores a notion of mediation to being a social person, particularly as our sociality is constructed in language.

One of the principle intersections between transience and democratic imagination is that it literalizes, on the level of figuration and social interaction, an ongoing, fundamental struggle to define freedom against existing forms of injustice or enslavement. In this line of thinking, Hannah

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<sup>14</sup> William Carlos Williams, *In the American Grain* (New York: New Directions, 1925). For another poet-critic's take on how transience, geographic imagination, and national ideology are intertwined in American literatures, see Susan Howe's *The Birth-mark: unsettling the wilderness in American literary history* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1993).

<sup>15</sup> Charles Olson, *Call Me Ishmael* (New York: Grove Press, 1947) included in *Collected Prose of Charles Olson*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 17.

<sup>16</sup> Alan Marshall, *American Experimental Poetry & Democratic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 23.

Arendt cites the formation of Athenian "democracy" against the backdrop of the Athenian slave trade and reproductive work of women, divorcing political ideas from labor and the fulfillment of biological necessity.<sup>17</sup> In her critique of concepts of freedom within the liberal democratic tradition, Wendy Brown notes how figurations of freedom are often made in reaction to "perceived injuries" from "immediate enemies," particularly those who would threaten the abstract sanctity of property and personhood. Property and personhood thus gain an abstract equality through their ontological separation from the social life in which politics is practiced. Brown notes how these defensive images of freedom perform a strange sympathetic operation, where they mirror suffering:

Consider exploited workers who dream of a world in which work has been abolished, blacks who imagine a world without whites, feminists who fantasize a world without parents. Such images of freedom perform mirror reversals of suffering without transforming the *organization of the activity through which the suffering is produced* and without addressing the *subject constitution that domination effects*, that is, the constitution of the social categories, 'workers,' 'blacks,' 'women,' or 'teenagers.'<sup>18</sup>

This cuts both ways, too, as efforts to redress for injuries related to social subordination end up individuating persons by marking them with the very "attributes or behaviors: race, sexuality, and so forth"—that enable their discrimination. The sustained poverty of transience is punished, in moral and legal terms, by making individuals responsible for structural forms of dispossession, disenfranchisement, and inequity. The hobo tries to play both sides of this problem, at once satirizing the pejorative markings of over-work, marginalization, and displacement while also perpetuating the forms of social, racial, and sexual hierarchies that produce the transient as a normative category in the first place.

What democratic subcultures of transience seek to imagine, then, is a certain bearing towards these mandates of identity formation and economic exchange that guarantee freedom from "our" enemies when, in practice, they serve as bulwarks to a more provisional, fluid, and self-critical relation to one's autonomy. And even while democracy offers theaters for collective identification, say with other forms of marginal life, there are also reasons for resisting the very logic of collective identification. Writing on Melville's *The Confidence-Man* (1857), itself a narrative of a transient community of river passengers on a boat going down the Mississippi, Jennifer Grieman notes how Melville tried to imagine a collection of strangers that remained irreducible to each other—"strangers still more strange." By increasing both the character and range of being strange to each other, the novel's ensemble of "charity" cases—the narrative is driven in large part by a series of damaged or disabled bodies begging for assistance—comes to seem like an odd or extreme version of democratic life where "the strangeness of a whole to itself... arises from the endless and unanticipated entry of new parts." The experience of being a stranger becomes a part of the form "as the text propagates a strangeness in and through each chapter, [and] what it imagines through its

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<sup>17</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998), 6.

<sup>18</sup> Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 7. Brown argues for a "postindividualist" theory of freedom that doesn't rely upon liberal identification as the means for both empathy and emancipation but rather a more relational sense of right that not only depends on the political and historical context in which it is enacted also the more immediate social context formed between people, whether they understand themselves to be a part of a common community or not. (Brown, 8–18).

own aesthetic practice is nothing less than an ethics and a politics of living plurally.”<sup>19</sup> Such a representation of democratic life is not premised on self-similarity or even self-consistency, but rather a ceding of confidence to the speculative character of such an amorphous public.

### Transience in the American Grain

One of the foundational gaps that makes the culture of transience in America distinct from its feudal European precedents, particularly in Britain, is the absence of a political-economic concept of “the commons.”<sup>20</sup> Celeste Langan, in *Romantic Vagrancy: Wordsworth and the Simulation of Freedom* (1995), makes a persuasive case for how Romantic British literature constructed its representations of “vagrancy” and concepts of individual freedom against the political and economic background of land enclosure, husbandry, and migrant work.<sup>21</sup> With early American settlers, the colonial endeavor was a way to reinvent conceptions of citizenship and landscape within a nativity they projected into or onto the Native American communities and cultures they encountered.<sup>22</sup> The Puritanical settlers in particular, on a sort of self-described Jeremiad, saw their earthly trial of wandering and displacement as a physical realization of divine purpose.<sup>23</sup> Vagabondage was reframed as a

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<sup>19</sup> Jennifer Grieman, *Democracy's Spectacle: Sovereignty and Public Life in Antebellum American Writing* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 192–223.

<sup>20</sup> For a history of struggles over common land in England during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries largely simultaneous to the management of the American colonies, J. M. Neeson, *Commoners: common right, enclosure and social change in England, 1700-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). For a now canonical essay about “the commons” as an ecological concept, see Garrett Hardin’s “The Tragedy of the Commons,” *Science* 162, Issue 3859 (December 1968), 1243–48. Much recent ecocritical work has built off Hardin’s notion of “the commons” to characterize how structural problems like climate change and famine lead to large-scale displacement of peoples, producing waves of transient, refugee populations at a global scale.

<sup>21</sup> Celeste Langan, *Romantic Vagrancy: Wordsworth and the Simulation of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). See also *Rogues and Early Modern English Culture*, eds. Craig Dionne and Steve Mentz (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2004).

<sup>22</sup> For a 19<sup>th</sup>-century account of British deportation of “vagabonds,” see J. D. Butler “British Convicts Shipped to American Colonies,” *The American Historical Review* 2, No. 1 (October 1896), 12–33. For a more contemporary history of this colonial phenomenon, see J. M. Beattie, *Crime and the Courts in England 1660–1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) and Ekirch, A. Roger, *Bound for America. The transportation of British convicts to the colonies, 1718–1775* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>23</sup> One could compare these New England biblical narratives to the frequent racialized and patriarchal fears of colonists from England, Spain, and France about European colonists disappearing into mixed racial company. See Ann Marie Plane, *Colonial Intimacies: Indian Marriage in Early New England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000); Julianna Barr, *Peace Came in the Form of a Woman: Indians and Spaniards in the Texas Borderlands* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Sharon Block (*Rape and Sexual Power in Early America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), Jennifer M. Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order in Early New Orleans* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

pilgrimage for religious and political freedom, albeit rooted in the settlement project of building homesteads, fortified towns, and agricultural systems that would put an end to the wilderness errand. But there was deep historical irony in this situation, too, as many of these "pilgrims" were in fact chronic violators of British vagrancy and poor laws who had been deported to the American colonies.

In James Russell Lowell's *Fireside Travels* (1864), he distinguishes American from European "characters" by citing the lack of a "cumulative" influence of "climate, scenery, and associations of several generations." This serial, restive "character" is a consequence, Lowell claims, of a continuous and almost compulsive need for "change of place" who not only roams in space but "leaves faith and opinions with as much indifference as the house in which he lives."<sup>24</sup> American's are nomadic, all the way down. This narrative produces one of the most familiar tropes in the literature of transience, as Lowell links this nomadism to a lingering American sense that one is always escaping or moving on from a past crime:

Now-a-days men are shy of letting their true selves be seen, as if in some former life they had committed a crime, and were all the time afraid of discovery and arrest in this. Formerly they used to insist on your giving the wall to their peculiarities, and you may still find examples of it in the parson or the doctor of retired villages.<sup>25</sup>

To say that transience is an instinctive result to some history of concealment or crime plays into a broader political narrative, one that carries into the twentieth century, that a functional economy and social order is based upon full transparency of intention and deed, modeled paradigmatically by Thomas Paine's plainness of speech (and parodied by Frost's rural commonplaces). Such plainness is impossible, the narrative goes, when one is moving around at the shifty borders of public life. There is no way to be truly sincere or achieve a moral correspondence between "truth" and "self," a correspondence rooted ultimately in a rigorous separation of public life and private virtue that has served as a theoretical cornerstone for the development of the built landscape, cultural production, and political discourse in America. But such theoretical separations break down in practice when economic imperatives for constant growth scatter peoples and places along networks of mines, railways, and highways, consolidating capital while generating marginal or provisional forms of life.

Historians such as Peter Rossi, Kenneth L. Kusmer, and Todd DePastino have documented the place of transient persons within "labor crises" of the early 1900s and the Great Depression as well as the more spectacular demonstrations of large-scale marches by veterans and underemployed workers on Washington.<sup>26</sup> Two notable demonstrations were the national migration and convergence of two groups made up by "General" Charles T. Kelley's rail-hopping "Industrial Army" and the *Army of the Commonwealth in Christ* led by Knights of Labor organizer and Ohio businessman, John Coxey in order to petition, in person, for unemployment relief and economic

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<sup>24</sup> James Russell Lowell, *Fireside Travels* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1864), 96–97.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 82–83.

<sup>26</sup> Peter Rossi, *Down and Out in America: The Origins of Homelessness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Kenneth Kusmer, *Down and Out, On the Road: The Homeless in American History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Though each of these texts have been pivotal in my historical understanding of transience in America, I am indebted most to Todd DePastino's historiographic method which combines cultural, political, and sociological approaches to analyze both the self-presentation of transient persons and the constitution of transient communities.



reform to address inequality in 1894. After Congress decided in 1924 to delay payment of service for veterans of WWI, which aggravated existing poverty and underemployment, a “Bonus Army” and march on Washington was planned in 1932 by a range of veteran organizations to claim these wages. The march gathered a number of sympathetic marchers along the way, settling ultimately into sustained occupation and encampment on the National Mall that was watched closely by many leftist commentators, like John Dos Passos (who traveled to Washington to document the campground for the *New Republic*). Though the left found frustration in the lack of connection between the veteran’s grievance and a more revolutionary political consciousness, the administration of Franklin Roosevelt grew frustrated with the public optics of a ragged army on America’s symbolic doorstep and dispatched officials from his Temporary Relief Administration, including the hobocum-sociologist Nels Anderson. On July 28<sup>th</sup>, General Douglas MacArthur, assisted by Major Dwight D. Eisenhower, took matters into his own hands and raided the camp with guns, tear gas, and tanks. An image of the encounter between armed police, national guard troops, and these veteran tramps appeared the next day on the cover of the *New York Times*. Three weeks later, Roosevelt was inaugurated, and almost a year later he would start the one and only “Transient Program” as part of the New Deal Agency, Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA).

As personal wealth increased in the early twentieth-century, transience was not just figured as a vice but also a virtue of middle-class autonomy and consumer spending power, represented most enduringly as the automobile tourist. In his book on automobile touring, *Americans on the Road* (1981), William James Balasco notes how popular travel literature of the time cashed in on the allure of self-sufficient aimlessness to sell cars and camp admissions, a practice that continues today. A July 20, 1922 piece in *The New York Times*, called “Two weeks’ Vagabonds,” uses Thoreau as the epic guide for this romantic vision: “You are your own master, the road is ahead; you eat as you please, cooking your own meals over an open fire; sleeping when you will under the stars, waking with the dawn... and always the road ahead. Thoreau at 29 cents a gallon.”<sup>27</sup> One finds a similar spirit in the emphatically permissive road poetics of Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957), a book as much dedicated the spirit of free movement as a public responsibility (and as a form of national “defense”) in the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 as it was to Kerouac’s fusing of Eastern spiritualism with bohemian individualism.<sup>28</sup> The principle protagonists—ironically named Sal Paradise Dean Moriarty—project a sort of bohemian, nomadic homosociality as both a self-invention and a worldview. Transient life, for them, was an exercise in radical honesty and the ethics of non-attachment, as they associated the forms of social conformity, commercialism, and spiritual foreclosure they rejected with trying to hold on to a particular home or human relationship (even if the two sides of their legendary coin—fantasies of asceticism and drunken escapades—always required distant benefactors). Their notions of generosity are as general as they are determined by their whiteness and maleness, a fact made evident by just about every encounter with forms of

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<sup>27</sup> Warren James Belasco, *America on the Road: From Autocamp to Motel, 1910–1945* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 8.

<sup>28</sup> Another name for the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956, signed into law by Eisenhower, was the “Interstate and Defense Highways Act.” A portion of the bill’s \$25 billion price tag was covered by defense spending, in large part because it connected military facilities to public thoroughfares. For a recent take on Kerouac and infrastructure development, see: Jason Vredenburg, “‘Solitary Bartleby’s’: Kerouac’s *On the Road* and the Ideology of the Super Highway,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 62, no. 2 (June 2016), 170-196.

gender, cultural, or racial difference.<sup>29</sup> The landscape of Mexico, as well as the Mexican migrant labor communities of Southern California, exist merely as romantic foils, just like the women in the narrative are treated more as silent props only present to nurse them in their physical dissolution or boredom. In *Guys Like Us: Citing Cold War Masculinity* (2004), Michael Davidson notes how such Beat fantasies of a sort of new age homelessness was regularly shored up by an ability to traffic in cultural, racial, and geographic otherness.<sup>30</sup> Today we similar yet nostalgic versions of this relation to individual permission and otherness in the steam-punk youth culture of train-hopping.

There was also an extensive legal and social scientific apparatus built up around transience that enabled authorities to sort profitable forms of individual autonomy and mobility from those who refused to participate in a wage labor system, repay their debts, route their desires through consumption, or foster (hetero)normative relations to one's home, family, or property. In an article printed in 1929 in *Social Science* by Intui Layman, "The Birth of the Hobo," he differentiates the temporary wanderers from the "veteran tramps" who come from a "mentally deficient" class. Inevitably, the "wanderlust" of the temporary wanderers cools off and some "return home, others may fall in love and marry, become tired of roaming the country, seek a steady job and establish a home somewhere."<sup>31</sup> Perpetual malingerers were not just deemed failures to themselves but classed capaciously as "public enemies," as we see in the New York State Legal Code formalized in 1838 (which endured as a legal context for Whitman's, Crane's, and Oppen's New York). Its definition of "rogues and vagabonds" is adapted explicitly from an English 1597 law designed to prevent the wandering of "persons and common laborers, able in body and refusing to work for the wages commonly given." In 1824, British common law extended the definition of vagrancy in this statute to include "offenses against public decency and acts which while not criminal, nevertheless verged on criminality." This included:

Every suspected person or reputed thief, frequenting any river, canal, or navigable stream, dock, or basin, or any quay, wharf, or warehouse near or adjoining thereto, or any street, highway or avenue leading thereto, or any place of public resort, or any avenue leading thereto or any street with intent to commit felony. (Act 5, Geo. 4, c. 83)<sup>32</sup>

During the 1870s, this definition was again expanded to include any person who associated with those populations deemed to be habitual criminals, such as prostitutes, gamblers, common drunkards, beggars, or reputed thieves. A "good reputation" was intimately associated with lawful

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<sup>29</sup> For an astute reading of the "white nomad" figure in Kerouac, see Victoria A. Elmwood, "The White Nomad and the New Masculine Family in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*," *Western American Literature* 42, No. 4 (Winter 2008), 335–61. For essays on the role of racial otherness, the highway system, and auto-eroticism, see *What's your road, man?: Critical Essays on Jack Kerouac's On the Road*, ed. Hillary Holladay and Robert Holton (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 2009).

<sup>30</sup> Michael Davidson, *Guys like Us: Citing Masculinity in Cold War Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2004), 90–93.

<sup>31</sup> Intui Layman, "The Birth of the Hobo," *Social Science* 5, No. 1 (December, 1929), 30–35.

<sup>32</sup> See: "A Public Enemy Law for New York" in *State of New York: Report of the Law Revision Commission* (Albany: J. B. Lyon Company, 1935), 593. For a discussion of the constitutionality of the New York vagrancy statute, see "The New York Public Enemy Act," *Columbia Law Review* 35, No. 8 (December, 1935), pp. 1292-1303.

behavior (612). Consistent across British and American iterations of such statutory language is also a perceived discrepancy, presumably by a police officer or judge, between an "able-body" and the unwillingness to apply said body to "regular employment" (594). Reputation and ableness also equated to the more general assumption that transience was an exclusive disfunction, as in an Ohio vagrancy statute that came up in the case of *Ex parte Smith* (1912): "Whoever, being a male person able to perform manual labor, has not made reasonable effort to procure employment or has refused to labor at reasonable prices is a vagrant" (596). This "male person" was ultimately penalized for shirking his responsibility to the family he is assumed to have.

Contrary to these moralistic classifications, the vast majority of vagabonds were not perpetual trampers but in fact temporary poor. Remarking on the pattern of recidivism in transient populations during the 1970s and 1980s in *Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America* (2003), Todd DePastino writes:

90 percent of those migrants who applied for public aid in New York State in 1974–75 had been on the road for less than one month. Fewer than 5 percent of police station lodgers surveyed in 1891–92 had been tramping for more than one year. Vagrancy arrest records from the period reveal low rates of recidivism, with three-quarters of incarcerated vagrants having committed no previous offense.<sup>33</sup>

Though state courts would regularly find aspects of vagrancy statutes to be unconstitutional, it was not until the Supreme Court case of *Papachristou vs. City of Jacksonville* (1972) that a state vagrancy law was evaluated on a federal basis and declared unconstitutional. Writing the opinion, Justice William O. Douglas declared the law void for "vagueness" and for its failure "to give a person of ordinary intelligence fair notice that his contemplated conduct is forbidden by the statute."<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, vestiges of the statutory language remain in many state and municipal codes that sanction loitering, panhandling, or disorderly conduct, often with the explicit purpose of preserving the free movement of goods and consumers.<sup>35</sup> Recently in California, political protestors have been arrested during demonstrations and charged under a derivative statute of a panhandling statute, 647(c), originally created to bar panhandlers from accosting passers-by or blocking public thoroughfares. Similarly, "Sit and Lie" ordinances and "Stop and Frisk," on the books in multiple US municipalities, show how deeply connected everyday policing procedures are with reserving the "public" as a space for the visibly "able" or upwardly mobile to move, and spend, freely.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Todd DePastino, *Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 15.

<sup>34</sup> *Papachristou vs. City of Jacksonville* 405 U.S. 156 (1972). Both a summary of the case, a record of the opinion, and a list of relevant precedents can be accessed at: <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/405/156/case.html>

<sup>35</sup> For an extensive discussion of the history and constitutionality of 647(c) statute, see: Darryl C. Delmonico, "Aggressive Panhandling Legislation and the Constitution: Evisceration of Fundamental Rights-Or Valid Restrictions Upon Offensive Conduct?" *Hasting Constitutional Law Quarterly* 23, Vol. 557 (1995–1996) 558–590.

<sup>36</sup> A version of state codes criminalizing panhandling, "Sit and Lie" ordinances have been passed by many US municipalities and exist in practice as a way to keep unwanted persons in motion, particularly in commercial districts, as they make it illegal to remain in a sidewalk for an extended amount of time during regular business hours. For a recent study of such laws, see: *Homes Not*

Though my generic focus will be on lyric, an equally varied and companionable genealogy of transient "subjects" exists in American naturalist and realist fiction as well as non-fictional travel writing.<sup>37</sup> One can look to examples in the work of Jack London, Vachel Lindsay, James Weldon Johnson, Djuna Barnes, Willa Cather, John Dos Passos, John Steinbeck, Nelson Algren, Richard Wright, James Agee, among many others. In 1904, Jack London (who would spend a brief stint as a member of General Kelly's "tramp army" march on Washington) published a brief study of "The Tramp" as a pamphlet for Wilshire's Magazine in New York City. London responds to what he takes to be a specious claim by the General Superintendent of Police in Chicago, Francis O'Neill that "Despite the most stringent police regulations, a great city will have a certain number of homeless vagrants to shelter through the winter." He advances a fairly straightforward Marxist critique of O'Neill's "organized helplessness as against the unorganized necessity," describing this chronic homelessness as in fact a necessary "surplus labor army." The tramp crisis is ongoing, in other words, because those who own the means of production *need* them to exist in order to fill occasional jobs, replace striking workers, and keep wages down. Wage work was unequivocally associated with masculine "strength" and virility for London, as it was for the I.W.W. who organized in transient labor camps and hobo jungles.

In sorting through members of this "surplus army," London ironically inhabits the discourse of the industrialist in order to distinguish the willful "tramp" from the leagues of "mediocre" workers and criminals that bosses have deemed both intellectually and physically "unfit" to work (despite their clear necessity for, and desire to, work). In choosing the "self-eliminating" fate of the "road," the "tramp" is in fact a modest solution to this vast "waste of human life," more merciful than "Chloroform or electrocution."<sup>38</sup> London writes:

And so the tramp becomes self-eliminating. And not only self! Since he is manifestly unfit for things as they are, and since kind is prone to beget kind, it is necessary that his kind cease with him, that his progeny shall not be, that he play the eunuch's part in this twentieth century after Christ. And he plays he it. He does not breed. Sterility is

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*Handcuffs: The Criminalization of Homeless in U. S. Cities* (Washington, DC: The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty). One could also make the argument that the racialization and subsequent repression of transience has also played a role in the uneven access to housing, formalized in the Federal Housing Authorities practice of "red lining" (denying mortgages based on race or ethnicity). For a history of racialized access to real estate and its long-term effects on education and familial wealth, see James Loewen's *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism* (New York: Touchstone, 2006). For a study of the perception and repression of disabled bodies and their place within concepts of publics, see Sue Schweik's *Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

<sup>37</sup> For a recent literary monograph that provides a good overview of transience in American fiction, particularly around the politicization of the hobo figure, see John Lennon, *Boxcar Politics: The hobo in U.S. culture and literature, 1869–1956* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014).

<sup>38</sup> Jack London, *The Tramp* (New York: Wilshire's Magazine, 1904). The pamphlet was issued without pagination. London reprinted another study of tramps, called "Road kids and gay cats," in the London-based journal of the same name, *The Tramp: [an open air magazine]*, edited by Douglas Goldring, published between 1910 and 1911. Goldring's journal also contained work on "open air" types by Wyndham Lewis, T. W. Thompson, and John Freeman.

his portion, as it is the portion of the woman on the street. They might have been mates, but society has decreed otherwise.

Nested in this satirical, Swift-like proposal to let the tramp cancel himself is a deeper link the transient may challenge between the "working" body and hetero-normative versions of sexual and social reproduction that queer writers and theorists continue to challenge. Work, for London and other socialist organizers at the time, should restore one's *masculine* dignity, a dignity shored up by both a domestication of sexuality as well as an explicit or implicit protection of women from the promiscuous and predatory public sphere.

Contrary to this white masculinist vision, Willa Cather presents readers of *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* with folk immigrant matriarchs in the prairies who navigate male anxieties about being out of place and time while also seeking agency, power, and autonomy within homesteading immigrant communities.<sup>39</sup> Transience is not associated with female sexual work, nor is it symptomized as a moral failure. Rather it is valued, as Christopher Nealon has suggested, as a capacity to construct alternate histories of and futures for America, however modest and understated.<sup>40</sup> In the 1906 statement from the Niagara Movement, a collection of "Fifty-nine colored men from seventeen different states" that included W. E. B. Du Bois, one finds a resolution written Du Bois that uncannily echoes the style and message of Whitman's strange travelers, albeit written as a direct response to Jim Crow policies and segregation of public transportation: "We claim the right of freeman to walk, talk, and be with them that wish to be with us. No man has a right to choose another man's friends."<sup>41</sup> Transience also plays a crucial role in narratives that experiment with how racial and ethnic "passing" or cultural displacement manifest through narration, dialogue, and character construction. One finds such experiments in texts like James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, and Jean Toomer's *Cane*, each of which the stability of gendered and racialized "persons" we use to anchor our conceptions of identity, social belonging, or utterance within broader cultural frameworks—the same conceptions that often inform our practices of lyric reading.

## Untimely Subjects

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the inability to secure a proper place within a social order was codified as a pathology or genetic deficiency that, frequently, intersected with biological narratives about race and "natural" social hierarchies. Charles Davenport, the American eugenicist, was particularly obsessed with what he took to be the hereditary sources of "Nomadism, or the Wandering Impulse." In his official report on this hereditary condition, Davenport borrows much of the European discourse around a condition generally characterized as an "ambulatory

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<sup>39</sup> Willa Cather's "Great Plains trilogy" includes *O Pioneers!* (1913), *Song of the Lark* (1915), and *My Antonia* (1918), all published with Houghton Mifflin. For a study of Cather's work in terms of American imaginations of transience, see Joseph Urgo's *Willa Cather and the Myths of American Migration* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois, 1995).

<sup>40</sup> Christopher Nealon, *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion Before Stonewall* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 61–99.

<sup>41</sup> W. E. B. DuBois, *Dusk of Dawn* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1940) 91.

automatism," lending a mechanical nature to the otherwise occasional bout of wanderlust. Here is Davenport on this state of perpetual "fugue":

It is a familiar observation that persons differ greatly in their capacity for remaining quiet and satisfied for a long period in one place. One occasionally meets a woman who, though living within 30 miles of a metropolis, has, in the 80 years of her life, been there only once. At the other extreme are the tramps and gypsies who travel constantly or with only slight intermissions and many of whom have repeatedly visited all quarters of the globe. An extreme in another direction includes those who, while capable of steady and effective work, at more or less regular periods run away from the place where their duties lie and travel considerable distances, either fully conscious and oriented, or in a dazed condition, or, it may be, living in a secondary, ordinarily submerged state of consciousness (trance or fugue). Thus human locomotor responses range from sessility and extreme domesticity to 'ambulatory automatism.'<sup>42</sup>

In order to justify "Vagabondage and vagrancy" as not merely a coincidence of poverty or lack of employment but as a public health crisis, Davenport moves to classify "Nomadism" as a "racial or tribal tendency to wander" (7). Unlike "normal" psychological, social, and sexual development, the nomad never grows out of the impulse "to go away" and abandon heteronormative attachments to marriage and family (9). In other words, repeated offenses of vagrancy must be treated as a psychosocial pathology and not as a series of conscious decisions.

This notion of transience as a pathology was literalized in repressive responses to large-scale displacement, unemployment, and inequality, as was prevalent in the trenchant application of "Black Codes" in post-Reconstruction South. During this period of public surveillance and enforcement, lasting well into the Jim Crow era, versions of this racial classification were used to fine, incarcerate, and force into labor black bodies rendered as social and sexual threats to white supremacy. For example, a Vagrancy Law that was enacted in 1866 in Virginia specified that justices of the peace and overseers of the poor could not only arrest "vagrants" but hire them out "for any term not exceeding three months" and "for the best wages that can be procured" (which were, of course, minimal or non-existent). And if the compulsorily employed fled these conditions "without sufficient cause," they were compelled to return to their employers by law where they would then work for free, often saying on for extra months bound by ball and chain. In the absence of an employer, they could also be forced to work on public projects under similar bondage and fed only bread and water.<sup>43</sup> A new form of slavery was instituted under the sign of vagrancy.

Iterations of these biological arguments, many of which had their roots in racial discourses, crop up in sociological studies of transient communities by Robert Ezra Park and his colleagues at University of Chicago. Park and Ernest Burgess were some of the first to take up hobo culture and

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<sup>42</sup> Charles B. Davenport, *The feebly inhibited; Nomadism, or the wandering impulse, with special reference to heredity, Inheritance of temperament* (Washington: Carnegie Institute, 1915).

For an account of approaches to compulsive wandering and the treatment of mental illnesses associated with transience in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe, see Ian Hacking, *Mad Travelers: Reflections on the Reality of Transient Mental Illness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>43</sup> Brent Tarter, "Vagrancy Act of 1866," *Encyclopedia Virginia*. Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, 25 (August, 2015). Accessed online on March 18, 2017.

endemic homelessness as academic subjects during the 1920s and 1930s during widespread work shortages, poverty, and strikes. They influenced not only writers like Richard Wright but a future generation of sociologists, including the work of Horace Cayton, a student at Chicago, who together with St. Clair Drake composed *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (1945), a foundational study of urban migration, resettlement, and housing policy for the black belt in Chicago that includes many vignettes of transient life. But Park's approach was to synthesize statistics about transient life into developmental abstractions, often with evolutionary and paternalistic overtones, and rationalize these abstractions in terms of the overlapping systems he saw structuring urban life into a dynamic "ecology." He read the "locomotion" of homeless bohemians (the origin of the term, hobo) as both a fulfillment of a biological need for cognitive movement and displacement as well as a resistance to the ultimate settling down into a mature, hetero-normative family life. Pushed to its extreme, endless locomotion lead to a permanent adolescence from which sexual perversion, mental illness, and social maladjustment manifested.

To not be at home in this world, this body, is not just a fate of the folk troubadour but the reality of a life whose affections and desires pitch one's self out of time or synch with the social, legal, and sexual norms that define it. Given that transience has so often been associated, both culturally and politically, with masculinity, it is telling to that many of the poets drawn to it as a disposition and social problem were also contending with the misfit between homosexuality and the heteronormative standards of citizenship as well as the criminalization of same-sex affection. In perhaps the definitive volume on hobo culture during the 1870s through the 1930s, *On Hobos and Homelessness*, Nels Anderson (solicited to graduate school at U Chicago by Park) notes how queer sexual practices were common among the denizens of "hobohemia" even while many of these laborers, sailors, convicts, or working-class men divorced from family life derided the effeminization of wage slavery, political disenfranchisement, and general disempowerment from the absence of property. Anderson notes how this gendering of transience—at once a queer subculture and patriarchal formation—produced a predatory environment between older and younger men, where older hoboies, called "jockers," raped or propositioned younger initiates, called "punks." Younger transients relied on older generations not just to learn how to get food and shelter but also for protection, some of which was repaid with sex work. Ben Reitman, the well-known doctor, anarchist activist, and creator of a hobo college in the "main stem" of Chicago, sublimated his own experiences of rape and sexual humiliation among the hobo community in the form of a fictional autobiography he published as a female persona: *Boxcar Bertha: An Autobiography as Told to Dr. Ben L. Reitman* (1937). The sexual culture and labor of transient communities becomes, in Bertha's narrative, the object of systematic statistical study. Yet, contrary to such predatory narratives, Anderson also notes how the homosexual practices of road life were also a means of convenience to avoid "the eternal complications which one becomes involved with women" and "intimacies that complicate the free life to which they are by temperament and habit committed."<sup>44</sup>

In her ethnographic and historical study of female homelessness, *The Women Outside: Meaning and Myths of Homelessness* (1992), Stephanie Golden notes how regulation of female prostitutes, "night walkers," gleaners, panhandlers, and others who subsisted through informal, grey economies was often tied to a public sense that virtues of domesticity and the reproductive labors of family life had been shirked. This was particularly true in America in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century up through the Great

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<sup>44</sup> Nels Anderson, *On Hobos and Homelessness*, ed. Raffaele Rauty (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 148. This edited text is based off of the graduate thesis Anderson submitted to Park and published subsequently thereafter. The text was originally published as *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man* (1923). It will hereafter be cited as *On Hobos*.

Depression where a moral individualism filled in the vacuum of any state-sponsored charity or formal relief system, often organized through churches (as there was in Britain and continental Europe).<sup>45</sup> Female tramps were also contrasted to male hobos often represented as “flamboyant, aggressive workmen” who take to the road with a “great sense of pride, self-reliance, and independence” (135). Since property or settlement rights were largely passed down through marriage or patriarchal lineage, any woman who existed outside such a heteronormative contract walked a thin line between homeliness and homelessness, moderation and excess (143–49). Though “voluntary societies” existed throughout the 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century to aid the least “socially offensive members of [the female] sex,” these societies often attributed their waywardness to individual *will* rather than structural correlations between patriarchy, poverty, and transience one can find in both 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century ethnographic or autobiographical chroniclers of outsider communities that focus specifically on female-gendered transients. This mentality carried through the postwar era when homeless shelters became the primary sites of relief that focused on physical, psychological, and moral rehabilitation. These shelters promoted social “regularity” not only through strict curfews, mental health appointments, and job-seeking requirements but also through advice about sexual health and family life, including pressuring young, unmarried mothers to give up their children for adoption (150–53).<sup>46</sup>

Much recent work in critical race theory and performance studies has taken up the question of how unruly, wandering, or visibly unproductive bodies are regulated by the police and the judicial system, often in the name of defending the public from their presence.<sup>47</sup> Along with Leo Bersani,

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<sup>45</sup> For examples of accounts of female transients in the British context, see Mary Saxby’s *Memoirs of a Female Vagrant* (1806, first published after her death in 1801 anonymously) and Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor* (1865). In the American context, see Golden’s *The Women Outside: Meaning and Myths of Homelessness* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1992); the autobiography of *Sister of the Road: The Autobiography of Boxcar Bertha* [Ben Reitman, 1937] (New York: Harper & Row, 1975); descriptions of female tramps in Frank Bellow’s edited collection *The Tramp: His Tricks, Tallies, and Tales* (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, 1878); and interviews done in the 1930s with female “hobos” by the uncannily named sociologist, Walter C. Reckless. Elizabeth Wickenden, who directed the Transient division of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, a New Deal agency, during the Depression, published various reflections on her work with female transients in the journal, *Social Work*, from 1937 to 1963. The differences between these accounts and contemporaneous first-person male accounts that generalize poverty in social realist terms, such as Jack London’s *The People of the Abyss* (1903) and *The Road* (1907) or George Orwell’s *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), is striking. Reitman’s autobiography was also influential for a more contemporary experimental take on the connection between sex work, patriarchy, poverty, and transience in Kathy Acker’s fiction, particularly *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984). In addition to studies by De Pastino and Golden, Peter H. Rossi also provides many valuable textual excerpts and historical summaries of how transience was gendered.

<sup>46</sup> For an analysis that builds on Golden’s work and focuses on the place of female transients in the US “tramp scare” from 1869 to 1940, see Timothy Cresswell “Embodiment, Power, and the Politics of Mobility: The Case of Female Tramps and Hobos,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 24, No. 2 (1999), pp. 175–195.

<sup>47</sup> For examples of recent performance studies and critical theoretical approaches to the social, political, and legal regulation of “unruly” or “wandering” bodies, see José Esteban Muñoz *Cruising Utopia: The There and Then of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), Sarah



we might think of the practice of gay cruising—anonymous sexual encounters between men in semi-public spaces like parks, ports, and bathhouses—as exposing the complex relation not only between political-economic distinctions of public personalities and privatized affections but also the links between class distinction and endless, unattached "sociability."<sup>48</sup> The life of the vagrant was also constituted by pre-existing ethnic and racial hierarchies, hierarchies which became most explicit at the moments when working class populations were pitted against each other in order to compete for wages.<sup>49</sup> These internalized racial hierarchy, perpetuated by media caricatures in popular and vanguard journalism, enabled white men to claim the open road as an exclusive yet "universal" privilege of whiteness even while they were often subject to the same laws criminalizing transience.<sup>50</sup> The relative fringe of willful transience, the version most often celebrated in American folk music and literature, is often based upon a violent disciplining of the social body in which racially, politically, or sexually marginal subjectivities have been repressed or occluded from public view.<sup>51</sup> We get a counter vision to this myth of broad and even exposure to the elements in a visionary prose piece, "Ancient Rain," by the itinerant San Francisco poet, Bob Kaufman. The rain that falls is not personally redeeming but rather moves him into another world where he is with Hart Crane and others who have found the street to be both inexplicably beautiful and fatalistic:

The Ancient Rain does what it wants. It does not explain to anyone. The Ancient Rain fell on Hart Crane. He committed suicide in the Gulf of Mexico. Now the Washington Monument is bathed in the celestial lights of the Ancient Rain. The Ancient Rain is falling on America, and all the nations that gather on the East River to try to prevent a star prophecy of 37 million deaths in World War III. They cannot see the Ancient Rains, but live in it, hoping that it does not want war... The Ancient rain wets my face and I am freed from hatreds of me that disguise themselves with racist bouquets. The Ancient Rain has moved me to another world, where the people stand still and the streets moved me to destination.<sup>52</sup>

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Ahmed's *Willful Subjects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014) and Sarah Jane Cervenak's *Wandering: Philosophical Performance of Racial and Sexual Freedom* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

<sup>48</sup> What made homosexuality seem such a problem to Freud and other classical thinkers, Bersani argues, is that it amounted to a form of "self-love," in that identification with similarity (as the "ego-ideal") was never separated from procreation (as "object-love"). The practice of cruising is a way, then, of performing this "self-love hospitable to difference" through anonymous erotic encounters with bodies stripped of their class and taste markers (Bersani, 60). See Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>49</sup> For a recent example of such a comparative look at vagrant experience, see Hsuan L. Hsu, "Vagrancy and Comparative Racialization in Huckleberry Finn and "Three Vagabonds of Trinidad" *American Literature* 81, no. 4 (December 2009), 687–717.

<sup>50</sup> For examples of these racial caricatures, see DePastino, 22.

<sup>51</sup> Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, 122.

<sup>52</sup> Bob Kaufman, *The Ancient Rain: Poems 1956–1978* (New York: New Directions, 1981), 77–78.

## Being-in-Transience

Even while the historical experience of transience serves as an important context for the poets I track, there is also a broader philosophical history of transience in American thought, one that grows out of phenomenology, pragmatism, and language philosophy. For these thinkers, restoring a constant movement to thought was key for making both their argumentative styles and philosophical concepts more porous, flexible, and felicitous with a dynamic socio-historical reality. Perhaps the great stylist of the transient essay, Montaigne, wrote that: "Being consists in movement and action... We are carried away, like floating objects, now gently, now violently, according as the eater is angry or calm."<sup>53</sup> Remarkably on Perseus King of Macedonia, Montaigne attributed the singularity of his mind to go "wandering through all kinds of life and representing customs to itself which were so vagabond and flighty that it was not known to himself or others what man this was—seems to me more or less to apply to everyone. We are always thinking somewhere else." In his essay on Montaigne's essayistic style in which he quotes the above passage, Maurice Merleau-Ponty notes how Montaigne sought to literalize the foolishness of consciousness, precisely because "to be conscious is, among other things, to be somewhere else."<sup>54</sup> Essaying is a form of transience.

We find this self-othering notion of the writing process echoed in the work of Emerson and Thoreau, both of whom were heavily inspired by Montaigne's willfully provisional prose. Both writers, in attempting to fashion a particularly American intellectual style, resorted to transience as a paradigm of both existence and expression. Richard Poirier, for example, has argued that Emerson's "power" did not culminate in a state of rest but rather manifested in a sustained state of transition, exemplified by his ambivalent phrases about highway men and objects that are always slipping out of clutching hands.<sup>55</sup> Coincidences were perhaps the most one could gather from such a transient state of being, coincidences that relied upon a dense overlaying of not just historical details and cultural backgrounds but metaphors and phrases. The deliberate mismatching of philosophic description and its object—such as the ghosts of runaway slaves evidenced through Thoreau's bean ledgers or Emerson's recourse to financial measurements "of his estate" in locating the grief of a lost son—became a methodology for showing what a body or mind could do when it was always overrunning its own limits. It also helped account for when one discourse couldn't fully account for the other.

In the first of his 1987 Frederick Ives Carpenter lectures on Emerson, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein, "Declining Decline," Cavell notes how poverty was an idea Emerson applied to "America's deprivations, its bleakness and distance from European achievements, as constituting America's necessity, and its opportunity, for finding itself."<sup>56</sup> In both "Self-Reliance" and "Experience," Emerson links this state of deprivation and displacement to what he takes to be the citational act of self-constitution in speech. A writer attempts to communicate or prove a "character." Since this character is *intrinsically* transient, speech read or heard can never prove either "my" past or future. It can only phrase moments of orientation and transition among these changes. Cavell notes in his lecture, "Being Odd, Getting Even," that Emerson adapted Descartes notion of

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<sup>53</sup> Michel de Montaigne, "Of the Affection of Fathers for their Children," *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), p. 279.

<sup>54</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Reading Montaigne," *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 200.

<sup>55</sup> Richard Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 122.

<sup>56</sup> Stanley Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures After Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Albuquerque, NM: Living Batch Press, 1989), 70.

the self as a "continuing task, not a property, a task in which the goal, or the product of the process, is not a state of being, but a moment of being... a transience of being, a being of transience."<sup>57</sup> What Thoreau picks up from Emerson, according to Cavell, is this notion of being always distant from the world from within it, occupying the "position of stranger" even to one's own commitments and affirmations.<sup>58</sup> Near the end of *Walden*, Thoreau analogizes this experimental relation to reality as the extravagant yarding of one's self in speech that we will return to in the second chapter on Frost:

It is a ridiculous demand which England and America make, that you shall speak so that they can understand you...I fear chiefly lest my expression may not be extravagant enough, may not wander far enough beyond the narrow limits of my daily experience, so as to be adequate to the truth of which I have been convinced. Extravagance! It depends on how you are yarded.<sup>59</sup>

Cavell, of course, picks up on this splitting of the term extravagance—extra-vagrant—into its constitutive parts as an emphasis on the ability of speech to convey more than settled knowledge, as in sums or property's; rather, speaking from and as a "vagrant" life entails a willingness to borrow from the world in which one speaks while also allowing "the world to change, and to learn change from it, to permit it strangers."<sup>60</sup> Ultimately, the emphasis on transience shifts the "location" and "task" of philosophy, for Cavell, from a performative self-understanding to what readers of lyric poetry would recognize as the very structure of address: "you accept the promise as yours, which would mean to identify yourself as one who 'reviews its vision.'"<sup>61</sup> Contrary to a kind of existentialist rhetoric, it is this notion of transience as a condition and practice of speech that is central to my readings of lyric.

## Lyric Speech and Sociality

The lyric work hopes to attain universality through unrestrained individuation. The danger peculiar to the lyric, however, lies in the fact that its principle of individuation never guarantees that something binding and authentic will be produced. It has no say over whether the poem remains with the contingency of mere separate existence.

Theodor Adorno, *On Lyric Poetry and Society*

Though it seems familiar enough, it is worth revisiting what Adorno seems to mean in his now canonical essay when he says that the particular danger to the lyric, as a form, is not that its speech is resigned to contingency but that the process of individuation, whereby speech "constructs" or "performs" different modes of existence, will come to stand for the separateness of

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<sup>57</sup> Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989), 111.

<sup>58</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Senses of Walden*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 55.

<sup>59</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) 216. All citations of *Walden* come from this volume.

<sup>60</sup> *Senses of Walden*, 118.

<sup>61</sup> "The Philosopher in American Life," *In Quest of the Ordinary*, 11.

the poem itself. To put it another way, the transient conditions of lyric speech will come to be mistaken for transience of the genre. The implications of this transposition are perhaps well known, as many readers approach lyrics with the assumption that they are highly wrought vehicles for the private experiences of identifiable individuals; whereas, it is precisely the question of what constitutes public and private experience or individual and collective speech that Adorno's understanding of lyric's historical contingency hinges upon.

A fundamental premise to my understanding of lyric speech is that its peculiar speech acts function like an address—an “I” speaking to or on the behalf of a “you”—and that an address posits a social relation. This is not to say that the lyric can be conceptualized as a consistent, trans-historical concept, a critical tendency Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins have usefully argued against. These moments of address can also be oriented towards dead, fictional, or impossible audiences, as Jonathan Culler has argued in relation to techniques of apostrophe, though we need not think of them as exclusively linguistic phenomenon. Unpacking the social relations enacted by lyrics requires something distinct from the dialogic imagination Mikhael Bakhtin tracks in the poetics of the novel or socio-linguistics has tracked in other modes of narration. For one, the lyric is more one-sided—even if this side, often treated as the very local of the personal or left, is often made multiple or split against itself, as we see in texts as historically disparate as, say, Philip Sidney's sonnet sequence of *Astrophil and Stella* and Rimbaud's *Illuminations*.<sup>62</sup> Because I don't think we can understand lyric speech outside of the social relations it imagines or tests, I treat the tropes of transient life we will encounter as not only interpretable in terms of the absorptive, a-historical temporality of the speaker, the metafiction of rhetoric, or the operations of language as such. Rather, I the positing of tenuous relations within the context of lyric speech are constitutively related to our historical and political conceptions of transient life, whether transience is thematized directly as a subjective reality or mediated through formal experiment.

I focus in each chapter on specific features of lyrical speech that a poet emphasizes as a way to see, feel, or hear transience differently. In Whitman's case, I look closely at the way he orients, defines, or addresses the many iterations of his lyrical “I” to the hypothetical audience of a “you,” with this “you” repeatedly shifting between an intimate interlocutor and a general futurity. I compare Whitman's emphatic and decidedly embarrassing addresses to the preposterous and provisional rhetorical “we” that Ralph Waldo Emerson posits at the out of “Experience.” In Frost, we can see how the integrity of persons, properties, and places is continually unsettled by what he takes to be the serial slippage and sonic variations of figures across a lyrical “sentence” or “phrase.” In the case of Crane, he adapts Chaplin's tramp gestures to a sort of metaphorical logic in which a consistency of emotional experience, particularly one arising from physical instability, can be tracked across a series of disparate images, vocabularies, and sentence fragments. In Oppen's case, sincerity is redefined from being a measure of correspondence between self, speech, and truthfulness to a “syntax” in which highly personal beliefs are tested against a range of historical materials, including prior versions or memories of one's self. Lastly, I look at Baraka's work across a series of genres—the composition of a play, letters to friends, editorship of magazines, and collections of lyrics—as a rebuke to the solipsistic, universalist, and racist dimensions of the lyric in the “New American” tradition. None of these features of a lyric's construction or language are separable from each other. It is often in the relation between these formal aspects that lyric speech can animate the enduring yet contradictory roles transience plays in ideologies of individualism and national fantasy.

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<sup>62</sup> For a useful history of the “lyric sequence” from Petrarch to T. S. Eliot, see Roland Greene *Post-Petrarchism: Origins and Innovations of the Western Lyric Sequence* (Princeton University Press, 1991).

There is of course a more everyday sense of “the lyric” in music broadly construed as “folk” in which a social history of transient life and its tropes is fairly well-established, though more can be gained by thinking about the relation between this musical history and literary formalism. Given the emphasis on performative variation over the propriety of authorship in both blues and folk music in general, it is not surprising that it was music that engaged most consistently with the social history of transience and its mythic or imaginative possibilities. Such songs are often credited as “traditional,” which is to say collectively authored and transmitted. One finds in the folk songs of the Great Depression, for example, numerous examples of tropes of the rambler, the itinerant stranger, or the wandering worker. Perhaps the most circulated folk songbook of that era, the I.W.W.’s “Little Red Songbook” (first edition in 1909, in its 19<sup>th</sup> edition by 1924), first published by a committee of I.W.W. local organizers in Spokane, Washington as *Songs of the Workers, on the Road, in the Jungles, and in the Shops—Songs to Fan the Flames of Discontent*. The songs are largely constructed in ballad meter with choral refrains to facilitate the call-and-response of collective singing. One song in particular, “My Wandering Boy,” takes up the theme of criminalized vagrancy from the perspective of a mother worrying about her train-hopping, hitchhiking son. The lyrics contrast the likely ragged clothes of this “vag” to the purity of his heart just before a courtroom scene in which a judge condemns the boy to thirty days of hard labor for vagrancy:

"I was looking for work, Oh judge," he said.  
Says the judge, "I have heard that before."  
So to join the chain gang far off-he is led  
To hammer the rocks some more.

In the spirit of a revolutionary leftist education, the lyrics pivot from the refrain "Oh, where is my boy tonight?" to a call to action:

Don't search for your wandering boy tonight,  
Let him play the old game if he will-  
A worker, or bum, he'll ne'er be right,  
So long's he's a wage slave still.

The hard, alternating rhymes and plaintive refrain not only provide a resonant script for this tragic necessity of vagabondage, itself an echo of British ballads and romantic lyrics, but the alignment of transience with wage slavery and the breaking apart of families. Using similar rhetoric in their journalistic organ, *The Industrial Worker*, the I.W.W. attempted to conscript the many male “vagabonds” to join their union ranks, leave the social and sexual vices of road-life behind, and become stable, productive breadwinners for their families. But the I.W.W.’s vision for an army of vagrant workers clashed with both the anarchic and homosexual character of many transient communities. One sees a version of this fear in a lost verse from Harry McClintock’s utopian hobo anthem, “Big Rock Candy Mountain,” in which an Arcadian vision in which wage labor is eliminated, cops have wooden legs, and rivers of alcohol flow gives way to a more specific historical fear about the threat of older sexual predators, or “jockers,” who prey upon young “punks”:

The punk rolled up his big blue eyes  
And said to the jocker, “Sandy,  
I’ve hiked and hiked and wandered too,  
But I ain’t seen any candy.  
I’ve hiked and hiked till my feet are sore

And I'll be damned if I hike any more  
To be buggered sore like a hobo's whore  
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains.

The American folk revival from the mid 40s to the mid 60s often mixed a realism of poverty and cultural dislocation with Americana transient tropes of the highway man, the roving gambler, the Western stranger, or the bohemian artist. Bob Dylan's "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue" from *Bringing it All Back Home* (Columbia, 1965) is a virtual catalogue of such tropes. The final stanza renders the uncanny cycle of vagabondage as an oscillation between permission and foreclosure, freedom and indebtedness:

Leave your stepping stones behind, something calls for you  
Forget the dead you've left, they will not follow you  
The vagabond who's rapping at your door  
Is standing in the clothes that you once wore  
Strike another match, go start anew  
And it's all over now, Baby Blue

One finds another set of reference points for transience in the American tradition of the blues, particularly as it relates to the hybridization of African song and oral traditions with the everyday realities of a slave economy in the Americas. In his 1972 anthology *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, Stephen Henderson interleaves poems by black writers with folk and blues songs from the Georgian Sea Islands, Leadbelly, "Big Bill" Broonzy, Son House, and Ma Rainey, among others. In their comparison, Henderson notes a common poetic technique, gleaned from musical performance, of "worrying the line." "This is the folk expression for the device of altering the pitch of a note in a given passage or for other kinds of ornamentation often associated with melismatic singing in the Black tradition. A verbal parallel exists in which a word or phrase is broken up to allow for affective or didactic comment."<sup>63</sup> Aldo Nielson has tracked a history of adaptations to this technique within black poetry in the US, noting how experiments with the shape of a line were themselves mimetic of transgressive social attitudes, precisely because such transgressions were based in playing with cultural expectations around proper, intelligible speech.<sup>64</sup>

We see a version of this lyrical technique, for example, in LeRoi Jones's poem from for Leadbelly, the itinerant blues singer and cross-over success in the largely white folk revival scene. Even the title, "Leadbelly Gives an Autograph," suggests a certain irony about the lyric as the

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<sup>63</sup> Stephen Henderson, *Understanding the New Black Poetry* (New York: William Morrow, 1979), 41.

<sup>64</sup> Writing on Lorenzo Thomas's notion of "transrealism," Aldo Nielson notes how African-American poetic and musical forms were mimetic of "transgressive social positions" by tampering with the syntactic and poetic structures of English. "From Baraka's 'changing same' and Russell Atkin's 'psychovisualism,' through Thomas's tampering 'transrealism' and Stephen Henderson's critical deployment of the folk terminology of 'worrying the line,' to Ed Roberson's 'calligraphy of black chant' and Nathaniel Mackey's 'discrepant engagement,' black poets and critics alike have systematically set about the tasks of theorizing black poetics and developing nomenclature appropriate to the needs of their subject and of their social critique.... Frequently, as in the case of Henderson, those vocabularies have been drawn directly from black vernacular traditions." (Aldo Nielson, *Black Chant: Languages of African-American Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 134–135.)

authentic transmission of a person or name even while it borrows much from the form of the blues. It begins assertively, but in an address that points two ways—toward the reader and toward the poet-performer himself—mimicking the stripped-down scene of playing the blues, including the internal rhyme that echoes a pivotal spatial feature (the corner) with the proper name of a slave rebellion (Nat Turner's Rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia, 1831):

Pat your foot  
and turn  
    the corner. Nat Turner, dying wood  
of the church. Our lot  
is vacant. Bring the twisted myth  
of speech.

(BR, 213)<sup>65</sup>

Not only is Jones echoing here T. S. Eliot's modernist scene of urban salvage from his "Preludes"—"The worlds revolve like ancient women / Gathering fuel in vacant lots"—but asserting the difference of *this* vacancy that forms out of the violence particular to black experience in America. The lyric ends in a sharp rebuke of its readers for the primitivism that underlies notions of equality:

Pay me off, savages.  
Build me an equitable human assertion

One that looks like a jungle, or one that looks like the cities of the West. But I provide the stock.

(BR, 214)

This music is made up, as the speaker suggests, of stock ideas or images. But by linking these "stock" images to such discursive artifices as "human equality" or primitivism ("savage" vs. civilized peoples), the poem shows how universal promises of equity often come hand in hand with the perpetuation of racial hierarchy. Conversely, the "stock" material for this assertion doesn't come from either this racializing imagery or compensatory political abstractions, but the very fact of performance: "The possibilities of music. First / that it does exist. And that we do, / in that scripture of rhythms. The earth, / I mean the soil, as melody." (BR, 213–14). Poets, or musicians for that matter, don't just present these cultural constructions as if they were authentic and "known" versions of everyday life. Rather, they strive to make them seem more strange, versatile, or varied than they first appear, a technique that is again associated with how transients put on "the clothes that you once wore" in order to show how the familiar can be put to different ends.

In emphasizing the sociality both projected and shaped by speech acts, I don't mean to characterize "social life" as some positivistic set of relations but as a series of encounters between persons, both imaginary and actual. In speaking about the social history of art in the paintings of Gustave Corbet, T. J. Clark has noted how the critic not only seeks to "discover the general nature of the [social] structures that [the artist] encounters willy-nilly; but [the critic] also wants to locate the

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<sup>65</sup> *The LeRoi Jones/ Amiri Baraka Reader*, ed. William J. Harris (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991). Hereafter cited as BR.

specific conditions of one such meeting." To say that transient figures or speech acts can have a historical efficacy is not to say that they have some exclusive claim on a historical process but that they are "one historical process among other acts, events, and structures—it is a series of actions in but also on history."<sup>66</sup> What makes an artwork social is not that it reflects historical circumstances with a certain kind of interpretive certainty but that it is a situation in which, to take the lyric as an example, imagined encounters between speakers are mediating multiple levels of determination at once: the figurative, the ideological, the relation between poet and a perceived public, the literary traditional, the marketplace. The task I take *Public Enemies* to be undertaking, then, is not simply to catalogue the myriad representations of transient life but to understand how these disparate social realities are negotiated in the intimacies and extravagances of lyric speech.

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<sup>66</sup> T. J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 13. Interestingly, Corbet was also associated with a certain urban vagrancy and bohemianism that would later be reflected in Baudelaire's poetry, profiling of the modern dandy, and his essay on Guy Constantin "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863) as well as Arthur Rimbaud's visionary poetry contemporaneous with the formation of the Paris Commune.



## WHITMAN'S VAGRANT WAGERS: Lyric Address in Democratic Crisis

Writing—heroic writing, the writing of a nation's scripture—must assume the conditions of language as such; re-experience, as it were, the fact that there is such a thing as language at all and assume responsibility for it—find a way to acknowledge it—until the nation is capable of serious speech again... Until we can speak again, our lives and our language betray one another. A written word, as it recurs page after page, changing its company and modifying its occasions, must show its integrity under these pressures—as though the fact that all of its occurrences in the book of pages are simultaneously there, awaiting one another, demonstrates that our words need not haunt us.<sup>67</sup>

Stanley Cavell, *Senses of Walden*

In its most literal sense a wager is an attempt to quantify a risk. I specify an amount I am willing to bet on a future outcome and get rewarded or punished accordingly. What I will call Whitman's "wager" is that lyric speech, conventionally thought of as a sort of aesthetic reserve for our most private hopes, dreams, or realities, could perform both the hopes and failures of American democracy. What is more, it would perform this in part by taking on the amorphous shapes and styles of one of a democratic public's avowed enemies: the transient. Readers of "Song of Myself" will remember that moment near the end of the sprawling, contradictory lyric sequence where an "I" promises everything "to you." We might think of this as just one of Whitman's many *overstatements*. But if there is a consistency in Whitman, it is the emphatic, dogged pursuit of this kind of avowal in so many social and historical contexts: my very definition, meaning, and value is premised upon *you*, even while neither of us will stay still, whole, or be fully intelligible to ourselves or each other. Through his many utopian claims, biblical litanies, historical catalogues, anaphoric chants, and iterative self-revisions, this nagging sense persists that everything does depend on this intimate affiliation between relative strangers.

Jorge Luis Borges, a great admirer of Whitman (and a testament to the extensive cultural reach of his poems), once described the strange magnetism of "this myth of a man" as a strange Trinity: "I have pointed out that Whitman is perhaps the only writer on earth who has managed to create a mythological person of himself and one of the three persons of the Trinity is the reader, because when you read Walt Whitman, you are Walt Whitman. Very strange that he did that." Caught up in this ambiguous ensemble of myth, poet, and reader is the confused nature of this "you," which hovers somewhere between identification and substitution. And despite being lonely, unfortunate, and impossibly cloying, Borges declares Whitman's greatest success was in his making "of himself a rather splendid vagabond."<sup>68</sup> What Borges points us toward, through this strange yet itinerant ensemble, is the peculiar mixture of intimacy and homelessness that populates, and defines, Whitman's highly self-mythologized poems.<sup>69</sup> And understanding how this ensemble works can help us figure out exactly why transience was so key to Whitman's lyrical innovations and legacy.

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<sup>67</sup> *Senses of Walden*, 33–34.

<sup>68</sup> Jorge Luis Borges in an interview with Stephen Cape and Daniel Bourne at the College of Wooster on April 25, 1980, published in the *Artful Dodge*.

<sup>69</sup> As Michael Moon has usefully drawn attention to, Whitman is constantly paralleling the physicality of print production, turning leaves, and tracing figures to the intimacy of lovers. The materiality of

In developing so much of his poetics through the voices of “vagabonds,” “tramps,” “loiterers,” Whitman uses techniques of lyric address to work through the social, ethical, and political problem of how we judge persons who speak intimately yet appear strangely, particularly when we feel like strangers to ourselves.<sup>70</sup> Though I develop my sense of address primarily from a reading of the serial poem which came to be known as, “Song of Myself,” I also draw upon a range of examples from across Whitman’s many editions of *Leaves of Grass* to interrogate basic critical assumptions about the self-referentiality of lyric form. I then transition into a reading of how one of Whitman’s first admirers, Ralph Waldo Emerson, both posits and troubles forms of collective experience, particularly when a “we” is made up of radically transient individuals. The third section of the chapter takes up this question of transient collectivity in Whitman’s poetics, looking closely at how figures or topoi—such as grass, ferries, or swamps—are constructed between persons, such that mutual forms of exposure, movement, and decay replace organizing principles such as identity, self-coherence, and fungibility over time. I end with a close reading of Whitman’s more explicit thematizing of democratic crises in America, arguing that the transient sociality and eroticism he constructs in his lyrics provides a granular version of a social and cultural order premised upon a more contingent and intersubjective notion of freedom.

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the book and the body are thus endlessly conflated. There is no moment more explicit than an address that shifted from an untitled chant of occupations in 1855 to as series of other modes of address until finally it was dropped completely from the deathbed “Song for Occupations”: “Come closer to me; / Push close my lovers and take the best I possess; / Yield closer and closer, and give me the best you possess. // This is unfinish’d business with me . . . How is it with you? / I was chill’d with the cold types, cylinder, wet paper between us.” (1855, 89). The drama of title changes for this poem is particularly fascinating and illuminative of Whitman’s relation to the content. The stanzas in question appear first after a section break on Page 57 of the 1855 Edition of *Leaves of Grass*. They appear next in 1856 as part of a poem more self-consciously framed as an exhibition of daily labor: “Poem of The Daily Work of The Workmen and Workwomen of These States.” In the 1860 edition, it is the third “Chant Democratic.” In the Civil War edition of 1867, it appears at the beginning of the serial poem, “To Workingmen,” after two previous poems addressed “To the States” and “To a Certain Cantatrice.” In the 1871 it appears for the first time as “Carol of Occupations.” In the last two editions, 1881 and 1891–2, the stanzas disappear even while the “Song for Occupations” stands. For Michael Moon’s exceptional reading of how Whitman thinks corporeality and textuality in relation, see: Michael Moon, *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 130–134.

<sup>70</sup> Here is Moon on Whitman’s attempt to overcome the impossibility of presence in the text through a series of metonymical insertions of his own life: “In an attempt to exceed or ‘go beyond’ the modes of representing human embodiment in the discourse of his age, Whitman set himself the problem of attempting to project actual physical presence in a literary text. At the heart of this problem was the impossibility of doing so literally, of successfully disseminating the author’s literal bodily presence through the medium of a book. As a consequence of this impossibility, Whitman found it necessary to undertake the project of producing metonymic substitutes for the author’s literal corporeal presence in the text” (Moon, 5). For another interesting reading of metonymy in Whitman, see: C. Carroll Hill, “Metonymy in Whitman’s and in *Leaves of Grass*,” *Language and Style in Leaves of Grass* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), pp. 154–203.

## Embarrassed Speech

I tramp a perpetual journey,  
My signs are a rain-proof coat and good shoes and a staff cut from the woods;  
No friend of mine takes his ease in my chair,  
I have no chair, nor church nor philosophy;  
I lead no man to a dinner-table or library or exchange,  
But each man and each woman of you I lead upon a knoll,  
My left hand hooks you round the waist,  
My right hand points to landscapes of continents, and a plain public road.

[untitled] (*Leaves of Grass*, 1855)<sup>71</sup>

A genealogy extends from this decision Whitman made to place a “tramp” with a rude staff on a public road in an opening stanza of the then untitled poem (that would become “A Poem of Walt Whitman, An American” (1856), “Walt Whitman” (1860), then what now call summarily “Song of Myself” (1881)). This tramp, who will go through various iterations of transient personas and postures, would have met most criteria at the time of writing to be considered the very definition of a “public enemy.” Whitman mines this statutory language to produce a range of lyric personae that go under the contradictory heading of transience: “the loafer” (one eschewing duty), “the loiterer” (a moral enemy of the public), or “the tramp” (a more popular, sentimental version of dispossession). Such figures who haunted the margins of cities and rural communities alike were not just the heroic versions of the “vagabond” but also the grizzled wanderers, suspected prostitutes, and migrant poor, each of which Whitman sings as both signs of democratic pluralism but also as living measures from

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<sup>71</sup> How to cite lines from the various versions of the poem which came to be metonymic for Whitman himself—“Song of Myself”—inevitably gets into the problem of which versions and line edits one privileges, which often gets into question of taste and whether each editorial iteration is an execution of an underlying, persistent idea or is itself a series of lyrics to be read independently of the others. There are also the material and textual differences of the production of each volume, given Whitman’s intimate involvement, as well as the socio-economic background the poem was edited in response to. For the sake of simplicity, I defer to the 1855 edition when I can and bring in later editions when the changes seem relevant to an argument about how Whitman developed his process of lyric address. While it is certainly the case that the politics and the voice of the poem shifted dramatically in parts, I am not convinced that its grammatical constructions of subjectivity and sociality were so inconstant. Because it is a poem that was constructed as much by the page and section as it is by individual line of type or title, I provide simply the edition year and page number to mark the poem as a means to locate the verse. For the ensuing citation of *Leaves of Grass* editions, I will include the publication year of the edition along with section and page number when applicable. This conveys both the serial nature of his lyrics and the moments when, in the early editions, a line of type is better conceived within the pagination of the broader, untitled trajectory of the book itself. For the sake of brevity, I will note the poem titles when appropriate prior to quotation but leave them off the in-line citations themselves. All references to the various editions were made using the e-text versions of *Leaves of Grass* published at: <http://www.whitmanarchives.org>. I thank the editors, Ed Folsom and Kenneth Price, for their meticulous and invaluable textual scholarship without which this kind of comparative textual work on Whitman would be impossible.

staid definitions of work, home, sexuality, and social belonging. And immediately after introducing us to this arch transient figure, one which embraces contradictory multitudes, Whitman subjects us to what will become a sort of habit of breaking up these self-pronouncements with rhetorical questions. Each is pitched in two directions which adumbrate the competing registers of transience his speech acts play upon. One direction is a broader, public conception of vagrancy and the other is the more intimate experience of being with me on the road: "Who has done his day's work and will soonest be through with his supper? / Who wishes to walk with me? / Will you speak before I am going? Will you prove already too late? / The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me . . . he complains of my gab and loitering." (1855, 55).

Aside from this captioning of transient life, there is evidence that later in Whitman's life, while working as a clerk in what would become the Attorney General's office, he came into contact with specific legal debates about the political and moral implications of implementing vagrancy statutes, particularly when they intersected with existing structures of discrimination. For example, he copied in a legal note by Henry Stanberry in 1866 that notes the use of a vagrancy statute to infringe upon the constitutional freedoms of a "colored preacher" named William Fincher in Georgia:

It is alleged that one William Fincher is now performing compulsory labor or service in the chain:gang in Pike County, Georgia, a condition of constraint to which he was forcibly subjected, without having been convicted of, or charged with, any crime, defined as such in the laws of Georgia; that he was indicted as a vagrant & convicted of vagrancy in the county court; that upon a hearing before an appellate court, on certiorari, the prosecution below was sustained, and that the whole proceedings were had upon insufficient evidence of the charge; that the sentence was given with circumstances of severity,—& that the object of the prosecution was to destroy the party's influence of action in the community, as a colored preacher, zealously attached to some society or association which is offensive to public sentiment. Such is the information which has been communicated; but your action in the premises will be grounded exclusively upon the facts, as you may discover them upon investigation.<sup>72</sup>

As Whitman copies here, Stanberry dismissed the claim not only because of the vagueness of the charge but precisely because it was based solely on only circumstantial evidence. Of course, such vagueness was precisely the point, as it gave both police and legal officials greater latitude in enforcing normative notions of public comportment, exchange, and civil discourse.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> From Henry Stanberry, Acting Attorney General, to Henry S. Fitch, Esq., U. S. Attorney, Savannah, Georgia, on December 11, 1866. A facsimile of this scribal document can be found at: <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/manuscripts/scribal/tei/nar.00189.html>

<sup>73</sup> I am drawing here on a rich recent history about thinking about normativity as a performative social process. Perhaps the key text for me in this regard was and still is Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006). However, one could also look to the recent work of Lauren Berlant around how normative is a kind of aspirational threshold in *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011). Of course, normativity means something very different in other discourse, such as philosophy. As Robert Pippin has argued, normativity often means any proposition that entails that ourselves or someone else "ought to do" something. For a discussion of this tradition, see a paper entitled "Normative and Natural" that Pippin delivered at the "Autonomy, Singularity, Creativity Conference" at the National Humanities

Whitman's early reviewers seem to pick up on this vagrant quality. Here is Rufus Griswold in a rather hilarious review of the 1855 edition from *The Criterion*:

As to the volume itself, we have only to remark, that it strongly fortifies the doctrines of the Metempsychosists, for it is impossible to imagine how any man's fancy could have conceived such a mass of stupid filth, unless he were possessed of the soul of a sentimental donkey that had died of disappointed love. This *poet* (?) without wit, but with a certain vagrant wildness, just serves to show the energy which natural imbecility is occasionally capable of under strong excitement.<sup>74</sup>

What Griswold seems to intuit, albeit by way of a dismissal of Whitman's intelligence, is his uncanny ability to transgress so many notions of propriety at once. It is not just that Whitman's speech is cloying, his poems are formally sloppy, or he describes characters who have no regard for the staidness of property or vocation but that the work as a whole seems beyond human. The poetry seems, quite literally, possessed by what "this poet" is not or doesn't have. In his 1911 essay, "Poetry of Barbarism," George Santayana glossed the infamously barbaric declaration of untranslatability from "Song of Myself"—"I too am untranslatable / I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world." (1855, 55)—as an indication of Whitman's self-awareness that, as poet, he didn't "inhabit a world history with civilization as its settings" but was instead more interested in "chaotic elements... aimless in their vehemence and mere ebullitions of lustiness."<sup>75</sup>

There is a lot of truth to both glosses of Whitman's vagrant spirit, as they get to the heart of why Whitman associates the experimental lives of transients with the very structure of lyric address. There is something embarrassing about the way his speakers are always grabbing us so earnestly, sentimentally, imploring us to believe in this grand vision of "manly" democracy that is both secular and soulful, immediate and trans-historical. In Roland Barthes's collection of lectures, *Discourse Amoureux*, he describes this kind of personality as a sort of pathological lover who, despite every attempt to demystify, erase, or depreciate its love, erects a "realism of value: I counter whatever 'doesn't work' in love with the affirmation of what is worthwhile... a stubborn voice is raised which lasts *a little longer*."<sup>76</sup> Whitman's importunate propositions to contain us or fulfill us in his

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Center in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina in November 2006. For a version of the paper, see: <http://onthehuman.org/about/papers/normative-and-natural/>

<sup>74</sup> Rufus W. Griswold, "[Review of *Leaves of Grass* (1855)]." *The Criterion* (November 10, 1855): [unknown].

<sup>75</sup> For this and other early critical receptions of Whitman's poetry, see: *A Century of Whitman Criticism*, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller. (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1969). In the same collection, one can find many characterizations of Whitman's "primitive" persona. For example, the Norwegian novelist Knut Hamsun writes argues that what Whitman writes is "not poetry at all; no more than multiplication tables are poetry. It is composed in purse prose, without meter or rhyme." Instead of referring him to a Kosmos, as the poetry itself demands, Hamsun calls him a savage who speaks a "voice of nature in an uncultivated, primitive land" (166).

<sup>76</sup> Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978), 22. There is a fascinating parallel between the "necessity" for Barthes's seminars given in 1977 (Seminar 1) and 1978 (Seminar 2) on the historical role of amorous discourse and the *Leaves of Grass* as a persistent endeavor: "The necessity for this book is to be found in the following consideration: that the lover's discourse is today of *an extreme solitude*. This discourse is spoken,

contradictions sound similar, in that they seem to trust that his endless apostrophizing of himself, ordinary people, or “America” will somehow organize all the political optimism and promises of cultural progress into an enduring “Union.” This presumptuousness is compounded by the intimacy so often risked by his insistent first-person speakers, declaring there is no way for us—his readers, potential lovers, and bearers of his irreducible significance—to hide from their solicitations. As the final epigraphic poem in the opening section, “Inscriptions,” of the so-called 1891–92 “deathbed” edition reads: “Thou reader throbbest life and pride and love the same as I, / Therefore for thee the following chants.” (“Thou Reader,” 1892, 19). So much of what we have come to know as “Whitmanian” style, both his emphatic avowals and enumerative syntax, seems driven by this presumption of similitude between *your* embodied life and whatever this incantatory, self-authorizing voice claims or works into its extremities of line, sense, or affection. It is also this similitude—at once spatial, temporal, and embodied—that underlies Whitman's democratic vision of a rough, strong, yet incipient American “body,” the very body, both fleshly and abstract that he addressed as *the* political agent of his poems.

In perhaps the foundational essay on the poetics of apostrophe and lyric address, Jonathan Culler takes up this question of why we, as critics, are embarrassed to talk about poetry's apostrophizing non-existent people or things. Such acts are awkward not only because they disrupt circuits of communication, but also because they remain stubbornly opaque, like a beggar holding out its hand. More often than not, Culler argues, critics “repress” them as exaggerations or “transform apostrophe into description. Whether this is because writing, in some innate hostility to voice, always seeks to deny or evade the vocative, it is a fact that one can read vast amounts of criticism without learning that poetry uses apostrophe repeatedly and intensely.”<sup>77</sup>

Whitman can be thought of as one of these lyrical beggars. Whitman, Culler argues, doesn't convince by arguments but by the “undifferentiated voicing” of presence—as in “O Captain!” or “O Heart!” of “O Captain! My Captain!” His embarrassments don't stop with “perverse” invocations to these “unborn” ones, “thou with dewy locks,” or “wild West Wind” but extends to the “you” which is enveloped by the poem's space of interruption, functioning purely as a projection of this animating voice. Within the “event” of the apostrophe, then, the emergence of an interlocutor is not “[a sign] of any actual difference subsisting between the assemblage of thoughts” but an “internalization” of the animated other that “works against narrative and its accompaniments: sequentiality, causality, time, teleological meaning.”<sup>78</sup> In somewhat different terms, Sharon Cameron describes this internalization process in terms of the absorptive, non-mimetic temporality of lyric speech. She defines the lyric as an “atemporal reference point” or a “still life” a recording not “temporal change” but collapsing “progressions so that movement is not consecutive but rather heaped or layered.” She contrasts the vertical, additive stacking of movements in the lyric to the

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perhaps, by thousands of subjects (who knows?), but warranted by no one; it is completely forsaken by the surrounding languages: ignore, disparaged, or derided by them, severed not only from authority but also from the mechanisms of authority (sciences, techniques, arts). Once a discourse is thus driven by its own momentum into the backwater of the ‘unreal,’ exiled from all gregariness, it has not recourse but to become the site, however exiguous, of an *affirmation*.” (A Lover's Discourse, 3–5).

<sup>77</sup> “Apostrophe,” *Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 135–36.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

chronological unfolding of novels or drama, suggesting that the "lyric compresses rather than imitates life."<sup>79</sup>

Read in both these lights, Whitman's serial interlocutors are never actually other but aspects of a speaker fallen out of historical time or rhetorical effects of an emphatic "presence" built on a refusal of any actual contingency beyond the poem's signifying chain. However, when we look closer at how apostrophe's work in one of Culler's example, it is the "I" who proves distant from this mass assembly, recursively walking the spot where "my captain lies, / Fallen cold and dead." (1867, 13b). The apostrophes that fill out the emotional drama of the exalted scene—"O CAPTAIN!," "O Heart!," "O Shores!," "O Bells!" (1867, 13b)—signify not an undifferentiated presence of a united people but vivid disjuncts between "the bells I hear" and the way "the swaying mass" calls the captain. There is nothing in the poem to indicate, for example, that each apostrophe, "for you," and sensation of the I are directed toward, or receptive of, the same object or signifying a common purpose. Apostrophe fails to completely cohere this assembly of strangers. Furthermore, there is nothing in the poem which indicates each apostrophized entity—Heart, Shores, Bells—as some value or significance sponsored by the organizing "figure" of the "CAPTAIN!" On the contrary, it would seem each embarrassing cry points to receptive materials or processes in which the captain's absence ramifies.

Though the stakes and contexts are always shifting, the very grain of lyric speech often begins and ends with the relation it constructs between an "I" and a "you." Rather than essential these moments of self-announcement, treating them as if they were signs of a consistent character, each appearance of the "I" represents a single locutionary *moment* among others, a life in a series of other lives. One could see this as a fact of pronominal shifters themselves. As Émile Benveniste has argued, there is nothing to guarantee that two successive instances of discourse "containing *I*, uttered in the same voice... [are] not a reported discourse, a quotation in which *I* could be imputed to another." The second-person, "you," becomes essential to this discursive situation precisely because it gives the speaker a persistent *orientation* within a circumscribable "reality" of speech (though this "reality" is not necessarily *social* for Benveniste, but rather a structure of signifiers).<sup>80</sup> To put this another way, one can't imagine the "I" without the life it is directed towards, a lyrical relation I read throughout as constitutively social. However, the nature of this relation is never

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<sup>79</sup> Sharon Cameron, *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 238, 240, 241.

<sup>80</sup> Though I am making a more specific claim about the sociality of lyric speech, Benveniste's argument about the social orientation of pronouns functions for language *in general*: "What then is the reality to which *I* or *you* refers? It is solely a 'reality of discourse,' and this is a very strange thing. *I* cannot be defined except in terms of 'locution,' not in terms of objects as a nominal sign is. *I* signifies 'the person who is uttering the present instance of the discourse containing *I*.' This instance is unique by definition and has validity only in its uniqueness. If I perceive two successive instances of discourse containing *I*, uttered in the same voice, nothing guarantees to me that one of them is not a reported discourse, a quotation in which *I* could be imputed to another. It is thus necessary to stress this point: *I* can only be identified by the instance of discourse containing *I* as the referee. The definition can now be stated precisely as: *I* is 'the individual who utters the present instance of discourse containing the linguistic instance *I*.' Consequently, by introducing the situation of 'address,' we obtain a symmetrical definition for *you* as the 'individual spoken to in the present instance of discourse containing the linguistic instance *you*'" (224). See: Émile Benveniste, "Subjectivity in Language," *Problems in General Linguistics* (Miami: University of Miami Press, 1973), 223–230. Published originally in *Journal de psychologie* 55 (July–September, 1958), 267ff.

transparent, a fact that we will see Whitman play upon continuously within the circumscribed scene of a lyrical encounter and in the intersubjective dramas across his book's many sections (some of which began as separate texts) that link strangers in common pursuits.

Throughout *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman plays on the difficulty of tracking the propriety of any single speaker or subject across a series of encounters. For example, in Section 28 of "Song of Myself" acts of self-objectification and self-forfeiture ("I am given up by traitors, / I talk wildly, I have lost my wits, I and nobody else am the greatest traitor") are framed by a series of sensory deviations ("Unbuttoning my clothes, holding me by the bare waist, / Deluding my confusion with the calm of the sunlight and pasture-fields, / Immodestly sliding the fellow-senses away, / They bribed to swap off with touch and go and graze at the edges of me,") and accusations ("You villain touch! What are you doing?"). Whitman gets his speakers into the kinds of epistemological trouble that haunt transient life: misrecognition, alienation, even criminalization. The exposure he celebrates through his speakers comes with social costs.

We can see this costs explicitly when his speakers voice their suffering, often translated into the physical mediation between lyrical persons or reader and text (the two—I and you, reader and text—are often posed as doubles, thought they rarely amount to being the same). Whitman frames the risks of illustrating *my* suffering through the apostrophized, metonymic "drops of me" (read as blood and ink). These drops are bled "From wounds made to free you whence you were prisoned / From my face—from my forehead and lips, / From my breast—from within where I was concealed—Press forth, red drops—confession drops, / Stain every page—stain every song I sing, every word I saw, bloody drops." (1860, 15:361). The whole body is presented here through a series of effusive, errant distillations—bloody/inky figures—to you. How then do we read this attenuated location "from whence"? It would seem that "you" is freed from this self-inflicted wound, perhaps a masochistic gesture on the part of the speaker. Yet, "wound" becomes just another figure amidst this exhaustive exposure that moves from lips, to breast, to page, to song. The poem interrupts itself, too, directing the personifications of its "songs" toward a speculative readership: "Who is now reading this? / May-be one is now reading this who knows some wrong-doing of my past life, / Or may-be a stranger is reading this who has secretly loved me, / Or may-be one who meets all my grand assumptions and egotisms with derision, / Or may-be one who is puzzled at me. / As if I were not puzzled at myself!" (1860, 16:361–62). We are being solicited by this effusive stranger not only to imagine how we have been involved obliquely in its itinerant past but in the present-tense shaping of the pretensions that make up this puzzling self. This fundamentally material process acts back on the various stances of the lyric speaker. As Michael Moon and other textual critics have shown, the constant reworking of his lyrical selves had a material basis in Whitman's actual re-setting of lines of type that make each poem or sections of *Leaves of Grass* as a textual whole (a whole that was uncannily coterminous with Whitman's adult life). We see this recursivity of physical production and lyrical personhood built into a poem like "This Compost!," whose opening line indexes past reconstitutes and foreshadows the recompositions to come: "Something startles me where I once thought I was safest" (1867, 308).<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> I am referring here to Whitman's practice of "composting" his own lines of type through the editing process, in a large part because he oversaw personally the setting of much of the time for his editions. Whitman would often lift entire lines and move them into other poems, suggesting that typesetting was as important for his editing process as composition with pen and paper. For a detailed account of this process in editing and printing the various editions of *Leaves*, see: *Re-Scripting Whitman*, ed. Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2005).



By the time we move on from the glowing tramp figure to the end of the first lyric series of the 1855 edition, what seemed an inevitable and inclusive union ("I celebrate myself / what I assume you shall assume" (1855, 13)) teeters in these final two stanzas on the threshold of misrecognition or obscurity:

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,  
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,  
And filter and fibre your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,  
Missing me one place search another,  
I stop somewhere waiting for you

(1855, 56)

It is not just communication but the survival of "me," the very subject of this sprawling song, that depends on each action of this phrase being correspondent: the failing to fetch, the missing of me, the stop somewhere to wait. And despite all the prepositional movement and verbal glancing of "me," the "I" goes *unvoiced*. Whitman's longest poem, the one he edited throughout his lifetime, ends not by "I" soliciting "you." The address is at best oblique and not at all a triumphant marching of a mythical, encompassing subject. I and you are fixed on the left and right margin of a single line, joined only in a temporary rest or chiasmus of blood that mirrors a dialectical between form and content. If there is any imperative to this interchange, it is not to identify with or judge our movements according to some pre-conceived notion but to literally see and hear where we go: "Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you, / You must travel it for yourself" (1855, 52).<sup>82</sup>

In his book on lyric address, *Poetry's Touch: On Lyric Address*, Williams Waters describes the difficulty lyrics have with balancing their private values with the public, communicative dimension of lyric gestures and sentiment. Waters glosses the closing line from T. S. Eliot's "A Dedication to My Wife"—"These are private words addressed to you in public"—as the enabling contradiction of lyric speech. Echoing Wittgenstein on the essential privateness of language (and the local games we construct around the singular provocations of reality), Waters argues that "words *are* private, even as they call attention to the way this privacy is changed by the same 'listening' of non-addressed bystanders that the words' utterance as poetry may be said to license."<sup>83</sup> Language games of

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<sup>82</sup> Donald Pease reads Whitman's dialogic persona as a method to resist fixed identity by enacting "never-ending colloquution between self and other... In a dialogue each person speaks from his or her own position, but that position is always modified by the anticipated qualifications of a respondent." Pease locates and defines this "modernist" subjectivity in Whitman as "personification of the 'common place' between people and things." (76). See: Donald Pease, "Blake, Crane, Whitman, and Modernism: A Poetics of Pure Possibility," *PMLA* 96, No. 1 (January, 1981), 64–85.

<sup>83</sup> William Waters, *Poetry's Touch: On Lyric Address*, 20. One could think this notion of a private language alongside Wittgenstein's discussion of how a grammar must be prepared to give name to a private experience such as pain: "But what does it mean to say that he has 'named his pain'?... When one says 'He gave a name to his sensation,' one forgets that much must be prepared in the language for mere naming to make sense. And if we speak of someone's giving a name to a pain, the grammar of the word 'apin' is what has been prepared here; it indicates the post where the new word

dedication, commemoration, and imaginative appreciation around the particular reality of an addressee balance both a generality of reference (a reading public) and a personal specificity (*my* wife). Poems might tighten the range of an address by interpellating a specific, immediate "you," nominating a specific linguistic target, but even the reception of this specific address depends on the psychological vulnerability of the addressee, what pragmatic linguistics call the "target" of a message.<sup>84</sup> The authority of the message is suspended somewhere between this implied public and the ability for this intimate "you" to be present to the message.

What I want to emphasize is how Whitman builds in a grammar of non-equivalence into multiple aspects of a lyric's form. By beginning the first two lines of the second stanza with present participles, Whitman highlights how even the words we have for articulating motion phase in and out of objecthood, with the substantives often preceding the actions. There is also the brief alliterative patterning of *f*ailing to *f*etch and *m*issing *m*e that ties no determinate value to this elusive "me" but rather, like metrical patterns, generates an abstract momentum of sound in which "me" is modified.<sup>85</sup> Whitman, like countless poets before him, is engaging in a wager with how a particular life can appear through an abstract patterning or technical device that has no essential relation to it. But it is the abstract patterning which preserves the idiosyncratic inertia, just as a law preserves its exception. "Missing me" propels your search, your blood, and I respond by stopping, waiting, a figure conditioned by its attendance "for you." It is the lyric equivalent of the retrospective saying, "I did it all for you," when what was done ("it") implies the aggregate energy of the entire song brought to bear here on this single, possible encounter. The drama is not just in how actions become substantives or how we define and refine the corporeal shape of the other but also in how whatever presence "I" possess— what is indicative or indexical of "me"—becomes a condition of your experience.

The act of epistemological resistance in the penultimate stanza—"You will hardly know what I mean"—sets up the expectation that "you" is in fact the implicit subject of the ensuing verbal participles: "failing, missing." The commonsense reading would be: "Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged, / Missing me on place search another, / [you] stop somewhere waiting for [me]." However, the two dependent clauses of the closing stanza hinge on "I" not "you." Has "I" failed to fetch "me"? The relationship between I and me or I and the possessive "my" is phrased as a problem of self-relation: one is not identical to the other. The poem voices this problem explicitly earlier in a line that anticipates modernisms' complicated relationships to self-objectification (in response to modes of cultural production overdetermined by logics of exchange and consumption):

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is stationed." (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Shulte (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), Section 257:98e.)

<sup>84</sup> For a useful discussion of how linguistic "targets" function as sites of ideological positioning and instruction, see Michael Silverstein's "The Uses and Utility of Ideology: A Commentary," *Language Ideologies: Practice and Theory*, ed. Bambi B. Schieffelin, Kathryn A. Woolard, Paul V. Kroskrity (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1998), 123–49.

<sup>85</sup> One could make an entire argument about the staged tension between sonic parallelism/alliteration and the appearance of lyrical subjects, both first- and second-person, in this poem. The two American poets that seem to me most concerned with this intimate wager between the abstract patternings of sound and visceral, experiential singularity are Hart Crane and Susan Howe.

"the other I am must not abase itself to you" (1855, 15).<sup>86</sup> The object of this address, again figured as a refusal of valuation by way of moral or statutory hierarchy, is "you my soul," as we read before the phrase above, separated by an ellipsis: "I believe in you my soul . . ." What often seems so proleptic and perverse about Whitman emerges precisely in this sleight of hand: the address has become the *condition* of belief, not a persuasion toward it.<sup>87</sup> What is more, it has become constitutive of both "my" self-difference (embodied, credulous speaker/spirit) and the very amorous object that must not "abase itself to the other." This is said by an "I" who looks backward at itself, "sweating through fog with linguists and contenders," and who fails to form an argument about its founding belief. The I can declare its belief in "my soul," but this belief must be posited through this refusal of the "I" to abase itself to its other, which seems to at the same time authorize the inverse refusal: "you must not be abased to the other." The slippage in this pragmatic inversion is a parallel to the passage at the end: I and you swap places. Yet, "the other" these parallel phrases posit pre-*positionally*—"to the other"—are discursively disparate: the self-difference of embodied belief (I to my soul) and the intimate, non-identity of the prospective lyric situation (if and when you would abase yourself to I). The imagined encounter we land on, without a period to limit its pause, is both a literal and figurative one.

We might remember that earlier in the same poem, when "all" were called to listen to this "I" who would tramp its "perpetual journey," it was a series of distinguishing "signs" that were given to mark this self-consciously rustic, vagrant figure of the public road: "My signs are a rain-proof coat, good shoes, and a staff cut from the woods" (1855, 51). In the same stanza, this figurative vagabond migrates to a series of negative, actionable claims: "I have no chair, nor church nor philosophy; / I lead no man to a dinner-table, library, exchange" (1855, 51). In disclaiming professionalized sedentariness, dogmatism, or even the conceptual rigor of traditional philosophical inquiry, this figure of a public errand is also making a series of promises: I will not substitute you for another. I will not submit you to the rarefication of an isolated study. I will not find you within the settled, domestic constraint of a meal. Following these negative avowals, the speaker seems to parse this exact problem of the quantitative and qualitative difference of this singular/plural you, which is after

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<sup>86</sup> I am thinking here of Rimbaud's famous letter to Georges Izambard in 1871 in which he formulated the phrase, "Je est un autre," as well as Walter Benjamin's discussion of one's empathetic relationship to commodities and projection of one's private fantasies into interior domestic assemblages and shop windows of commodities throughout the *Arcades Project*. See: *Arcades Project*, trans. Kevin McLaughlin, ed. Howard Eiland and Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002.)

<sup>87</sup> In perhaps the strongest and most sustained argument against the self-identical readings of Whitman's eroticism and prophesizing of liberal individualism, Michael Warner argues that this "perversity" of Whitman's phenomenology of "selfing" is based around the transgressive notion that "sexuality [is] an expressive capacity of the individual," and that this individual could appropriate the pronominal shifters of anonymity and indefiniteness in order to address a "print public sphere" that it can neither anticipate nor know fully. "Assuming what I assume, you and I have neither an identity together, mediated as we are by print, nor apart, since neither pronoun attributions nor acts of assuming manage to distinguish us" (40). Thus, in an argument parallel to mine, Warner claims that "interpersonal drama" of Whitman's self-abandoning addresses to strangers, to you, and to his readers are ways of using the technologies of print address to evoke the very "embodied sociality that modern public print discourse negates" (42). See: "Whitman Drunk," *Breaking Bounds: Whitman & Cultural Studies*, ed. Betsy Erkilli & Jay Grossman, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1996), 30–44.

all what it must "call" us in order to summon us to the stop, or embrace, this "I" enacts: "But each man and each woman of you I lead upon a knoll, / My left hand hooking you round the waist, / My right hand pointing to landscapes of continents and the public road" (1855, 51).

Notice too how "of you" is singled out as a collective body out of which this "I" is drawing out man and woman toward some common, shared vantage: a knoll. And Whitman treats this "knoll" as an *actual* site. Actual topographic variation is what enables this grammatical assumption. This imagined physical "encounter" reduplicates the grammatical ambiguity of who exactly is being selected from among the singular/plural "you." In order to actually "see" collectively what the first-person pronoun, "I," is pointing at, while also feeling its hand on us individually, "we" (potential readers/interlocutors) must imagine this embrace as both multiple and commonly oriented. This risks substitution, of course, which is precisely Whitman's wager in both embracing you in common and pointing out a road addressed only to you. It should be remembered that this proximate yet receding public road—"it is not far, it is within reach" (1855, 52)—must be traveled *singularly*—"Not I, not any one else can travel it for you." Thus, even if we can occur together momentarily, we are still traveling on different roads. "There is no stoppage and never can be stoppage" even if "I, you, and the worlds, all beneath or upon their surfaces, were this moment reduced back to a pallid float, it would no avail in the long run, We should surely bring up again and again where we now stand, / and surely go as much farther, and then farther and farther." (1855, 51). We are in it for the long run, the "long run" being the figurative landscape *and* the serial construction of the poem.

Following Whitman's penchant for mixing discourses, he draws upon techniques of rhetorical questioning and lyrical address as topoi that bring strangers together. Borrowed from the discourses of phrenology, "adhesiveness" was Whitman's idiosyncratic term for this glancing site of contact. As presented for the first time in "Song for the Open Road," the "here" of adhesiveness, occurs in the mutual instantiation of a rhetorical question, "Do you know what it is?":

Here is adhesiveness, it is not previously fashion'd, it is apropos;  
Do you know what it is as you pass to be loved by strangers?  
Do you know the talk of those turning eye-balls?

The fact that we cannot assume each moment of affection between strangers produces a clear notion of who is adhering to what creates, for Whitman, a certain kind of opening for speakers to recognize each other outside of moral and political standards of self-possession and self-consistency. It is also in this opening that we can hear Whitman's dogged insistence that "we" take this and every other moment *personally*, as if all things material could be personified in the contradictory shapes of a democratic lover.<sup>88</sup> From the outset, "What I assume" and what "you shall assume" are marked as radically distinct, even if these orientations share the same material ground: "every atom belongs to me as good belongs to you" (1855, 1). Grammatically, the shared material ground in which this orientation can occur *is* the grounding, authorizing gesture. What I assume will not be the same as what you assume, and yet the embarrassing pretension of Whitman's lyric model is that by embodying my value and addressing it to you, making it our "ground," the transpersonal

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<sup>88</sup> In a lecture on personification, Donald Davie argued usefully that the pairing of any abstract noun with a verb is a form of rhetorical personification (and not some special mechanical operation to be refused). We use this "rhetoric" everyday to describe our ordinary experience of concepts or things, such as "Justice demands." The attenuated phrase "I shall... filter your blood" is a figuration of the first person as a rhetorical device. See Donald Davie, "Personification," F. W. Bateson Memorial Lecture, cited in *Essays in Criticism* 31:2 (1981), 91-104.

arrangement of these concrete truths and untruths will show itself. As Sarah Ahmed has argued, it is through substantiating the phenomenological process of orienting ourselves in a social environment that subjects become conscious of themselves as subjects, particularly sexual subjects, who make their desires and behaviors normatively legible to others. Ahmed's example is the prototypical armchair philosopher who elaborates a system and examples from a universalized position of a dispassionate male "I" seated at a desk.<sup>89</sup> Whitman evokes this normative process not only in his unwillingness to stay still but also in his repeated play on the connotations of the word itself, assume, which could mean either to take for granted (the premises of an argument, the reason for another person's behavior, etc.) or to take upon one's self, as in the assuming of a burden. Assumption exists here and elsewhere *only* in the present tense—"assumed" never appears in any version of "Song of Myself."<sup>90</sup>

To assume both intimacy and untranslatability, either for speech or knowledge, is a kind of utopian impulse, as in a word, an idea, or person can co-exist without one subordinating the other. But given Whitman's penchant for concretion, he still has to also find a palpable way for his lyrical addresses to situate these incommensurable things. He does this, in part, through a syntax of negative indication. For example, he will declare a person "more than" available language yet "none more than" you are as a historical being. In the brief poem addressed "To One Shortly to Die," the speaker declares "I sit quietly,—I remain faithful, / I am more than nurse, more than parent or neighbor. / I absolve you from all except yourself." (1867, 265). "You" are absolved because I address you as "more" than I could suppose. "More than" is also a way of delimiting a particularity in a historical continuum as in the poem addressed "To the Sayer of Words." The speaker defines "you" as "none more than [you] are the present and the past." (1867, 4:219). The speaker of "Whoever you are, Holding me now in hand" admonishes this speculative figure of lover by stated "I am not what you supposed, but far different." (1867, 122). In this case, with the embrace already consummated, the address is used to assert a practical limit of what you could or will come to know about me through our intimacies.

It is important, too, that the many self-permissions of Whitman's speakers carry both the promise of mobility and the danger of effacement or self-negation. Whitman describes this in a kind of visionary poem, entitled, "Roaming in Thought" in his epigrammatic 1881 "By the Roadside" collection to which he adds the astonishing subtitle "*After reading Hegel*": "Roaming in thought over the Universe, I saw the little that is Good steadily hastening towards immortality, / And the vast all

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<sup>89</sup> Sarah Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 25–109.

<sup>90</sup> There is actually a general lack of "assumed" in almost all the poems of every version of *Leaves of Grass*. The first appearance I can find is in the 1856 version in the middle section of the poem "Poem of Many into One" which acts out a challenge to those who would "talk to America" without studying its land, idioms, and men: "Have you possessed yourself of the Federal Constitution? / Do you acknowledge liberty with audible and absolute acknowledgment, and set slavery at naught for life and death? / Do you see who have left described processes and poems behind them, and *assumed* new ones?" (1856, 192). In the 1871 edition, this line migrates to another poem and is revised as a question of vision: "Do you see who have left all feudal processes and poems behind them, and assumed the poems and processes of Democracy?" ("As I Sat Alone on Blue Ontario's Shore," 1871, 319). Assumption here is figured as a necessary historical process to both poetic innovation and political development beyond slavery. Interestingly, both are figured as extensions of "possessing" the provisionality of the constitution.

that is call'd Evil I saw hastening to merge itself and become lost and dead." (1881, 216).<sup>91</sup> Whitman could admire the erudition of Kant, Fichte, and Schelling or the systematicity of Hegel, as he writes in *Specimen Days* (1882), for evoking the "infinite variety, the past, the surroundings of to-day, or what may happen in the future, the contrarieties of material with spiritual, and of natural with artificial" and making them all "to the eye of the *ensemblist*, but necessary sides and unfoldings, different steps or links, in the endless process of Creative thought." But in these lines of thought he also sees "something lacking—something cold, a failure to satisfy the deepest emotions of the soul—a want of living glow, fondness and warmth."<sup>92</sup> In short, they lacked an orientation toward another life, be that generalized or specific.

Thought it might seem counterintuitive at first, another way that Whitman preserves the particularity and opacity of persons and things is through one of his signature devices: the catalogue. Catalogues are not static lists for Whitman by dynamic ensembles that hold a series of voices in tension, a technique he adapted from semantic parallelism and metaphorical intensification of biblical verses in King James edition.<sup>93</sup> In Paul's Corinthians, for example, he describes "charity" as

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<sup>91</sup> Whitman's image of "Evil" as that which merges into itself and becomes "lost and dead" mirrors the cautionary narrative Hegel himself writes about the Christian ascetic personality he describes as the "Beautiful Soul" whose moral self-regard doesn't produce self-consciousness but rather a self-righteous remove from the world. For the development of this concept, see the section titled "The 'Beautiful Soul': Evil and the Forgiveness of it" in G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), §632–671. For a more detailed tracking of Whitman's reading and exposure to Hegel, see Brian Brodhead Glaser, "Reassessing Whitman's Hegelian Affinities," *Walt Whitman Review* 29, No. 1 (2011), 19–32.

<sup>92</sup> Walt Whitman, "Specimen Days," *Complete Prose Works* (Philadelphia: D. McKay, 1897), 898.

<sup>93</sup> Biblical references are not just topical but formal in Whitman. Within the first stanza of "Song of Myself," Whitman sets up both the pronomial and verbal within a consistent grammatical form: loafe changes positions but is still assigned to "I" yet what "my" qualifies changes: soul, ease. Robert Alter has argued that verses in the Bible often open by presenting two completely disparate descriptions as co-existent and mutually applicable. The developmental movement in the lines is from an ordinary term to a literary one, what Alter describes as a "semantic parallelism." He gives this example from Isaiah 59:9–10: "We hope for light and look! darkness, / for effulgence, and in gloom we go. / We grope like blind men a wall, / like the eyeless we grope." Light migrates to darkness and effulgence to gloom: "The second line intensifies the assertion of the first line by making the outer darkness an inner darkness, the total incapacity to see, and transforming the general image of walking in the dark of the preceding verse into a more concrete picture of a blind man groping his way along a wall." Whitman also mirrors the metaphorical intensifications of The Song of Songs. The Song of Songs inverts the feminized landscape-as-city allegory into a metaphoric (not allegorical) system where its parts, human and non-human, are drawn into a non-identical, cumulative, mutually constitutive relation. Whereas the woman-as-city allegory legitimated such violent, imperial conquests of "the whore of Babylon," the figurative enumerations of Song of Songs create a symbolic economy that Francis Landy has described as the metaphorical discourse of love. See: Francis Landy, "The Song of Songs," *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, eds. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1987), 305–19. For a discussion of Whitman's relationship to Corinthians, see: James L. Livingston, "Walt Whitman's Epistle to the Americans," *American Literature* 40:4 (January, 1969), pp. 542–544. For a response to Gay Wilson Allen's early characterization of Whitman's biblical indebtedness as well as a reading of "Song of Myself" in light

a physical "enduring" of earth's incongruities through the rigorous alternation of voices. Whitman lifts the language from this Epistle for his late poem, "Carol of Words" (1871): "The earth does not argue, is not pathetic, has no arrangements, / Does not scream, hast, persuade, threaten, promise, / Makes no discriminations, has no conceivable failures, / Closes nothing, refuses nothing, shuts none out" (1871, 4:232). Incongruity is sustained in part by lack of an organizing judgment. Reading him out of the exegetical tradition of the KJB, Josephine Miles and, more recently, Denis Donoghue, have argued that we should read Whitman's "voicing" of things as a sublime phrasal poetry (versus a clausal poetry). Sublime phrasal poetry works by suffuses its themes and objects completely with the poet's passion, producing the compounding sentence structure of "nouns and epithets, participles and compounds, with a very minimum of clausal subordination and active verbs."<sup>94</sup>

In *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (2002), Susan Stewart helpfully defines voicing as the complicated material process by which "my history" and "the uniqueness of your existence" emerges through utterance. "The particular timbre, tone, hesitations, and features of articulation" can be read as concrete responses to a "shared history of language and experience."<sup>95</sup> In reading one of Whitman's later poems from "Vocalism" (located in the "Autumn Rivulets" section in the death-bed edition), Stewart describes poetic voice as a will to speak that arises from extensive encounters with the world: each speaker is as much speaking as it is spoken through by the social and material character of our senses, a notion she borrows from the young Marx.<sup>96</sup> If we look more closely at how Whitman defines voicing in "Vocalism," we find this "social history" in the ways affects, things, and subject positions are "animated" by each other through speech. Voice, as a stable quality, emerges through a series of potential analogies that double as elaborations, redefinitions, or intensifications: "Vocalism, measure, concentration, determination, and the divine power to speak words." Following this list, Whitman presents a series of things and affective states bestowed with a will of their own, thronging the mouth, refusing decorum, and resisting the will of their speakers: "armies, ships, antiquities, libraries, paintings, machines, cities, hate, despair, amity, pain, murder, aspiration, form in close ranks, / They debauch as they are wanted to march obediently through the mouth of that man or that woman." (1892, 297). This catalogue of states and things is, quite literally, a form of life that enters speech according to its own rule and gravities. Affective states (hate, despair, pain) inflect cultural, industrial, and military institutions, suggesting that "in speech" the one determines the other.

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of "Song of Solomon," see: Emmy Stark Zitter, "Songs of the Canons: Song of Solomon and 'Song of Myself,'" *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 5:2 (1987), 8–15.

<sup>94</sup> Denis Donoghue, "'Leaves of Grass' and American Culture," *The Sewanee Review* 111:3 (Summer, 2003), 347-374.

<sup>95</sup> Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2002), 110.

<sup>96</sup> Here is Marx on the social history of the senses in his "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844: "Only through the objectively unfolded richness of man's essential being is the richness of subjective *human* sensibility (a musical ear, an eye for beauty of form – in short, *senses* capable of human gratification, senses affirming themselves as essential powers of *man*) either cultivated or brought into being. For not only the five senses but also the so-called mental senses, the practical senses (will, love, etc.), in a word, *human* sense, the human nature of the senses, comes to be by virtue of *its* object, by virtue of *humanised* nature. The *forming* of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present." ("Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979), 88–89.)

In the first line of the second, serially numbered section, the poem steps back reflexively to make this affective interplay explicit in the form of a question: "What is it in me that makes me tremble so at voices?" (1892, 298). The speaker waits with brain and lips closed until "that comes which has the quality to strike and to unclose." What makes "me" tremble is the anticipation of an addressed life that this "voicing" constructs, a particular "you" that has both the resolve to respond to "this life" and the concatenation of objects *we* draw around, and through us, in speech. Whitman uses his notion of voicing to interrogate the very empirical status of demonstrated facts. In the opening poem of 1855, Whitman announces himself to "mathematicians," "logicians," and practitioners of "positive science" by characterizing facts not as inert objects but as entrances: "Gentlemen I receive you, and attach and clasp hands with you, / 'The facts are useful and real . . . they are not my dwelling . . . I enter by them to an area of the dwelling." The speaker goes on in the next stanza to define itself as a remainder of life that has been staked in place of these facts: "I am less the reminder of property or qualities, and more the reminder of life, / And go on the square for my own sake and for others' sakes" (1855, 28). Whitman also stakes a version of himself along with these first-person iterations: "Walt Whitman, an America, one of the roughs, a kosmos, disorderly fleshly and sensual." (1855, 28). Each instance of self-announcement becomes a stubborn reminder and future condition for how myself is visible to others, and vice versa, through a series of inevitably static posturings or still lifes.

Drawing upon idiomatic and geographically specific speech was also a way that Whitman marked his interlocutors with historical particularity. In the series of public talks Whitman sketched as a way to establish himself as a sort of public intellectual, *American Primer* (edited and published posthumously by Horace Traubel in 1904), he describes the aim of a composition as one of restoring an embodied history to words:

Of words wanted, the matter is summed up in this: When the time comes for them to represent anything or any state of things, the words will surely follow. The lack of any words, I say again, is as historical as the existence of words. As for me, I feel a hundred realities, clearly determined in me, that words are not yet formed to represent. . . . A true composition in words, returns the human body, male or female—that is the most perfect composition.<sup>97</sup>

The composition of a text, implicitly, parallels the pragmatic composition of the body as it responds to the various impediments and invitations it meets along the road. If certain bodies are repressed as criminal or suspect, as with Whitman's gabbing loiterers or eroticized strangers, then so too will their speech reflect these judgments. For this reason, Whitman looks to novelties of speech in order to address both these local repressions and the broader social and political failures to accommodate his transient speakers:

A perfect user of words uses things—they exude in power and beauty from him—miracles from his hands—miracles from his mouth—lilies, clouds, sunshine, woman, poured copiously—things, whirled like chainshot rocks, defiance, compulsion, houses, iron, locomotives, the oak, the pine, the keen eye, the hairy breast, the Texan ranger, the Boston truckman, the woman that arouses a man, the man that arouses a woman.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Walt Whitman, *An American Primer*, ed. Horace Traubel (Boston: Small and Maynard, 1904) 28.

<sup>98</sup> *American Primer*, 14.



In the dialectic of use, words are not just instruments to effect specific ends but are also formed through a history of labor, weather, and sexual desire. Where a dictionary would fail to capture the seemingly infinite contexts that condition words-in-use, Whitman uses the space of his poems to enumerate these chaotic multiplicities, as Leo Spitzer has argued, that effect language we shape in common. What is more, he seeks to give each the particular orientation of “arousal,” even if this desire is shaped between two people who hardly know each other. Michael Davidson, argues something similar when he describes Whitman’s shifty use of pronouns as a sort of cross-dressing by which multiple erotic codes are reconfigured through the grammatical semblance of a single person.<sup>99</sup>

There is manuscript evidence of Whitman revising the *American Primer* lectures on the unbound copies of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*. However, the majority were written during “[t]hat stretch of time after 1855 until 1861 was crowded with personal as well as political preparations for war.”<sup>100</sup> Although he never actually delivered them, Whitman planned to deliver these “rhetorical sketches... by degrees through all These States, especially the West and South, and through Kanada.” Whitman dreamed of giving up his work in the newspaper to become a public orator or, even, Free Soil presidential candidate. Referring to the *Primer* sometime in the 1880s, Whitman reportedly told Traubel that “This subject of language interests me... I never quite get it out of my mind. I sometimes think the *Leaves* is only a language experiment—that it is an attempt to give the spirit, the body, the man, new words, new potentialities of speech.”<sup>101</sup> What his populist political editorials, literary rants against British influence, and formulations of American common language all share in concern with his poetry is a focus on how words capture their popular usage and the “realities” each moment of use implies. Words themselves, as pragmatic objects, reflect a relationship between the sites of occupations (a farm, a prairie, a coast, etc.) and new forms of pronunciation that emerge through application: “I like limber, lasting, fierce words—I like them applied to myself—and I like them in newspapers, courts, debates, congress.”<sup>102</sup> It matters not just what a word is but where and how it occurs.

Whitman's consistent subject, the *perceptual* body, is also limited by its finite appearance in a situation it does not design or elect completely, while also hurdling ahead of itself, bound up in the things it uses or perceives: “All truths wait in all things, / They neither hasten their delivery nor resist it, / They do not need the obstetric forceps of the surgeon” (1855, 33). Whitman captures this dialectic between perception and embodied knowledge by showing how a phenomenal orientation precedes and outlasts any particular instance of communication or individual will. What is seen acts back on what could be said. Given Whitman's fascination with phrenology, one might expect that

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<sup>99</sup> See: Michael Davidson, “When the World Strips Down and Rouges Up”: Redressing Whitman,” *Breaking Bounds*, 220–237. For other readings of Whitman's queer sociability and pronomial swapping in American poetry, see also: Robert K. Martin, *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998) and Thomas E. Yingling, *Hart Crane and the Homosexual Text: New Thresholds, New Anatomies* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990).

<sup>100</sup> Horace Traubel, Foreword to *American Primer*, ix.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, viii–ix.

<sup>102</sup> *American Primer*, 14.

such a supra-personal force would in fact be latent version of an ideal human race yet to manifest.<sup>103</sup> Yet Whitman never gives us such a consolidated picture of a “human race” and seems just as interested in the porosity of “natural” laws or “historical” characters as they are spoken.

Perhaps this is all to agree that, yes, Whitman is embarrassing. But he is embarrassing with an additional sense. We might remember that to embarrass means not only to encumber, to perplex, or to render "difficult or intricate" but to fill one with shame or a sense of indebtedness to another. Etymologically, the term comes from French *embarrasser* and is often used to describe a superfluity of wealth ("embarrassment of riches") or, in the Spanish adaptation, to describe a pregnancy with. One might recall Adorno's doubly embarrassing moment in *Aesthetic Theory* when he describes the thoroughly subjectively mediated artwork as becoming "pregnant with the appearance of an other."<sup>104</sup> Though this is an awkward way of phrasing art's responsibilities to both the particularity and non-identity of the other, it also seems an accurate translation of why we find "committed" artworks so embarrassing ethically and politically. They bear a kind alien purpose. Whitman's lyrical phrasings go to the heart of American discourses of individualism, democratic union, and frontier expansion only to show that they also play host to a divergent series of loquacious yet resistant transients who trouble these progressive narratives at every turn. As we move on to consider this rhetoric of democratic union in not only Whitman but his early admirer, Emerson, more explicitly, we will see how these local dynamics provide a constant test for the so-called truth of the whole.

### What is it, then, between us?

What is it, then, between us?

What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?

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<sup>103</sup> For an insightful discussion of Whitman's engagement with phrenology as a way of dealing with epistemological opacity, see Nathaniel Mackey's "Phrenological Whitman," collected in *Paracritical Hinge: Essays, Talks, Notes, Interviews* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 21–40.

<sup>104</sup> The full quote from Adorno on the “pregnancy” of artworks is: "The instant of expression in artworks is however not their reduction to the level of their materials as to something unmediated; rather, this instant is fully mediated. Artworks become appearances, in the pregnant sense of the term—that is, as the appearance of an other—when the accent falls on the unreality of their own reality. Artworks have the immanent character of being an act, even if they are carved in stone, and this endows them with the quality of being overwhelmed when faced with an important work" (Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 79). In his essay on Sartre's theory of the literature of “engagement,” Adorno phrases the work of art as the semblance of “an Other that ought to exist”: “If art is merely identical with itself, a purely scientized construction, it has already gone bad and is literally preartistic. The moment of intention is mediated solely through the form of the work, which crystallizes into a likeness of an Other that ought to exist. As pure artifacts, products, works of art, even literary ones, are instructions for the praxis they refrain from: the production of life lived as it ought to be.” See: Theodor W. Adorno, “Commitment,” *Notes to Literature: Volume Two*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1992), 93. For the essay by Jean-Paul Sartre that Adorno is referring to in this essay, see: Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, (London: Methuen, 1967).

Whatever it is, it avails not—distance avails not, and place avails not.

"Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" (1892)

If lyric address confronts us with the difficulty of my value enduring through you as something shared yet non-identical, it is the calling of "us" into question that brings this tenuous, discontinuous sociality into relief. The answer to the question of what has formed and crossed between us, nested near the middle of Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," would seem to be a simple one: grass. As both a metonymic material form (at times for bodies, pages of the book, individual dispositions, etc.) and a broadcasting process, grass is multiplied over the course of the poem while never remaining identical with itself; rather, it comes to sketch out the tenuous, discontinuous structure of "the commons" in Whitman. Although American poets borrow so much of their interest in ordinary encounters with alien, wandering figures from the British Romantics, especially Wordsworth and Coleridge, the objects and ground of these encounters is radically different. Rather than formally account for the loss of commons and the injured remainders of British imperialism, American poets adapted these experiments in ballads, stopped-traveler poems, and epics of the growth of an individual mind to a national context where "vagrancy" is a normative condition for democratic exchange. The "Solitary Reaper" and the leech gatherer of "Resolution and Independence" become Whitman's syntactically indefinite "whoever you are now holding me in hand" or the metaphoric ground of "grass." This is made most explicit in the line-broken sentence in the third-to-last stanza of "Song of Myself" in which the speaker bequeathes itself to the broadcasting of grass: "I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles." (1855, 56). Here, grass joins two incongruous expressions of affective valuation—"I love" and "you want me"—in a mutual process by which the remainder of one life is broadcast as another life by another moving form. The broadcasting of grass seeds provides a literal, ecological version of the kind of structure of response and value Whitman has been constructing through address, metaphorical intensification, and other formal lyrical devices. We see this, for example, in the first iteration of a poem titled "To You" which in the collection of "Inscriptions" that Whitman placed at the front of his later volumes. In the penultimate poem of the section, coming just before the address to "Thou Reader," it poses the speech of strangers as a question that moves in two directions: "Stranger, if you passing meet me and desire to speak to me, why should you not speak to me? / And why should I not speak to you?" (175).

While the love of one stranger doesn't guarantee the other, there is a trust of survival in this impersonal, transfiguring process, even if this bequeathing of one's life to addressing or questioning. Later, grass is figured as the hopeful flag of "my" disposition and even more distantly the marshy plant, Calamus, known more commonly as "sweet flag." In this way, it provides a figurative complement to address. It serves at once as the content of a broader political hope (a more provisional, uneven conception of unification) and historical posture (sedimented, mutually impacting lives) and as a marker for the terrain or marginal situation where I take up residence and wait for you. A pivotal line of so-called rhetorical questioning occurs in "Song of Myself" when the child asks, "*What is the grass?*" by not only speaking the question but *fetching* the very substance and bringing it to the speaker. It would seem the child is practicing a simple language game: what is the relationship between this word and the object I hold in my hand and how does language posit the "presence" of this thing? The problem is a parallel one, of course, to the issue of self-presentation in the lyric. Whitman's speaker responds only with another question: "How could I answer the child?" Clearly, this question is not an appeal to the child, but to "you," the intimate yet shifting interlocutor. And the "I" confesses to you, seemingly talking over or through the child: "I do not know what it is

any more than he." (1855, 16). Even with this impossibility of knowing voiced, the speaker is not afraid to posit what this grass *might* be, just as the speaker's assumptions never threaten to substitute "you" for what new singularity "you" has been or might become. Our life is not threatened by *this* question, asked at *this* moment, because our perception momentum continues to play out what this address initiates.<sup>105</sup> The anaphoric conjectures quickly begin accruing: "I guess"... "Or I guess"... "And now it seems to me"... "Tenderly I will use you"... "This grass is very dark to me"... until the perceptual apostrophe, "O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues!" It is as if each probing guess produces a new reality of its own, a syntactical momentum, much as address attempts to gather and locate "you" and "I" into a place where we can speak to each other.

But this is more than a questionable indirection. The overlaying of these perceptual, linguistic (I guess), and even material (each blade of grass) possibilities is concretized in the apostrophe of "so many uttering tongues." The hundred realities we saw Whitman declare as felt within himself, awaiting words, materialize here as a series of conjectural possibilities personified as instruments of speech. Each claim to clarify "what" this grass *is* is then translated into another attempt at clarification and signification: "Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic, / *And it means*, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones, / Growing among black folks as among white, / Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the same."<sup>106</sup> (1855, 16). The lyrical subject doesn't concretize as a grammatical figure until the end of this line of questioning. The "I" is the one who gives and receives, in present tense. Yet, the object of this giving and receiving remains indefinite—I give "them" the same, I receive "them" the same—as if the speaker cannot know whether it is the person itself who is given or it is this entire intra-personal and intra-material process of "meaning" that the grass becomes an occasion for thinking, describing, and questioning.

Heidegger, in his late essay on the "questioning" of technology and poiesis, describes a similar conflict. Whereas the "Origin of the Work of Art" approached the four-fold nature of the artwork through a self-conscious crafting of thinking, this late essay sets as its task a questioning that builds a way or occasioning of "co-responsibility" between "a *telos* (aim, purpose) and a *poiesis* (bringing-forth)." In rhetorical terms, this enables Heidegger to seek a common purpose amidst a series of given semantic forms, word histories, and examples of poiesis: "Technology is not equivalent to the essence of

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<sup>105</sup> In this notion of perception as outrunning the perceptual subject, I am indebted to the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. Here is the line from *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) I am referencing explicitly, which notes a social character of perception that mirrors the sociality of address: "The world may remain undivided between my perception and his... both are, not *cogitationes* shut up in their own immanence, but beings which are outrun by their world, and which consequently may well be outrun by each other. The affirmation of an alien consciousness standing over against mine would immediately make my experience into a private spectacle, since it would no longer be co-extensive with being." (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), 411.)

<sup>106</sup> Leo Spitzer has a useful gloss on this poetics of the proper name in a long footnote: "Whitman has exploited also la poetry of proper names: *Knuck, Tuckahoe, Member of Congress* [sic] . . . Many times Whitman has indicated he knew the magical effect produced by Victor Hugo in using exotic proper names, or affective values that Proust extracted from a series of station names from the West-to-East railroad. The proper names, through their semi-mysterious arbitrariness, through their semi-clear etymology and through their place outside the common use of words and linguistic associations, have a magical quality that makes use of the frequent lists of names and litanies in Christian and Hindu traditions." (Leo Spitzer, "La enumeración caótica en la poesía moderna," (Buenos Aires: Conti, 1945), 27, my translation).

technology. When we are seeking the essence of 'tree,' we have to become aware that 'That which pervades every tree, as tree, is not itself a tree that can be encountered among all the other trees.'<sup>107</sup> Whitman's task is an inverse one, though, that interrupts any claim to essential human or national identity with another question or doubt that acts out a more local devotion to what life becomes, then, between us: "Do you not know how the buds beneath are folded? Waiting in gloom protected by frost, / The dirt receding before my prophetic screams, / I underlying causes to balance them at last." (1855, 53). Notice the strange resulting syntax of this question addressed to "you": "I underlying *causes* to balance them at last." What is causing what? The "I" seems to be distanced from its verb (causes) by the gerund (underlying) in a material sequence it arrives late to: at last. Is the subject underlying the phrase or are the buds, dirt, and frost this prophetic scream is embarrassed with? We are given every reason not to trust this figurative, tramping "I," even while it seems to place all its faith in our falling in with it, in and out of the complicated "health" and "strength" of its rapturous body.

When the speaker of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" declares that whatever it is between us will not be "availed" or made available by the distances or places we traverse, it is also renewing its commitment to this endless projecting of I with you: "I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence; / I project myself—also I return—I am with you, and / know how it is." (1867, 186). Just before the question that begins the fifth section of the poem, Whitman gives us a version of this posture of similitude:

These, and all else, were to me the same as they are to you;  
I project myself a moment to tell you—also I return.

I loved well those cities;  
I loved well the stately and rapid river;  
The men and women I saw were all near to me;  
Others the same—others who look back on me, because I look'd forward to them;  
(The time will come, though I stop here to-day and to-night.) (1867, 188)

The status or content of these mutual amorous objects—those cities, the state and rapid river—is unclear, precisely because anaphoric parallelism is not the same as identity. What is consistent in these gestures of sameness is the transient process we have been tracking in many scopes and registers: the self-othering and returning of desire, the intimacies of strangers, the leaf of grass as "the journey-work of the stars" (1855, 34). Each side of this coincidence, Whitman insists, is nothing less than the other. Each is an occasion for the one to call upon another.

The consequence of this uneven structure of mutuality is that his speakers are often finding themselves present in places they have never been, gathering up ciphers, tokens, or recreations of themselves that have been scattered about like currency. As the speaker of "Song of Myself" says of the animals it would go and live with: "They bring me tokens of myself . . . they evince them plainly in their possession. / I do not know where they got those tokens, / I must have passed that way untold times ago and negligently dropt them, / Myself moving forward then and now and forever, / Gathering and showing more always and with velocity" (1855, 34). Here, the vagrant speaker knows how it is with you, how it pays itself out in symbols, and how it lives beyond itself through the indebtedness of perception and touch will always make "it" the subject of this perpetual tramping. Key however is this notion that these poor substitutions for myself—my tokens, my self-made

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<sup>107</sup> Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper Perennial, 1977), 4.

currency—gather and show a momentum that is *more than* they are. The alienation of oneself into a currency—read as money and contemporaneity—never clarifies the problem of what I owe to you or fully recompenses *the* life that you have loaned to me; rather, it only marks a present-tense debt that cannot be paid. It also serves to reify the fact that "society" is not a given but continually reconstituted ensemble through how we address and articulate our indebtedness to each other.<sup>108</sup>

There is an underlying polemic lurking here, too, about the instability of affective worth being privileged over available measures for the production and circulation of workers and their commodities. In fact, Whitman is constantly making mixed metaphors of financial and erotic exchange: "Blind loving wrestling touch, sheath'd hooded sharp-tooth'd touch! / Did it make you ache so, leaving me? / Parting track'd by arriving, perpetual payment of perpetual loan, / Rich showering rain, and recompense richer afterward." (1891–2, 29:216). Physical contact is transfigured as an unpayable, perpetual account. The madness for contact is a need to *experience* or encounter other bodies and animated things as answerable, accountable, yet still vulnerable to the risks of misrecognition and false equivocation. The juxtaposition of the language of finance alongside physical intimacy and movement draws attention to the difficulty we have for giving a positive content to these social obligations. What is consistent, however, is the lyrical phrasing of what *I* owe to *you* (the personal orientation of debt) and how that debt is inevitably extrapolated into logics of losses and gains, "beginnings and endings," that over-run the value of each of these appearances. By restoring the intimacy of our debts to each other, these lyrics are also troubling their transferability, their liquidity, while also concretizing the errancies that transient communion affords.

The section of *Leaves* where we see the deepest challenge to a notion of liberal freedom rooted in positivistic notions of "individual license," "the nation," or "the market"—discourses that have delegitimized vulnerability as a physical or moral weakness—is perhaps fittingly in Whitman's most openly erotic series, now known widely now as the "Calamus" poems.<sup>109</sup> Whitman gives us every temptation to read the Calamus plant allegorically as a flag, phallus, or other symbolic stand-ins. Yet as a figure internal to the book, it is both an echo of the earlier elaboration of grass as the metonym for this hopeful speaker—"the hopeful flag of my disposition"—and the tracking of this promise to its space of dissolution or failure. Throughout the series, Whitman openly courts the paradox of his acts of placement. Instead of directly addressing "you," this series begins with the indirection of proceeding "for all who are, or have been, young men." The section doesn't introduce a new problem of address and self-display but rather shifts emphasis from the *Leaves* more confident postures/passages to an indirect mode of locution whereby the speaker is addressed by the figures it has apostrophized: "Tallying and talked to here by tongues aromatic." Voicing and possession seem possible here only if the lyric figure has already matured and haunts the space it co-inhabits with "you." Our metaphors and senses betray us, too, and this may be the point. The democratic participation of strangers relies on the capacity for *my* words to shift the responsibility of forming a nascent, ongoing concept of a person across physical and epistemological boundaries to other lives.

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<sup>108</sup> For a broader history of cultural, moral, and financial concepts of indebtedness, see David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (New York: Melville House, 2012).

<sup>109</sup> I am echoing here Wendy Brown, who describes the problem of liberal formulation of freedom this way: "A liberal formulation of freedom, proferring liberty as individual license, appears to aggravate the vulnerability of the socially weak to the socially privileged, and thereby to facilitate as well as legitimize the exploitation of wage labor by capital, the racially subordinate by the racially dominant, and the sexually vulnerable by the sexually exploitative" (*States of Injury*, 20).

As critics have noted, the fight over the publication and reception of the Calamus poems was in ways personal, political, and literary historical. After having addressed a copy of his self-published, anonymous 1855 edition to Emerson, a towering figure at the time, Whitman received back on July 21<sup>st</sup> 1855 perhaps the greatest confirmation of talent and value a young poet could ever receive. As the now infamous letter, addressed to the anonymous "Sir," read: "I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of 'LEAVES OF GRASS.' I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that American has yet contributed" (1856, 345). It is extremely rare that any address is so effective, in life or lyric. Without a name or definite personality yet attached other than the rustic, rakish figure who appeared amidst the opening pages, these sprawling lyrics had not only found their target but communicated their complex worth. Emerson met Whitman in Manhattan shortly thereafter, in December, where they had reportedly a very lively walk and dinner.

Being the incorrigible self-promotor that he was, Whitman decided to publish this letter in the back of the 1856 edition and did not seek permission from Emerson. Immediately following this letter was a letter Whitman sent from Brooklyn in 1856 to his "Dear friend and master." Throughout the letter, this "splendid vagabond" maintains a thin line between the rhetoric of subservience and mastery, both to his auditor and to his materials: "Master, I am a man who has perfect faith. Master, we have not come through centuries, caste, heroisms, fables, to halt in this land today. Or I think it is to collect a ten-fold impetus that any halt is made. As nature, inexorable, onward, resistless, impassive amid the threats and screams of disputants, so America. Let all defer." (1856, 347). Thus even in supposedly private letters—perhaps always designed to become public—Whitman was constructing this vagrant drama his lyrical addresses enacted. Emerson, being sufficiently enthralled by this first meeting and willing to graciously overlook Whitman's publication of his private letter for personal gain, agreed to meet Whitman again, this time in Boston, to discuss a manuscript of new poems for the 1860 edition.

Because it has taken on a kind of oedipal significance for theories of Whitman's queer politics and poetics, the story of this walk through the Boston Commons is by now familiar. Emerson cautioned Whitman to excise "Enfans d'Adam" because of its clear presentation of physical contact and desire and Whitman refused, dumbfounded and stubborn. It is was this collection which echoed most strongly the erotically potent series of mates, daughters, and sons emerging from gardens, heavy with love's exhaustion in the Song of Songs. Much of this material, of course, was not new but could be found in pieces across the previous editions in a "Poem of a Few Greatnesses" (1856) and the poem beginning "The bodies of men and women engirth me" (1855). The poems are also continuous—in tone, phrasal form, and vocabulary—with much of "Song of Myself." The last lines of the second section read: "From the night, a moment, I, emerging, flitting out, / Celebrate you, enfans prepared for, / And you, stalwart loins." (1856, 291). In addition to these ecstatic, lusty forms, the poem also gives us Lear-like apostrophes that testify to the costs of bearing one's self to an unwelcome kingdom ("O Furious! O confine me not! (What is this that frees me so in storms? / What do my shouts amid lightnings and raging winds means?)" (1856, 6:305). Less noted is that it is in this same eroticized collection where Whitman provides his most explicit descriptions of bodies as enslaved commodities, an editorial wager that brings his emphatic mode of voicing in direct relation to the limits and dangers of treating a body as an allegory for a nation.

Given a slave's lack of legal personhood and status as a laboring, creative human, the auction itself can be read as a horrible inversion of rhetoric where the one at the podium has become a pure object of its examining crowd who can simply project upon its skin their various fantasies of capital, agency, and inheritance. The speaker itself traffics in these fantasies and benefaction, taking over for the dumb, slovenly auctioneer to extoll the virtues of future heroes that will emerge from this "chattel" and positing the purifying memory of love between man and woman, parent and child, etc.

By the time the speaker gets to the claim, "If any thing is sacred, the human body is sacred, / And the glory and sweet of a man, is the token of manhood untainted" (1856, 3:299), the ironic valuation of the body has become unbearable. The poem turns on this voice, indicting its cruel optimism which overrides one of the gravest human crimes ever perpetuated: "How do you know who shall come from the offspring of his offspring through the centuries? / Who might you find you have come from yourself, if you could trace back through the centuries?" (1856, 3:298–299).

Recrimination is not here posited as an apostrophe of the slave but as a voice that emerges from within the logic of the poem, without an assigned speaker, to address the very imaginative progress this examination of limbs red, black, and white seemed to authorize. But this speculative address, nested as the middle of the section like "What is it then, between us?," is quickly displaced by another interpellation of a body for sale: "A woman's body at auction!" (1856, 299). As a parallax to erotic encounter, these horrific scenes of speculating upon the lineaments of slaves don't produce an affirmative or transparent idea of lyric "subjects" or expressive bodies but rather concretize the various perspectives and discourses that render persons into static objects for passing interest, sale, brutal retribution, or social death.

Though this drama of commodified bodies is a part of the whole that Whitman would eventually title as "Calamus," the more familiar narrative content about a homosexual encounter in a swampy landscape comes in the form of a lyrical series about "paths untrodden." A manuscript has been recovered that gives the original title for this series, included first in 1860, as Calamus-Leaves with the secondary (or original) title crossed through: "Live Oak, with Moss."<sup>110</sup> A symbiotic relation is built into the metaphor of the title between life and decay. We are led into a landscape that, literally, doesn't bear the mark of passage (a biographical irony given how much Whitman experimented here with explicitness of semi-public sex between men) through a series of negative deictic gestures: "Not the heat flames up and consumes, / Not the sea-waves hurry in and out, / Not the air, delicious and dry... Not these—O none of these, more than the flames of me, consuming, burning for his love whom I love—O none, more than I, hurrying in and out; Does the tide hurry, seeking something, and never give up?" The "fates" of "I," "you," and this combustible landscape of passion and lunar tides are caught up in a process of not concentration but diffusion: "wafted in all directions, for friendship, for love.—" (1:3). Here, the poem breaks off, and takes up in the next section of the series a rumination on a live oak in Louisiana, perhaps witnessed while Whitman was traveling to or through New Orleans with his brother, that "utters joyous leaves all its life" with no one to respond (2:7). Yet we cannot read this "uttering joyous leaves of its life" with no one to respond as a failure of responsibility entirely; it is rather another way of proceeding. Here is how the 1860 version begins:

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<sup>110</sup> In a handwritten note on the back of the manuscript, dated by archivists as 1859, Whitman wrote this description of the "Calamus-Leaves: Live Oak, with Moss": "A Cluster of Poems, Sonnets expressing the thoughts, / pictures, aspirations &c / Fit to be perused during the days of the approach of / Death. / (that I have prepared myself for that purpose.— / (Remember now— / Remember then (lxvii). See Alan Helm, "Whitman's Live Oak With Moss," *The Continuing Presence of Walt Whitman: The Life After the Life*, ed. Robert K. Martin, ed., (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), 185-205. For the original manuscript of "Live Oak, with Moss," I reference *Walt Whitman's Songs of Male Intimacy and Love: "Live Oak, with Moss" and "Calamus,"* ed. Betsy Erkill (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011). Hereafter cited in line as "Live Oak, with Moss" with section and line number.



1.  
 IN paths untrodden,  
 In the growth by margins of pond-waters,  
 Escaped from the life that exhibits itself,  
 From all the standards hitherto published—from  
     the pleasures, profits, conformities,  
 Which too long I was offering to feed to my Soul  
 Clear to me now, standards not yet published—  
     clear to me that my Soul,  
 That the Soul of the man I speak for, feeds, rejoices  
     only in comrades;  
 Here, by myself, away from the clank of the world,  
 Tallying and talked to here by tongues aromatic,  
 No longer abashed—for in this secluded spot I can  
     respond as I would not dare elsewhere,  
 Strong upon me the life that does not exhibit itself,  
     yet contains all the rest,  
 Resolved to sing no songs to-day but those of manly  
     attachment,  
 Projecting them along that substantial life,  
 Bequeathing, hence, types of athletic love,  
 Afternoon, this delicious Ninth Month, in my forty-  
     first year,  
 I proceed, for all who are, or have been, young  
     men,  
 To tell the secret of my nights and days,  
 To celebrate the need of comrades. (1860, 341)

This state of self-transparency, the very thing which Whitman's speakers struggle so dearly with, is figured as accomplished here, paradoxically, in the place where life doesn't inevitably exhibit itself. The talkers who talk of beginning and ends are also inverted, as aromatic tongues that seem to tally and speak beyond the mechanic confines of the industrious world. Aromatic, no longer abashed, secluded, these are not "ciphers" for a robust solitude but conditions for a "substantial life, bequeathing, hence, types of athletic love."

The speaker is thus resolve to tell, from this temporally and seasonally marked location (Ninth Month, in my forty-first year), the secrets of "my nights and days" *as* the needs of others. This resolve is paralleled to the resistance to any songs that do not detail "manly attachment," as if the other chants this volume has accrued risk crowding out this more explicitly self-othering address. Grammatically ambiguous, it is either "this life" or the "I" under the mimetic persuasion of its strength that is doing the resolving, projecting, and bequeathing of these "types of athletic love." But, in fact, the athleticism is nested entirely in the flatly affirmative phrase: "I proceed," even while the lyric has made clear the intersubjective roots of these responses. What looks like self-declaration, in other words, is everything but. The series proceeds with a question of how to display a life suspended among the rhizomatic fragrances, the accumulated years of the poet, and failed standards of socio-economic life:

34.  
 I dream'd in a dream, I saw a city invincible to the attacks of the whole of the rest of the earth;

I dream'd that was the new City of Friends;  
Nothing was greater there than the quality of robust love—it led the rest;  
It was seen every hour in the actions of the men of that city,  
And in all their looks and words. (1892, 284)

So many of Whitman's positive formulations of love, communicability, and democratic participation seem to be just this: a dream in a dream. Whatever Whitman really believed about American potential and the capacity for all these ordinary acts of address, labor, love adds up, in this series, to a union of resistant yet affectionate singularities (the other that I am / the other that you are), all resting on just a touch, or a glance, between passing strangers in the peripheries of cities.<sup>111</sup> As a speaker cries out later in the series, in a passage that echoes the adhesiveness of the “Song of the Open Road”:

Passing stranger! you do not know how longingly I look upon you  
You must be he I was seeking, or she I was seeking, (It comes to me, as of a dream,)  
I have somewhere surely lived a life of joy with you,  
All is recalled as we flit by each other, fluid, affectionate, chaste, matured,  
You grew up with me, were a boy with me, or a girl with me, I ate with you, and slept with  
you—your body has become not yours only, nor left my body mine only" (20:66)

Like the transient utopia of the “City of Friends,” this stranger comes to “me” as of a dream. It is the stranger that returns the history of my body—how it grew in relation to you, slept with you, ate with you—a body that began and has matured beyond the possessiveness of any one interlocutor (were a boy... or a girl).

It is this ambition to shift what counts as evidence of a life held in common, one not bound by the assumptions of property or being proprietary, that Whitman shares most with his mentor Emerson, particular his late essays. We might recall that Emerson begins his essay “Experience” (1844) with a kind of rhetorical wager, one that summons into existence a presumed collectivity that it proceeds, throughout the essay, to riddle with senses of loss and miscounting:

Where do we find ourselves? In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none. We wake and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight. But the Genius which, according to the old belief, stands at the door by which we enter, and gives us the lethe to drink, that we may tell no tales, mixed the cup too strongly, and we cannot shake off the lethargy now at noonday. Sleep lingers all our lifetime about our eyes, as night hovers all day in the boughs of the fir-tree. All things swim and glitter. Our life is not so much threatened as our perception. Ghostlike we glide through nature, and should not know our place again.

One could call this a twisting of fate: “we” find ourselves interpolated in a waking series, separately or ensemble, that lacks both phenomenal definition and grounding in belief. Even if we accept Stanley Cavell's account that this is a skeptical enactment of an ineluctable involvement in the world or Sharon Cameron's argument for this essaying procedure as an indirect elaboration of grief, there

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<sup>111</sup> Erkkila, *Live Oak with Moss*, 63. All citations of the “Calamus” series are from this volume and are presented with section number separated by a colon from the page number.

remains the question of where this tenuous voice places us. Is this "here" a shared historical moment or the experiential time of the essay? Are we what we say *where* we say it? The essay has only begun to open its eyes, and yet it sees through "our" finding without a memory of what it has seen and the assurance of what kind of world it has awoken to.

Emerson's foundational stepping, what Cavell has called his "finding-as-founding," functions in ways akin to lyrical apostrophe. He asks an unanswerable question from an unformed, abstract collectivity that sets an essay in motion that cannot "find" its beginning, either in terms of a grounds for belief or for one's familial and cultural lineage. This "we" is not a marker for some common narrative or cultural history that "I" and "you" can claim ensemble; rather, it is the supposition of an oriented voice that enables the essay to go on, implicating "us" in the fate of its doubts and difficulties. And what it becomes indebted to is not the spectacular plenitude of genius or the original fullness of America—myths Emerson is sometimes credited as authorizing—but the futural other to which this project of finding is addressed.<sup>112</sup> Of course, the experience of each of these enchanting doubts and difficulties Emerson narrates will be different depending on who is speaking (I) or listening (you). The way we hate, despair, or endure pain in relation to each other is figured as our common ground for thought and socio-cultural formation instead of some systematic disavowal of prior institutions, origins, or modes of belonging.

By stepping into this opaque, collective finding, it is as if "Experience" stumbles into this series from the end of Hegel's "Sense-Certainty" chapter of his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where the complex prepositioning of our language, always pointing to this Now when it means the possibility of all Nows, actually illuminates a dialectical means by which an transpersonal, collective truth emerges. "We must step into [Understanding's] place and be the Notion which develops and fills out what is contained in the result." As opposed to a bad infinity that gets caught up in the finiteness of each object of attention or voicing, Hegel describes a real infinity as the dialectical supersession of understanding "own's untruth and the untruth of the object."<sup>113</sup> The trouble for Emerson, though, is not that self-consciousness will develop the untruth of understanding but that we begin from a rhetorical position that has to serve as the proof of its own value. In one of the many journals he kept on specific topics, this one "Fate," Emerson phrases this reality as a sort of lyrical affirmation that carries uncanny resonances with Whitman's modes of address: "We affirm, we affirm, yet you or I know not the value of what we affirm."<sup>114</sup> This epistemological limitation, in itself, doesn't condemn the worth of the whole.

In his pivotal essay on "The Experiential Content of Hegel's Philosophy" (1963), Theodor Adorno recognizes a similar problem of experience and knowledge in Hegel's dialectical method:

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<sup>112</sup> Whitman's futural address of apostrophe is not unlike Shelley's apostrophic promising of the autumn's dead leaves to some future enchantment: "O Wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being / Thou from whose unseen presence the leaves dead / Are driven like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing." See: "Ode to the West Wind," *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: Norton, 2002), 298.

<sup>113</sup> "Understanding has indeed superseded its own untruth and the untruth of the object... what has emerged for it as a result is the Notion of the True—but only as the implicit being-for-self of consciousness, and which the Understanding, without knowing itself therein, *lets go its own way*. To begin with, therefore, *we* must step into its place and be the Notion which develops and fills out what is contained in the result." G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §134.

<sup>114</sup> MS Am 1280H, Notebook 60, Ralph Waldo Emerson Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

“The concept of experience will be left undefined: only the presentation can concretize it. . . . [For Hegel], what experience is concerned with at any particular moment is the animating contradiction of such absolute truth.”<sup>115</sup> In locating this animating contradiction in the flexible measure of experience itself, Adorno believed that Hegel proved the “untruth” of his own “absolute whole” he extracted from these dialectical relations. Experience, rather, is that embarrassing place where the subjective mediation of the world is “animated” by the coercive forces that consolidate “everything that exists by virtue of its. . . domination.”<sup>116</sup> And since nothing can be known that is not “*in* experience,” for either Hegel or Emerson, the provisional epistemological “ground” of existence is constantly being displaced, which for Emerson takes the character not of a dialectic but of a fateful transience. or “evanescence.”

As if anticipating Whitman, Emerson gives us an encounter with an alienated version of ourselves as, or through, a stranger in one of his essays from his first series, “Self-Reliance” (1841), though the encounter is described here as the metaphysical “work of genius”:

In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty. Great works of art have no more affecting lesson for us than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. Else, to-morrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinion from another.<sup>117</sup>

Alienated majesty is shorthand here for an uncanny feeling. What we took to be our own mental labor returns to us through another person. This alienation is produced by our own inflexibility, an inflexibility that is mocked by the kind of riotous vagabond that Whitman would present in both his person and his poems to Emerson years later. “Experience” returns to a similar situation, though the encounter is now situated explicitly within the conditions of an open road. This “highway” does not restore our thoughts to ourselves but is rather a sort of holy average where moral commands seem less like earned thoughts and more like prayers or incantations:

If we will take the good we find, asking no questions, we shall have heaping measures. The great gifts are not got by analysis. Everything good is on the highway. We may climb into the thin and cold realm of pure geometry and lifeless science, or sink into that of sensation. Between these extremes is the equator of life, of thought, of spirit, of poetry—a narrow belt. Moreover, in popular experience, everything good is on the highway.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 53.

<sup>116</sup> Adorno, “Experiential Content,” 87.

<sup>117</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” *Essays: First Series* (Blacksburg: Virginia Tech University Press, 2001), 15.

<sup>118</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Experience,” *Selected Prose and Poetry*, ed. Reginald I. Cook (San Francisco: Rinehart Press, 1950), 150. All quotes of this essay come from this edition.

The highway has at this point in the essay taken the place of the middle-ground Emerson stumbles us into at the beginning. But this description hardly seems like an endorsement of the road's intrinsic goodness. One could just as well read the redundancy of the statement—"Everything is good on the highway"—as sounding a cautionary note about how relinquishing an analytical eye towards ourselves or our surroundings can lead to either a complacent populism or the deluded optimism of pure enterprise. What is clear is that a life lived on the road is where these conflicting "measures," ways of reading his propositions, can be brought into the open.

This rhetorical project resonates with Emerson's late lecture, "Quotation and Originality," where he describes intelligence as a transgressive form of indebtedness that involves appropriating and assimilating prior literary examples as well as whole structures of thought. Textual citation becomes a conversation as these instances are folded into speech, enabling speakers and writers to "transcend[s] their own privacies." Strikingly, he again renders this process in terms of economics and political allegiance:

This vast mental indebtedness has every variety that pecuniary debt has,—every variety of merit. The capitalist of either kind is as hungry to lend as the consumer to borrow; and the transaction no more indicates intellectual turpitude in the borrower than the simple fact of debt involves bankruptcy. On the contrary, in far the greater number of cases the transaction is honorable to both. Can we not help ourselves as discreetly by the force of two in literature? Certainly it only needs two well placed and well tempered for cooperation, to get somewhat far transcending any private enterprise! Shall we converse as spies? Our very abstaining to repeat and credit the fine remark of our friend is thievish.<sup>119</sup>

Though Emerson clearly protects himself from accusations of inhumanness or impropriety that we find in Whitman's reviewers, he takes to task the very languages his contemporaries might have used to make their sense of self-worth and intent legible to others.

What both Whitman and Emerson put on display, through their plays on conversational "credits" and unpayable "accounts," is a common problem of articulating a meaningful form of exchange that doesn't assume an equivalence either between the terms of transaction (credit/debt) or the lives that these quantities index. As is well charted by Sharon Cameron and others, this language problem surfaces again in "Experience" as the *impossibility* of distinguishing between "my son" and the spectacular logic of possession: "I seem to have lost a glorious estate,—no more."<sup>120</sup> Emerson's version is obviously more restrained and melancholic than Whitman's, but what they share is this sense that one has to reconstruct social relationships from the very discourses one has at hand, including the compulsive over-determination of social life in transactional terms. Neither Emerson or Whitman completely give up on entwined languages of commerce and liberalism, either. One could easily build a sort of counter-archive of sentences and metaphors to my examples that would seem to endorse the heartiness of the individual and the group within the political-economy of American democracy. But it is less the point that Whitman or Emerson exclude these attitudes or propositions from their wholes and more that they seek to give these materials a particular subjective orientation. Writing on Emerson's use of the word "ground," Cavell notes how he styles his series

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<sup>119</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Quotation and Originality," *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vol. 8 (Boston: Fireside Editions, 1909) 180–81.

<sup>120</sup> Sharon Cameron, "Representing Grief: Emerson's Experience," *Representations* 15 (Summer 1986), 15–41.

of ideas not as a stable foundation but as a provisional structure in which to make his earnestness felt:

'Here are materials strewn along the ground' is to be given the weight of, or the place of, or the power to displace, the philosophical idea of ground or foundation, a displacement which constitutes the scene or the work of philosophical progress in the essay 'Experience,' where the progress of philosophy is called 'success,' not in irony but in transfiguring earnestness.<sup>121</sup>

Marked as non-ironic, this transitive process of making one's self into speaking figures that both alienate and refract one's intimate purpose is what gives the essay its shape, including its discursive shifts about the organizing premises of an idealism that once seemed a stable, unifying system of thought. Like Whitman's wanderers *in* thought, the "we" Emerson wagers at the outset is a call *in media res* from a variety of intensive processes, a variety as diverse as those who might hear themselves in new and as yet untranslatable sociality of "ourselves."

### Democratic Romance

Whitman's complex relationship to American democracy was on display as much in the irregular shapes of his prose as in the entreaties of his lyrics. In a paragraph that Whitman added to the opening of *Democratic Vistas* when he included it in the 1882 publication of *Specimen Days and Collect*, Whitman presents an image of the polis as a dynamic field, akin to weather, that buffets and inflects "political and other life" through a "ceasless play" of "cross purposes."

If a man were ask'd, for instance, the distinctive points contrasting modern European and American political and other life with the old Asiatic cultus, as lingering-bequeath'd yet in China and Turkey, he might find the amount of them in John Stuart Mill's profound essay on Liberty in the future, where he demands two main constituents, or sub-strata, for a truly grand nationality -- 1st, a large variety of character -- and 2d, full play for human nature to expand itself in numberless and even conflicting directions -- (seems to be for general humanity much like the influences that make up, in their limitless field, that perennial health-action of the air we call the weather -- an infinite number of currents and forces, and contributions, and temperatures, and cross purposes, whose ceaseless play of counterpart upon counterpart brings constant restoration and vitality.)<sup>122</sup>

What Whitman admires about Mill's essay is its ability to nominate a "conflicting" play under the common heading of a national "character."<sup>123</sup> While it is the "character" that is moved to act on

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<sup>121</sup> Stanley Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2013), 9.

<sup>122</sup> Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, ed. Ed Folsom (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010), 87.

<sup>123</sup> This notion of conflicting play has resonances both with Schlegel's theory of the immanent criticality of the artwork and Schiller's aesthetic education. For an interesting discussion of

behalf of itself and this "grand nationality," what is moving it to action is similar to the heterogeneous assemblage of human and non-human forces or figurative and perennial "substrata"—that drive the poet, or the orator, to speak. The lyrical phrase—I bequeath myself to you—is quite literally resonant with an incipient form of political life—"lingering-bequeath'd yet in China and Turkey"—that requires "constant restoration" in order to take on the scale of "political life."

What we should be asking of Whitman's prose, however, is whether or not the range of affections and characters the nation makes possible are wholly determined by the sovereignty of the American state itself—or, is Whitman's public more, as Michael Warner has argued, at cross-purposes with the state and its naturalized moral and legal standards.<sup>124</sup> Aside from the obvious self-declarations about embodying America, there is precedent for thinking of Whitman as an orator of "the nation." Whitman's biographers have followed F. O. Matthiessen's suggestion that Whitman developed an idea of himself as a public lecturer or "wander-speaker" at a time when he was exploring career option outside of class- and newsrooms. Whitman was fascinated with the rhetorician because he lived like a legislator without an office, making poetry into the bearer and shaper of a public imagination. David Reynolds relays this illuminating self-description from April 1857:

That the mightiest rule over America could be thus... That to dart hither and thither, as some great emergency might demand—the greatest champion American could ever know, yet having no office or emolument whatever,—but first in the esteem of men and women. . . . But to keep up the living interest in public questions—and *always to hold the ear of the people*.<sup>125</sup>

The subject of a rhetorician is thus the life we put into a question, much like "the grass I love," which makes what we would otherwise take to be private feelings into public emotions. In *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman explicitly calls for a:

great breed of orators [who] will one day spread over The United States, and be continued... Blessed are the people where, (the nation's Unity and Identity preserved at all hazards,) strong emergencies, throes, occur. Strong emergencies will continually occur in America, and will be provided for. Such orators are wanted as

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immanent critique in the tradition of German aestheticism, see: John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

<sup>124</sup> Michael Warner is one of the few critics who has recognized the implications of Whitman's queer inhabitation of nationalist, individualist, and imperialist ideologies, particular those which constitute a totalitarian version of a "democratic" public. Warner writes of Whitman's temperance novel, *Franklin Evans* (1842): "The glorious temperance pledge marks the receding horizon of that relatively absolute voluntariness. Whitman, pursuing the voluntarist utopia of pledging to an extreme, interpolates a dream-vision; a jacobian fantasy about a stateless festival republic" (33). Warner goes on to characterize this as Whitman's "fantasy of stateless public association," one that his odd grammatical constructions facilitate in the very substance of lyric language. See: Michael Warner, "Whitman Drunk," *Breaking Bounds: Whitman & Cultural Studies*, ed. Betsy Erkkila & Jay Grossman, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 30–44.

<sup>125</sup> David Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 367.

have never yet been heard upon earth. What specimen have we had where even the physical capacities of the voice have been fully accomplished?<sup>126</sup>

Even with all its confidences, the "accomplishment" of this fully present, fully participatory democratic public is never declared; rather, it is posed as an open question. And rather than end this vista with an answer, Whitman gives us a rather non-sequitous time-stamp of his work as a Fraud Investigator from the Revenue Department: "After an absence, I am now (September, 1870) again in New York City and Brooklyn, on a few weeks' vacation." The rhetorical trajectory moves from a generalized "subject" of America to a radically located moment where the interlocutor, marked as Whitman himself, announces that he has, in fact, been absent.

What we take as the intimate constraining of our attention (I to you) in lyrical care for another is, at the same time, an attempt to rhetorically circumscribe a set of materials that can be held in common. Given that American spatial and political imagination never began from a tradition of "the commons," even one it could mourn the loss of, Whitman finds his measure for commonness in these imbricated occasions of self-announcement. Starting or embarking always entails an exposure to. Whitman performs this contradictory movement most typically in the self-reflexively etymological poem, "Starting from Paumanok." Rather than call his home by its colonial name, Long Island, Whitman folds his own personal origin into the various metaphors and natural processes embedded in the Native American name, meaning literally "fish-shaped." Rather than announce himself, Walt Whitman, as the brand new thing, the first full sentence documents a transient life already lived ("After roaming many lands, lover of populous pavements"), or a series of lives that might have been lived ("Or a soldier camp'd or carrying my knapsack and gun, or a miner in California, / Or rude in my home in Dakota's woods, my diet meat, my drink from spring, / Or withdrawn to muse and meditate in some deep recess"), even as it narrates a striking up "for a New World." What ends in a colonial measure for a settler's imagination contains many other counter measures, some of which are personalized by the speaker as nourishment or spaces of social withdrawal. In engaging the present history of Paumanok, we are engaging with the origination and sustenance of many peoples. His elaborate rhetorical indirection also adumbrates a vista for the various transgressions this author, these speakers, and these materials will compose together: "See, vast, trackless spaces, / As in a dream, they change, they swiftly fill, / Countless masses debouch upon them, / They are now covered with the foremost people, arts, institutions known." Following the section break, the exhortation continues: "See projected, through time, For me, an audience interminable." (1860, 6–7:6). These are the expanses that Whitman and his sometimes imperious, often transient speakers never settle but rather invite others to form not just "For me" but "between us."

We encounter such self-conscious expanses in Whitman's prose styling. When he wrote this retrospective prose piece for the deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass*, "Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," that veers into sentimentalism and personal mythology, he speaks about his "lines" and "his poems" as if they were transience personified:

Perhaps the best of songs heard, or of any and all true love, or life's fairest episodes, or sailors', or soldiers' trying scenes on land or sea, is the *résumé* of them, or any of them, long afterwards, looking at the actualities away back past, with all their practical excitations gone. How the soul loves to float amidst such reminiscences! So here I sit gossiping in the early candle-light of old age—I and my book—casting backward

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<sup>126</sup> Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, ed. Ed Folsom (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010), 75.



glances over our travel'd road. After completing, as it were, the journey—(a varied jaunt of years, with many halts and gaps of intervals—or some lengthen'd ship-voyage, wherein more than once the last hour had apparently arrived, and we seem'd certainly going down—yet reaching port in a sufficient way through all discomfitures at last)—After completing my poems, I am curious to review them in the light of their own (at the time unconscious, or most unconscious) intentions, with certain unfolding of the thirty years they seek to embody. These lines, therefore, will probably blend the weft of first purposes and speculations, with the warp of that experience afterwards, always bringing strange developments. (CPP, 656)

Striking in this moment of reflection, which came at the end of the death-bed edition, is this insistence not on a sort of cumulative knowledge but on the successively strange developments that give these “experiences” their peculiar “warp.” Even within his most tried and true lyrical personas, he feels something like Emerson’s destabilization, a destabilization he again links to the physical experience of endless travel. It might seem, then, that we are back to where we started and that all these transient forays and passionate utterances have, in the end, been just a running-in-place.

In his retrospective gesture, as in Whitman’s mythic projections of self and other, I take him to be showing us a way to think through the democratic crisis he found himself in not just after the Civil War but continuously throughout his writing. Every stated purpose, when spatialized as a “vista” or “backward glance,” contains in itself a disparity of purposes or tracks one might take and others have taken. Perception is not a singular project any more than adapting one’s self to the openness of a road, a consequence we have seen played out in his various formal innovations of lyric address, line, and sequence. It is in the same paragraph, too, where Whitman describes this plurality as authorized by the fact that he always wrote without a “sufficient Nationality, or, on the other hand, what may be call'ed the negative and lack of it” (CPP, 661). To put this another way, America was never a “subject” or “object” he assumed. Rather, America “democracy” was clearest in the embodiment of its “averages” (CPP, 668), averages that could only be construed from the determinateness of how “I” appear to and for “you,” particularly when neither implies a stable notion of social and political belonging.

When critics have sought to extract what they take to be the democratic theory in Whitman’s poetics, this theory is often premised upon generalizations of Whitman’s more bombastic propositions. George Kateb’s influential (and highly contested) adaptation of Whitman’s poetics to a theory of democratic virtue is premised upon the notion that we can read his poems as a series of arguments for the moral equivalence of all political subjects, an equivalence that can only be guaranteed by a sort of liberal idealism. Kateb sees this latent connectedness of all persons figured in Whitman’s oceanic imagery in which all internal differences are subsumed to the movement of the whole.<sup>127</sup> Interestingly, there are structural resemblances between the kind of infinite identity that Kateb sees in an ideal democracy of the kind “sung” by Whitman and the kind of absolute self-

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<sup>127</sup> See: George Kateb, “Walt Whitman and the Culture of Democracy” in *A Political Companion to Walt Whitman*, ed. John E. Seery (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2011) 26.) In the same collection, Nancy Rosenblum provides a helpful rejoinder to the limits of Kateb’s reading of Whitmanian pluralism and the implications of Whitman’s multi-perspectivalism for charting a new path for the assumed subject of political scientific thought, especially the universal human figure that is presumed by much of late 20<sup>th</sup>-century human rights discourse. See: Nancy Rosenblum, “Strange Attractors: How Individualist Connect to Form Democratic Unity,” 47–59.

referentiality that structuralist theories of lyric form are premised upon. Each is a self-determining, unitary whole.

Both Allen Grossman and Wai Chee Dimock have argued for very different conceptions of “unity” in Whitman, conceptions that are to a large degree based on a more acute attention to the ways that lyric forms function. Dimock contrasts Whitman’s insistence on the substitutability of objects and persons, manifest in his paratactical “grammar,” to the distributive justice model of John Rawls, which attempts to build a political “syntax” in which all contingencies can be not only accounted for but sorted according to importance. The “self” of Whitman’s “democratic poetics” is:

barred, that is, from the circumstantial domain, inhabited by densely-featured people, some of whom are miracles and some of whom are just unhappy freaks of accident... [His] poetics, in short, can have no access to that chaotic world of special loves and hates. It is silent about those objects that, for us, are not categoric, not interchangeable or substitutable, not adequately described by grammar or fully accounted for by syntax.<sup>128</sup>

What Dimock reading misses to my ear is what we have seen manifest in Whitman’s insistence on opacity, on being hardly or iteratively known, through a series of seemingly equivalent situations. On the other hand, Allen Grossman sees Whitman’s pragmatic commitment to the irreducibility of each “person” as a model of “union” more akin to the intractable intimacies of love. This is a poetics not of political functions but “social roles” that are “immanent, comedic, doxological, choral,” and that seek, like the poet-nurse, seek to heal “the violence of language.”<sup>129</sup> He contrasts these “poetics of union” to the political abstractions of the Republican politician Whitman most admired, Abraham Lincoln, who rationalized going to war with the Southern states based on an idea of the nation that could bear no internal contradictions, akin to Aristotle’s logical correspondence between “thought and identity.”<sup>130</sup>

Pivotal for both Dimock’s and Grossman’s readings is this notion that one finds a poetics of unity, and perhaps working notions of a democratic culture, not just in Whitman’s explicit assertions about “America” but in the peculiar grammars through which he stages his romances between strangers. Even while Whitman’s idealizing enthusiasms for global connection may have largely taken sway in his later poems, with “Passage to India” being the most conspicuous example, one can still track a persistent interest in how a reading “public” in particular will judge the more local iterations of his speakers or his work over time. As early as the 1855 preface, Whitman related this episodic work to the general failure of his contemporaries—poets and politicians alike—to produce an adequate history of how bodies are assembled into democratic “communities” and “publics.” It is worth quoting at length the place where this phrase appears, precisely because it gives us a sense

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<sup>128</sup> Wai Chee Dimock, “Whitman, Syntax, and Political Theory,” *Breaking Bounds*, 78.

<sup>129</sup> Allen Grossman, “Poetics of Union,” *The American Renaissance Reconsidered*, ed. Walter Benn Michaels and Donald Pease (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 185.

<sup>130</sup> “Lincoln judged the world that he constructed by a hermeneutic criterion of intelligibility, modeled on Euclid. A house divided against itself, like a sentence that assert contradictories, cannot stand because it makes no sense and accords with no possible state of affairs... ‘God cannot be for and against the same thing at the same time’. Hence Lincoln’s speaking induced... a sentiment of what Marianne Moore called his ‘intensified particularity,’ deriving first from a willed overcoming of complexity and consequent clarification from his own person” (Grossman, 187).

of how the strange cadences and attenuated syntax of his prose reflect what he takes to be both a civic and formal problem. Though I cannot reproduce it here, it should be noted that this untitled preface was structured like a newspaper article or bulletin, with the text set left to right in two parallel vertical columns. His poetics were visually conflated with the daily news:

As the attributes of the poets of the kosmos concentrate in the real body and soul and in the pleasure of things they possess the superiority of genuineness over all fiction and romance. As they emit themselves facts are showered over with light . . . the daylight is lit with more volatile light . . . also the deep between the setting and rising sun goes deeper many fold. Each precise object or condition or combination or process exhibits a beauty . . . the multiplication table its—old age its—the carpenter's trade its—the grand-opera its . . . the hugehulled cleanshaped New York clipper at sea under steam or full sail gleams with unmatched beauty . . . the American circles and large harmonies of government gleam with theirs . . . Of the human form especially it is so great it must never be made ridiculous. Of ornaments to a work nothing outre can be allowed . . . but those ornaments can be allowed that conform to the perfect facts of the open air and that flow out of the nature of the work and come irrepressibly from it and are necessary to the completion of the work. Most works are most beautiful without ornament . . . Exaggerations will be revenged in human physiology. Clean and vigorous children are jettied and conceived only in those communities where the models of natural forms are public every day. . . . Great genius and the people of these states must never be demeaned to romances. As soon as histories are properly told there is no more need of romances.<sup>131</sup>

While we may be able to picture moments within this description—say, a "hugehulled cleanshaped New York clipper at sea"—Whitman makes it near impossible to hold in mind this complex ensemble that is somehow mimetic of “everything” flowing into and out of the text. What is more, it would seem that such sentimental melodramas that mix comedic happenstance with tragic consequence, what we might generally call “romance,” is *precisely* what Whitman gives us in the lyrics that follow. Etymologically, demeaning “the people,” that arch constitutional abstraction, could mean here either carrying on these “romances” as if “they” were natural or as if we had been simply humbling ourselves to their “necessity.” A history properly told would be different from both.

If Whitman is asking us to treat this preface as a poetics, and I do believe he is asking us to, what I take him to be keying us into is this critical difference between the romances we have told been or have identified with and a more specific, personal notion of necessity. In terms of contemporary referents, one can imagine that in romance he is referencing a range of American exemplars, from Washington Irving, James Fennimore Cooper, Edgar Allan Poe, and Nathaniel Hawthorn. It would seem to index a sort of manipulative emotional structure that not only

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<sup>131</sup> Preface to *Leaves of Grass* (1855). As I mention, the layout of the 1<sup>st</sup> edition is significantly different and difficult to represent here, as the untitled preface began unnumbered (on Page III) following the only appearance of Whitman's name in the volume, "Walter Whitman" (as registered on the copyright page by Clerk's office of the District Court of the United States for the Southern District of New York) and is organized in two vertical columns of text reminiscent of newspapers and journalistic pamphlets of the time. The quote begins in the left column and finishes in the right column of Page IX. For reference to original page design of all Whitman's editions as well as extensive publication history information, see: <http://www.whitmanarchive.org>.

obscures history but contains the various features the preface derides: exaggeration of forms, superfluous ornamentation, waste of labor, the enclosure of youth, and the repression of "natural" desire from public life.

When one compares this to the problems Whitman diagnoses with democracy that an American "Literature" might address in *Democratic Vistas*, the parallels are striking. What literature would seem to characterize best are the *intrinsic* necessities of experience, labor, and desire, examples of which we could find myriad in, say, his "Song for Occupation," whose first lines conceive of "labor" within human and nonhuman assemblages: "In the labor of engines and trades and the labor of fields I find / the developments." (1882, 170). Throughout the vistas, "Democracy" is a responsibility and a position of practice yet to be fulfilled, just as America or "These United States" are destined to either "surmount the gorgeous history of Feudalism, or else prove the most tremendous failure of time" (4). The coming of the "divine Literatus," which is to shape and aggregate the world is in fact native *to* this very precarious position and future.

What Whitman *doesn't* doubt, however, is that American culture has been remade in the crass universality of the dollar. In diagnosing this "diseased spectacle" of financial "speculators" and business "vulgarians," Whitman seems a neighbor to both the Marxist sociological analyses of Weber or Simmel as well as the contemporary rants of Thomas Carlyle. What emerges through Whitman's strange rhetorical mixture, however, is that the state of the nation was indeed abysmal:

I say we had best look our times and lands searchingly in the face, like a physician diagnosing some deep disease. Never was there, perhaps, more hollowness at heart than at present... The spectacle is appalling. We live in an atmosphere of hypocrisy throughout. The men belief not in the women, nor the women in the men. A scornful superciliousness rules in literature... A lot of churches, sects, &c., the most dismal phantasms I know, usurp the name of religion. Conversation is a mass of badinage... The depravity of the business classes of our country is not less than has been supposed, but infinitely greater... The great cities reek with respectable as much as non-respectable robbery and scounderness. In fashionable life, flippancy, tepid, amours, weak infidelism, small aims, or no aims at all, only to kill time. In business, (this all-devouring modern word, business,) the one sold object is, by any means, pecuniary gain... The best class we show, is but a mob of fashionably-dressed speculators and vulgarians. True, indeed, behind this fantastic farce, enacted on the visible stage of society, solid things and stupendous labors are to be discovered, existing crudely and going on in the background, to advance and tell themselves in time. (12)

If Whitman admired something in Carlyle's invective, "Shooting Niagara" (to which the vistas are largely written in response to, it was Carlyle's admonition against the leveling quality of "Free-Trade"<sup>132</sup> and its false promise to release all from suffrage, obstruction, and spiritual malaise. If

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<sup>132</sup> Carlyle describes the "Niagara" leap of America into "completed democracy" as a fruition of unlimited free trade: "That, in lieu thereof, there shall be Free Trade, in all senses, and to all lengths: unlimited Free Trade, — which some take to mean, 'Free racing, ere long with unlimited speed, in the career of *Cheap and Nasty*;' — this beautiful career, not in shop-goods only, but in all things temporal, spiritual and eternal, to be flung generously open, wide as the portals of the universe; so that everybody shall start free, and every- where, 'under enlightened popular suffrage,' the race shall be to the swift, and the high office shall fall to him who is ablest if not to do it, at least to get elected

America had made liberty equal to the freedom of property, how could one "value" the concreteness of particular bodies or voices? Perhaps Whitman also saw something of himself in Carlyle's tendency to link racial essentialisms to political and cultural possibilities, as much of his early poetry and prose often did.<sup>133</sup> What seems clear, however, is that there never was a completed democracy, commonwealth, or aristocratic class to salvage following America's disunion; rather, what "reform" or reconstruction meant to Whitman was not a watering down and undermining of "Great Men" but rather taking apart these universalizing gestures from the inside out.

Perhaps one of the greatest dangers of identifying one's poetics with transient personas is settling off into the kind of solipsism that seems to make the romance of transient life a metaphor for a rugged individualism. In a fascinating footnote to the 1876 centennial preface to the author's edition of *Two Rivulets*, Whitman (the sometimes phrenologist) would seem to objectify the "imaginary race" his "robust" individuals are said to be metonyms of.<sup>134</sup> But even here, he describes

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for doing it" (Thomas Carlyle, "Shooting Niagara: and After?" *Macmillan's Magazine*, Edingurgh, Vol. XVI (April 1867), 320.).

<sup>133</sup> Peter Coviello has argued that Whitman settles on sexual attachment and erotic attentiveness over his early claims for some kind of American racial unity that often relies on dangerous normalizations of whiteness: "What makes for the messiness in the shift from one to the other, above all else, is the fact that the languages of sexual attachment available to Whitman are themselves as riddled with complication and incoherence as the available languages of race... Whitman's refusal in 'Calamus' to define sex as a quality of attachment fundamentally distinct from any other—his refusal to circumscribe sexuality in any definite set of acts or relations—constitutes what is arguably the most consequential intervention in American sexual ideology he would ever make." (144). Coviello reads this indeterminacy of intimate need as an invitation to the "readers hunger to know something more." Sounding like a deconstructionist without the polemics about textuality and signification, Coviello describes this as the "double movements of occlusion and suggestion" or the "expressive possibilities of nondisclosure." See Peter Coviello, *Intimacy in America: Dreams of Affiliation in Antebellum Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2005).

<sup>134</sup> Frances E. Keuling-Stout on the complicated publication history of *Two Rivulets*: "[R]ather than an illustration of the poet's decline, *Rivulets* presents an impressive number of graphic "firsts" to help make it a startling venture into breaking down "the barriers of form between Prose and Poetry" (*Rivulets* 28). Whitman clearly announces this poetic mission in "NEW POETRY"—a small prose unit of the first section in *Rivulets*. Further, by using the visible mediums of print and photo to "talk" to (Whitman's dialectical strategy) its verbal composition, *Rivulets* sets up novel typographic and visual experiments on the page... For the first time, Whitman creates a two-volume matched set which he imprints "Author's Edition" on the title pages of *Rivulets* and *Leaves*. And in an odd printing move, he transfers *Passage to India* out of *Leaves* and into *Rivulets*. He also has a photo (cf. Linton engraving) and a poem ("The Wound-Dresser") in *Leaves* talk to the poem "Out from Behind This Mask" in *Rivulets*. In *Rivulets*, Whitman interweaves prose sections with poetry sections: *Two Rivulets* (poetry with prose), *Democratic Vistas* (prose), *Centennial Songs—1876* (poetry), *As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free* (poetry), *Memoranda During the War* (prose), and *Passage to India* (poetry). In the first section of *Rivulets*, he has prose and a bold wavy line (a printer's ornament) run simultaneously under poetry for eighteen pages. Strangely, too, in the same printing issue of *Rivulets*, Whitman labels his book spine differently. He stamps "Verse" on some copies and "Prose and Verse" on others (Myerson 201). He also inserts not one but two prefaces in *Rivulets* (1876 and 1872). And finally, in the introductory Preface (1876), Whitman tries to define as well as market his 1876 set (*Leaves* and *Rivulets*) as one of his "willful" and poetic "escapades." Accessed online at Whitman

a nagging uncertainty about how any single “character” could contain the “last inclosing sublimation of [what a] race or poem [is]” within existing “democratic formulas”:

Namely, a character, making most of common and normal elements, to the superstructure of which not only the precious accumulations of the learning and experiences of the Old World, and the settled social and municipal necessities and current requirements, so long a-building, shall still faithfully contribute, but which at its foundations and carried up thence, and receiving its impetus from the democratic spirit, and accepting its gauge in all departments from the democratic formulas, shall again directly be vitalized by the perennial influences of Nature at first hand, and the old heroic stamina of Nature, the strong air of prairie and mountain, the dash of the briny sea, the primary antiseptics—of the passions, in all their fullest heat and potency, of courage, rankness, amateness, and of immense pride. (1876, 1009)

Rather than consolidate a democratic spirit this series of “common and normal elements” serve to loosen “the mind of still-to-be-form'd America from the accumulated folds” (1876, 1008–9). What is “enclosing” in this figurative action is quite literally a cumulative *purpose* and set of material “necessities” that migrate across landscapes, affects, seasons, etc.. In a Preface to the small pamphlet of poems, *As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free* (1872),<sup>135</sup> later bound as a complete insert within the centennial 1876 edition of *Leaves of Grass* (and *Two Rivulets*), he gives a name to this “more or less audible” through-line. He calls it a “thread-voice”:

Leaves of Grass,' already publish'd, is, in its intentions, the song of a great composite *democratic individual*, male or female. And following on and amplifying the same purpose, I suppose I have in my mind to run through the chants of this volume, (if ever completed,) the thread-voice, more or less audible, of an aggregated, inseparable, unprecedented, vast, composite, electric *democratic nationality*.

The “vastness” of this voicing is not a measure of its geo-political power but of the range of scales and scopes in which democracy is realized. He doesn’t attribute this “thread-voice” to any particular lyric persona or scene but rather to the serial “aggregate” of his “chants.” To put it another way, *Leaves of Grass* is not the story of a heroic vagabond who somehow personifies America democracy by assimilating its differences to a generous, healthful, and unified body but rather a collection of transient voices that thread their way through the normative structures and institutions that shape how we appear to each other in public. This includes the American romance with individualism.

Comparing the “subject” of Whitman’s political and lyrical writings doesn’t give us an easy description of how these moments of address add up to a prescriptive political theory. Rather, what lyric form presents are emergent social relations that are self-consciously built out of precarious, transient interactions. Social obligations are perpetually constructive and physically realized by the

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Archive on April 17, 2017 at

[http://whitmanarchive.org/criticism/current/encyclopedia/entry\\_61.html](http://whitmanarchive.org/criticism/current/encyclopedia/entry_61.html).

<sup>135</sup> “As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free.” *New York Herald* 26 June 1872: 3. This poem was later published with seven other poems in a pamphlet, *As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free* (1872). It was later included as a supplement bound with *Two Rivulets* (1876). Later, Whitman changed the title to “Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood,” added a new opening stanza, and additional revisions, and incorporated the poem into *Leaves of Grass* (1881-82).

way we set each other in motion—through our bodies, our instruments, our speech. For Whitman, it is never a question about creating new forms *ex nihilo* but inhabiting existing architectures, subjectivities, and covenants as the intersubjective, affective differentials that they are. To tell the history fittingly of “you,” the “true” subject of “my” songs, is to be with you as a stranger. Both I and you remain discontinuous with how we appear to others, yet it is by undertaking the transit across these appearances that makes the limits of autonomy legible and not some governing abstraction about individual freedom. Democracy *is* this serialized disparity, just as this grass *is* the grass I love and the hints of the Civil War dead from either side.

## A STRANGENESS IN COMMON: Trespass, Drift, and Extravagance in Robert Frost

I wish Edward Thomas (the poet) were here to ponder gulfs in general with me as in the days when he and I tired the sun down with talking on the footpaths and stiles of Ledington and Ryton. I should like to ask him if it isn't true that the world is in parts and the separation of the parts as important as the connection of the parts. Isn't the great demand for good spacing? But now I do not know the number of his mansion to write him so much as a letter of inquiry.

Robert Frost, "A Romantic Chasm"<sup>136</sup>

In Robert Frost's allusive address, written sometime between 1945 and 1948, to his then-absent companion, Edward Thomas, we find a cluster of questions informing his poetics from his early books of lyrics to his late public lectures: how does one figure, or make audible, spaces between things? And if these spaces are to remain distinct, how does one preserve a plurality of spacing, particularly in speech patterns or personalities we might identify, at least initially, as commonplace or familiar? And how can a poem mean or intend something that neither a speaker nor an interlocutor can know?

The gulfs Frost built into his imaginary walls and stunted conversations have a situational resonance that reverberate beyond whomever announces or questions their borders. As the references above to specific footpaths and biblical mansions suggest, they serve not only as cultural and historical measures of Frost's displacement to prewar England from a bucolic New England, but also as the more abstract yet ordinary separations between wanderers, among both the living and the dead.

Robert Frost met Edward Thomas after relocating to Gloucestershire, England with his family in 1912 in order to finish work on the poems that would become *North of Boston*. By the accounts of both, the two poets' desultory walks were occupied by intense discussions poetics, prosody, and natural history at a time when Thomas was still finding his way into poetry and Frost was beginning to stake out his literary fame as a sort of experimental American populist—neither of Palgrave's *Anthology* nor of Pound's expatriate coterie.<sup>137</sup> Frank Lentricchia, for example, has described this early period in terms of Frost's wry attempt to cultivate, in poetry and person, a conspicuously hetero-normative, anti-establishment authorial persona that would earn him both fame and financial success.<sup>138</sup> Ironically, it was from this geographic and cultural remove that Frost published the book that launched his career as a New England persona, producing many of the

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<sup>136</sup> *The Robert Frost Collection*, 1866–1996, MS-1178, Rauner Library, Dartmouth College (Hanover, NH), Box 16, Folder 56. Citations from the Rauner Library are hereafter included inline as MS-1178 along with corresponding box and folder numbers. Though the actual date of composition is not on the manuscript, "A Romantic Chasm" was likely composed between the 1945 US edition of *A Masque of Reason* published by Henry Holt and the edition published by Jonathan Cape in London in 1948. Interestingly, the manuscript draft contains a more extended discussion of the gulf between Frost's "alien" American idiom and the English ear he experienced while in England.

<sup>137</sup> *The Golden Anthology*, ed. Francis T. Palgrave (London: Collins' Clear-Type Press, 1875).

<sup>138</sup> Frank Lentricchia, *Modernist Quartet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 80–85.



regional personalities and verbal habits that would make him a sort of belated spokesperson for a place he often struggled to inhabit himself.

While Frost's skill for irony has been well charted by his critics, less noted is the attention we find in this belated note to Thomas about *how* speech or actions might chart these real and symbolic losses and what the social consequences of separations between speakers might be. The desire to elucidate and preserve the idiosyncratic spacing *in* speech is one of the principal differences between him and his modernist contemporaries, particularly from those who also sought a more direct presentation of average things or mundane subjects in their lyrics. The first poem in *North of Boston*, "Mending Wall," advances this notion of an intentional gap, citing obliquely "the gaps I mean" despite the fact "No one has seen them made or heard them made" (CPPP 39, 10):<sup>139</sup>

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,  
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,  
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.  
The work of hunters is another thing:  
I have come after them and made repair  
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,  
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,  
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,  
No one has seen them made or heard them made,  
But at spring mending-time we find them there.  
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;  
And on a day we meet to walk the line  
And set the wall between us once again.  
We keep the wall between us as we go. (CPPP, 39)

This potent gap refers, over the parallel tracks of the poem, to not only the necessary repairs of a stonewall marking the shared line of two properties but the disparate agencies and world views that organize around these separations, both human (recalcitrant neighbor, fantastical speaker) and inhuman (frost heaves, hunted animals). The opposed attitudes are familiar to any reader of Frost. One embodies the playful drift of metaphor, presented via the first-person ("He is all pine and I am apple orchard. My apple trees will never get across / And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him" (39, 24–26) and the other is phrased in terms of what the speaker takes to be an inherited ethics: "He will not go behind his father's saying, / And he likes having thought of it so well / He says again, 'Good fences make good neighbors'" (40, 44–46).

What keeps this reparative game of setting stones from settling into mere allegory is the porous yet consistent mediation of the line that, in turn, becomes the literal and formal provocation

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<sup>139</sup> The following texts were used to reference Frost's writing: *Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays of Robert Frost*, eds. Richard Poirier and Mark Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1995). Cited as CPPP; *Collected Prose of Robert Frost*, ed. Mark Richardson (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press at Harvard University Press, 2010). Cited as CP; "Introduction to Ballads Migrant in New England," MS-1178:16:60; *Mountain Interval* (New York: Holt, 1916); *North of Boston* (London, UK: Nutt, 1914; New York: Holt, 1915); *Notebooks of Robert Frost*, ed. Robert Faggen (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, ed. Lawrence Thompson (San Francisco: Holt, Rhinehart and Wilson, 1964). Cited as *Selected Letters*.

for repeated encounters: “set the wall between us once again. / We keep the wall between us as we go” (39, 14–15). The “I” repeatedly tries to close down this distance of reasoning and culture (the neighbor appears to him as an “old-stone savage armed”) through hypothetical speech acts, phrasing a series of things “I” *could* say or ask: “*Why* do they make good neighbors? Isn’t it / Where there are cows? But here there are no cows. / Before I built a wall I’d ask to know / What I was walling in or walling out, / And to whom I was like to give offense. / Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, that wants it down.” (39–40, 30–36). In this compulsive repetition of the convoluted opening line—“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall”—the poem merely circumscribes another “gap,” displacing yet again the presumed agent of this unsettling or responsibility for the (re)formation of this property divide. What its verbal redundancy makes clear, however, is that both speakers are caught in some kind of physical and epistemological feedback loop whereby any answer lies at the limits of what “I” perceive or manage to know: “He moves in darkness as it seems to me, / Not of woods only and the shade of trees” (40, 42–43).

Frost’s lyricism is typically less associated with disjunction than it is with the very substance of common sense, whether we take the wisdom of this sense to be ironic or ultimately endorsed. Through the various permutations of structuralism, including its inflections of both historical materialism and formalism, literary criticism has developed many theoretical tools to conceptualize such moments of epistemic instability and errant purposiveness that Frost gestures to above in his willful “separation of parts.” Indeterminacy of meaning or presence, for example, has been revalued as the equivocal sign of emergent social relations, aesthetic sensibilities, or responses to systemic crises. In refusing signification from within signifying orders, gaps are read as signs of potentiality itself, transferable, say, between literary forms and political realities or from one ideologically overdetermined situation to an emergent set of counter-beliefs. In separating formal experimentation from politics and even history, Marjorie Perloff famously suggested that formal indeterminacy is very substance of the American avant-garde following from Rimbaud to postwar Fluxus happenings to Cagean chance procedures.<sup>140</sup> Drawing upon both philosophies of mind, Jennifer Ashton analyzes Perloff’s version of indeterminacy as its own critical fiction that refuses a more absolute autonomy of the text from any act of interpretation or historical causality, which has the inverse effect of essentializing a dualism between acts of mind and the life-world of thought.<sup>141</sup>

In recent theories of the lyric, the genre has been treated as a flexible critical category defined largely by its indeterminate relation to historical reference and existing concepts of selfhood and temporality. Lyric speech is distinctive because it doesn’t rely upon a consistent referentiality to a historical world, the same historical world that presumably a critic would be citing. Recent work by Jonathan Culler as well as Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins have attempted to historicize the category of the lyric in different ways, either through a genealogy of formal responses to philosophical problems (Culler) or as a contingent set of generic practices and contextual details

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<sup>140</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1981).

<sup>141</sup> Jennifer Ashton, Jennifer, *From Modernism to Postmodernism: American Poetry and Theory in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). For useful contrasts to the strict dualism between mind and world or textual and context meaning that underlie Ashton’s notion of aesthetic autonomy, one might look to more a broader tradition of non-dualist, phenomenally situated notions of thinking (and writing) in Merleau-Ponty, Hubert Dreyfus, or Alva Noë. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962) and Alva Noë, *Action in Perception* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004). See also *Mind, Reason, and Being-in-the-World: The McDowell-Dreyfus Debate*, ed. Joseph K. Schear (New York: Routledge, 2013).

consolidated into “lyrics” through a series of critical projections (Jackson and Prins). Though divergent in methods and critical aims, their theorizations of the lyric share a sense that our modern definition of the modernist lyric is an outgrowth of, or response to, the kind of performative self-consciousness that Hegel associated with “Romantic” poetry—and M.H. Abrams later described as the “greater Romantic lyric.”<sup>142</sup> In Abrams’s account, the lyric models a self-consciousness that suffers a subjective crisis, is displaced into the world, and then ultimately comes home to a new version of itself. Richard Poirier adapted this path of lyrical self-consciousness to his careful readings of the epistemological laboring of Frost, arguing that the physical and intellectual restiveness of his speakers necessitates a constant relocation or transformation of the places where a body can come to rest.

What seems distinct about Frost’s interest in the disjunctive qualities of lyric speech or figuration is how logics of analogy and transferability—what guarantees the generational and signifying continuity of common sense—may obscure the determinacy of each epistemological “gulf” or obscure “need” that arise in a ramble or conversation. The separations of social life that render us into distinctive, alienable persons are both mirrored and modified through successive utterances. Among Frost’s many obstinacies is his unwillingness to attribute or prescribe any intrinsic or instrumental critical value to states of drift, non-belonging, or self-difference. Rather, as we will see, his lyrics operate as shifting sites in which a range of extravagancies, both metaphorical and socio-historical, come into conflict over time. One never speaks only *by* and *for* one’s self. When we look to how Frost viewed the social-character of lyrical speech, we find consistent attention to the discrepancies between what a speaker seems to endorse in the propositional content of a phrase and transformations that occur in the process of speaking. For example, Frost valued the “lowly” ballad as a vital source of linguistic innovation whereby migrant, working-class people internalized lyrics through daily practice and then reproduced phrases with “flaws”: “[The ballad] may flaw in metro [sic], syntax, logic and sense. It may seem to be going to pieces, breaking up, but it is only as the voice breaks with emotion.”<sup>143</sup> This breakdown is most evident in the act of voicing itself, where a subject position functions as a conduit for a history of ordinary linguistic improvisation that diverges from grammatical sense. Writing to Walter Pritchard Eaton in 1915, Frost describes “the cave of the mouth” as a site of pursuit between the poem and a social history of “sentence tones,” again playing upon the analogues between sense and exchange (cent/sense): “All I care a cent for is to catch sentence tones that haven’t been brought to book. I don’t say to make them, mind you, but to catch them.”<sup>144</sup> In a letter to Sidney Cox in 1914, Frost connects the diversity of word-sounds to a diversity of life-forms that one could neither possess nor assume some value for:

The grammatical sentence is merely accessory to the other and chiefly valuable as furnishing a clue to the other. You recognize the sentence sound in this: You, you—!  
It is so strong that if you hear it as I do you have to pronounce the two you’s differently. Just so many sentence sounds belong to man as just so many vocal runs

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<sup>142</sup> Along with Jackson and Prin’s *Lyric Theory Reader*, see: Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015). For Hegel’s account of lyric poetry referenced by Culler, see *Hegel’s Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). For Abram’s account of the “Greater Romantic Lyric,” see: M. H. Abrams, *The Correspondent Breeze: Essays on English Romanticism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1984).

<sup>143</sup> “Introduction to Ballads,” 60.

<sup>144</sup> *Letters*, 191.

belong to one kind of bird. We come into the world with them and create none of them. What we feel as creation is only selection and grouping. We summon them from Heaven knows where under excitement with the audile [audial] imagination. (CPPP 681)

Diversity of speech, like diversity of creation, arises from the fact that repetition is impossible and intonation will always lead us to hear or pronounce the same thing differently. And he figures this sonic purposiveness in species terms: vocalization parallels the iterative songs of birds. The sonic play of imagination evokes not a heavenly abstraction (“from Heaven knows where”) but a socially mediated, creaturely world that precedes, as well as inflects, every speech act.

What I will focus on in this essay is how Frost built a transgressive sense of “spacing” into his early lyrics of *North of Boston* and *Mountain Interval* (Holt, 1916) whose final shape was as much a result of his time *in*, as his persistent estrangement *from*, his adopted homeland, New England. I will end with a reading of “Two Tramps at Mud Time” and Frost’s final public lecture at Dartmouth College, “On Extravagance” (1962) as reflecting a transient sense of poetic vocation that opposes itself to the universality of exchange value. Rather than affirm some quaint New England picture, he repeatedly opens up gaps in so-called “representative” figures and perceived “commonness” of speech in order to introduce strange notions of agency and ethical responsiveness that are less individualistic and more transient and transpersonal. I take Frost to be describing this process in the oft-quoted essay he published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, “The Constant Symbol” (1946), in terms of poetry’s “great predicament”: “a figure of the will braving alien entanglements” (CPPP 787). This includes entanglements with the very regionalist tropes he made seem so familiar. Perhaps sarcastically, given his own growing currency as a national treasure, he compares this predicament to the pragmatic career of a political representative for whom personal credit for any success is always a *misrepresentation* of the successive agencies that were, and continue to be, involved. In the context of his lyrics, such entanglements emerge through the speech acts of his wandering speakers and conversational partners. The extravagance of his lyric speech casts doubt not only on a continuous relationship between person, place, and purpose, but also on the very notions of exchangeability and autonomy that anchor exclusive claims to property or credit.

## Lyrics of Trespass

While *North of Boston* made its 1915 debut with New York-publishers Henry Holt and Company (who re-published *A Boy's Will* that April) only seven days after Frost returned to America, it had already been printed in England by David Nutt and Company in London 1914. Frost had sailed from Boston to London on August 23, 1912 and his first book, *A Boy's Will*, also published by Nutt, was reviewed glowingly in American as well as English literary journals (*Poetry* [Ezra Pound], *Poetry and Drama* [F. S. Flint], and *The English Review* [Normal Douglas]) while Frost was living in Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire and Dymock, Gloucestershire. Compared to the relatively slow start of his career as a poet—he had just turned 41 when he returned to the United States—his success was sudden. Before meeting his family in Bethlehem and settling on a farm back in the granite notch of Franconia, he undertook a whirlwind tour of Boston, meeting with literary dignitaries and establishing contacts with poet-critics such as John Gould Fletcher and Amy Lowell as well as William Stanley Braithwaite, gaining a publishing agreement sight-unseen with Ellery Sedgwick (editor of *Atlantic Monthly*), and setting up a speaking engagement at Boston Authors Club. In perhaps one of the great ironies of twentieth-century literary history, it was this strange “Book of Peoples” (the UK dedication page included this subtitle under his dedication to his wife) constructed

through a series of textual, geographic, and historical *removes* that launched his American reputation as a lyrical populist and regional spokesperson for New England.

This "Book of Peoples" hardly reads like a Fireside catalogue of civic exemplars. Descriptions that come immediately to mind of these pastoral subjects are ones that would suit a more sarcastic brochure for visitors to New England: guarded, suspicious, wry, maybe hostile at times. What is more, we rarely meet these characters head on. Instead, we encounter them obliquely, through the mediation of an "I" that seems set apart from the logic of the place, a sort of alien witness arriving late to a series of foreboding customs, contested properties, or domestic arguments. As we follow the course of these arguments, the sides rarely bring us to the closure of a resolution. For example, the "The Housekeeper" (first published by Dora Marsden in *The Egoist*, Vo. 1, No. 2, January, 1914) opens with the speaker, ostensibly a neighbor, letting "myself in at the kitchen door" (CPPP 82). The titular character, a woman out of synch with her physical form ("I'm getting too old for my size"), responds to the sudden intrusion by citing her failure to "keep" the limits between inside and outside: "I can no more / Let people in than I can keep them out" (82, 3-4). "I" is not a position of progressive authority here. It is simply a heading for what comes and goes. As she goes on to recount the failures of the father of their child, John, to understand use and exchange value, we realize that she is not just speaking about "keeping" a home: "Twenty for this cock, twenty-five for that. / He never takes the money. If they're worth / That much to sell, they're worth as much to keep. / Bless you, it's all expense though" (86, 149-52). This notion of keeping house is made more strange, too, as John tries to justify the extravagant price (50 dollars) he paid for a "Langshang cock" (a large breed of Chinese rooster imported and bred in Britain in the 1870s) he grooms simply for its beauty, a beauty that once adorned the transparent glass-and-steel conservatory built to house the triumphs of world commerce for the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London, Sir Joseph Paxton's "Crystal Palace." Wherever we look for authentic regional characteristics or characters defined by the stability of their homes, we often find epistemological and geographical *misdirections*.

During Frost's time in England, he served as a sort of aesthetic mentor to Thomas who, in turn, led Frost on meandering walks across the English countryside. In practice, Frost and Thomas paid very little attention to *how* the landscape was divided, often straying from public passages into private properties. A recent biographer of Thomas, Matthew Hollis, describes one occasion in particular when Frost and Thomas wandered behind his cottage into the property of a gamekeeper.<sup>145</sup> Frost, holding stubbornly to their right to roam, threatened the shotgun-wielding gamekeeper with his fist until the two were eventually forced back on to a public path. Undoubtedly one could read the behavior of Frost, like the trespassing foragers of "Blueberries" (1914) or the mischievous non-native speaker of "Mending Wall," as a posture of entitlement—more particularly, a normatively masculine right to move and speak freely, as if walls or boundaries were an affront to the co-extensiveness between a man's imagination and the organic world. But in this anecdote of trespass, there is also a broader echo of a tension in Frost's poetics that I want to draw out, between the types of sovereign individuals Frost has become so famous for and a more conditional, successive notion of agency that emphasizes the power of lyric speech acts to unsettle exclusive claims to local histories, properties, and even self-identity.

In the same imaginative letter about the romance of gulfs, Frost imagines ways to move across such social and historical separations through techniques of lyrical voicing. In trying to imagine ways to keep one's closest friends "strange," he lays out a theory of the verse sentence as

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<sup>145</sup> Matthew Hollis, "Edward Thomas, Robert Frost and the road to war," *Guardian* 29 (July 2011). Accessed on April 17, 2017 at <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jul/29/robert-frost-edward-thomas-poetry>.

the drift of a series of “word-shifts,” themselves produced by locally estranging metaphorical or sonic effects:

The estrangement in language is pretty much due to the very word-shift by metaphor you do your best to take part in daily so as to hold your closest friend off where you can “entertain him always as a stranger”—with the freshness of a stranger. It often looks dangerously like aberration into a new dialect. But it is mostly back and forth in the same place like the jumping of a grasshopper whose day’s work gets him nowhere. And even when it is a word-drift, which is a chain of word-shifts all in one direction, it is nothing but that an average ingenuity with figures of speech can be counted on to keep up with... You are both free peoples so used to your freedom that you are not interested in talking too much about what you are free from... In the beginning was the word, to be sure, very sure, and a solid basic comfort it remains in situ, but the fun only begins with the spirited when you treat the word as a point of many departures. There is risk in the play. (CPPP 804)

“Drift” becomes a formal term for Frost, in that it objectifies a disjunction between what one hears and what one understands as the grammatical sense of a sentence. Drift implies a deviation from a common measure, orientation, or movement, which in Frost’s case was not necessarily an assumed or self-conscious consensus about a time and place that everyone shared. Rather, given many of the ostensible topics in *North of Boston* and *Mountain Interval*, we can see how drifts of speech and bodies exist in constant tension with general measures such as labor contracts, money, or property that impose arbitrary, reified senses of connection. What complicates the gestures of Frost’s rural personas beyond mere entitled wandering is the fact that these “free peoples” risk two things at once: intimate relations with others as well as self-identity in speech. The so-called goodness of hours on a winter walk can betray the fact that the “I” is really an itinerant interloper or mere voyeur onto a more settled, sheltered life.

If we accept the centrality of spacing and drift in Frost, the question becomes how we attend to formations of gulfs in the very practice of speech. Attending to a gap, like any sort of aporia, is difficult precisely because “it” cannot necessarily be inferred from what comes before or after. Perhaps it is no surprise then that Frost so self-consciously staged the “separation of parts” through the things we already believe we know, a strategy he describes in his infamous 1919 letter to Louis Untermeyer in terms of playing with the obviousness of exchange: “I like to seem the person altogether obvious. You get more credit for thinking if you restate formulae or cite cases that fall in easily under formulae, but all the fun is outside saying things that suggest formulae. I should like to be so subtle at this game as to seem to the casual person altogether obvious” (CPPP 206). We might think of Frost’s play on the transactional character of speech in relation to what young Marx described as the power of money. In a notebook entry in which Frost distanced himself from the free verse of Whitman, Frost ascribed the origin of his poetics to a phrase he attributes to Stephen Crane: “the impact of the dollar on the human heart.”<sup>146</sup> In offering a seemingly universal medium and form of rational equivalence, money takes on the very substance of social life out of which we fashion the character of “the *other* person,” making us blind to what or who we are in dialogue with.<sup>147</sup> In Frost’s lyrics, commonplaces of thought and action bear out the dangerous obviousness

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<sup>146</sup> *Notebooks* 140.

<sup>147</sup> Marx, Karl, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844” *Marx and Engels Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978) 102.

of universal equivalency, yet they also train our senses to moments when a speaker seems at odds with, or overly seduced by, the seeming transparency of exchange, even if a speaker fails to conceptualize this problem for him or herself.

Though Frost is describing ordinary language use in the “Romantic Chasm,” we might extract from his description a working definition of a poem itself: a series of divergences and estrangements that appear whole only in relation to each other. Figurative language, like a metaphor, is risky not only because it make us seem strange to our friends, but because it can also make us strangers to concepts we once held of ourselves. In giving a non-conceptual theory of metaphor, Hans Blumenberg has argued that compound metaphors like “a meadow laughs” can act as an interruption in thought, using prior concepts to produce a non-conceptual effect. It forces a reader to bridge a gap in intuition by linking a prior act, “laughing,” to an aspect of one’s life-world, “a meadow,” in which it had never appeared. Whatever intention a metaphor can be said to embody is a “departure” from a conceptual order, throwing us back on what Blumenberg calls, echoing Husserl, the referential structure of our “life-world” out of which concepts emerge.<sup>148</sup>

Paul Ricoeur has described the force of language’s phenomenological background as the metaphor’s elucidation of the “action of context” or the polysemic play between a sedimented history of use (in the conventions of a sentence, an artwork, or a mode of discourse) and the local improvisation of a word.<sup>149</sup> Ricoeur borrows this sense of polysemy from the work of Benveniste, which he cites earlier in the essay as a series of “contextual values”: “what one calls polysemy is nothing but the institutionalized sum, let us say, of contextual values, always instantaneous, continually apt to enrich, to disappear” (130). What makes the transient experience of reading across metaphors estranging is that, in objectifying *successive* shifts in ordinary signification according to such contextual values, a word can depart from a concept as quickly as it confirms it. No metaphorized person or place can stand still as wholly representative because their meaning derives from transitions between actions and contexts. As we saw in “Mending Wall,” this is particularly troubling when one is trying to delineate one right from another via such unstable terms as wall or gap.

The gravity and breadth of Frost’s metaphorical game comes from the fact that words, when treated as points of departure, no longer confirm the special temporality or isolated consciousness of an “I.” Conversely, the “you” is no longer simply an object of description or an absolute other one encounters, but a kind of co-conspirator in producing a more mutable and conditional sense of what it means to be free. It is a striking coincidence that Frost personifies this process in terms of encounters between “free” peoples, precisely because freedom is not an abstract virtue or right in this instance, but a measure of where this talk occurs: a freedom *from* or *in relation to*.

Lyric speech provides a definite socio-political function in that it breaks up a habitual, positivistic notion of individual autonomy, one that never considers what one is departing from or towards. In returning us to these moments of encounter between ways of seeing or ordering the world, word-shifts emphasize the agency of these social and material conditions that both surround and internally pattern our conversations. We listen and read not just for the grammatical propositions of individual speakers, but also for the ways in which their speech becomes implicated

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<sup>148</sup> Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*, trans. Stephen Randall (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 83–84.

<sup>149</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, trans. Robert Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin, John Costello (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), 190. For Ricoeur’s citation, see Émile Benveniste, “La forme et le sens dans le langage,” *Le Langage: Actes du XIIIe congrès des sociétés de philosophie de langue française* (Neuchâtel, La Baconnière, 1967) 27–40.

with contexts or environments. This implication occurs often without the ability for speakers to represent this process as self-knowledge. We see this especially in early first-person lyrics from about walks in the woods, such as “The Woodpile” (1914) or “Birches” (1916), where the inhuman life seems at willful odds with or least “non-responsive,” as Bonnie Costello has argued, to a speaker’s ratiocinations and gestures of self-importance.<sup>150</sup> The lack of identity between a person and a place takes on a political charge when we think about it in relation to the prior insistence on trespass. In “Blueberries,” the husband uses the logic of usufruct to suggest to his wife a residual right to the fruit on Mr. Patterson’s pasture: “If he thinks all the fruit that grows wild is for him, / He’ll find he’s mistaken.” (CPPP 64, 79–80). Patterson’s possessiveness is mistaken precisely because it misrecognizes how life gains its particularity and vitality from what surrounds it (and not what it encloses or when it was enclosed). Similarly, even the intrusion of the speakers is a displacement of some prior life form. The husband recalls a time when they used to pick blueberries soundlessly, like “trolls underground,” until one of them would accuse the other of “keeping a bird / Away from its nest” (64, 86–89).

Fittingly, Frost’s word-drifts include the arch part or figure of lyrical speech, the “I.” “I,” too, is a character subject to drift and dislocation from what “I” believed or intended in the first place. And the world in which “I” move proves itself to be something other than the projected image of “my” thought. One can look to most of Frost’s lyrics rooted largely in a first-person perspective in his early books to glimpse this undoing of the sovereign speaker. The last poem in *Mountain Interval*, “The Sound of Trees,” also describes the process of following out an extravagant choice that is never actually made: “I shall set forth for somewhere, / I shall make the reckless choice / Some day when they are in voice / And tossing so as to scare / The white clouds over them on. / I shall have less to say, / But I shall be gone.” (CPPP 150, 19–25). What provokes language and pathetic projection onto the trees and clouds is a series of future progressive formulations that, as the lines develop, end up negating the very position of avowal.

Perhaps the starkest example of speech diverging from the self-conscious posturing of a speaker is in his most famous single lyric, “The Road Not Taken.” Frost wrote the poem as a satire of Edward Thomas and the peculiar mixture of heroic indecision he showed on their walks in England. As the first poem of *Mountain Interval*, it acts as a preface or preparation for the poems that follow, much like “Mending Wall” acts as a précis for the social and generational gaps that follow these springtime wall menders. The first thing that might tip us off to something strange at work in “The Road” is the fact that, confronted with two diverging roads, the speaker bemoans the ability *not* to organize these divergent realities into a cohesive figure of himself as traveler: “And sorry I could not travel both / And be one traveler” (CPPP 103, 2–3). A gulf is signaled, only to be passed over by the self-celebrated fact of one road having “perhaps the better claim, / Because it was grassy and wanted wear.” But that claim doesn’t hold up in the following couplet: “Though as for that the passing there / Had worn them really about the same” (103, 7–10). The next clause, enjambed across a stanza break, echoes this parity of perception: “And both that morning equally lay” (103, 11). Then, despite the self-assurance that this single traveler could keep the other option for another time, the poem phrases a fundamental doubt about ever being able to return to the same position: “Yet knowing how way leads on to way, / I doubted if I should ever come back” (103, 14–15). The poem has given us every reason to doubt these distinctions, either about the speaker as a “traveler” or the material world that is reflected through its speech.

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<sup>150</sup> Bonnie Costello, *Shifting Ground: Reinventing Landscape in Modern American Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003) 19–23.



What follows, though, is a retrospective posturing of difference, replete with dramatic sighs: “I shall be telling this with a sigh / Somewhere ages and ages hence: / Two roads diverged in a wood and I— / I took the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference” (103, 16–20). We might expect that the repetition of the first line (“Two roads diverged in a yellow wood”), with a slight difference of metrics and description (yellow wood is generalized as “a wood”), would parallel the distinction the speaker seeks in identifying its own personal virtue with a certain roughshod composition of a forested path. However, Frost’s clever elliptical dash between the repeated instances of the first-person pronoun exposes a moment of stuttering insistence, like a record needle stuck in a groove, in order to complete the rhyme scheme, “I” echoing “by.” Metrically, the “I” undergoes a sonic shift from stressed to unstressed.

This metrical shift also alerts us to the larger separation between what a lyric can make audible and what the speaker voices as a self-possessed difference. The self-congratulatory, maverick posture of the speaker in effect overrides the tenuous relation between self and world exposed through the experiential work of measuring one passage against the other, treated by the speaker like two sides of an abstract scale. Against the relief of this formulaic individualist posture, readers are left with a sense that this pathological dualism (two paths echoes two travelers) doesn’t map on to the material reality of the situation. The lyric exposes the “I” to what it cannot imagine: acting out itself as two travelers—subject as object, and vice versa—at once.

Striking, too, is that a probable inter-textual source of this lyrical set-piece of American poetry is to be found not only in Frost’s dialogues with Thomas but also in his engagements with contemporary vitalism and pragmatic philosophy well documented by Richard Poirier in his landmark *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing* (1977) and *Poetry and Pragmatism* (1992) and more recently by Frank Lentricchia (1994), Bonnie Costello (2003), Kristen Case (2011), and Mark Richardson (2014).<sup>151</sup> In 1911, Frost had just finished teaching a college-level course in the education department at the State Normal School, a course in which he included William James’s *Psychology: A Briefer Course* alongside Plato and Rousseau. During a trip to New York for Christmas break, Frost brought with him Henri Bergson’s *Creative Evolution* (1911). In the same letter to Untermeyer mentioned above, Frost comments on the potential for poetry, and creative labor in general, to do the work of “bothering” our ability to assign some overarching purpose to an evolutionary process: “What I like about Bergson and Fabre is that they have bothered our evolutionism so much with the cases of instincts they have brought up” (CPPP 206). What I take Frost to mean is not that evolution is no longer applicable. Rather, he is saying that we should expand our sense of what counts as a determining agent within a process of selection, including a person’s ability to instinctually respond to drifts in one’s environment or emotional life that might never be available as stable objects of thought.

Frost’s borrowings from Bergson are not merely theoretical. No reader, as far as I know, has pointed out the verbatim echoes of the metaphor of the traveled road Bergson uses to construct a critique of instrumental reasoning:

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<sup>151</sup> See Richard Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) and *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); *Robert Frost in Context*, ed. Mark Richardson (New York: Cambridge UP, 2014); Kristen Case, *American Pragmatism and Poetic Practice: Crosscurrents from Emerson to Susan Howe* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011); David H. Evans, “Guiding Metaphors: Robert Frost and the Rhetoric of Jamesian Pragmatism.” *Arizona Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (Autumn 2001) 61–90

It would be futile to try and assign to life an end, in the human sense of the word. To speak of an end is to think of a pre-existing model which has only to be realized. It is to suppose, therefore, that all is given, and that the future can be read in the present. It is to believe life, in its movement and in its entirety, goes to work like our intellect, which is only a motionless and fragmentary view of life, and which naturally takes its stand outside of time. Life, on the contrary, processes and *endures* in time. Of course, when once the road has been traveled, we can glance over it, mark its direction, note this in psychological terms and speak as if there had been pursuit of an end. Thus shall we speak ourselves. But of the road which was going to be traveled, the human mind could have nothing to say, for the road has been created *pari passu* with the act of traveling over it, being nothing but the direction of this act itself.<sup>152</sup>

To put this work in terms of the lyric, the poet's task is not to assign a reasonable end or "pre-existing model" of experience to the speaker but rather to follow out the conflicting relations between a figurative consciousness and its world over time. Neither can the "road" (the lyric scene) be dissociated from the process of traveling it or, in this case, objectifying it in speech. For Bergson, this means that the intentional arc of a particular life or decision can only be shown negatively, through a process he likens to a "hand passing through [iron] filings: the inexhaustible detail of the movement of the grains, as well as the order of their final arrangement."<sup>153</sup> He compares this process to Zeno's paradox about Achilles and the tortoise, which he argues creates its own problem by substituting an infinitesimal series of quantitative divisions and spatial intervals that have nothing to do with the qualitative, imminent experience of time—or, *how* and *where* spacing arises in the act of crossing over or through them.

Frost saw lyric personhood as a similar representational problem. To speak the self, as the speaker does in "Road Not Taken," is a retrospective and proprietary act, as it fixes the "I" as the measuring stick for all that "is given." "I" am the difference. But to move towards strangers and convey the experience of displacement in language is a different task altogether, as it makes one speech vulnerable to the measure of whatever is encountered in traveling, be this a stranger or an alienated version of one's self. The lyric becomes a fluid situation of sounds and drifts in sense that we measure any particular speech act against.

In "The Self-Seeker" (1914), this drama takes a tragic turn as a worker discusses with a company lawyer, in the presence of a friend and his daughter, how much he should be paid for a signing away liability in a work accident in which he lost the use of his feet (the pun on metrics intended, for sure). By way of the daughter's insistence, the poem reminds this seeker of the bargain that the lyric is based on: he accepts the fixed measure of a price for the flexible measure his feet would have provided in practicing his intimate knowledge of and curiosity about wild flowers. The poem speaks two forms of spacing at once, evoking what is not said in what is, what is avoided by being understood, or the difference between the mobility of sense versus cents.

For Frost, this also requires thinking beyond the limits of individual psychology that even Bergson treated as a kind of negative reserve for these counter-factual determinations. A word-shift didn't take its significance solely from the abstract ground of the mind or what Bergson calls, in *Matter and Memory* (1896), "pure memory," but from a social history of situated speakers. What the

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<sup>152</sup> Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Henry Holt, 1911), 51. See also Bergson's *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

“Self-Seeker” lost is, quite literally, the wild yet purposive duration of a walk with his loved ones. There is ultimately no lost self to be compensated for. There is only the incongruence the verse itself sounds between the drifts/shifts a forage affords and any credit or corporate liability this worker could claim as the price of a limb.

Frost expands Bergson’s critique of instrumental reason to also encompass the relationship between persons and the physical histories of places. In linking phenomenal experiences separated by time or space, a metaphor also measures the distance between abstract and concrete entities, such as freedom or unity and the sites in which they are practiced. This is crucial in figuring the everyday qualities of a region “North” of Boston (the setting of his second, third, and fourth books) where the colonial history of America and its constitutional ideals seem at most distant and at least irrelevant to his self-consciously unincorporated series of lyric characters. In *North of Boston*, an obliquely ekphrastic poem like “The Black Cottage” makes displacement an object of historical and aesthetic speculation, as we access this derelict, porous home vicariously through a conversation between a visitor and the first-person position of the speaker, a local minister who interprets the family matriarch as struggling to reconcile the loss of her relatives in the Union army with her “quaint” belief that “all men are created free and equal” (CPPP 60, 61). Both of our local informants seem wholly incapable of, or at least unwilling to, synthesize the conflicted history of the place and its prior inhabitants into a cohesive site. Yet, what the minister frames as the limitations of “her” ethical commitment to racial equality—“White was the only race she ever knew. / Black she had scarcely seen, and yellow never”—the poem shows to be the product of the minister’s projections, as well as the social, political, and material consequences of the Civil War— “She had supposed the war decided that” (61, 75–79). The home, as well as its prior inhabitants, fails as a metonym for the personal sacrifices necessary to preserving political equality or national sovereignty. What these failures materialize, though, in the very grain of speech, are precisely the past and present obstructions to coming to know each loss on its own terms.

Perhaps predictably, given Frost’s penchant for serial displacement, the poem ends in a series of digressions. The minister drifts out of the present in what starts out as a rumination on Christian charity and ends in an Ozymandius-like fantasy about a desert civilization, folded into sand, that no army would bother to conquer: “I wish / I could be monarch of a desert land / I could devote and dedicate forever / To the truths we keep coming back and back to.” For the minister, the fluctuating territory of the desert is not sufficient for such a recursive devotion. It must be walled in: “So desert it would have to be, so walled / By mountain ranges half in summer snow, / No one would covet it or think it worth / The pains of conquering to force change on” (62, 111–18). This privative moral fantasy is then broken up mid-sentence by an em-dashed discovery that the cottage has played host to another order of life: “—There are bees in this wall.” The inhuman protrusion of bees—“Fierce heads looked out; small bodies pivoted” (62, 125–26)—occurs at the very moment when the fiery sunset glows through the dormancies of the structure, serving as a stark rejoinder to the content of the conversation while also pointing to the latent cracks in the cottage as a “special picture / Among tar-banded ancient cherry trees, / So well back from the road in rank lodged grass” (59, 2–4). The cumulative effect is not of a moral resolution or lesson. Rather, the span of the lyric, one that shuttles between the foreclosed pasts and present fantasies of a place, functions as a porous occasion for thinking through what we, as visitors passing through, seem to need from such pastoral locations. The end is voiced by the first-person speaker, whose collective pronoun seems all the more precarious because of the disparate claims and agencies it has come to entail: “We rose to go. Sunset blazed on the windows” (62, 127).

The other side of this lyrical play with the material and imaginative properties of a scene is the social and political reality of being constantly exposed, whether that is through outright dispossession or the itinerant reality of rural wage work. One of the outgrowths of Frost’s attention

to the ordinariness of rural speech and life was an attention to a population of contingent rural labor, a relative exception amongst his largely white male cohort of modernists. An assumed familiarity or ordinariness becomes an obstruction to communication between those who have a home or a job—hetero-normative senses of belonging attached to capital—and those who don't. In both "Death of a Hired Man" and "The Self-Seeker," transient workers possess no common language in which to make the worth of their lives intelligible to those who speak in terms of a liberal domestic morality or the corporate liability of life on the market. As the second poem in the volume, "Death of a Hired Man," takes up this communicative and social impasse through the transient figure of Silas, a "Hired Man" taking shelter in the home of his former employers—Warren and Mary, a married couple. The ethical dilemma is relatively simple: what do we owe this contingent life? What we learn through their competing senses of home and social contract is that Silas's has come back with a plan to "help [Warren] ditch the meadow." Or, as becomes increasingly clear to the figurative sensibility of Mary, he has "come home to die" (*CPPP* 43) in a place he remembers bundling, tagging, and numbering his hay bales. When Mary attempts to represent whatever final request Silas embodies, it comes out in a jumble that reflects Silas's own physical and mental incoherence:

He meant to clear the upper pasture, too.  
That sounds like something you have heard before?  
Warren, I wish you could have heard the way  
He jumbled everything, I stopped to look  
Two or three times—he made me feel so queer—  
To see if he was talking in his sleep. (42, 55-60)

What makes Silas so transfiguring is that, like a sleepwalker, he seems to exist as a liminal being, effectively haunting her imagination with his "queer" speech and disposition. Perhaps the most explicit instance of this comes just at the end of the poem when Mary attempts to adapt the oblique claim Silas makes on her life to a strange, figurative turn in her speech: "He may not speak of it, and then he may. / I'll sit and see if that small sailing cloud / Will hit or miss the moon." (42, 166-68). What does the rather specific demand of Silas's life on this family have to do with the impossible collision between the cloud and the moon?

The answer is, of course, nothing, because they belong to wholly different histories and conditions. But the figure itself is a telling extravagance, as it reimagines an ethical dilemma of a transient life through a transient figure. The oddness is amplified, too, when Mary seems to participate in this figurative and ethical disjuncture by putting "out her hand / Among the harp-like-morning-glory strings, / Taut with the dew from garden bed to eaves, / As if she played unheard some tenderness" (43, 110-12). In turn, the poem seems to confirm this magical agency in the next stanza: "It hit the moon. / Then there were three there, making a dim row, / The moon, the little silver cloud, and she." (45, 169-71). This metaphorical shooting of the gap, a melancholic echo of Silas's many departures, is punctuated by Warren's final report: "'Dead,' was all he answered" (45). Silas's final departure happens off-stage, dramatically displaced, and meets us only through the speech of Warren who, in life, had denied him any residual claim to return and practice his craft.

Warren is a typical species of personality in Frost in that he acts as a fairly unpersuasive foil of "good sense." He reprimands his wife for her tenderness and Silas for always being out of pace with the world: "After so many years he still keeps finding / Good arguments he sees he might have used" (42, 77-78). Warren goes on: "Poor Silas, so concerned for other folk, / And nothing to look backward to with pride, / And nothing to look forward to with hope, / So now and never any different" (43, 102-5). But Silas's greatest fault for Warren, what places him beyond the aid of others,

is that his pride blinds him to his own lack of self-worth: "He don't know why he isn't quite as good / As anybody. Worthless though he is, / He won't be made ashamed to please his brother." (44, 150-52). As the contradictions pile up—he has nothing to be proud of, he is limited by his pride; he knows nothing, he always knew where to find his hay bales—it becomes increasingly clear that Warren is telling us less *about* Silas and more about his own inability to evoke the complexity of his character.

This inability is made palpable, too, in their argument over what a home is. After figuring Silas as a "hound" worn out upon the trail, Mary defines her sense of home: "I should have called it / Something you somehow haven't to deserve" (43, 124-25). Home is thus a kind of inalienable right or state of grace. Warren's definition of home is more akin to a burden of kinship associated with a particular place: "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in" (43, 122-23). As a migrant wage laborer alienated from his family, Silas belonged to neither in the sense that he was at "home" wherever and whenever he could be paid for a day's work. What Warren seems incapable of registering is a more basic contradiction about the wage system as such: his freedom to pursue labor without a commensurate right to shelter, food, care, and all else that is required for reproducing the laboring body is a purely *negative* freedom. The cruel truth of Silas is that he arrives to the house as just such a living negation in that his transient existence has rendered him largely unintelligible except as an oblique ethical pressure on concepts of domesticity and the responsibilities of ownership.

When asked about the relationship between this poem and the contemporary labor situation in 1942, Frost was both crabby and revealing. He wrote this note to serve as a "Preface" for "Death of the Hired Man" in response to Whit Burnett's request to include some explanatory note along with the poem for a high school textbook entitled *American Authors Today* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1947):

In asking me to preface my poem, the idea of the editors is no doubt to have me bring it up to date by connecting it with some such thing as National Labor Relations. I am always glad to give my poems every extraneous help possible. The employee here depicted is no longer numerous enough to be dealt with statistically by the Department of Economics and Sociology. Nevertheless I should like to flatter myself that it is at least partly for his sake that the revolution is being brought on. In conclusion I beg to protest that it was with no such thoughts as these that the poem was written. By the way, it's in blank verse, not free verse.<sup>154</sup>

In making this cagey defense of the self-evidence of his now anachronistic lyric style and subject matter, Frost is also pointing to what he takes to be a very real aporia in the labor consciousness of America. Silas is the kind of figure that has no home in statistics, largely because his kind didn't leave much of a paper trail and existed prior to formalization of sociological studies and federal records of labor; rather, the peculiar qualities of his estrangement find their "place" in the contradictory sayings and metaphors of his lyrics.

In the other poem from the collection most explicitly about the diminished form and social status of a laborer, "The Self-Seeker," the freedom to move and seek out new forms of exchange or subjectivity takes on a tragi-comic gravity. The speaker ostensibly in search of a self, referred to as

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<sup>154</sup> Preface to *Death of a Hired Man* (ca. 1946) MS-1178, Box 19, Folder 52. Dartmouth Library. The editors of the book, Whit Burnett and Charles Slatkin, ended up using their own preface to the poem and not Frost's version.

the "Broken One," must decide upon a price equivalent for losing the use of his "feet." When the lawyer "for the company" visits to offer him "Five hundred dollars for the pair," his friend and interlocutor, Willis, frames this as a Faustian bargain, precisely because this conversation between worker and lawyer has no relationship to what these feet have or could enable: "Yours are no common feet. The lawyer doesn't know what it is he's buying: / So many miles you might have walked you won't walk. You haven't run your forty orchids down. / What does he think?—How *are* the blessed feet?" (CPPP 93). The criticality of Frost's poems seems sharpest when a freedom to speak, to move, to work, or to love is presented that only exists as an abstract potentiality. Again, we can see this problem in the presentation of the Broken One's feet which, as "valuable" parts, are abstracted from the body which suffers or the broader world of labor in which others, too, struggle to go on. As he says to Willis, "They already have my soul, why shouldn't they take my feet"?

The cruel joke is that the "feet" are in fact alive and well, that is if we take them as the metrical abstractions that Willis and the Broken One go to great lengths to preserve. "Blessed" is just such a conspicuous addition. The regularity of metrical stress stands in relief to the fundamental *disequivalencies* between the bargaining positions: the company proxy, which sets a price for a foot, and Willis and Anne (his daughter) who oppose this logic with a more speculative, aesthetic value for the flowers an able body might encounter. To put it in terms of "sound-posturing," the feet help us hear two definitions of circulation—the money form and the body—through the fateful progress of iambs. But, as the Broken One reminds his friend, the real terms of the trade have already been set: "I have to take / What I can get. You see they have the feet, / Which gives them the advantage in the trade. / I can't get back the feet in any case." (88–90, 65–68). The Broken One literalizes this abstraction of his body and labor value by eventually withdrawing himself from the negotiation entirely, resigned to the proxy dialogue between Willis and the lawyer: "'This is between you two apparently. / Where I come in is what I want to know.'" (99, 219–20). The sentence-sound seems to illustrate the expense of these various substitutions: feet for feet, price for experience, money for future culpability. The first iambic stress of "I" stands in contrast to its unstressed "I," which occurs at the very moment he resigns himself to signing the papers and settling this impossible bargain.

Earlier in the poem Anne had already given her crippled father an oblique answer to this question of where the worth and self-knowledge of a transient life comes in. Anne phrases what we might call a lyrical relation of value (what I mean to you) in terms of their shared pursuit of rare flowers: "I didn't bring a Purple Lady's Slipper. / To *You*—to you I mean—they're both too common." (97, 151–52). We might also hear in this intimate address a subtle refusal of the order of substitutability and exchange that put a price on his "feet" (which, as the poem's "audible imagination" asserts, can never be completely subsumed in practice). When the deal is settled and the lawyer offers his condolences in the generic form of a "We're sorry," Willis responds sharply by rebuking his use of the first-person plural pronoun: "Who's *we*?—some stockholders in Boston?" (100, 132). And perhaps this is one of the strongest questions a lyric or lyric sequence can pose: what is left out of these spuriously "common" measures of price, wage, or property? Whether it is the imaginative stock of these wildflowers or the peculiar measure between able and disabled feet, Frost is making audible these modes of social relation and encounter that run against any form of belonging or liability a job can verify. And the physical remainder of these disjuncts in lived value and the universal abstraction of money is the broken body, one that, by the end of the poem, has been marked as outside any collective voice that a settlement could offer. *North of Boston*, as a lyrical sequence, does not shore up the self-sufficiency of its peoples or New England but exposes speakers and readers alike to what might be lost if we base our senses of self-worth, place, and social responsibility on the abstract measure of property instead of the daily trespasses of speech.

## Extravagant Vocations

In his more reflexive moments, Frost uses the internal shifts and drifts of the lyrical line to ponder the vocation of poetry, particularly when it is set in contrast to the types of rural economy and labor populating his poems. While Frost admired Wordsworth for the social realism of his lyrical subjects, he was frustrated with what he took to be the gulf between his elevated diction and the rural lives he described. Perhaps one of the best example of this self-conscious turn is a poem he wrote about a dialogue between a pretentious speaker and two contingent lumber workers, “Two Tramps in Mud Time” (*A Further Range*, 1936). Frank Lentricchia argues that Frost sought to close down this distance between poet and subject by collapsing the labor of constructing a poem with the laboring bodies observed in a lyric: “the man who writes *is* working, he *is* the solitary reaper.”<sup>155</sup> In his reading of “Two Tramps,” Lentricchia reads this equivalence between poetry and labor as Frost’s maneuver to justify poetry as a manly enterprise out of a gendered anxiety he shared with contemporaries like Wallace Stevens and Ezra Pound.

But what if we read Frost’s portraits of labor, in light of his essay-missive to Thomas, as attempts to represent the *spacing* of poet, speaker, and place? This requires a kind of counterfactual reading. The poem’s form is an adaptation of the four-stress lines with alternating end rhymes that characterized many English ballads (which had more varied line-lengths). It is also a poem explicitly about the logical apposition of poetic avocation with wage-earning vocation, specifically the transient work of clearing lumber. This apposition develops from the comparison between the “loving” work of a lyric speaker and the work of two transient lumberjacks who (the speaker tells us) slept “God knows where” last night (*CPPP* 252, 50). It is the first-person speaker (a not so veiled proxy for Frost) who claims to unite the two modes of labor in the final stanza: “But yield who will to their separation, / My object in living is to unite / My avocation and my vocation / As my two eyes make one in sight” (252, 65–68). But wouldn’t such synthesis subsume the distinction of another will? The poem’s penultimate stanza clarifies the problem, as the right to the wood is figured as an irreconcilable difference between the poet and the tramps: “My right might be love but theirs was need. / And where the two exist in twain / Theirs was the better right—agreed.” (252, 62–64). It is at this juncture, we might say, that a concern for spacing and the speaker’s appetite for unity of action, perception, and virtue part ways.

When the speaker claims to unify these diverging relations to work by way of his sight, what is abandoned is a poem that was never written. In this poem, a speaker might have shifted his definition of work to accommodate more transient notions of vocation and necessity as well as common rights of access. Read in light of this abandoned future, the closing maxim seems to belong less to any “deed” (notice the pun on action/property) of the speaker than to a speculative work of the lyric itself: “Only where love and need are one, / And the work is play for mortal stakes, Is the deed ever really done / For heaven and the future’s sakes” (252, 69–72).

What the lyric as a whole makes possible is a reading *against* the limited, separate claims of its speaker. The *propria persona* of the poet figures the two tramps as just this kind of excessive and entirely Other provocation: “These two must make me love it more / By coming with what they came to ask” (252, 42–43). Although their question never rises to the level of spoken language, their muted presence lingers as a provocation distinct from the will of the speaker, something “more” than the self-vindication of a poet’s vocation. Here we might think of the two tramps as concrete historical figures that put internal, yet discrete pressure on the first-person speaker’s claims to a unity of will and scene, rendering its right as contingent as these alienated figures who slept “God knows

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<sup>155</sup> Lentricchia, 97.

where.” They are the questionable fact neither the poet nor the poem can resolve. What stands in the course of the lyric is an incoherent picture in which poet-laborer and the transient lumberjacks struggle to make the stakes of their occupations and claims to a place legible in relation to each other without reducing this relationality to a common abstraction. But, per the usual, one deed supplants another.

Given his self-cultivated reputation as an arch Yankee, we might be surprised that Frost would define the vocation of poetry in his final public lecture, “On Extravagance,” as a “penny” generously spent rather than saved” (CPPP 902). He inverts the lowly coin from a measure for one’s labor and class status to a vehicle for a shifty form of interaction between people. But this is familiar territory, too, for those readers who have tracked the numerous instances across both his more populist and experimental lyrics of the symbolic confluences between the money form and lyrical exchange, or cents and senses. In the table of contents for *A Further Range*, Frost makes the literal joke of poetry’s failure to “add up,” publishing a series of alternative titles that only appears in the list of contents and riff explicitly on the language of finance. The other title for “The Gold Hesperidee,” “*or, How to Take a Loss*,” offers the satirical slant to a priest’s penchant for steady symbolic values, which hampers his ability to address the physical demands of growing (and losing) apples. The vocation of the poet, on the other hand, is to put these failures of equivalence in dialogue, sounding how they fail. Alongside the arch “doubleness” of “The Gold Hesperidee; *or, How to Take a Loss*” Frost placed the sing-song singleness of “*The Hardship of Accounting*”: “Never ask of money spent / Where the spender thinks it went. / Nobody was ever meant / To remember or invent / What he did with every cent.” (CPPP 282). The poem sonically mimics the double-book logic of accounting through the hard, insistent rhyming of the right margin weighing against the trochaic insistence of the left. Between the two ledgers, the poem admonishes “us” to consider *who* did the spending and *how* it was done against the afterlives of *what* was spent, meant, or ultimately possessed. In “On Extravagance,” Frost describes this as a lyric’s ability to develop a sense that doesn’t belong exclusively to any particular act of address or conceptual extrapolation:

And people hold you. You say something sad and something cynical, and they forget to allow for the extravagance of poetry—that you’re not saying that all the time. That’s not a doctrine you’re preaching. You loathe anybody that wants you to be either pessimist or optimist. It doesn’t belong to it; it doesn’t belong at all. . . . The extravagance lies in “it sometimes seems as if.” See. That would be a good name of a book: “it sometimes seems as if.” Or it says: “If only you knew.” You could put that on the cover of a book. “If only I could tell you,” you know. (CPPP 904)

Here Frost is challenging the retrospective forms through which we recognize a life (grammatical, representational, socio-political) in order to assign it an exchangeable value or moral meaning. This puts his speakers, including himself, in a strange bind. As in Frost’s statement—“If only I could tell you”—the fluctuating intentions and emotional dispositions of a speaker can only be “known” to the degree in which a poem or a lecture makes the transient conditions of speech apparent—“it sometimes seems as if.” This is why Frost foregrounds not only the extravagances of his individual phrases as separated from their lyrical contexts but also the artificiality of his own rugged individualist persona of a native Vermonter.



Frost of course owes much of his rhetorical and historical interest in extravagance to the American writer he most admired, Henry David Thoreau.<sup>156</sup> It was in Thoreau's conclusion to *Walden* that he voiced his fear that his expression:

may not be *extra-vagant* enough, may not wander far enough beyond the narrow limits of my daily experience, so as to be adequate to the truth of which I have been convinced. *Extra vagance!* it depends on how you are yarded... I desire to speak somewhere *without* bounds; like a man in a waking moment, to men in their waking moments; for I am convinced that I cannot exaggerate enough even to lay the foundation of a true expression.<sup>157</sup>

Following this passage, Thoreau gives a striking image of such a trespassing figure in "our shadows" that dissolve the identity of bodies and "reveal an insensible perspiration toward the sun."<sup>158</sup> *Extra-vagance* is a flexible measure of expression that doesn't depend upon the limits of habit or property but a desire or intent formed across subjective, discursive, even juridical boundaries. We might also recall that in his conclusion to *Walden*, Thoreau took extravagance to be a necessary response to the social (and market) expectation of writers to speak so that they will be understood. Thoreau describes this as the problem of speaking more than "one order of understanding"<sup>159</sup> simultaneously, a problem Frost often spatializes in terms of dialogues between persons or between a speaker and a landscape.

The fact that Frost allied his poetry with expenditure over accumulation is not only an affront to the kind of Protestant work ethic so many readers project on to his New England personas, but also a challenge to the purpose of the lyric as a vehicle for rested or reconciled parts. Richard Poirier, the critic most attuned to Frost's dialogue with Thoreau's idiosyncratic notions of extravagance, describes Frost's affective, symbolic, and physical excesses as moments of "expenditure": "The expenditures can involve simply caring for someone or something, romantic responsiveness, or some combination of mental and physical vagrancy or walking beyond the confines of 'home' in search for something new that might be brought back."<sup>160</sup> Nested in the word "extravagance" is an echo of another type of transgression that Poirier picks up on here, that of the vagrant who haunts the peripheries and causeways of public life.

The vagrant is significant because, like Frost's many damaged or estranged workers, it functions as a limit case of social imagination and a figurative double to the kinds of enfranchisement that autonomy assumes. What is striking is how often Frost parallels the *voluntary* transience of his typically male poets, visitors, or nightwalkers, as we saw in "Two Tramps," alongside the *involuntary* condition of lacking a home or stable place of work. We see this most explicitly in Warren, an itinerant farm hand, who passes away wordlessly in "Death of a Hired Man"

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<sup>156</sup> For Frost's relationship to Thoreau, see George F. Jr. "Frost's Synecdochism," *American Literature* 58, no. 3 (1986) 379–392; Eric Carl Link, "Nature's Extra-vagrants: Frost and Thoreau in the Maine Woods," *Papers on Language & Literature* 33, no. 3 (Spring 1987) 182–197.

<sup>157</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 315, 316.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 316.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 316.

<sup>160</sup> *Work of Knowing*, 93.

(1914) while his employers—a husband and wife—debate their ethical responsibility to this former worker. Rather than read such instability as a redress of their own personal freedom, his speakers fall back into insular, recursive forms of reasoning or assuage their anxieties by projecting a sovereign sense of self or rule on to an inhuman landscape. But perhaps there lies the greatest trust that Frost put in the lyrics themselves, as he valued poetry for its capacity to present what “you” and “I” cannot account for on our own.

With such a project in mind, the solitary or conversational lyric need not advocate one way or another, but rather can train our ears to the ways in which these social, political, and material contingencies are mediated by the supposed commonness of “our” speech or sense. This is why I take Frost to be so invested in both the clarity of separation and opposition, as such contingencies are visible or audible only by way of spaces formed between people, attitudes, or successive claims on common properties. In notes for a 1918 class on “BARRIERS” between literary trade and international diplomacy following Woodrow Wilson’s “Fourteen Points,” Frost generated a series of questions in order to understand how “freedom” was not an essential idea but a situational or conditional permission that depended on competing claims to a history, a culture, or a polis. He asked:

1. If an idea is a good idea what difference if any does it make to you whether it is your own or someone’s else? / 2. Is it permissible to erect barriers against the intrusion of other peoples thought on our own thinking? What are some of the barriers? / 3. On what ground do we ask to be let alone when we are engaged with a piece of work? / 4. What is this prejudice in favor of keeping people off us with their suggestions while we are in process? / 5. Discriminate between the kinds of egotism involved.<sup>161</sup>

We should be asking the same questions of Frost’s poems.

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<sup>161</sup> “BARRIERS” (1918), MS-1178:16:14.

## HART CRANE'S TRAMPS AND TRANSIENT GESTURES

After Hart Crane saw Chaplin's first feature-length version of his "Tramp" character in *The Kid* in 1921, he wrote his homage "Chaplinesque" and sent it to Chaplin. Waldo Frank, a mutual friend of both Chaplin and Crane, set up a meeting between the two in Greenwich Village. In *My Autobiography*, Chaplin describes the encounter: "[We] talked until breakfast time the next morning.... We discussed the purpose of poetry. I said it was a love letter to the world.' A very small world,' said Hart ruefully. He spoke of my work as being in the tradition of the Greek comedies." Before Crane committed suicide, he sent Chaplin a copy of *White Buildings* and wrote on the flyleaf a dedication: "To Charles Chaplin in memory of *The Kid* from Hart Crane. 20 January, '28."<sup>162</sup> In this encounter and note, Crane marks an intimate link between what he sees as the purpose of his poetry and his interpretation of Chaplin's transient persona that developed across his brief body of writing. Poetry spoke from a diminished place within a diminishing world. It also no coincidence that Crane dedicates his first book to what was and probably still is the most famous icon of transience in American culture.

In a very literal sense, transient persons are peripheral. They both inhabit and constitute the limits of cities, infrastructures, labor standards, or norms of private and public behavior. But it is the kinds of movements, desires, and affiliations that develop in these peripheries that make transients not only threatening but liable for recrimination. It is striking, then, that throughout Crane's writing we find not only the willingness to play the part of the perpetual outcast to his critics and friends but also a scrutiny of the verbal, formal, and stylistic consequences of taking up transience as the purpose and subject of many of his poems. As both Christopher Nealon and Brian Reed have pointed out in the context of Crane's epic, *The Bridge* (1930), his cast of transients is as numerous as it is varied, evoking both Whitman's ensembles of vagabonds and prostitutes as well as early twentieth-century manifestations like "hobohemians" and "highwaymen."<sup>163</sup> What I focus on here is how these complex pressures on and from transient experience manifest in lyric speech, particularly in Crane's first book, *White Buildings* (1926).

To begin, we can look to one of Crane's most explicit poems about the fraught links between physical mobility and suspect behavior, "Passage." Though hard to narrate explicitly—itsself a common feature of Crane's poems about transience—a basic sketch of its plot is that a thief steals a book from a speaker who confront each other in their return to an orchard. In response to the thief's question of "Why are you back here," the first-person speaker declares itself "justified in transience":

"Why are you back here—smiling an iron coffin?"  
"To argue with the laurel," I replied:  
"Am justified in transience, fleeing  
Under the constant wonder of your eyes—."<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Charles Chaplin, *My Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964), 248–49.

<sup>163</sup> For Reed's description of Crane's "nomad rallery," see Brian M. Reed, *Hart Crane: After His Lights* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 230. See also Christopher Nealon's reading of the figuration of hobos in a railway jungle in "The River" section of *The Bridge* in *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion Before Stonewall* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

<sup>164</sup> *The Complete Poems of Hart Crane*, ed. Marc Simon (New York: Liveright, 2000), 25. References to Crane's essays come from *The Complete Poems and Selected Letters of Prose of Hart Crane*, ed. Brom Weber

With this address that hinges between the diegetic “thief” and the reader’s eyes tracking the words, Crane is telling us something about the disposition of the speaker. For one, this “I” understands itself to be always already exposed to questioning or doubt. But it also understands its presence, what I “Am,” as both an argument and justification for this transient behavior. Riffing on the dual meaning of passage as poem and as movement, this justification turns on the variability of the prepositions: *in* the erratic movements of one’s body, *in* the compositional limits of the page, *in* the pastoral dichotomy between country and city, and, perhaps more pointedly, “under” the surveillance of “your eyes.” Justification, too, carries the connotations of proof, specifically the rhetoric of *self*-evidence. But this speaker is hardly positioned as a source of authority, either to the thief or to the watchful reader, as even the pastoral frame is highly abstracted or put out of synch earlier by the speaker’s odd quantification of its walking motion: “had I walked / The dozen particular decimals of time?” What seems to provoke these strange turns of phrase is a rather consistent feeling that this evasive and untimely “I” speaks to us from a broadly suspicious position.

Understanding how such suspicion is inhabited and interpreted through the constraints of lyric form will help us restore what I take to be the social background to Crane’s often excessive, anachronistic, or hermetic speech acts. It also helps us see the ways in which Crane thought through specific problems of transient experience and social life that not only occupied his contemporaries in film and sociology but also inform more general discourses about social and economic progress. Each of Crane’s “tramps” are assembled out of a complicated cultural and generic legacy. He weaves together biblical parables of exile, techniques of comedic pantomime, and erotic melodrama with the everyday physical realities of poverty, displacement, and migration across transitional forms such as oceans, bridges, highways, hobo jungles, even dispersals of sound. Crucially, these transitional figures and experiences are often stripped of their identifying features, as in Crane’s epigraph for *The Bridge* which comes from God’s description of Satan as a vagrant in the *The Book of Job*: “From going to and fro and in the earth / and from walking up and down in it” (CP, 41). Satan is not only cast over the Earth’s surface but condemned to move *in* it, as if the material supports of motion have also thickened into obstruction. As a lyric poet, Crane was deeply invested in materializing obstructions and limits to communication, an effect he achieved by experimenting incessantly with how lyrics mediate ideas of persons through elliptical voicing, figuration, and syntax. Allen Grossman, perhaps the best reader of the relations between affect, lyric technique, and interpretive difficulty in Crane, has described this effect in terms of Crane’s passionate conflation of historical structures with lyrical forms.<sup>165</sup> In conflating structural forces with emotional immediacy, Crane achieves his lyrical effect of being both impossibly personal and unapproachable, ancient and hyper-modern. What sets his approach to modernity apart from more cautionary modernisms of cultural “decay” or “decline”—espoused by Allen Tate or T. S. Eliot, against which he often measured—was this attention to how difficult yet urgent it was to convey the experience of living out of step with one’s self, others, and environment from one lyric to another.<sup>166</sup> Articulating this

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(New York: Anchor Books, 1966). Quotes from Crane’s letters come from *The Letters of Hart Crane*, ed. Brom Weber (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1952).

<sup>165</sup> Allen Grossman, “Hard Problems in Poetry, Especially Valuing,” *True-Love: Essays on Poetry and Valuing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 24; See also “On Communicative Difficulty in General and ‘Difficult’ Poetry in Particular: The Example of Hart Crane’s ‘The Broken Tower,’” 147–63.

<sup>166</sup> For an extended discussion of Crane’s relationship to these discourses of cultural and civilizational “decay,” see Langdon Hammer’s *Hart Crane and Allen Tate: Janus-Faced Modernism*

experience was not directed toward a unifying cultural or religious project, either, but like Chaplin it was a means to locating where bodies, languages, and the built landscape bend against each other or connect up into disturbingly efficient assemblages.

In the sections which follow, I first show how aspects of Crane's lyrical style grew out of an engagement with Chaplin's gestural language. Next, I situate Crane's adaptation of Chaplin's tramp performances in relation to sociological profiles of transients and transient communities as well as queer theoretical accounts of transient sociality, arguing that Crane objectifies the social risks and violent consequences of constantly speaking out of place, body, and time. I close with a discussion of Crane's poetic self-justifications in which he explains his willingness to play the part of a "suspect" in order to seek out forms of emotional complicity that unsettle logics of coherence, possession, and exchange.

## Tramp Theatrics

He developed a manner of speaking and using language which was stylized and natural all at once. He achieved the combination by paying attention to the stances that underlay the sentences: only turning stances into sentences, only writing those sentences through which stances could show through. He called this a *gestich* or gestural language, as it was simply an expression of human gestures.<sup>167</sup>

Bertolt Brecht on the poet, Kin-Jeh

Though Brecht is referring to the poetic roots of his own theatrical practice, his description of "gestural language" gives us a compelling way to conceptualize transience in terms of dramatic technique and narrative form. A *gestus* achieved what Brecht called an "estrangement effect" not simply by isolating an act—a gesture—but through a series of quotable physical "movements" or "stances" expressed in a sequential structure, be that of a sentence or a narrative. But as these gestures are comically repeated and self-consciously framed as "exemplary" by actors, they generate their own order of meaning that jars with, and ultimately separates from, the dramatic reality in which they appear. Walter Benjamin goes so far as to analogize these typified gestures to "movable type."<sup>168</sup> A transient is just such a living type, a type that seems to be defined by an obstinate resistance to honoring the proper time and place of certain actions. Repetitive gestures like begging for change shift from comedy to tragedy as they no longer signify meaningful requests but rather importunate signs that he or she no longer belongs to a community of reasonable, lawful persons.

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(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). For an account of Crane's "American decadence," see Niall Munro's *Hart Crane's Queer Modernist Aesthetic* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 16–35.

<sup>167</sup> Cited in Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (New York: Verso, 1999), 126. For the original, see: Bertolt Brecht, *Grosse kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe*, Vol. XVIII (Aufbau/Suhrkamp, 1989–98), 78–79.

<sup>168</sup> "Making gestures quotable is one of the substantial achievements of the epic theater. An actor must be able to space his gestures the way a typesetter produces spaced type." See: Walter Benjamin's essay, "What is Epic Theatre?" in *Imaginations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 151.

No character or artist of the 1910s, 20s, or 30s made transience more “quotable” than Charlie Chaplin. Not only was Chaplin, as a performer, writer, and director, subsumed into his persistent caricature of “Charlie,” but “Charlie” or “The Tramp” operated as a metonym for social processes that reshaped the American landscape during the “Roaring Twenties” and through the Great Depression. Under-employment, crises in housing availability and cost, wide-spread work actions, and uneven cultural assimilation all produced wide-scale migration, homelessness, displacement, and staggering inequality in the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The hobo stood in for these structural problems. If one looks to the range of “Charlie” films Chaplin made with First National and the production company he co-founded (with Mary Pickford, D. W. Griffith, and Douglas Fairbanks), United Artists—*The Kid* (1921), *The Gold Rush* (1925), *City Lights* (1931), *Modern Times* (1936)—each performance is based on an imperfect impersonation of social or economic “roles”—gold prospector, parent, wealthy magnate, assembly worker, etc. that kept capitalism running. And the Tramp's willingness to play the naïve conman to get what audiences would have recognized as moral or economic necessities—breaking a window in order to sell a homeowner replacement—exposed the thin line between being a criminal and a successful entrepreneur (a line also skirted by the widely popular gangster and “outlaw” films of the 1920s).

Chaplin’s genius, of course, was to mix together these contradictory roles and structural problems through *romantic* plots, driven mostly by a stark relief between heterosexual commitment and homosocial happenstance. One of Chaplin’s first “Tramp” features, “The Vagabond” (1916), shot with Essanay Studios in a dusty canyon in Niles, California, features “The Tramp” as a vagabond violin busker who rescues a vulnerable, physically abused woman (played by his frequent collaborator, Edna Purviance) from “gypsies” in a roadside encampment. This pairing of vulnerable transient lives in a predatory world became a standard for Chaplin, as it lent an amorphous outcast among outcasts a social and romantic reality. André Bazin has argued that Chaplin's romance plot operates like a capitalist conversion narrative. Bazin writes, “Love alone can prompt [The Tramp's] desire, albeit blundering and comic for other reasons, not only to adapt himself to society but one might say to accept a moral way of living and a psychological individualism.”<sup>169</sup>

Given that Crane dedicated *White Buildings* to the impact Chaplin’s “Tramp” made on his sense of poetry, it is compelling to think of how Chaplin’s tramp gestures pervade the lyric collection as a whole. The Tramp, as others have pointed out, was itself a mashup of early modern vaudevillean vagabonds, pantomime masks of lowly social types, like “Pedrolino” of Italian Commedia Del-Arte, and alienated melancholic clowns, like Moliere's didactic “Pierrot,” many of which also make direct or indirect appearances in Crane’s poetry. “Modern Times” (United Artists, 1936) uses “The Tramp” to bridge the genres of comedy and social realism. In his *Autobiography*, Chaplin describes the seed of the film as a romantic encounter amid socio-economic unrest: two “nondescripts... involved in the Depression, strikes, riots, and unemployment” are arrested and meet in a police car. This arrest, framed as romantically fortuitous, would come after the now infamous “factory sequence” in which the Tramp is fed into a machine designed to automate both eating and working, creating a feedback loop that resolves ultimately in the Tramp suffering “a nervous breakdown.”<sup>170</sup> Of course, the breakdown is momentary, as the narrative ultimately moves toward smiling heterosexual partners strolling down the road and toward the hills.

What might be said to linger, though, is not just the fact that the Tramp has to show how Paulette Goddard to put a smile on their forlorn situation but also Charlie’s whole retinue of

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<sup>169</sup> André Bazin, *What is Cinema?* Vol. 2, ed. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 115.

<sup>170</sup> *My Autobiography*, 383.

gestures—a plaintive open-footed shuffle in over-sized clothes, an earnest smile, an ironic wink—that persist, like physical ticks, through each moment of crisis. What is more, Chaplin dramatizes the belatedness of his commitment to silent film in *Modern Times* (“talkies” had the majority of the market share by the mid 1930s) by playing with the threshold between gesture and speech. In a scene set within the dining room of a restaurant, the Tramp rolls precariously around the room as a singing waiter on roller-skates until he stops in the center of a shot, apparently *about* to sing. Yet instead of intelligible lyrics “Charlie” gives us a string of nonce sounds in the shape and cadence of a song. Despite the fact that his job, literally and figuratively, might rest on speaking clearly, he gives us something like a sentence without words, physicalizing the limits to the pretense that workers should and could be happily expressive of their place within a service, consumer, or industrial economy—with Charlie moving, erratically, between each one.

As the second-highest grossing feature film of the year (after *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*), *The Kid* was Chaplin's most successful film with First National. But it is also a rather singular instance in Chaplin's Tramp performances, precisely because it both objectifies and dislocates these social and moral norms through the accidental parentage of an orphan child (and not conventions of a heterosexual romance). The opening title card frames the sentimental range we will move through in this untraditional father-son narrative, morphing from comedy to tragedy: "A picture with a smile—and perhaps, a tear." Much of the pathos and comedy of the film comes from the fact that Charlie repeatedly plays both the role of the doting Protestant mother—instructing Jackie Coogan on the proper use of a fork and a knife—and the entrepreneurial, physically protective paterfamilias. In a conversation with short-story and scriptwriter Gouverneur Morris, Chaplin defended what he took to be the generic and affective "admixture" of "The Kid" in his *Autobiography* in a way that echoes the serial character of Brechtian gesture:

I said that the transition from slapstick to sentiment was a matter of feeling and discretion in arranging sequences. I argued that form happened after one had created it, that if the artist thought of a world and sincerely believed in it, no matter what the admixture was it would be convincing. Of course, I had no grounds for this theory other than intuition. There had been satire, farce, realism, naturalism, melodrama and fantasy, but raw slapstick and sentiment, the premise of *The Kid*, was something of an innovation.<sup>171</sup>

It is this conflation of affects audiences might associate with particular generic effects— natural histories of life unto death, restoration of family unites, successful transfers of power—that is also a signature of Crane's lyric style. Affects could be dislocated, by way of interruptive gestures, from the very moral purposes normative narratives of familial, social, or economic prosperity seem to fulfill. In laughing or crying at the Tramp's near machinic persistence—what Henri Bergson would call the “mechanical encrusted on the living”—we are responding not just to a series of misfortunes but also Charlie's failure to link his “gags” to moments of self-consciousness or ethical awareness. He never seems to know what he is doing, learn who he is, or justify where he belongs. Even his will to survive becomes something like an irrational gesture. But the sentimentalism of the performance also keeps us from seeing the acts as fully ironized.

In order to understand how Chaplin's gestures migrated into Crane's speech, we need a model for how the verbal and non-verbal might be related. The American pragmatist and social psychologist, George Herbert Mead, can give us one in the way that he maps a shift from non-verbal

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<sup>171</sup> *My Autobiography*, 238.

gesture—using pantomime as an example—to vocalizing what he calls “significant symbols.” In a section from *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934), Mead describes how a gestural cycle of “stimulus” and “response” is initiated when one creature, a bird for example, calls out and another creature not only hears it but “makes use of it.” Mead maps this logically as “*A* [stimulus] calls out the response *B*.” First responses are likely instinctual, or sheer imitation, and have the effect of building gestures common to both *A* and *B*. Mead defines this as “action on a common basis.”<sup>172</sup> Then something happens in vocalization: we hear ourselves speak and become conscious of a person who is, to some degree, responsible for this response. Our mind, similarly, plays back through a range of prior gestures, gestures that are themselves a result of a series of internalized social “roles.” Consequently, we begin to adapt these “significant symbols” to new situations, modulating our speech to appear more controlled, passionate, credulous to others:

We must be constantly responding to the gesture we make if we are to carry on success. The meaning of what we are saying is the tendency to respond to it. You ask somebody to bring a visitor a chair. You arouse a tendency to get the chair in the other, but if he is slow to act you get the chair yourself. The response to the vocal gesture is the doing of a certain thing, and you arouse that same tendency in yourself. You are always replying to yourself, just as other people reply.

Speech, Mead argues, is itself a social action that takes its form and meaning from an “actual field of social experience.”<sup>173</sup> The significance of linguistic symbols arises from their place within this “field” of social encounters and interactions that grounds the “meaning” of speech in the difference between the contextual conditions of speech and the novelty of individual responses.

Given how hermetic Crane’s language often reads, with its rarefied images and superannuated syntax, we would be hard-pressed to say exactly what kind of “field” of sociality or experience his speech is responding to. But perhaps the most literal answer is the right one. Crane can’t evoke a clear background of social experience precisely because the referent, “transience,” has been demonized, outlawed, or contorted into sentimental postures that are easily misread as palliative gestures and not indexical of structural problems. Caught in a feedback loop between hyper visibility and obscurity, transient speech is always responding to a lag between successful acts of communication and narratives of social, ethical, or financial success. This lack of clarity about who is speaking or what is being spoken through becomes, for Crane, the locus of significance and the engine of differentiation from the cultural scripts he so readily borrows. This is not say that this difference resides in the signifying order of language itself but rather that lyric speech is a practice in which the disparate contexts for and representations of transience come into relation.

Within the first three stanzas of “Chaplinesque,” Crane refashions the Tramps’ gestures into a collective voice that narrates a process of being displaced and resigned to loving from the margins of a city. In the “we” of “*We* make our meek adjustments,” one can hear not only Chaplin’s gestural repertoire but also a retinue of other transient figures mobilized by both American writers like Whitman and Melville as well as French writers like Charles Vildrac, Rimbaud, and Jules Laforgue.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self & Society*, ed. Charles Morris (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2015), 67.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>174</sup> For an extended reading of Crane’s engagement with “clown” figures from American and French traditions, including a reading of his “messianic” with the artist as a perpetual outcast, see R. W. B. Lewis, “Hart Crane and the Clown Tradition,” *The Massachusetts Review*, 4:4 (Summer, 1963), 745–67.



Yet what the collective voice dramatizes in “Chaplinesque” is not a messianic vision of the “artist-as-outcast” but rather a dialogue between a body in oversized clothing, a landscape, and an audience:

We make our meek adjustments,  
Contented with such random consolations  
As the wind deposits  
In slithered and too ample pockets.

For we can still love the world, who find  
A famished kitten on the step, and know  
Recesses for it from the fury of the street,  
Or warm torn elbow coverts.

We will sidestep, and to the final smirk  
Dally the doom of that inevitable thumb  
That slowly chafes its puckered index toward us,  
Facing the dull squint with what innocence  
And what surprise!

Crane mimics here in a tonal span the kinds of affective and generic conflation that Chaplin performed. He moves us through postures of Christian pathos—replete with meekness, hunger, and sentimental cliché—to notes of threat—urban “fury,” and “doom”—to the exaggerated truth of comedy—dancing through these moments of exposure and vulnerability with a cavalier aplomb. Both sonically and thematically, Crane produces a sense of continuous motion, either by way of alliteration—contented/consolation, For/find/famished/fury, “Dally the doom,” —or cumulative abstraction where an action, like a “random consolation,” is figuratively dissociated as the slithering content of pockets so large and bare they fill with air. One can almost hold this halting, adaptivemovement in mind. Almost.

Where a meaningful disjunction becomes audible, like the “*too* ample pockets,” is in the insistent mismatch Crane draws out between a cycle of exposure, impoverishment, and marginalization and the perverse belief that these punishing circumstances are in fact vehicles for erotic and romantic improvisation. A key here for this mismatch—one that became a sort of lyrical signature for Crane—is in the word *consolation*. These consolations are deeply situational, in that whatever compensation one receives for a loss is contingent on a series of extrinsic forces—“as the wind deposits”—and not through an individual act or claim. But, as if to overcompensate, Crane insists that this dalliance with doom is driven by an earnest capacity to “love the world” still, the very world that threatens “our” existence. The “innocence” and the finality of the “smirk” seem incongruous, if not satirical.

In emphasizing the contingency of both the dance and the dancer, Crane points us toward the strange tonal mixture that Chaplin sustained in his performances, where precarity was both the source of his comedic charm and mark of his tragic distance from a normative audience: “us.” Beginning almost every stanza with an anaphoric “we,” Crane raises the questions of what kind of collectivity is being made here and how we, as readers, are being solicited to the drama? Are “we” offering consolation or being consoled for the incongruity between our passions and a world in

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R. W. B. Lewis notes how Crane had worked on translations of Laforgue’s “Locutions des Pierrots” from the French.

which they might be reciprocated? The penultimate stanza doesn't resolve these varieties of ambiguity but rather gives them a more precise target. The speaker doubles down on the mismatch between grace and disaster, or grace with disaster, in what is the most literal re-description of Charlie's evasive movements: "We will sidestep... to the final smirk." But the tone shifts once more, as the speaker makes a more positive assertion that "our obsequies" are located outside the instrumental logic of "enterprise." These "obsequies" are opposed, in the first moment of direct address, to a second person—"We can evade *you*":

And yet these fine collapses are not lies  
More than the pirouettes of any pliant cane;  
Our obsequies are, in a way, no enterprise.  
We can evade you, and all else but the heart:  
What blame to us if the heart live on

Never one to eschew cliché, Crane holds up the most sentimental object of all, "the heart," as the very thing that survives these hapless movements. But Crane's sentimentality, like Chaplin's, is doing a complex work. It not only figures a persistent emotional will beyond "your" reproach but also a socially normative process whereby feelings, once encoded in conventional and metonymic terms, take on a life of their own. The perversity, of course, is that this charm is sustained, literally, by a series of collapses. In the final stanza, Crane literalizes the coercive stakes of this "game" his speaker has been playing:

The game enforces smirks; but we have seen  
The moon in lonely alleys make  
A grail of laughter of an empty ash can,  
And through all sound of gaiety and quest  
Have heard a kitten in the wilderness. (CP, 11)

By carrying through the lilting momentum of these sentimental tropes and alliterative sounds to such a pathetic conclusion, I take Crane to be drawing an explicit parallel between Chaplin's pathetic pantomime and moments where his speech seems suddenly, uniquely over-burdened. It is burdened with the punishing reality of this transient game and the strange moments of identification, affection, vulnerability, and catharsis it sustains in the recesses of the urban landscape. And the triteness of the final consolation—"a kitten in the wilderness"—feels less like a resolution than a gesture that has gone on too long, happened in the wrong place, or has been hollowed out to the point of absurdity, like a holy "grail of laughter."

Running across "Chaplinesque" is a terrible sense that, despite the consolations, there is finally nowhere to hide. In *The Kid*, Chaplin's Tramp makes a joke of this over-exposed reality in the dream sequence near the end of the film, brought about possibly by concussive blows to his head. After surviving a fight with a local strongman, losing his adopted kid to the authorities, and being locked out of his apartment, the Tramp fades into a fantasy that, despite the angel wings and garlands of flowers, looks conspicuously like his ghettoized neighborhood. The gag becomes real when, even in this poor-man's paradise, the Tramp finds himself running from his arch-enemy and constant pursuer: the beat cop. What Charlie unconsciously reveals is a fact Crane also enacts about transient life: there is no "outside" for such erratic, placeless bodies, just as there is no "privacy" in which to rest from the long arm of the law. Yet he persists in his perverse love for the world, sustained by the constant wonder of "our" eyes.

In a series of letters to his close friend, Gorham Munson, Crane links his sense of Chaplin's "Tramp" to a broader notion of poetic community. He isolates the lyric "we" in particular as a shelter or camouflage for threatened modes of feeling: "I am moved to put Chaplin with the poets (of today), hence the 'we'... Poetry, the human feelings, 'the kitten,' is so crowded out of the humdrum, rushing, mechanical scramble of today, that the man who would preserve them must duck and camouflage for dear life to keep them or keep himself from annihilation." Crane defends his reading of Chaplin's films, and what they meant for poetry, by declaring that "Tramp" embedded the experience of an "outsider" within the domestic and stately spaces of comedy, pushing the form "into a new kind of tragedy, eccentric, homely and yet brilliant."<sup>175</sup> In a later letter, Crane pushes this idea further, developing a notion of the "humor" as the modern artist's "weapon" against the dulling life of "the proletariat," with the ribald Mark Twain, the moral satire of H. L. Mencken, and grotesqueness of Rabelais as his examples. Crane writes, echoing the Nietzsche of *The Gay Science*: "[L]et us be keen and humorous scientists. And I would rather act my little tragedy without tears, although I would insist upon a tortured countenance and all sleekness pared off the muscles."<sup>176</sup> Crane makes explicit the violent process by which a *poet* is converted into a comedic *object* that suffers from its tragic relation to an audience's expectations. Divisions between interior and exterior spaces, such as "home" and "street" or "dream" and "reality," are inverted, such that lacking means of support is both a condition of one's freedom—artistic, economic, and political—and a fateful consequence of constant exposure.

With this historical background in mind, it is worth considering in more detail the sociality Crane projects from his conversion of the Tramp from a figure isolated by poverty or the pressures of moral identification into a collective pronoun—"We make our meek adjustments." Crane weaves into this implied collectivity a whole host of transients—Pierrot, The Tramp, Whitman's vagabonds, or Melville's vagrants of office or sea. He positions this "we" as not just a potential agency for lyric but a sort of subculture defined by its active, sentimentalized distance from normative conduct one would expect from a law-abiding, well-adjusted, and therefore productive citizen.

## Transient Sociability

What! he a vagrant, a wanderer, who refuses to budge? It is because he will *not* be a vagrant, then, that you seek to count him *as* a vagrant. That is too absurd. No visible means of support: there I have him. Wrong again: for indubitably he *does* support himself, and that is the only unanswerable proof that any man can show of his possessing the means so to do.

Herman Melville, *Bartleby, the Scrivener*

Melville's legal narrator evokes the statutory language of vagrancy as a means of displacing his passive object of description, Bartleby, in a story Crane took very much to heart.<sup>177</sup> Like Chaplin's

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<sup>175</sup> Letter to Gorham Munson, November 3, 1921, 69.

<sup>176</sup> Letter to Gorham Munson, January 15, 1920, 30. See all Crane's "The Case Against Nietzsche," *Selected Letters and Prose*, 197–98.

<sup>177</sup> For an account of Crane's intensive engagement with the writing of Melville, see Waldo Frank's "Introduction" to the 1933 *Collected Poems of Hart Crane* he edited for publication by Horace Liveright. See also Paul Mariani's description of Crane's summer in Isle of Pines, Cuba in 1926 when

Tramp, one of the threats posed by Bartleby is that he seems unwilling or unable to fashion clear links between the moral commitments of an enterprising life: self-possession, productivity, and autonomy. Whether one reads Bartleby's shadowy presence and ambiguous preference "not to" as a refusal or a plea troubles his boss, a lawyer, to the point where he goes searching for a legal justification to remove this unproductive body from the office. Though he seems to doubt his own conclusion, the lawyer finds this justification in the very statutory language used to criminalize vagrant or transient persons: "no visible means of support."<sup>178</sup> This phrase, present in so many American and British statutes prohibiting vagrancy, transience, and public displays of poverty, would have been familiar to Hart Crane from his reading of Herman Melville's story, "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (who is ultimately imprisoned in The Tombs on the charge of "vagrancy"). What would have also been familiar was how closely this mode of judgement resembled the prosecution of queer sexuality, particular the kind of cruising Crane did in the parks and ports of New York. The consistent thread in both is a recourse to heteronormative standards of behavior and social responsibility to justify punishment. If one was seen to be "able-bodied," one was expected to find a vocation, earn wages, and secure a home for a family. To not act on this capacity exposed one to prosecution.<sup>179</sup> Similarly, the largely male character of transient communities, such as hobo jungles, became synonymous with predatory homosexuality (or, conversely, female prostitution). Sex was displaced from the home into semi-public spaces, confusing liberal delineations public virtues and private relations.

Around the time that Crane was shuttling back and forth between his short-lived tenure managing his father's candy factory in Akron and his weekend romps in New York, the sociality of transient characters was very much on the American mind. Throughout the tenures of Coolidge and Hoover, transience took on a renewed public profile, be it through the visible subcultures of tramps and hobos surfacing in popular literature and cinema, the rise of rail and automobile tourism, or the dawning notion that the other side of socio-economic development and prosperity was enduring homelessness, poverty, and displacement of peoples.<sup>180</sup> Homeless encampments and mobile armies

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he was reading intensively and writing many of the poems for *White Buildings* in *Broken Tower: The Life of Hart Crane* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 222–37.

<sup>178</sup> For Crane's engagement with Melville, see Waldo Frank's "Introduction" to the 1933 *Collected Poems of Hart Crane* he edited for Horace Liveright. See also Paul Mariani's *Broken Tower: The Life of Hart Crane* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 222–37.

<sup>179</sup> Vagrancy statutes in New York, formalized as state codes in 1838, were referred to as "Public Enemy Laws" and were designed to facilitate the conviction of criminals in absence of "proof of an unlawful purpose." Perceived states of criminal being were also explicitly gendered, as in the case of Ohio's *Ex parte Smith* (1912): "Whoever, being a male person able to perform manual labor, has not made reasonable effort to procure employment or has refused to labor at reasonable prices is a vagrant" (596). See: "A Public Enemy Law for New York" in *State of New York: Report of the Law Revision Commission* (Albany: J. B. Lyon Company, 1935), 593.

<sup>180</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the contrasts between motorist culture and railroad hoboemia, see William James Belasco, *Americans on the Road: From Autocamp to Motel, 1910–1945* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1979). Belasco describes the culture of motorists and "autocamping" as an alternative to railroad travelers who sought more posh accommodations in hotels. The car was treated as a sort of modern "stagecoach" in which a "small but visible and articulate minority" could go "gypsing" and make a "total break with restrictive institutions. As a creature of the railroad, the hotel seemed to inhibit individual freedom every bit as much as the iron rail. Autocamping maximizing

of unemployed workers were not new, of course, but there was a growing public and academic recognition of transience as a social phenomenon, as either a choice or an imposition of circumstance. Only a year before Crane published *White Buildings* with Boni and Liveright in 1926, the pioneering sociologist, Robert Ezra Park, edited with his colleague, Ernest Burgess, a collection of essays on the study of what they called the "human ecology" of a city. They saw "ecology" as a scientific paradigm for sociological analysis that brought together a surprising mixture of pragmatist philosophy, psychology, evolutionary theory, and "progressive" race theory adapted from the work of Booker T. Washington (Park had worked with Washington at the Tuskegee Institute prior to joining the faculty at U Chicago).

Roderick D. McKenzie, a colleague of Park's at U Chicago, described Park's ecological methodology as a way to conceive of social relations in the absence of a positive concept of society: "In the absence of any precedent let us tentatively define human ecology as a study of the spatial and temporal relations of human beings as affected by the selective, distributive, and accommodative forces of the environment. Human ecology is fundamentally interested in the effect of *position*, in both time and space, upon human institutions and human behavior."<sup>181</sup> The intense individualization brought about by urbanization, wage labor, and the expansion of manufacturing and infrastructure had produced what Park called a "constellation of social atoms"<sup>182</sup>—juvenile delinquents, homeless workers, hobos—that required a new sense of social "organization" to accommodate these aberrant personalities into "productive" individuals of "the family, the neighborhood, and the local community."<sup>183</sup> Within such a schema of belonging, the spatial discourse of positionality quickly takes on a normative social and political character. Social atomization is not in itself a problem but rather a new assemblage that needs to be mobilized through proper institutions and "vocations."

In adopting the discourse of atomization, Park and his colleagues stop short of making the connection between the social production of these precarious or transient populations and the realities of industrial labor, capital expansion westward, and the rapid development of urban spaces along road and railway networks. Rather, throughout *The City*, Park and his colleagues fall back on biological, psychological, and racial essentialisms to rationalize deviant populations into a progressive narrative of social and economic "adaptation." One chooses not to be a wanderer, just as one chooses to settle, get a job, marry, and reproduce the next generation of workers, even if one's sense of "position" is radically contingent on shifting environmental or generational factors. This notion of transience as a biological or psychological deficiency is made explicit when Park turns his speculative eye on the "hobo mind," a subject he became acquainted with most intimately through the field work of his graduate student, Nels Anderson.

In Park's largely speculative essay, "The Mind of the Hobo: Reflections Upon the Relation Between Mentality and Locomotion," the "hobo" represents a pathology whereby endless "motion

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independence, removing what one advocate suggestively called 'the hotel question.'" (Belasco, 41). Belasco notes how some motorists looked to the Western roads as difficult spaces of comradery and democratic improvisation, much like the hobo jungles of the rail system.

<sup>181</sup> Roderick D. McKenzie, "The Ecological Approach to the Study of the Human Community," in *The City*, ed. Robert Ezra Park, Ernest W. Burgess, and Roderick D. McKenzie (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1925), 63–64.

<sup>182</sup> Robert Ezra Park, "Juvenile Delinquency," *The City*, 107.

<sup>183</sup> Robert Ezra Park, "The Mind of the Hobo: Reflections Upon the Relation Between Mentality and Locomotion," 159.

becomes an end-in-itself rather than a biological, social, and cognitive means to discovering and "rooting" one's self in a particular, place-bound vocation. But "locomotion" is also what enables imagination abstraction of one's experience in Park's schema, setting humans apart from "plants." It is through a change of scene and location that mankind is "enabled to develop just those mental aptitudes most characteristic of man, namely the aptitude and habit of abstract thought." It is also in locomotion that "the peculiar type of organization that we call 'social' develops. The characteristic of a social organism—if we may call it an organism—is the fact that it is made up of individuals capable of independent locomotion."<sup>184</sup> Whereas one can have desires privately, to act on those desires is to make disparate individual purposes "public."<sup>185</sup> Park's rhetorical slip between a body and a vehicle (locomotive) of travel is telling, as it enables him to describe the transient person as if "he" were an aimless "romantic" vehicle in step but out of touch with a social world in which public life is synonymous with a remunerative occupation. Park writes: "The hobo is, to be sure, always on the move, but he has no destination, and naturally he never arrives. Wanderlust, which is the most elementary expression of the romantic temperament and the romantic interest in life, has assumed for him, as for so many others, the character of a vice."<sup>186</sup> "His" sole vocation is movement.

Park echoes here a long history of Western thinking about "transience" not as a consequence of, for example, wage labor, migration, mental illness, or enforced restrictions on "who" gets to call certain places home, but as willful perversions of personal freedom and mobility or as natural biological and racial flaws.<sup>187</sup> Throughout work of Park and Burgess, it is clear "who" occupies this potential position of a productive social life—the white male breadwinner. As a consequence of his treatment of the "hobo" as a kind of biological and psychological type within an ecological schema, Park's analysis misses the very possibility it opens up: that transience might be a way to experiment with new forms of social purpose not legible within existing accounts of either normative urban life, the use of public space, or personhood more broadly. It might also be a mode of life in which dreams of individual autonomy and alternative socialities come up against their limits, as in the prevalence of racialized violence directed towards European and Asian immigrants and African-American rail workers as well as sexual violence directed towards queer or female-identifying transients.

Anderson took a more nuanced tack in his study of what he called "hobohemia" and endemic homeless populations in American cities, mixing a statistical and sometimes moralizing approach with a more acute eye for how transients established problematic cultures of their own in interstitial spaces. Anderson situated the transient figures of the 20s within what he called "the mobility tradition" that grew out of westward expansion from 1850 to 1890 and then subsequent development of "spaces between widely dispersed settlements."<sup>188</sup> Anderson focuses in particular on Chicago's "main line," one of the largest informal communities of transients in the country. The "main line" was a site where transients could find shelter, get information through underground

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<sup>184</sup> *The City*, 157.

<sup>185</sup> *The City*, 158.

<sup>186</sup> "The Mind of the Hobo," *The City*, 158.

<sup>187</sup> For a reading of race and racialization in the development of the University of Chicago "school" of sociology, including its precedents in the work of Franz Boas and W. E. B. Du Bois, see Vernon J. Williams, Jr., *Rethinking Race: Franz Boas and his Contemporaries* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1996).

<sup>188</sup> On Hobos, 29.

publications, and attend free lectures at a "Hobo College" funded in large part by the anarchist physician, Ben Reitman. Anderson also ventured outside of the city to study hobo "jungles," or encampments of hobos that sprung up along rail lines and on the peripheries of incorporated cities. Jungles had their own social and sexual codes, often involving forms of queer domestic role-play, with older, veteran males playing the part of "Uncles" to younger "Punks."<sup>189</sup> A spoon or a plate was owned only as long as it was being used and such transitory rights were collectively enforced. As the bohemian portmanteau would suggest—hobohemia—Anderson saw those largely young males who self-identified as "hobos" as amalgamations of leftist or anarchist political views, an existential commitment to wandering, and a series of concrete personal, social, or economic factors that made living in one place for too long impossible.<sup>190</sup> A "hobo" occupied, counter to Park's logic, many positions at once.

When it became clear that such perpetual movement was a threat to the geographical solidification of certain industries and centers of power, the public and private discourse around vagrancy shifted from a valorization of the itinerant worker to the "family man" who would marry, have children, and make a more long-term commitment to his occupation. For Anderson, this led to a somewhat anachronistic, quixotic position for these "Knights of the Road," precisely because they were at once the vehicles for, and the remainders of, the distribution of capital: "The true hobo was the in-between worker, willing to go anywhere to take a job and equally willing to move on later. His in-between role related to the two frontiers [westward expansion and then development of industrial urban centers]. He came on the scene after the trailblazer, and he went off the scene as the second frontier was closing."<sup>191</sup> While hobos and the other transient populations that populated the boarding houses and "jungles" facilitated the extensive processes of infrastructure construction, seasonal farming, and raw resource extraction (timber, minerals, etc.), they ultimately had little to show for it and were seen, therefore, as questionable at best and criminal at worst. So even if non-attachment was an intentional choice for some, though hardly not most, it became a necessary attitude in order to cope with this sense that the social life of transience was constantly falling in and out of time with these myths of national progress.

What Anderson helps us see is how these fringe socialities, defined in part by promises of anonymity and self-invention, were not just clearinghouses for disaffected or resentful political, psychological, and sexual misfits. They were also flexible containers for ideological blends of individualist and colonial-settler fantasies. Getting by as a transient required a certain episodic skill

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<sup>189</sup> Anderson organizes these "boy tramps" into a series of types: the "wanderlust" type, the "egocentric" type, the "mentally defective" type, the "home trouble" type, and finally the "working" type (On Hobos, 103–6). Anderson notes the prevalence of the "perversion" of "homosexuality" and pedophilic attractions among young and older men. One man, known as "Mother Jones" by his friends, is described as a man in his fifties who "makes his living by catering to the wants of homosexuals who are willing to pay for it. He plays either the female or the male role. He always dresses well and looks attractive. He spends his time in Grant Park [Chicago] in summer and in the hotel lobbies in winter. He used to be a tramp while on the road was initiated to the practice" (On Hobos, 111–12).

<sup>190</sup> "The American tramp class is practically a one-sex group. Few women ever enter it. Again, it is a young man's group. It is more mobile than any tramp class abroad... While we have the inefficient and handicapped types which predominate in foreign tramp groups, we also have a large percent of workers" (On Hobos, 99).

<sup>191</sup> On Hobos, 29.

at negotiating these multiple levels of myth, contingency, and violence while also appearing in public as a free, willing, and able person—justified, in every hetero-normative sense of the word. As with Bartleby, Chaplin, or Crane, there is a real and perceived mandate on being sociable. In his 1910 essay, "The Sociology of Sociability," Georg Simmel describes what he takes to be the selfless, and therefore motiveless, play of human association he calls "sociability." To be sociable is neither to act solely on one's desires or conform to the ethical demands of "concrete society" but to treat such serious and consequential distinctions of taste, class position, learned behaviors, and even moods as "rhythms" with which one plays. The standardized and impersonal forms of equivalency of money and time that Simmel saw as constitutive of urban life under capital provide an abstract form for these everyday improvisations. What enables the constancy of this play is that a person sacrifices, to some degree, a level of personal intimacy for the sake of a flexible affiliation. Simmel's example is a "coquet" who suspends her own sexuality in order to treat the drama of consent and denial as a means of relief from the "frictional relations of real life."<sup>192</sup> It is the failure of one mode—an acquisitive or possessive relationality—that calls out the other behavior—a more contingent, serial relatability.

Picking up on Simmel's sociability as an analogue to certain performances of queer sexuality in his essay, "Sociability and Cruising," Leo Bersani describes the apparent ease of falling in and out of group identities as a "pure relationality," where the "problematic nature of groups that must at once curb and serve individuality is resolved." The pleasure of association remains "intransitive," like a verb without a direct object, and divorced from the masochism, pain, and "tragedy endemic to social life."<sup>193</sup> For many of Crane's critics, the highly allegorical structure of his poetry offers a similar promise, in that non-normative affections and behavior find their shape in the pleasurable slippages of the text and its verbal architectures. But Bersani pushes us further. How, he asks, can we account for the pull of erotic attachment, particularly queer attachment, in this notion of selfless, serial encounter? What about the gay "coquet" who may "[owe] nothing... to the sociology of groups" but is also politically, clinically, and socially marked as a promiscuous vehicle for moral dissolution, disease, powerlessness, even death itself? In short, what happens when a transient is queer?

What makes the transient so threatening is that it seems to confuse the gestures of an enterprising spirit familiar to liberal theories of individualism with a radical commitment to non-possession. In the queer, restive affections of Crane's poetry and the semi-public sexual practice of "cruising," one can see how a transient relationship to both one's self and objects of desire is an attempt live without acquisitive and ultimately violent desires for control over a partner or one's surroundings. It is not just that cruising offers a "nameless" intimacy, "identify-free" mobility, and polymorphic "worthiness," but that the potentials of endless mobility and erotic mutability are predicated on a willingness to forego the obvious advantages of occupying a definite place or position in a socio-economic order. Herein lies both the cost and harbinger of a transient eroticism, as queer sexuality or affiliation might be decoupled from heteronormative, masculine notions of freedom (and their grounding in wage labor, family life, or home ownership) while also affirming a sort of perpetual "negativity."<sup>194</sup> For Bersani, the pleasure of self-negation becomes a sort of

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<sup>192</sup> Georg Simmel, "The Sociology of Sociability" in *Simmel On Culture*, eds. David Frisby and Mark Featherstone (London: Sage Publications, 2000), 120–130.

<sup>193</sup> Leo Bersani, "Sociability and Cruising," *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 46–48.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 60–61.



metaphysical potential. Though Crane too takes pleasure in refusing an acquisitive relation to either one's self or one's world, he also shows the darker consequences of speakers who are thrown out of sequence with their world and themselves.

In Crane's "Possessions," he stages the consequences of this repeated breakdown. The constancy of exchange, the very engine of "productive" social relations for Simmel, is the imaginative vehicle through which Crane shows the spuriousness of possession, precisely when possession is defined as the proof or ability to *be* what one is (self-possessing) or have what one holds and to be able to bank this fact for the future. Following the opening apostrophe that conscripts the reader into some disposition of "trust"—"Witness now this trust!"—we are quickly situated in a scene of "direst" consequence: "the rain / That steals softly direction / And the key, ready to hand—sifting / One moment in sacrifice (the direst) / Through a thousand nights the flesh / Assaults outright for bolts that linger / Hidden,—O undirected as the sky / That through its black foam has no eyes / For this fixed stone of lust . . ." (CP, 18). The doubling of the preposition, "through," does a lot of work, as it conveys a sense of mediated and perhaps cumulative movements that the poem, at the same time, insists on being directionless. Flesh stands in the boundaries of a person, as it does in so many of Crane's poems, even as the features of a body are being distributed, assaulted, and transfigured. This is exacerbated in the next two lines which index a "trembling" in "the total" of accumulated time: "Accumulate such moments to an hour: / Account the total of this trembling tabulation." The "total of this trembling," it would seem, is the mode of valuation and possession this eroticized "flesh" is bristling against.

It is not until the third line of the second stanza that we encounter a first-person speaker as a perspective through which to position this increasingly inhospitable drama: "I know the screen, the distant flying taps / And stabbing medley that sways." The speaker then "enters" this hostile "medley" by taking up "the stone," presumably a reference to the "stone of lust," on "Bleecker Street," as quietly "as you can make a man." Conspicuously, this act of repurposing, redolent of the riotous stripping of street pavement stones for barricades or weapons, is situated in a public place where a "stone of lust" would be judged very differently than in a space of private remove. But this action is quickly abstracted into an attack on the accumulated "total" of money, hours, and people in this city, reminiscent of Simmel's critiques of the imperiousness of clocks in the modern metropolis. Yet the poem makes another self-conscious turn when the speaker expresses a desire to be "Wounded by apprehensions out of speech." Possession becomes dispossession, as the "I" makes itself into an object of this ecstatic wounding, turning, and "bleeding." The lyric voices not what "I... desire" but what the city desires in and through the speaker: "I, turning, turning on smoked forking spires, / The city's stubborn lives, *desires*" (my emphasis). This attenuated syntax ultimately makes the "I" into a question mark—"who bleeding dies"—while also shifting the burden of documenting these truncated passions—"rage and partial appetites"—to the very totalizations—"blind sum"—that seem to constitute their endangerment (CP, 18). Just like a lyric is sustained by its endless digestion of rhetorical forms for intimate purposes, so too does this "I" seek its reflection in everything it can't contain.

A persistent through-line in Crane's poems are such mixed metaphors, themselves a useful form of ambiguity. By eroticizing machinery, for example, his speakers displace the physicality of desire onto instruments of production that seem otherwise hostile to their existence. To Helen, the speaker of "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen," the speaker pleads: "And now, before its arteries turn dark / I would have you meet this bartered blood." In the next strophe, the speaker continues: "But if I lift my arms it is to bend / To you who turned away once, Helen, knowing / The press of troubled hands, too alternate / With steel and soil to hold you endlessly" (CP, 26). Then, we get one of many conspicuously clunky figures for romantic life: "Bent axle of devotion" (CP, 28). Later in "Faustus and Helen," Crane dramatizes the uneven process by which

contemporary particulars of “memoranda, baseball scores, / The stenographic smiles and stock quotations” are blended with strange organicisms and mythical interpretations of aerial warfare. A bombing sortie is rendered as “corymbulous formations of mechanics” driven by “eternal gunman,” only to be remediated as the ecstatic knowledge of a collective speaker: “our flesh remembers / the tensile boughs, the nimble blue plateaus, / The mounted, / yielding cities of the air!” (CP, 31). It is hard to say what exactly is being marked in this exclamatory gesture: the sublimity of the landscape, the passion of the utterance, or this complex process of mediation by which “flesh” is stretched to the scale of (un)real cities? Perhaps the misplaced enthusiasm is the message. The ethereal mashup of discourses is not an index for some unrealizable mythic vision but rather a more literal expression of a collective body—“our flesh”—extended and rarefied to such a point that it no longer feels justified, real, or maybe even believable. Yet the exclamation mark is, in a sort of desperate and belated way, inviting us into the epistemological and experiential “disorders” of the poem.<sup>195</sup> A lyric becomes a compressed record of adapting highly permeable, disorderly bodies to a series of hostile socio-historical forces and disparate formal frames.

### Unknown Accomplices

Each utterance presupposed, and contributes to the presuppositions of, a jointly inhabitable mental world, and even though such worlds last only as long as there is a warrant for a common focus of cognitive attention, one should not think one can go around failing to sustain them.

Erving Goffman, *Felicity's Condition*<sup>196</sup>

In his memoir, *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s* (1934), Malcolm Cowley gave us the now infamous portrait of Crane an addictive, self-destructive, manic, and ultimately repentant personality that has informed more of Crane's reception than I can possibly note here.<sup>197</sup> Cowley worked with Crane while he was briefly employed at an advertising agency and notes how Crane, composing lyrics at work, used to make fun of his own compositional process. Apparently hunting for archaic words in his Webster dictionary for his visionary travel poem, "Voyages"—that takes up the "tendered theme" of circulations both spiritual ("great wink of eternity") and physical ("Infinite consanguinity")—Crane substituted the nonce term of “findrizzly” for the nautical phenomenon known as "spindrift" to capture a breadth of a seal's vision: "The seal's wide spindrift gaze toward

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<sup>195</sup>I borrow here from Stanley Cavell's distinction between the normative functions of performative utterances, based largely in convention and “the order of law,” and the passionate inflection of speech. A passionate utterance, Cavell writes, “is an invitation to improvisation in the disorders of desire.” See Cavell's chapter "Performative and Passionate Utterance" in *Philosophy After Tomorrow*: (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press at Harvard University, 2005), 155–192. See also Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's queer re-reading of Austin's performatives in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>196</sup> Erving Goffman, “Felicity's Condition” (*American Journal of Sociology*, 1983), reprinted in *The Goffman Reader*, eds. Charles Lemert and Ann Branaman (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 170.

<sup>197</sup> For a critique of these symptomatic biographical readings, see Jacques Khalip, "Cruising Among Ghosts: Hart Crane's Friends," *Arizona Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (Summer, 2008), 67.

paradise." Reportedly, he narrated this decision as a joke to Cowley: "I practice invention to the brink of intelligibility."<sup>198</sup>

Reading Crane's poetry bears out the serious truth of this joke. But we should not take for granted the fact that Crane, across his few poetic statements, insisted that poetry should be concerned with the formal integration of physical and emotional "experience," no matter how obtuse or rarefied that experience seemed.<sup>199</sup> In an expository letter Crane wrote to Harriet Monroe about his submission of "At Melville's Tomb" to *Poetry*, Crane advanced a compelling reading of a simile in T. S. Eliot's "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" as a model for his own process of metaphorization: "Every street lamp that I pass / Beats like a fatalistic drum." This line, Crane argues, serves as a metaphorical short-hand for the throbbing heart and nerves as a body that links the lamp/drum in the physical passage through a city. Crane refers to this technique as "incarnate evidence." Even in the example, Crane hones in on the psycho-somatic mediations of moving through a landscape, one he translated to an oceanic context in "At Melville's Tomb." There, the poetic subject witnesses the return of anonymous bodily remainders as "[t]he dice of drowned men's bones he saw bequeath / An embassy." Reminiscent of the Bartleby, who was employed at a "dead letter office," Crane glosses these bones as undelivered missives—"the only surviving evidence of certain messages undelivered"—stripped of identifying features and joined by "the circuit of a particular emotion." Conscious of the tenuousness of his description, Crane goes on in his letter to Monroe to say his faith in these chance, anonymized appeals is not based on an assumption the reader will understand them but rather a "trust" that these experiential "short-hands" will act as "reasonable connective agent[s]."<sup>200</sup>

In a well-known letter Crane addressed to Alfred Steiglitz, a photographer whose work he had seen but never met in person, he makes the social action he imagines for his poetry explicit. He likens the process of composition to being an "accomplice" in transgressive movements "we" can never "fully understand":

We are accomplices in many ways that we don't yet fully understand. 'What is proved was once only imagined,' said Blake. I have to combat every day those really sincere people, but limited, who deny the superior logic of metaphor in favor of their perfect sums, divisions and subtractions. They cannot go a foot unless to merely catch up with some predetermined and set boundaries, nor can they realize that they do nothing but walk ably over an old track bedecked with all kinds of signposts and 'championship records'... In that sense I hope to make it the one memorable thing to you in this letter that I think you should go on with your photographic synthesis of life this summer and fall, gathering together those dangerous interests outside of yourself into that purer projection of yourself. It is really not a projection in any but

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<sup>198</sup> Malcolm Cowley, *The Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s* [1934] (New York: Penguin, 1976), 230.

<sup>199</sup> A Letter to Waldo Frank, June 20<sup>th</sup> 1926, *Collected Prose*, 230. In an essay for Oliver M. Sayler's 1929 symposium "Revolt in the Arts," Crane writes: "Revolution flourishes still, but rather as a contemporary tradition in which the original obstacles to freedom have been, if not always eradicated, at least obscured by floods of later experimentation... The poet's concern must be... self-discipline toward a formal integration of experience" ("Modern Poetry," *Collected Poems* [1933], ed. Waldo Frank, 175).

<sup>200</sup> Letter to Harriet Monroe, 1926, *Selected Letters and Prose*, 234–240.

a loose sense, for I feel more and more that in the absolute sense the artist *identifies* himself with life.

Giving an account of oneself as a lyric poet or a lyric speaker, to borrow Judith Butler's phrasing, foregrounds the ways "I" am implicated in "dangerous interests" that exceed "my" capacity for either narration or self-identification.<sup>201</sup> Of course, it was this phrase—"the superior logic of metaphor"—which gave rise to a whole host of readings of Crane as a technician of linguistic and referential indeterminacies, from readers as separate in time and critical purpose as John Irwin, Lee Edelman, and Langdon Hammer. The common thread in these disparate readings is that Crane was not of this world, this time, or this normatively sexualized body. In the absence of such affirmative propositions, he created a visionary, a-historical system of metaphors and symbols that could negate the actually existing conditions of cultural or social life.<sup>202</sup>

Though useful in clarifying aspects of Crane's style and his difference from his contemporaries, this genealogy of readings misses the thread of social action we have been tracking in the relation between Crane's modes of speech and figuration and the historicity of transient experience. Crane signals something like this dynamic to Stieglitz when he claims that the artist creates from a kind of ecstatic state of being. Physical and textual passage—"going a foot"—is equated with a kind of "dangerous" porousness of body, self, and world. For Crane to claim he cannot know what he is doing in speaking is to some degree a literalization of the strange performative bind a transient person finds itself in. A transient, we might recall, is one for whom the place, character, and reception of speech is not only in flux but a matter of legal and political contention. Crane eschews clear grammatical and historical supports for complicated metaphors and contorted syntactical logics that foreground mutual unintelligibility even while they also gesture toward affective complicity.

But for all his optimism, Crane was not necessarily in a position to trust the alignment between the physical reality of transience and his idiosyncratic lyricism that put him at odds his generation of American modernist contemporaries, including close friends like Allen Tate. Some of Crane's most interesting statements of poetics emerged in moments of shame and self-defense towards these interlocutors. Yvor Winters, an early critical champion of Crane, famously criticized him in a letter for constructing "logically inadequate" sentences and being a "sloppy metaphysician." Crane's defensive response is telling, as he justifies his poetry *as* a series of accidental transgressions

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<sup>201</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1995), 7–9.

<sup>202</sup> Irwin influentially described Crane's elaborate verbal surfaces as an "embedding of multiple metaphoric relationships" that he opposes to the "entropy" and "arbitrary, material chaos of the world." The poem became a "counterworld" of purely "linguistic coherence" where metaphors become metonyms of rhetorical values that diverge more and more from "reality." By way of both De Manian post-structuralism and Lacanian psychoanalysis, Lee Edelman has argued that Crane's highly wrought abstractions of bodies and architectures are themselves allegorical reflections of an "unmediated vision" that supersedes any particular concretion. Emphatic "presences" index actual "absences."<sup>202</sup> Hammer differentiated Crane's approach to lyric form from "traditional" modernists like T. S. Eliot and Allen Tate by claiming that his poems metaphorically condense beginnings and ends, causes and consequences, into a "non-narrative language" that "exists outside history in the timeless present." See: John T. Irwin, "Hart Crane's Logic of Metaphor," *The Southern Review* II:2 (April, 1975); Lee Edelman, *Transmemberment of Song: Hart Crane's Anatomies of Rhetoric and Desire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987); Hammer, *Janus-Faced Modernism*, 117–171.

in which not only his speakers but his own identity as a poet is implicated. And he likens Winters' notion of logical order to the spurious transparency of a commodity:

You seem to think that experience is some commodity—that can be sought! One can respond only to certain circumstances; just what the barriers are, and where the boundaries cross can never be completely known. And the surest way to frustrate the possibility of any free realization is, it seems to me, to willfully direct it. I can't help it if you think me aimless and irresponsible... I am suspect, I fear, for equivocating.<sup>203</sup>

What Winters treats as a metaphysical confusion is in fact, for Crane, a hard-won yet accidental *physical* reality, a fact Winters and so many of Crane's readers haven't seen despite the hints he drops almost everywhere about a dramatic and gestural lineage of melancholic clowns, romantic wanderers, and sentimental tramps for whom "logical inadequacy" might be a fair description of their actual circumstances. As in Chaplin's fateful misses, Crane's passionate speech rarely add up to discernible material gains or have the kinds of consequential effects internal to the strange timing of his lyrics that lend a character a narrative, legal, or social credulity. Crane never goes clear. The force of rendering transient life lyrically is not that it liberates figures from the punishing binds of marginality and displacement but that it produces new significant symbols—social actions—to call out or respond to moralizing standards of intelligibility, comportment, and exchange.

The notion of being willfully "suspect" takes on different slant, too, when we consider that Crane associates his formal experiments with nomadic and melancholic figures whose proximate distance from any stable notion of belonging is the source of both the laughter and suspicions they serially attract.<sup>204</sup> In order for us to see ourselves as what *we* really are—"unknown accomplices"—we have to be stripped of the very identifiers that enable us to separate or hold in mind what we privately feel from what we publically affirm, instrumental interactions from passionate avowals, classical motifs from contemporary features, the solidity of land from the diffusions of the sea—the list could go on. But this negative freedom comes with its costs, costs which are often registered through the very communicative body with which one encounters or relates to others. Heard in this key, Crane's speech seems less pitched to some passionate impossibility and more a reality of the difficulties of keeping transient lives in passionate conversation.

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<sup>203</sup> *Letters*, 299.

<sup>204</sup> For a useful analysis of the term "willful" and its disciplining function for certain kinds of disorderly or wandering bodies, see Sarah Ahmed's *Willful Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

## SPEAKING OUT OF PLACE: An Objectivist Genealogy of Sincerity

I will cry havoc in a small voice.

George Oppen to his sister, June Oppen Degnan, September 4, 1964<sup>205</sup>

At its simplest, speaking sincerely has come to mean a correspondence between who we are and what we say—that is, if we take sincerity as a verification of a singular and emphatic voicing of a person. To speak sincerely is to will an idea of one's self in the form of speech towards another: trust me, I am what I say I am. And to continue speaking sincerely is to verify this correspondence of will, belief, and speech throughout the flux of circumstance: I will continue to believe what I claim to believe. In *Truth and Truthfulness* (2004), Bernard Williams describes sincerity as a "disposition to make sure that one's assertion expresses what one actually believes."<sup>206</sup> Belief in what one says is communicated not just by the content of the assertion but by the ways in which a speaker persuades others to trust the relation between statement, will, and duration of belief. It is this relation between belief and assertion that also marks a divergence between who does the saying and who does the hearing, as we assume that a speaker has other beliefs just as we assume that a hearer "will come to believe more than the speaker said."<sup>207</sup> Even the root of the term Williams uses, *dis*position, keys us into this dynamic between gaining and losing possession of one's self or one's position in the world that is implicit in a more attitudinal, intersubjectively negotiated version of sincerity. Deserving truth and dislocation come hand and hand, as both are means to adapt to shifting requirements of accuracy and belief.

Given how much Western poetry has been associated with dissimulation, illusion, and the pleasures of seduction—at least since Plato's banishment of poets from the Republic or Theocritus's metafictional idylls—it is no surprise that auditors or readers would approach a lyricist, particularly one who purports to be delivering the truth about reality, with some degree of skepticism.<sup>208</sup> It is no coincidence, either, that a healthy tradition of skepticism in American literature has often been focalized through the itinerant "confidence men." Such characters are often encountered in public thoroughfares or spaces of transit, much like transients, and play the sort of face-saving games that

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<sup>205</sup> "To June on Sep 4, 1964," (UCSD, 1.9). All citations from George Oppen's daybooks, notes, and unpublished drafts come from the Mandeville Archives at the University of California, San Diego. For letters, the Box # and Folder # is provided. The citational format for drafts and notes from the daybooks is as follows: Box #, Folder #, Leaf #. Many thanks to those at the library for their assistance.

<sup>206</sup> Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 96. Hereafter cited as *Truth and Truthfulness*.

<sup>207</sup> *Truth and Truthfulness*, 96.

<sup>208</sup> Mark Payne, for example, argues that the development of what modern readers call "the lyric" (versus epic or narrative poetry) grew out of Theocritus's self-conscious fictional construction of self and scene in his "idylls." This self-conscious fictionality mirrors the kinds of subjective and situational calibration that Bernard Williams tracks in performances of sincerity, though it should be noted that the lyrical conventions of idylls are more generally considered to be the basis of the more specialized lyric tradition of the "pastoral." See: Mark Payne, *Theocritus and the Invention of Fiction* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

often attached to performances of masculine ego, pride, and power.<sup>209</sup> Similarly, “confidence men” provoke the same question a sincere orator may pose to its listener: why should I trust what you say? Truthfulness becomes a matter of judging appearance, appearances from which we must sort out virtues from self-serving motives or affects of instability or pity from the effects of manipulation or exploitation. Skepticism toward and confidence in sincerity is on display, for example, in the river-boat spectacle of disability, solicitation, charity, and trust that unfolds throughout Herman Melville’s novel, *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade* (1857). Like Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, Melville’s novel is obsessed with the epistemological tools we use to rationalize “strangeness” into normative moral, ethical, or political values.<sup>210</sup> While working on the river drama of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), Mark Twain staged a more explicit confidence game through his re-writing of *The Prince and the Pauper* (1881) that addresses, among other things, the *unbeimlech* (homeless or “uncanny”) figure of “the tramp” through first-hand accounts of transient persons who were criminalized by poor laws in Elizabethan London. In T. S. Eliot’s introduction to *Huck Finn*—both Twain and Eliot grew up beside the Mississippi River, which Eliot names as “the only natural force that can wholly determine the course of human peregrination” (xii)—Eliot differentiates between the isolate, vagabond figure of Finn and the “pioneer” colonial settlers of America:

Huck Finn must come from nowhere and be bound for nowhere. His is not the independence of the typical or symbolic American Pioneer, but the independence of the vagabond. His existence questions the values of America as much as the values of Europe; he is as much an affront to the “pioneer spirit” as he is to “business enterprise”; he is in a state of nature as detached as the state of the saint... He has no beginning and no end. Hence, he can only disappear.<sup>211</sup>

What unites Melville’s and Twain’s representations of homeless, itinerant, or socially detached life are not just an interest in the ways fellow citizens judge such wandering bodies but also what happens to truthfulness within an absence of trust and a generalization of estrangement. Both truthfulness and belief are constantly being realigned and redefined not only within a person but also a socio-political order.

In focusing largely on a genealogical strange of postwar American poetry, I want to ask a similar question that Melville and Twain ask of their times: what does it mean to be truthful about one’s self and circumstances, particularly when the two are perpetually unsettled? Across George Oppen’s brief writings on his life as well as Mary Oppen’s narrative of their life together, *Meaning a Life: An Autobiography* (1976), we find a wayward continental romance of the kind that would be familiar to other postwar highway vagabonds with stable financial means. They even briefly owned

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<sup>209</sup> In this notion of saving face, I am of course referencing Erving Goffman’s sociological discussion of the “face-work.” See Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967).

<sup>210</sup> My understanding of how confidence games play a central role in American democratic culture and imagination owes much to the work of Jennifer Greiman. In particular, see Jennifer Greiman’s chapter “Theatricality, Strangeness, and Democracy in Melville’s *Confidence-Man*” in *Democracy’s Spectacle: Sovereignty and Public Life in Antebellum American Writing* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

<sup>211</sup> T.S. Eliot, Introduction to Samuel L. Clemens (Mark Twain) *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (London, Cresset Press, 1950), xv–xvi.

the same ill-fated amphibious car driven by Lyndon Baines Johnson, the Quandt Amphicar 770, which could be driven on the highway or used as a propeller boat. But the wreckage of postwar life always haunted the permissions of their travels. In the elliptically titled “Of This All Things...” (from *This in Which* (1965)), the first-person speaker begins by claiming its one “distinction” it can “have,” as in durably possess, is a life lived “With a beautiful woman.” But what seems like a sentimental peon to a transient heterosexuality is quickly unraveled, as her piercing “presence” is not cited as a “comfort” but a companionship in the desire to witness “Whatever terrors / May have made us / Companion / To the earth, whatever terrors—” (NCP, 35).

When George Oppen returned to poetry after such a 25-year textual silence and political exile from the US, his return was motivated, in part, by an urgent sense new forms of truthfulness and belief were required to render the overt and historically mediated “horrors” of postwar life in America, evoked obliquely in his first poem back, “Blood from the Stone.”<sup>212</sup> And if he was to place this confidence in discrete poems or lyrical series, he had to think more acutely about how a residual sense of displacement shared could be built into the very texture of his syntax, a syntax he described in a Daybook as both “homeless” and “drift[ing]” (Daybook IV:I, 190). Reading *The Materials* (1962), *This in Which* (1965), and *Of Being Numerous* (1968), one feels the incredible ethical and epistemological burdens placed on what it means to be “honest” without moral or scientific axioms. “Who” was speaking, or what lyrical readers often describe as one’s “voice,” was made contingent upon where or how thought happened or what was spoken *with*. Presenting actual speech, perceptual acts, or emotional experiences implied an engagement with phrases, images, or objects that are not authentically “found” but encountered, tested, and re-oriented beyond the confidences of an individual speaker. Previous versions of what a person was or came to believe became the raw material for composition, as if a poem, particularly a long serial poem, offered an exploded history of the relations and materials we use to verify the place, character, and ethical integrity of persons, including the self-consciousness of the speaker. As we will see, this amounted to a sort of paradigm shift from sincerity from a personal value to a quality of construction, one which led to a wholesale revision of lyric self-consciousness as such.

## A Sincere Genealogy

What remains consistent in the genealogies of sincerity provided by Williams as well as the foundational work by Lionel Trilling in his 1970 lecture series, “Sincerity and Authenticity,” is the originations of sincerity in Greek political discourse and Latin accounts of objecthood. Trilling notes how in Latin, sincerity used to refer to the integrity of an object and not a person. A thing

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<sup>212</sup> Rachel Blau DuPlessis cites 1958 as the turning point for “The Oppens” (George and Mary as well as their daughter, Linda) after living in Mexico for seven years. They had just been granted passports and George had his famous dream about “rust in copper” that his therapist translated as a fear over self-stagnation and neglecting his “paternal and sorrowful mandate that such rust was going to be prevented” (*Selected Letters*, xvii). DuPlessis notes how Oppen began writing again in May 1958, beginning with “Blood from the Stone,” and corresponding about his moral commitments to literature. “In February, March, and August 1959, Oppen initiated contact with publishers—his sister, June Oppen Degnan, who was affiliated with *The San Francisco Review*, James Laughlin, and Henry Rago of *Poetry Magazine*” (*Selected Letters*, xviii). The Oppens returned once more with the Zukofskys to Mexico in 1959 before they came back permanently in January 1960.” For an extended discussion of Oppen’s return to publishing, see: *Selected Letters*, vii–xxi.



was sincere if it was well made, held up to repeated, multiple uses. However, European Enlightenment and Renaissance culture shifted sincerity towards more of a rhetorical concept associated with a transparent, self-conscious, or "authentic" relation between language, person, culture, and the historical demands of truth. Sincerity entailed the mutual project of knowing and being true to one's self, figured somewhat ironically by Polonius in his advice to parting Laertes: "Neither a borrower nor a lender be, / For Loan oft loses both itself and friend, / And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry. / This above all—to thine own self be true."<sup>213</sup> Trilling relates the rise in interest in sincerity around the beginning of the sixteenth century to anxiety around class position and social mobility in burgeoning mercantile cultures. The workings of mercantile capitalism necessitated a new socio-political hermeneutics for and typology of the "hypocrite-villain, the conscious dissembler."<sup>214</sup>

Both Trilling and Williams note how sincerity was repositioned over the last two centuries by Hegel, Nietzsche, liberal political theory, and cultural critique as a problem of communicating the integrity of an object or disposition of an agent as a transparent end. This end can be social, as in a speech act that communicates a subjective experience of an emotion, a desire, or a need for another; it can be cultural, as in a self-reflexive subject or object interpreted or judged according to a set of normative signifying regimes and practices; and it can be political, as in adjudications between individual intentions or rights and a system of legal or political representation. In each instance, to describe a sincere person or give an account of a sincere action is to describe two things at once: a self-relation of an agent to an action and how that "sincere" gesture or composition is mediated by social, political, and cultural standards of comportment, signification, and public appearance. In a fragment from Oppen's manuscripts for *Of Being Numerous* (1968) uses the figure of the "dead end" to gesture toward this struggle to assign ends to sincerity when the person to whom it would be addressed is also in question: "'Dead end. // Perhaps not that there is nothing to say / But no one to address."<sup>215</sup> Cognate terms for sincerity like honesty, accuracy, authenticity, and truthfulness—to borrow Trilling's and Williams's vocabularies—not only attach a range of values to states of being that appear whole, well-crafted, or self-consistent but establish expectations for how these entities, living or inanimate, act within a social world. To be honest is to enact a continuity between who you are and what you do, just as to be historically accurate suggests a determinate relation between an explanation or narrative and the material reality to which it refers.

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<sup>213</sup> "Hamlet" (1.III.75–78) in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., eds. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean H. Howard, and Katherine Eisaman Maus (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2008). It is interesting to think about how Polonius's paternal wisdom, which echoes the Delphic "know thyself," ironizes sincerity as a personal virtue. While Laertes might be said to be an embodiment of sincerity as a self-conscious integrity and dignity, a model for courtly sociality, Polonius seems to represent the dissembling, calculating, and performative version of self-truth. Trilling notes how the English Renaissance were both highly critical and accommodating of heroic ideals of sincerity: "In the Renaissance, however, the heroic style of the superego was confronted with a new antagonism, that which was offered by the ego, the aspect of the self which has for its function the preservation of the self. The heroic mode came under attack not only as being absurd in the grandiose elevation of its style and in the moral pretensions which this expressed, but also as standing in the way of the practical conduct of life." (Sincerity and Authenticity, 82).

<sup>214</sup> Sincerity and Authenticity, 17.

<sup>215</sup> (UCSD, 22.9.35). This fragment would become a part of Section 9 of *Of Being Numerous*.

Bernard Williams criticizes histories of sincerity for fetishizing the act of assertion, in that the onus of distinction between misleading speech and sincere speech is defined solely in terms of the moral responsibility and explicit (or ironic) intention of the speaker. The problem with such a criteria for judgment is that it often leads to the contradictory position of defining all lies as wrong (as violations of an abstract moral code) and advocating for the necessity of masking some truths (to save a family from persecution, for example) without an understanding of how intentions are conditioned, and negotiated, between interlocutors. "Deceit, after all, is a relation between you and your earthly hearer, and the question of what you meant must be answered in terms of intentions directed towards that hearer. God may know my intentions in the sense of my good intentions, but the intentions that form my meanings cannot rest with him."<sup>216</sup> In other words, rules around honesty and deceit are not sufficient in and of themselves to guide our judgments about why and when a sincere *relation* is undermined. Just because a "rule" is in place doesn't mean that our forms of exchange are governed by such rules or that we can trust others subscribe to all our ethical assumptions. Aside from the objective truth content of what one actually says in a particular situation, sincerity involves "conversational implicatures" that operate according to both rule-based behaviors we must assume, ranging from pragmatic and provisional to the constitutional or hereditary, and fields of reference actual speech content attunes us to, both in which words are selected and which are not.<sup>217</sup>

In poetic terms, diction and dialect often do the work of constructing this field of reference, signaling certain class, racial, and gender relations implied by certain vocabularies or inflections.<sup>218</sup> This includes the conversational situations where metaphors are taken literally or figuratively, such as "a philosopher who was asked by his wife to watch the soup cooking on the stove and who, when she came back, was staring intently at it as it boiled over."<sup>219</sup> In such situations, we are motivated not just by abstract values like "honour" or "shame" but by the "particular relations in which we socially and personally find ourselves."<sup>220</sup> Williams gives the example of Adam Smith's example of

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<sup>216</sup> Truth and Truthfulness, 104.

<sup>217</sup> On this notion of conversational implicatures, Williams writes: "What she said (in the sense of her *saying that...*), or what she stated, is in our ordinary understanding identified with its truth-conditions, whereas implicatures lie out the truth-conditions... This natural conception of an assertion's content helps to pick out ways in which we may be uncertain what a speaker has asserted... Not everything that one can infer from a person's making a particular assertion is an implicature. It is not a matter of implicatures if one reaches the conclusion from the tone of his speech that he is not a native English-speaker, or, again, if one gathers from the timing of his interruption that he is tactless, offensive, or does not know that this is the dead man's widow... Implicatures more resemble matters of linguistic rule, and it is a striking fact that competent speakers can standardly recognize an implicature if they are presented with a sentence and are invited to think of it as asserted in normal circumstances." (Truth and Truthfulness, 98–99).

<sup>218</sup> Daniel Tiffany's work on cant and diction in what he calls "Infidel Poetics" is a prime example of how one could read the implicature of diction against or as distinct from the particular forms poems deploy. In fact, he argues for a kind of dialectic between diction and form through which we can read the social and political imagination of particular poets. See: Daniel Tiffany, *Infidel Poetics: Riddles, Nightlife, Substance* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2009).

<sup>219</sup> Truth and Truthfulness, 99.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

gentlemanly humiliation and dishonor around making "a false promise to the highwayman." The humiliation, for Smith, comes from "being coerced into making the promise" and not from "breaking the promise" or from speaking from a position in which one's promise would never be taken seriously. The "highwayman," in other words, would be incapable of sincerity because it is already speaking from an abject and unmoored position. As we will see, Oppen inverts this relationship between property and promise by valuing an honesty that emerges out of drift, dislocation, and distance from the ways in which democracy had been articulated through logics of exchange in postwar consumer culture.

To counter such clear ideological assumptions about "rule-based" behavior, Williams suggests a more basic dialogic test of sincerity that seems correlative with Oppen's: "I lead the hearer to rely on what I say, when she has good reason to do so, and in abusing this I abuse the relationship which is based on it."<sup>221</sup> Crucially, the pronouns in this formulation are not figurations of a rule but a shifting set of values, assertions, and definitions of historical or social accuracy. Oppen wrote in a draft of his *Statement on Poetics*: "It is true that my own temperament, my own sense of drama, enters into this: I like to seem to be speaking very simply—and a sense of drama is dangerous, I know that, this is again a question of modulation, as is music: a question of honesty, question of sincerity—the sincerity of the *I* and the *we*, it is a tremendous drama, the things that common words say, the words 'and' and 'but' and 'is' and 'before' and 'after.'"<sup>222</sup> Since the pronomial person is as much a performative construction as the prepositional integuments of an honest statement, there is no art of speech or position in a syntax that is inured to this drama.

In attending to this dialogic reflexivity, a "sincere" speaker is looking both outward to the others it involves and solicits in its projects while also reflecting on what is gained or lost in positioning itself in a particular way. Williams describes this as a notion of truthfulness that speakers "deserve" depending on what social situations they are responding to and what kinds of relations—privacy, intimacy, co-operation, mutual resistance—are necessary responses to conditions of powerlessness, atomization, coercion, etc. To put this in lyrical terms: we "deserve" a relation of truthfulness and a range of trusts if we successfully balance *my* values with *your* senses of legitimate claims on relevant pasts, presents, and futures. Williams extends this virtue of social and historical adaptation into a kind of "realism," in the sense that responding "accurately" to one's situation invokes an "order of things that is independent of us."<sup>223</sup> We need this concrete sense of an independent reality, what Roland Barthes called a "reality effect," in order to adjudicate sincerity.<sup>224</sup> It helps us understand how something impersonal, like power or commodification, is at work in determining both "truthful" frameworks and constituting local, individual senses of this reality.

Because of sincerity's association with self-similarity or self-consciousness, exemplified by the confessional model performed by Jean Jacques Rousseau, we typically think of sincerity as a first-person speech act, correlative with the subjective intensity of "Romantic" lyric speech. However, we can also think of sincerity, as Hegel notably did, as closer to the painful *dis*articulation of the subject into multiple, competing subject positions that occurs through cultural expression and development. Diderot's example of "Rameau's Nephew" (and not the moralizing first-person

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<sup>221</sup>Ibid., 118.

<sup>222</sup> Selected Prose, 48–49. This "Statement of Poetics" was published posthumously, as Stephen Cope notes, in *Sagetrieb* 3, No. 3 (Winter, 1984), 25–27.

<sup>223</sup>Ibid., 99.

<sup>224</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 141–149.

narrator) is Hegel's privileged model of this operatic multiplicity of voicing. The Delphic inscription of γνῶθι σεαυτὸν ("know thyself") so central to Greek, Enlightenment, and Romantic expositors of self-knowledge is traded for the truthfulness of a virtuosic range and flexibility. But even in this scenario, the question remains of "who" are "what" we are calling sincere. Is sincerity a consistent relation that persists among the parts or is it a subjectivity that verifies the integrity, accuracy, and authenticity of these parts? What do we, as readers of modern poetry, typically refer to when we call a disposition sincere? Are we referring to an inherent quality of mind or character, as one definition of disposition would suggest, or are we referring to the style in which a person or thing is arranged relative to what is not itself?

In perhaps Oppen's most thematically and formally explicit Whitmanic poem, a poem he composed following his return to both poetry and America, a long genealogy of transient poetics is consolidated in the subtle rhyme between the seeming lyrical self-apostrophe—Me!—and the shift to the third-person "he" in whose gesture the apostrophe becomes a mark of physical proof. I am here. This is *my* heart in *my* chest, circulating blood throughout *my* body, but even this seems a misplaced gesture.

Me! he says, hand on his chest.  
Actually, his shirt.  
    And there, perhaps,  
The question.

Pioneers! But trailer people?  
Wood box full of tools—  
    The most  
American. A sort of  
Shrinking  
    in themselves. A  
Less than adult: old.

A pocket knife,  
A tool—  
    And I  
Here talking to the man?  
    The sky

That dawned along the road  
And all I've been  
Is not myself? I think myself  
Is what I've seen and not myself

"Myself I Sing," *The Materials*, NCP 56

Actually, the speaker is touching his shirt and not his heart, skewing the very act of pledging. This mediated gesture of location compounds in further questions: are you a pioneer or a sort of journeyworker who practices a tool-based trade, and what might be the difference between the two? Is this misdirection indexing or announcing a lyrical presence that is the "most American"? Or, do we associated American experience with this "Shrinking / In themselves" to a diminished

maturation ("Less than adult: old")? We get no answers. Rather, the retraction continues, as this vagrant, imploding life phases first into a specific, versatile, yet compact object ("A pocket knife") to a generalizable object of utility, what Heidegger would call the ready-to-hand: "A tool."

It is at an elliptical, typographically marked break, one that also signals a historical bridge between Whitmanic chants of spiritual and socio-economic expansion (redolent of "O Pioneers!" or "O Captain, My Captain!") and transient labor or "journeywork," where an "I" is finally introduced, as if "myself" was just an afterthought. It is no longer the self-evidence of a migrant, laboring body that is in question but the self-evidence of this belated first-person in relation to this man: "And I / Here talking to the man?" What follows is another hinge, or phasing, of meaning where a question is answered by another phenomenological process mixing disparate scales. "The sky," a kind of perceptual commons, dawns along a particularly human orientation and conveyance: "the road." But it is not just the road involved by dawn but the sudden fact that "all I've been / Is not myself?" The problematic, mediated act of singing or announcing one's self turns on this quotient of what I have experienced ("been," "seen") that is *not* myself: the shirt he is wearing, the tools he has formed in relation to, the words I use, the road we walk, the dawn sky that lights up the distances between "me" and other lives. By placing us in a sort of historical parallax between settler colonialists and postwar trailer encampments, Oppen is also signaling the deep relation between the development of American "lyric" form and contingent life. Where we might expect a declaration of the freedoms of the road, we find imploding bodies—"A sort of / Shrinking / in themselves. A /less than adult: old"—and physical degradation that separates aging from emotional maturity or self-understanding.

As we turn back now to track the more specific definition and place of sincerity in the cultural poetics of "Objectivism," we will see how establishing an "independent" standard of truthfulness involved a serial attunement to processes of construction and circulation that exist beyond the fetish object of so much lyric reading and thinking: the private experience of an individual.

## A "Sincere" Program

The dialectic of dislocation and adaption Bernard Williams tracks in his genealogy of sincerity was especially important for the formal condition Joseph Le Conte and other poetry critics have referred to "seriality," particularly as it manifested through the poetic genealogy we will now track in more detail from the "Imagism" of Ezra Pound to the uneven poetics of the "Objectivists."<sup>225</sup> Both George Oppen and Louis Zukofsky experimented with how sequential relations doesn't necessarily imply narrative development of character or moral understanding. A serial sincerity would emphasize the "necessity to talk" honestly and from a position of radical diminishment ("I will cry havoc in a small voice") as a continuous problem of communication (not necessarily as a generic expectation, in the way fictional realism might). In a draft of a poem we will revisit at length later, "Leviathan," Oppen figures honest "words" as a troubling momentum in the sense that they expose us to the homelessness of the continuous present:

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<sup>225</sup> Joseph Le Conte, *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991). For a general discussion of the place of seriality in Objectivist poetics, see Rachel Blau DuPlessis's "Objectivist Poetry and Poetics" in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Poetry*, ed. Walter Kalaidjian (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 89–102. See also Jack Spicer's Vancouver lecture, "The Serial Poem and *The Holy Grail*" in *The House that Jack Built: The Collected Lectures of Jack Spicer*, ed. Peter Gizzi (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 49–97.

W[e] must talk now. Nothing ours  
 But words. We are too many  
 To live by pettiness, silence, by deception  
 Of each other. There is no shelter of the past  
 Will give shelter, no haunting adult shadow  
~~Of ourselves~~  
~~Will~~ To cast a shelter of the past behind us.

(UCSD, 20.42.201)<sup>226</sup>

Voicing the precarious conditions of honest conversation entails an exposure *to*, and not withdrawal *from*, the contingencies of the present and the relentless pursuit of a language. As Michael Heller has pointed out, this is not an automatic process, either, but involves a "dynamic receptivity *to* contingency."<sup>227</sup> If we take sincerity to be describing *how* a person relates to the unpredictable, social unfolding of circumstance, what is at stake in characterizing one's self or others as "sincere" is attributing both a social legibility as well as a moral or ethical value to such a provisionally communicative action.

It is not news to claim the loose grouping of poets now referred to as "Objectivist" by literary critics—which grew out of complex responses to European -isms such as "symbolism" and "imagism"—as concerned primarily with repurposing the lyric to produce material histories of speech instead of dramatizing robust, sympathetic individuals with transparent psychologies. Michael Davidson, one of the deepest readers of Oppen and postwar poetry in general, has argued that materiality was for the so-called "Objectivists" a "necessary adjunct to self-knowledge" because "materials are embedded in social relations and conditions of use and exchange."<sup>228</sup> To speak is to position "the outside" and develop an affective relation toward materials.<sup>229</sup> The poem was not a

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<sup>226</sup> Another early version of "Leviathan" relates being locked up in words to being locked up with the "inexplicable" tools of labor. But these tools, like "our words," remain facts in the sense that their actuality doesn't rely upon our individual purpose: "Locked up/ With the tool box and the lunch pail: / The height gauge / the dividers / And the / Files / Iron handles / Of the fact. / What is inexplicable / Remains." (UCSD, 20.42.203).

<sup>227</sup> Michael Heller, *Speaking the Estranged: Essays on the Work of George Oppen* (Bristol, UK: Shearsman books, 2012), 41, my emphasis. "To Publishers" was of course the prepositional name of the short-lived publishing venture George and Mary ran together briefly (with Louis Zukofksy as editor), publishing works William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound, but folded before they could put out Pound's collected works.

<sup>228</sup> Michael Davidson, *On the Outskirts of Form: Practicing Cultural Poetics* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 101. Davidson levels a meaningful critique at more analytical approaches to Oppen's poetics informed by philosophy of mind. He criticizes the recent work of Oren Izenberg, for example, who "value[s] words as tools by which we frame propositions" instead of interrogating the "position from which we speak" (101). For the work he is discussing, see: Oren Izenberg, *Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Being* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>229</sup> In her recent book, *Radical Affections: Essays on the Poetics of Outside* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010), Miriam Nichols describes the poetics of "the outside" in terms of the post-modern trajectory of American poetry beginning with Charles Olson and the Black Mountain School. Where I differ with Nichols is not in her innovative readings of these poets' engagement with radical

substitute world of reference but a partial capture or series of instants in which, to modify Heidegger, speaking became a historical problem.<sup>230</sup>

Departing from centuries of Western thought about sincerity as a virtue of a self-conscious individual or personal commitment to an abstract truth, these poets posit a constructivist version of sincerity that treats the lyric speech, figuration, and thinking as an intensive, serial process of social and historical mediation. Directness of emotive presentation and the harmonic consistency between a creative self and a world are not authorities that can be isolated by a poet or claimed by a speaker; rather, sincerity is an emergent, provisional quality of a lyric or lyrical series that neither a lyrical speaker nor the histories to which it responds (including past versions of itself) can comprehend fully. In their introduction to the foundational collection of essays on the "Objectivist" poets, "Objectivist Nexus," Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain point out that "Objectivist" meant for Oppen and Zukofsky not an "objective viewpoint" but a processural imperative: "to objectify the poem, to make the poem an object."<sup>231</sup> In his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), Theodor Adorno gives us a way to think about objects and persons as historical processes by distinguishing between what he calls "individuation" and "objectivation" in artworks. In modern art in particular, Adorno describes the desire to make objects primary as a desire to realize what is "nonexistent in them, for whose sake they exist... however refracted."<sup>232</sup> Like the sincere performance of a speaker, objectivation seems to hold out the promise, within the logic of capital, that what is not manufactured, alienated, or reified can present itself or be heard on its own terms from the very thing that seemed to defy or deny its existence. But rather than draw upon an "a priori idea of the beautiful," an artwork that emphasizes objectivation seeks out formal solutions "that the imagining ear or eye does not immediately encompass or know in full detail."<sup>233</sup> An artwork can have a "meaning" that is contingent on the "nexus of its elements" instead of an idea of the subject or the beautiful that subtends these material contingencies.

When Zukofsky put together his essays and dossier of poems for the 1931 special issue of *Poetry Magazine*, he was careful to place "Objectivist" in scare quotes (and maintain them in the 1932 follow-up anthology, *An "Objectivists" Anthology*). Burton Hatlen has pointed out that this quotation was in fact a consistent strategy, one that maintained the unifying sign of this heterogeneous grouping of poets (which would include Basil Bunting, George Oppen, Lorinne Neidecker, Charles Rakosi, Charles Reznikoff, Kenneth Rexroth in addition to fore-runners such as Ezra Pound, William Carlos

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empiricist thought and practice but in the absolute separate between Williams and Pound and the poetries that followed. It seems to me that Pound's notion of sincerity as a modality of processural precision is inherently oriented toward "the outside."

<sup>230</sup> I am of course referencing Heidegger's questioning of being as a philosophical methodology in part because of his foundational influence on Oppen's thinking. Peter Nichols's book on Oppen's own intellectual and poetic development in relationship to his reading of Heidegger's lectures on metaphysics, essays on German poetry, as well as *Being and Time* is an invaluable resource in this regard. See: Peter Nichols, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>231</sup> *Objectivist Nexus*, ed. Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1999), 8. Essays from this collection are hereafter cited by essay and book title.

<sup>232</sup> *Aesthetic Theory*, 109.

<sup>233</sup> *Aesthetic Theory*, 24.

Williams, and Marianne Moore) as a conspicuous act of naming.<sup>234</sup> And perhaps Zukofsky's ironizing of his role of anthologizer is not surprising given the fact that "Objectivism" was premised upon a poetics of historical, imagistic, and verbal accuracy that privileged restless contact with particulars over doctrinal abstraction. As Charles Altieri has argued, "This model of poetic art needs to be continually reinvented because as soon as perceptual and compositional energies grow slack or seem inadequate to the mind's needs, writers seek to supplement concrete detail by symbolic generalization." Altieri is rare among critics of objectivism in scrutinizing the two categories Zukofsky himself gives us to understand this process: sincerity and objectification (which, we might recall from the 1931 issue, he applied specifically to the work of Reznikoff).<sup>235</sup> Altieri defines Zukofsky's sincerity as refusing formal or abstract closure in order to privilege the "post-logical movements" of thought, feeling, and perception that are "intensified in the act of writing." Sincerity gains its dialectical rest in "objectification," a kind of second-order arrangement by which subjective intensity becomes a "minor unit" of the historical "totality" a poem objectifies: "its character may be simply described as the arrangement, into one apprehended unit, of minor units of sincerity—in other words, the resolving of words and their ideation into structure."<sup>236</sup> Sincerity is also liminal in the sense that the phenomenal accuracy of a word is not the achievement of reason or a life at "rest" but the *suggestion* of a potential "totality" between word, sense experience, and history.

But DuPlessis and Quatremain point out how Zukofsky himself equivocates about the status of an axiomatic formulation of objectification, going to far as to question whether objectification "is more pertinent to the mind than presentation in detail."<sup>237</sup> For comparative purposes, here is the Zukofsky's fullest formulation of how the poem is made into an objective combination of historical particulars, later republished as "An Objective" in his collection of prose, *Propositions*:

In sincerity shapes appear concomitants of word combinations, precursors of (if there is continuance) completed sound or structure, melody or form. Writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody... Present with sincerity, the mind even tends to supply, in further suggestion, which does not attain rested totality, the totality not

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<sup>234</sup> Burton Hatlen, "A Poetics of Marginality and Resistance: The Objectivist Poets in Context," *The Objectivist Nexus*, 37.

<sup>235</sup> It is striking to me that one of the most ambitious recent monographs on the "Objectivist" tradition, Ruth Jennison's *The Zukofsky Era*, doesn't mention Zukofsky's or Oppen's engagement with the concept of sincerity. Jennison's important re-reading of Zukofsky's optics and objectification as materializing, in the form of the poem, the perceptual mediation of commodity fetishism skips over the role of sincerity in this process. She writes: "As we have seen, Objectivism, despite the appearance of its name, is less interested in objects or even the perceivable data of the material world, than it is in the forms these objects take and the paths by which they travel, mediated, to become available to perception." (19). What then do we make of the fact that "objectification" is itself a focalization or arrangement of "minor units of sincerity"? See: Ruth Jennison, *The Zukofsky Era: Modernity, Margins, and the Avant-Garde* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2012).

<sup>236</sup> Charles Altieri, "The Objectivist Tradition," *Objectivist Nexus*, 33.

<sup>237</sup> Poetry Magazine, 278.



always found in sincerity and necessary only for perfect rest, complete appreciation.<sup>238</sup>

What comes before rest, before the objectification of history in a poem, is the ongoing elaboration of "sincere" combinations. Sincerity is typically *non*-totalizing, in that it does not produce resolved wholes or comprehensive experiences of aesthetic tastes ("complete appreciation") but functions as a "precursor" to reproducible patterns of melody. Writing sincerely, we might say, is a way of composing partial images and sounds. This notion of partiality would be of particular importance to Oppen for whom the discreteness of a mind was traded for the discreteness of series as a perceptual record of a conscious implication in a material history, including the things one fails to say or think completely. If we think of composition in musical terms, as Zukofsky does, partiality is conditional on the continued orientation of melody, a term Zukofsky is borrowing not just from musical theory but Aristotelian poetics and politics.

In Aristotle's politics, he defines both a pedagogical and ethical function for melody (*melos*) in that it can provoke in the "free and educated" listener states of "mystic frenzy" that accompany belief or the calm and "purgation" that accompanies healing or spiritual relief. For the "vulgar crowd of mechanics, laborers, and the like"—here Aristotle implies the slaves of Greek society—music will function merely to relax and amuse. The effect of *melos* "correspond[s] to their minds."<sup>239</sup> What gives Zukofsky's *melos* a different aesthetic and political slant, however, is that he strips the concept of any assumed formal correspondence between mind, social order, and racial hierarchy. The musical character of poetry does not just refer to a temporal sequencing of sounds and their affective counterparts but a spatio-historical process by which thought and culture dialectically "objectify" or "combine" with each other.<sup>240</sup> While a self-conscious honesty could be "counterfeited"

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<sup>238</sup> Zukofsky republished an edited version of his original "Program: 'Objectivists,' 1931" in his later prose collection, *Prepositions*. The original "Program" provided a prose statement by Pound on Carnevali (whose translations of Rimbaud are also in the issue), an example from Hemingway's "*They All Made Peace—What is Peace?*" and a list of "Objectivist" poets that includes: "Pound, Williams, McAlmon, Reznikoff, etc." The brief "Program" is followed up by the more famous essay on "Sincerity and Objectification" that takes Reznikoff as its primary case study. Pound arranged with Harriet Monroe to have Zukofsky edit the entire issue. For the two essays and examples of "sincerity and objectification," see: *Poetry Magazine* 5:37, (February, 1931), 268–289. Hereafter both the "Program" and the essay on sincerity and objectification in Charles Reznikoff will be cited as *Poetry Magazine* with page numbers. For Zukofsky's edited and more widely publicized version, see: *Prepositions: The Critical Essays of Louis Zukofsky*, (Berkeley: University California Press, 1981), 13.

<sup>239</sup> See: Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, Book 8, Part XII. Accessed at MIT Classics Internet Archives: <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.8.eight.html> on December 12, 2015.)

<sup>240</sup> Interestingly, this re-writing of Aristotelian categories also had a roughly contemporary European counterpart in Antonin Artaud's theorization of the theatrical staging of cruelty. In his 1938 collection of essays "The Theater and Its Double," Artaud defines *melos* as a way of establishing a physical presence and affective response to this presence before a figure or gesture is treated as representative. Artaud writes: "That is why in the 'theater of cruelty' the spectator is in the middle and the spectacle surrounds him. In this spectacle, sound effects are constant: sounds, noises, cries are chosen first for their vibratory quality, then for what they represent." (Antonin Artaud, "The Theater and Its Double," *Selected Writings*, ed. Susan Sontag. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 258).

because it referred back to the exclusive theater of the individual mind, sincerity meant a *technique* of truthfulness that aimed at (to use Zukofsky's metaphor of optical intensification) the ongoing partiality of experience: "[The poet's] concern must be with the technique of presenting work that is an object of experience, of objectifying, as Pound wrote, 'the thing that is true and stays true and keeps fresh for the new reader.' . . . Poetic sincerity cannot be counterfeited, one lives in a world with things as they are no matter what one thinks about them."<sup>241</sup> Both Oppen's and Zukofsky's notions of sincerity seem heavily indebted to this "trust" that Pound placed in the impersonal movements of actuality or "mineral fact" that, as Pound suggests, is neither chosen nor completely rationalized by the poet.

Given Zukofsky's steady correspondence with Pound and his titling of the first section of his 1929 essay, "Ezra Pound: The Cantos," as "Ta Hio" (which Pound translates as "grand learning"), there is every reason to believe that his notion of sincerity emerged out of engagement with Pound's "translation" of Confucian analects, *Confucius: The Great Digest, The Unwobbling Pivot, The Analects* (first published by Glenn Hughes in 1928, reprinted in 1951 by New Directions). Pound's experiments with Ernst Fenollosa's translations and research into Confucius as well as the ancient Chinese poems collected as *Cathay* (1915) did not just think of sincerity as a rhetorical quality of a self-conscious speaker but a reciprocal relation to the constraints of the material world. In the poems of *Cathay*, sincerity is often thematized as a problem of voicing the impassable distances between speakers or the "drift" of persons.<sup>242</sup> In his version of the Confucian analects, Pound figures sincerity as an evacuation of the self in order to commune with the "inborn nature of others" and "the nature of material things." In other words, sincerity is a "talent" by which a speaker can take on the character of the things it speaks or passes over. Pound translates "Tsze Tze's Third Thesis" as:

Only the most absolute sincerity under heaven can bring the inborn talent to the full and empty chalice of the nature. He who can totally sweep clean the chalice of himself can carry the inborn nature of others to its fulfillment; getting to the bottom of the natures of men, one can thence understand the nature of material things, and this understanding of the nature of things can aid the transforming and nutritive powers of earth and heave [ameliorate the quality of the grain, for example] and raise

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<sup>241</sup> Poetry Magazine, 256.

<sup>242</sup> In fact, it is hard to find a poem in *Cathay* that does not treat some form of political exile, insurmountable distance, or the enactment of love as a series of deferred arrivals and eternal departures. Establishing a meaningful continuity of experience and language is aligned with the incessant relational problem of crossing the land, returning home, or taking leave of a place: "Here we must make separation / And go through a thousand miles of dead grass" ("Taking Leave of a Friend," 141). Preserving the unique character and desires accumulated in these distances becomes the work of the poems. The first and probably most famous poems of the volume, "Song of the Bowmen of Shu," (written "reputedly" by Bunno in 1100 B.C.) opens with the desultory action of tired soldiers picking fern-shoots and the collective question: "When shall we get back to our country?" As the poems show, it is impossible to return to where one began a journey, and one is more likely to encounter familiar forms as a series of Whitman strangers or estrangements. For the full collection of the poems of *Cathay*, see: Ezra Pound, *Personae: The Shorter Poems*, ed. Lea Baelcher and A. Walton Litz (New York: New Directions, 1990).

man up to be a third partner with heaven and earth.<sup>243</sup>

Pound's Confucian emphasis on "process" confounds the distinction between subject and object in the act of *poesis* such that sincerity is no longer a distinctly personal or private value but something apparent in the pronomial and prepositional "drama" of prosodic construction.

In the terminology section of his "translation" of Confucius, Pound describes the character for "Sincerity" as "pictorially the sun's lance coming to rest on the precise spot verbally. The right-hand half of this compound means: to perfect, bring to focus."<sup>244</sup> As with Pound's theorization of the ideogram, two modes of representation are conflated: visual mimesis of an ecological process (sunlight refracted, metaphorized as a lance) indicates a precise verbal counterpoint (a "rest"). In Pound's hands, this Confucian concept becomes a justification for an ethics of precision and radical continuity with "process." One can find this basic tenant in his translation of Tszé Sze's first thesis: "You do not depart from the process even for an instant; what you depart from is not the process. Hence the man who keeps rein on himself looks straight into his own heart at the things wherewith there is no trifling; he attends seriously to things unheard."<sup>245</sup> To know about the world, which includes having emotional responses to it, is to participate in what the "open road" avails: "People do not move in the process. Those who know, exceed." Tszé Tse's third thesis phrases this paradoxical rest and extravagant consciousness from within process as a self-evacuation in service of establishing a continuity with "the nature of things."

The activation of this "inborn talent" is not a passive or natural process but an act of cultivation and making through which greater precision and clearer definition of the world is sculpted. It is this precise faceting of the world, the determinate power Pound sought for his images, that Tze deems "sincerity." And when sincere characterization is achieved, or at least strived toward, it becomes a self-manifesting history: "it will manifest; manifest, it will start to illuminate, illuminating to function, functioning to effect changes. Only the most absolute sincerity under heaven can effect any change [in things, in conditions]" (175). There are strong parallels, then, between Pound's notion of the self-sustaining cultural vanguard and images which evoke a world-consciousness at a standstill.

What Fenollosa's speculations on English grammar in light of Chinese characters and in turn Pound's re-working of his Confucian translations made possible for the later "Objectivists" was a notion of sincerity as a determinate relation between a subject and what it is not (instead of a self-relation). Fenollosa emphasizes the importance of relationality throughout his essay on the Chinese character, going so far as to claim that relations "are more real and more important than the things which they relate."<sup>246</sup> A precise rendering of relations, for both Pound and Fenollosa, meant an

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<sup>243</sup> Ezra Pound, *Confucius: The Great Digest, The Unwobbling Pivot, The Analects* (New York: New Directions, 1951), 175. Hereafter cited as Confucius. These texts were first published in 1928 and were based off of translations originally prepared by Ernest Fenollosa.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>246</sup> "Relations are more real and more important than the things which they relate. The forces which produce the branch-angles of an oak lay potent in the acorn. Similar lines of resistance, half-curbing the out-pressing vitalities, govern the branching of rivers and of nations. Thus a nerve, a wire, a roadway, and a clearing-house are only varying channels which communication forces for itself. This is more than analogy, it is identity of structure. nature furnishes her own clues. Had the world not been full of homologies, sympathies, and identities, thought would have been starved and

attention to the verbal "forces," specifically transitive verbs, that communicated the structure of the natural world and not just its verbal analogies.<sup>247</sup> Poetic devices, specifically metaphors, did not imply an evasion from the precise workings of the material world but a materialization of "immaterial relations" that furnished language and the natural world with inherent affinities.

Although Pound and Zukofsky treated sincerity as a matter of historical accuracy and verbal condensation, their turn towards a poetics of the processual also meant putting this precision at work in a social world. Zukofsky writes of this contradiction in Pound: "interest in the present, so that life, as Pound has said, may not make mock of motion and humans not move as ossifications... It follows that Pound has been both the isolated creator and the worldly pamphleteer. To put the defences of his own being in order, he has drafted himself into the defence of innovation clarifying and making sincere the intelligence." Zukofsky interprets Pound's "constant reinterpreting of processes becoming in himself one continuous process" as the impetus behind his wide-ranging dialects in *The Cantos* and personae in the earlier volumes. Each persona or temporary vocabulary required an accurate rendering of the relation between speech and historical situation. A sincere intelligence was one that mediated "between speech and action" or an actor and the cultural order it bristles against or is exiled from.<sup>248</sup>

In Zukofsky's "Program: "Objectivist" 1931," he shifts Pound's (and Fenollosa's) notion of precision from a "natural" mimeticism and organic *poesis* to a historical fidelity—"accuracy of detail"—achieved through a combination of musical balance and optical intensification.<sup>249</sup> As other commentators have pointed out, he begins the "Program" with a mixed-metaphor of poetry that includes both focalization ("bringing the rays from an object to a focus") and weaponization ("the thing which is aimed at").<sup>250</sup> As an extension of each, poetry is the process and the goal, in the sense it is both a focalization of subjective investment ("Desire for what is objectively perfect") and a movement toward the contemporaneous materials ("inextricably the direction of historical and contemporary particulars."). Poetry is a way of historicizing desire, including how desire can be mobilized for specific targets qualified as either allies or enemies.<sup>251</sup> Following the "Program," Zukofsky's first poetic example of sincerity comes from Charles Reznikoff's "Third Group of Verse": "The ceaseless weaving of the uneven waters" ("Sincerity and Objectification," *Poetry*, 275).

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language chained to the obvious... The wealth of European speech grew, following slowly the intricate maze of nature's suggestions and affinities. Metaphor was piled upon metaphor in quasi-geological strata." See: Ernest Fenollosa, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, ed. Ezra Pound (San Francisco: City Lights, 1968), 22–23. Hereafter cited as *Chinese Written Character*.

<sup>247</sup> Here is Fenollosa on transitive verbs: "Their power lies in their recognition of nature as a vast storehouse of forces. We do not say in English that things seem, or appear, or eventuated, or even that they are; but that they *do*. Will is the foundation of our speech. We catch the Demi-urge in the act" (*Chinese Written Character*, 29).

<sup>248</sup> *Prepositions*, 69. This notion of a new medium "between speech and action" is actually quoted from Pound's comments on Lenin in the fourth issue of *Exile* published in 1928. There is much more to be said about Pound's engagement with Lenin.

<sup>249</sup> *Poetry Magazine*, 280.

<sup>250</sup> *Poetry Magazine*, 268.

<sup>251</sup> "Borrowing from the language of Marxist geography and historiography, Ruth Jennison has argued that this militant language should be read as a partisan expression of "collective, progressive, political intentionality" instead of "modernist coterie" (*Zukofsky Era*, 34).

Each word in itself has the kind of power Aristotle gave to tragic mimesis in each particular of this linguistic "image" presents "water in action." Because it focuses on action, sincerity is incipient, not yet objectified, and immanent to the veracity of poetic craft, to which Zukofksy attributes a kind of innate cognitive attractiveness. But Zukofksy doesn't just echo Pound's Confucian formulation about verity in the process of a craft. He gives sincerity an ironic and historical slant. The fact that such word combinations or "minor units" can be deemed sincere and therefore cognitively suggestive of a possible totality or perfection of rest ("objectification") is an "ironic index of the degradation of the power of the individual word in a culture."<sup>252</sup> Zukofsky is making both a historical materialist link to the function of poetic language under capital and a case for sincerity as a dialectic between thought and linguistic ensemble.

Given the internal contradictions of Zukofsky's "Program," it is hard to know exactly how he intended the term totality to be heard. Was he using it in the Hegelian sense of an "objectification of a meta-subject," the very engine of world history, or did he intend something closer to the Marx's refutation of the young Hegelians?<sup>253</sup> As Martin Jay has pointed out in his conceptual history of "totality," Marx "challenged the contemplative and non-practical epistemology of Hegel and the Young Hegelians" who believed that the whole could be considered from outside of it or in retrospect. Marx treated "actual life" as the totality out of which the so-called "immutable laws of their [political] theory" emerged, emphasizing the sensory history of social life and species being. Thinkers like Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, and Theodor Adorno would of course extend this critique of Hegelian totality.<sup>254</sup> Was Zukofsky's "sincerity" this untotalizable element of self-creative life or was it simply a pause in the progress of objectification? It is hard to say exactly. What we can say is that Zukofsky describes the grouping of images that make up an "Objectivist" poem as a non-violent ensemble: "the grouping of nouns so that they partake of the quality of things being together without violence to their individual intact natures."<sup>255</sup> When asked about sincerity as a concept in an interview with L. S. Dembo more than thirty years after the "Objectivist Program," Zukofsky declared his frustration with philosophy and epistemology in particular. What he remained invested in, however, was the inevitable "fact" of a body's

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<sup>252</sup> Poetry Magazine, 274.

<sup>253</sup> As Martin Jay has argued in his conceptual history of totality, *Marxism and Totality*, Hegel's version of world history as well as Georg Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* can be seen as the primary 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century expositors of this "expressivist" version of "universal history" of which any particular class-consciousness is a dialectical expression. In both thinkers, analysis of individually antagonistic aspects were always made with an eye towards the production and reproduction of a systemic whole. See: Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley: University California Press, 1986), 81–128.

<sup>254</sup> *Marxism and Totality*, 62. A similar critique of such spiritual whole's is present in the turn to immanent critique Benjamin made following from his readings in the German Romantic fragments of Schelling and Novalis. Immanent critique sought to elaborate the internal differences of totalities in order to produce a new critical entity between critic and the work of art. Totalities of nature or reason were in fact pretexts for large-scale subjugation, exploitation, and violence. In the sociology and philosophy of Georg Simmel, one can find a similar belief in the impossibility of complete unity between life and form, of existence and meaning. "Totality, [Simmel] claimed, was a function of man's capacity to unify inchoate matter into formal patterns, but something irreducible always remained untotalized" (*Marxism and Totality*, 77).

<sup>255</sup> *Propositions*, 13.



The act of revision takes on a sort of ethical burden since building a syntax also means suffering the ramifications of speech. In looking over Oppen's drafts, one can see that he often edited each line down to its bare minimum of syntactical elements in order to isolate certain perceptual details, substantives, or emotional turns. He would also recycle past phrases or stanzas in new contexts in ways that paralleled Whitman's treatment of verse as units of type.

Oppen's incessant self-revision enabled him to strip his own re-purposed phrases and borrowed speech of an aura of original intent and highlight how the conviction voiced in a phrase can become a part of the "drift" of other projects. Even while he readily imported whole bits of language of others, he still needed a way for the poem to measure the differences between homage and critique, endorsement and resistance. In a passage in his daybook, he credits William Carlos Williams for taking the movements of will as his poetic measure, recording this short fragment: "Eros -- the will -- / Eros! drifts / In the ontological."<sup>259</sup> We can find an echo of this language if we return to the earlier quote from "The Building of a Skyscraper"—"To suffer the things of the world / And to speak them and himself out." Displaying "moments of conviction" involved voices in this constructive dialectic between passionate experience and self-externalization. Oppen's sense of syntax also diverged widely from Fenollosa's (and Pound's) notion of an English sentence built on the "force" of transitive verbs as opposed to the "subjective inclusions" of the copular "is" or "are." For Fenollosa, the work of poetry was to concretely and vividly convey "the interactions of things" through:

active words, each doing its utmost to show for the motive and vital forces... We should try to preserve the metaphoric overtones. We should be aware of English grammar, its hard parts of speech, and its lazy satisfaction with nouns and adjectives. We should seek and at least bear in mind the verbal undertone of each noun. We should avoid 'is' and bring in a wealth of neglected English verbs.<sup>260</sup>

For Oppen, the use of copular demonstrates the kinds of faith speakers place in what a thing actually "is," signified by such copular statements. They could show the "*tremendous emotional response to even the slightest intuition of connection*," which Oppen means in both the formal and social senses.<sup>261</sup>

What emerged through this piece-meal, disjunctive writing process—citation, self-quotation, subtraction—was the very halting, gnomic syntax that readers have come to identify as Oppen's paradigmatic style, one that seems to balance both a distance from what it speaks and an intimacy within these distances. This notion of distant intimacy or an intimacy of distances gets at two key "invest[ments]" of Oppen's poetics: to objectify the dismemberment of democratic culture and the alienations of public life while also showing how moments of sincere conviction and speech crop up among the "walled avenues" of urban life, mass production, and a life of transit or migration. Sincerity had to be updated not just because its notion of a self-sustaining subject was specious (and justified economic exploitation) but because it couldn't capture the displacements and estrangements that American culture was a "product" of.

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<sup>259</sup> UCSD, 19.2.40. On the same leaf he provides these definitions of Eros: "Eros, which of course means love, would also mean desire, which would mean will, which would mean vitality, the living as opposed to the inert. I do not mean to attempt an heroic inflection in writing this."

<sup>260</sup> Fenollosa, 28.

<sup>261</sup> UCSD, 19.12.269.

At times, Oppen thematized this quality of distant intimacy in terms of the mediations and layerings of urban space. In a section which emerged out of his earlier writing about urban life and history of New York, Oppen wrote: "Strange that the youngest people I know / Live in the oldest buildings // Scattered about the city / In the dark rooms / Of the past—" (NCP, 177). Living bodies and the sedimented history of walls or places are rendered as a sort of transient dialogue, a dialogue opposed to the perceived value and permanence of New York itself. The section ends, after elliptically citing the first line of Williams's "To Elsie" ("The pure products of America—"), with the mixed metaphor of finance and material struggle. These immigrant children of the middle class are said to be "Investing" the "ancient buildings" with their lives and jostling each other "In the half-forgotten, that ponderous business. / This Chinese Wall" (NCP, 177). This is not a poetics of assimilation but a way of clarifying the "ponderous business" of negotiating limits to sociality, objectified literally as the sentence fragment—"In the half-forgotten"—an adjective without an object. Importantly, these half-forgotten parts are no one's to keep. Abstractions of landscape or value did not just estrange life but also became vehicles for the kinds of competing desires Rameau's nephew so operatically performed.

One finds a similar drama in the self-isolating traffic of "A Language of New York," the poem which would later become the raw material for *Of Being Numerous*. What New York represents, as a place and as a language, is this very problem of registering a sincerity that sometimes lacks a positive character. Describing the difficulty of writing this long poem in his Notebook, Oppen notes how he saw his way through by including his "failed directions... where the poem is [going] or means to go."<sup>262</sup> In objectifying the partial cultural and linguistic history of a city, these failures to address one another can also be seen as constructive:

How forget that?  
How talk  
Distantly of 'the People'

Who are that force  
Within the walls  
Of cities

Wherein their cars

Echo like history  
Down walled avenues  
In which one cannot speak.

(UCSD, 20.17.64)

In the brevity of its line, this serial fragment is both mimetic of the disjunctive urban patterning of speech and of the places where the necessity for talk becomes almost unbearable. If we adapt our understanding of sincerity to this notion of successive development, acting honestly would mean

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<sup>262</sup> "to give an idea [of] where the poem is [going] or means to go -- long poem and moreover it breaks off at times, or even fails to achieve a [portion] it [attempted]--- I have had to leave in those failed directions ---- because they are part of what is achieved... on that basis I attempted to write of NY." (UCSD, 19.12.276).



voicing the ways in which first-person speech acts or perceptual details are not abstract reserves from processes of historical or cultural succession but determinate expressions of them. In the "Building of Skyscraper," Oppen phrases this succinctly: "It is the business of the poet / "To suffer the things of the world / And to speak them and himself out" (NCP, 149).<sup>263</sup> Sincerity *in* making trumps the sincerity *of* the maker.

In his only published essay, "The Mind's Own Place" (*Kulchur*, 1963), Oppen describes sincerity as a "test": "It is possible to find a metaphor for anything, an analogue: but the image is encountered, not found; it is an account of the poet's perception, of the act of perception; it is a test of sincerity, a test of conviction, the rare poetic quality of truthfulness."<sup>264</sup> Calamitous to Oppen, then, is not just the obfuscation of violence, injustice, and atrocity in axiomatic expressions or narrative "comfort[s]," but also the rhetorical persuasiveness of an "honest" speaker who might lead us to believe these structural problems can be resolved through successful poetic analogies or fiat of expression. Yet, in this same essay, this infamously silent, withdrawn poet likens this poetic labor of staging honest encounters to the work of a "populist."<sup>265</sup>

What exactly constitutes a "public" for Oppen will be the question we close with, as it offers a key into how Oppen builds a link between the emotional journeywork of sincerity and the broader failures of American "formulations of democracy" to respond to alienation, political disenfranchisement, and the historical legacies of violence that follow from overt or covert wars.<sup>266</sup> Revisiting this poetic lineage of sincerity also helps us face persistent critical question of whether we can mean precisely what we write or say, or that these two "we[s]" correspond. Transient persons, we might recall, have and continue to be judged according to such social, political, and cultural standards of self-consistency, standards which assume correlations between how one appears, what one is worth, and how one belongs to a social order. Oppen's utterances take their emotional and ethical charges from the very structures that render a "public" language wrecked, self-divided, or impoverished. Yet there is still something like a persistent, latent image of "a people" in the wreckage of such speech.

## Minor Publicities

Defenses of poetry, and literature more broadly, often emerge in situations where the ability for poetry to establish a sense of subjective and cultural continuity is in question. For example, Allen Grossman defined the lyric form as one born out of a crisis of communicability. Speaking means the difference between the continuity of culture or utter abandonment to fear, despondency,

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<sup>263</sup> This poem was included in *This in Which* (1965) along with the poem that would become the basis of *Of Being Numerous*, "A Language of New York." All quotations from the published, final versions of the poems come from Michael Davidson's edited collection, *New Collected Poems*, published by New Directions in 2002. Citations from this collection will be abbreviated as NCP.

<sup>264</sup> The essay was originally published in *Kulchur* 3, No. 10 (Summer, 1963). Oppen first submitted this piece to the *Nation* in 1962 and it was rejected. For the quotation, see: *George Oppen: Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers*, ed. Stephen Cope (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 31–32. Hereafter cited as Selected Prose with essay title.

<sup>265</sup> Selected Prose, "The Mind's Own Place," 35.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

and the recurrence of atrocity.<sup>267</sup> This sense of communicative crisis is heightened, too, when we think of poetic composition as contemporary to such global crises as world war, genocide, and the prospect of nuclear winter. Every attempt to calibrate word to thought to world becomes a “doubtful and complex” undertaking that, Oppen argued, “makes much greater emotional demands on emotional clarity! the fact is that ANY statement we make becomes a declaration of faith, an emotional act.”<sup>268</sup> As he wrote to his sister, June Oppen Degnan, in September of 1963: “Humanity seems to me fairly precarious -- but the thing would still be there! Or so I feel always; even my vocabulary is affected by that conviction, that 'the Truth' is not a pronouncement but a thing... Well, we talk.”<sup>269</sup> Writing again to June about his plans for his second volume, *This in Which*, later in 1963 or early 1964, George described his poem “Leviathan” as a kind of *ars poetica* of his role as poet:

Tho I've said that Leviathan [sic] is my defense not of the work, but of my role, still it is obvious that the poems arise from my own need to write them. I do not know that they are of *use*. It is possible that they contribute only to the process which is stripping people of defenses... If you live to be very old, I think surely you will see a crisis of culture, I mean of our whole culture, a way of thinking and of feeling. In which case literature will exist, if it exists, as a process of thought.<sup>270</sup>

For lyric speech to have any kind of historical traction in this climate of paranoia and devastation, it had to be stripped down to its most vulnerable, abandoned parts:

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<sup>267</sup> Grossman opens his essay “Hard Problems in Poetry, Especially Valuing,” with the statement that “Poetry is the means of last recourse, the artistic form of communicative action.” (15). What poetry can grant is “True-love, 'the only worth all granting,’” which “confers the power to transgress the threshold, however inscribed, between existence-not-yet and the *nunc stans*: existence-just-now” (18). See: Allen Grossman, *True-Love: Essays on Poetry and Valuing* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2009). In his lecture entitled “London is Falling Down: Poetry and Social Formation,” Allen Grossman declares that the function of poetry is to “obtain for everybody one kind of success at the limits of the autonomy of the will to effect its purpose by other means.” The turn to poetry is driven by the “collapse of communicative systems of other kinds.” See: Allen Grossman, “Poetry, A Basic Course,” (Dubuque, IA: Teaching Co., 1992), Audio Cassette.

<sup>268</sup> Here is the full quote from Oppen, which is written in his notebook as part of a larger discussion of “A Language of New York”: “‘IF there is an existence which corresponds to our ideas, which validates our ideas, that is, if 'in the beginning was the word,' if it is objectively true that the world itself has the order of our ideas, then there is no difficulty in words: they describe the world correctly. If it is NOT true, then we undertake something much more doubtful and complex and something which makes much greater emotional demands on emotional clarity! the fact is that ANY statement we make becomes a declaration of faith, an emotional act.” He contrasts his commitment to emotional clarity with T. S. Eliot's work: “[Eliot's] early work records an aridity of disbelief -- And the later work presents the world as it is experienced thru an established and inherited faith. But it seems to me that the profound undertaking is to describe the world, to grasp the world as most of us experience it, and as it will thru the rest of history, I think, be experience --” (UCSD, 19.12.253).

<sup>269</sup> Selected Letters, 89.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid., 98–99.

Truth also is the pursuit of it:  
Like happiness, and it will not stand.

Even the verse begins to eat away  
In the acid. Pursuit, pursuit;

A wind moves a little,  
Moving in a circle, very cold.

How shall we say?  
In ordinary discourse—

We must talk now. I am no longer sure of the words,  
The clockwork of the world. What is inexplicable

Is the 'preponderance of objects.' The sky lights  
Daily with that predominance

And we have become the present.

We must talk now. Fear  
Is fear. But we abandon one another.

Throughout "Leviathan," truthfulness seems to lie in an unstable gulf between explicability and actuality, language and measure, each of which are always shifting in location and form. Developing a way to talk now and be present to and as persons becomes exigent, but that exigency, paradoxically, can only be expressed through a series of fears and obstructions. What remains conspicuously absent from this disastrous "clockwork of the world," is not only a place to stand but a way to guard that place through possessive or defensive postures. The drama of Oppen's sparse syntax in "Leviathan" comes from the fact that the "whole man" of a "body politic" seems perpetually unstable. The simplified, recursive, yet sincere weighting of these "little words" (conjunctions, pronouns, and copular verbs) stand in for the social presence of persons or a commonwealth in which "we" could actualize ourselves in the common drama of talk.

Given the title, it is hard not to read "Leviathan" as a sparse riff on both the slow proceedings of a biblical monster, a figure Hobbes borrows to explain his early modern notion of political necessity in *Leviathan* (that would serve as a foundation for more contemporary understanding of contract theory). Truth is a crisis in motion and, like the image of a bodily engine that opens Hobbes text, appears as a difficulty of seeing or speaking to truth in the ordinary patterns of conversation: "For seeing life is but a motion of Limbs, the beginning whereof is in some principall part within." Hobbes goes on to liken the bodily network of nerves, joints, and blood to the "*Automata* (Engines that move themselves by springs and wheeles as doth a watch)" in which sovereignty is figured as the "*Artificial Soul*" that gives "life and motion to the whole body." Art, Hobbes says, imitates this animation of wheeling limbs and goes further than "the Naturall" in creating a "great Leviathan called a Common-Wealth, or State."<sup>271</sup> Political power, like knowledge of

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<sup>271</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge, UK; Cambridge University Press, 1991), 9. Hereafter cited as *Leviathan*.

the natural world, is formed out of a crisis of representation. Hobbes of course would translate the Latin version (*nosce teipsum*) of the Delphic aphorism of self-knowledge ("know thyself") into an act of self-textualization: "read thyself." This emphasis on the representational character of thoughts and passions is not meant to "countenance, either the barbarous tate of men in power, towards their inferios; or to encourage men of low degree, to a sawcie behavior toward their beters" but to encourage self-education about the "similitude of *Passions*."<sup>272</sup>

Centuries later, journalist and public intellectual Walter Lippman would suggest a similar crisis faced American democracy in the form of a "phantom public." He suggested that Americans had been taught to think of their society as "a body, with a mind, a soul and purpose, not as a collection of men, women and children whose minds, should and purposes are variously related. Instead of being allowed to think realistically of a complex of social *relations*, we have had foisted upon us by the various great propogative movements the notion of a mythical entity, called Society, the Nation, the Community."<sup>273</sup> This is the same kind of mythical consensus that nationalist movements and state socialism, like the Stalinist government, relied upon, as if "the public" were synonymous with an "overmastering social purpose" and not the specific leaders and special interests who drove policy. Lippman notes how the very notion of democratic sincerity relies on this fiction that "public men" embody the "spirit of mankind" that is objectified in our national institutions, imagery, and historical narratives, even if these same "public men" often rely upon "public opinion" to distance themselves from both the source and consequences of their decisions. When individuals identify with such unifying figures or the cosmopolitan fictions prevalent in liberal thought, they are, in effect, making an appeal to "nobody."<sup>274</sup> Undermining such hegemonic fictions would require a *dis*-identification or non-identity between prosaic, individual actions and the kinds of universalized "opinions" that serve as benchmarks for political debate and due process.

Though Oppen was similarly suspicious of democratic conceits like "public opinion" or "popular sovereignty," he didn't believe that the failures of political participation and accountability could be addressed through sweeping rhetorical condemnations or even narratives of national transformation. The image or voice of "the public" was to be found in disaggregated materials of

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<sup>272</sup> Here is the full passage from the end of the Introduction to *Leviathan*: "But there is another saying not of late understood, by which [men] might learn truly to read one another, if they would take the pains; and that is, *Nosce teipsum, Read thy self*: which was not meant, as it is now used, to countenance, either the barbarous state of men in power, towards their inferiors; or to encourage men of low degree, to a sawcie behavior towards their betters; But to teach us, that for the similitude of the thoughts, and Passions of one man, to the thoughts, and Passions of another, whosoever looketh into himself, and considereth what he doth, when he does *think, opine, reason, hope, feare, &c*, and upon what grounds." (*Leviathan*, 10). Interestingly, the material basis of self-reflection and empathetic response is the same for Hobbes.

<sup>273</sup> Walter Lippman, *Phantom Public* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1925), 156.

<sup>274</sup> Lippman argues that liberal notions of democracy, diplomacy, and cosmopolitan life rely heavily on the conceit of public opinion: "The liberals have misunderstood the nature of the public to which they appealed. The public in any situation is, in fact, merely those persons, indirectly concerned, who might align themselves in support of one of the actors. But the liberal took no such uninflected view of the public. He assumed that all mankind was within hearing, that all mankind when it heard would respond homogeneously because it had a single soul. His appeal to this cosmopolitan, universal, disinterested union in everybody was equivalent to an appeal to nobody" (*Phantom Public*, 169).

social life, what he called the “daily preponderance of objects,” as mediated through the tired, interpersonal currency of speech. The truth is in what we say and the phrases we borrow and repeat, yet this truth also moves and eats away at the signs we use to phrase memories and convictions. Where Rousseau could posit the irreducibility of individual reason and Diderot the first-person position of moral judgment, there is a more fundamental doubt in the work of Oppen and other "Objectivists" that sincere speech can model the reproduction of a social contract through individuals. As Michael Davidson has wrote of Oppen's famous line: "Oppen qualifies the idea that we must choose the social over the individual by stressing that when we speak in the collective pronoun 'We have chosen the *meaning* / Of being numerous' (NCP, 166).<sup>275</sup> That is, we have chosen the *story* of sociality."<sup>275</sup> In a letter he wrote to June a year earlier shortly after returning to the US from political exile in Mexico, Oppen falls back on the smallness of honest talk as a way out of what appears to be the systematic failure of democratic narratives:

I believe people are terrified. Those who aren't will be. Someone said to me the other day 'Change the axioms.' And that was a writer of high school science text books! It is necessary to talk, to begin to talk. I mean to be part of a conversation among honest people... Of course we are afraid the children will overhear us. But someday someone will overhear the children and face absolute despair. The physical scientists will give us no peace. One imagines a new Nietzsche crying in the market place: 'Newton is dead. Haven't you heard? Newton is dead.' Narrative, which is everyone's art, and everyone's comfort, is wearing out. There is no fact more obvious than that every life ends badly. Very badly. Loneliness, desertion, irreparable physical injury. Every ship sinks. Every calamity the hero escapes he does not escape. I mean to be part of a discussion among honest people.<sup>276</sup>

Instead of assuming a confident, self-sufficient personality—itsself a pernicious mandate in a public that only speaks the language of market value—the bareness of honest talk was a way of acting in the absence of a public language and in the naturalization of everyday violence.

What also seems misunderstood in many readings of Oppen's most famous passage—“We have chosen the *meaning* / Of being numerous—is the distance it marks between the intrinsic meaning of existence and a more positive version of common sense—say the *sensus communus* that underlies Kant's categorical notion of aesthetic judgement in his third critique—remains stark. This is mirrored by the distance Oppen sees between speech acts and the kinds of individual agency guaranteed by political and economic liberalism. In a draft of Section 26 from *Of Being Numerous* (OBN), Oppen calls out this the self-negating thread in liberal definitions of freedom: "They carry liberalism / to a conclusion / in suicide. / We want to defend / Limitation / And do not know how" (NCP, 177). Though he generalizes the "they" of liberalism as a sort of Heidegerian chatter of

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<sup>275</sup> Michael Davidson, *On Outskirts of Form: Practicing Cultural Poetics* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 7.

<sup>276</sup> This letter was sent to his sister June, then editor and publisher of the San Francisco Review, in regards to the publication of *The Materials* by her review and James Laughlin's *New Directions* in New York. George specifies that he doesn't want to include "poems from Discrete Series" and that in the "last twenty years I have suffered only from erosion. The tone and the method of those poems makes it impossible to interleave them with the new poems." (56). See: *Selected Letters of George Oppen*, ed. Rachel Blau DuPlessis (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990). Hereafter cited as *Selected Letters*.

idle speech in contrast to the limited sociality of "We" in this revision, this "they" had a definite historical referent in a more lengthy previous draft: the "The Poet's Theatre" at New Bowery Theater in New York (where LeRoi Jones, Frank O'Hara, and Diane Di Prima, among others put on one-act plays, some of which Oppen attended). In the passage that would eventually go into OBN came from a longer draft of a poem called "The Poet's Theatre," Oppen writes explicitly about the boundaries he sees to "our liberalism," tying it directly to the clearances that render "Common sense" obvious: "The boundaries / Of our liberalism / We want to say / 'Common sense' / And cannot. We stand on / That denial / Of death that cleared the forests, / Cleared the forests" (UCSD, 22.26.103). Phrasing limitations to knowledge in speech is akin, for Oppen, a recognition that our ability to speak is premised upon the death or silencing of others. Even if this is not a fair judgment of the projects presented at the Poet's Theatre—the one-act plays hardly represent a robust "liberalism" that we would recognize today—the emphasis on limitation as constitutive of speech is telling.

In a later Daybook, Oppen makes the link between style, syntax, and sincerity explicit: "Forging a style, if one is sincere, is forging a syntax. We recognize it as a syntax when we recognize it as sincere." (Daybook IV:I, 190). By shifting the measure of sincerity to syntactical precision, the "accuracy" of an image is no longer measured by its ability to demonstrate a historical totality at rest or provide some crystallization of an aesthetic genius loci but by its ability to represent the partiality of any single conviction in relation to another. As Oppen wrote to his friend Steven Schneider, who introduced the Oppen's to the poetry of Yves Bonnefoy, "there is not will before the will that can choose the content of the will."<sup>277</sup> There is a sense that forging is an embedded or situated practice and that any act of will is made amidst a series of prior orientations, assertions, and patterns of recognition. Aesthetic judgment, too, must change if the value or appearance of a "style" is contingent upon what it develops in relation to. Oppen's version of a sincere syntax is closer to the relational model of aesthetic judgment in what Stanley Cavell, and most recently Sianne Ngai, characterize as "passionate utterance." If we understand aesthetic practice not just as a self-contained law but as a passionate appeal to others to recognize or take up an experience, the behest of aesthetic "beauty" is shifted from a responsibility of the object to what both Cavell and Ngai describe as the "intersubjective demand" of a speech act situation. Like Williams more situational notion of truthfulness, aesthetic judgment is actually worked out between people in situations of potential disagreement and involve a range of conflicting affective states.<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>277</sup> "Dear Steven: I keep picking at this --. That you are disturbed over 'the chromosomes' so surprised me. If we are to speak of ethics, we must speak of the human will. And the will is 'given'. Chromosomes or what you will, but there is no will before the will which can choose the content of the will. (UCSD, 22.18.25). [In the same note Oppen includes a draft of the poem "Time of Atrocity" which was later adapted as a part of OBN. In this same letter Oppen also expresses a faith in the ethical frame of familial belonging over revolutionary action. When he later included the materials from this draft, he would cut the opening line: "The will, the human will, // Which is all that we have / Now in the helicopters the casual will // Is atrocious / Is it not. // To be unable to accept / What happens." (UCSD, 22.19.72). The fear then is that one lacks the preparedness to encounter this crisis, to witness it, and to be capable of adjusting to how one is involved, personally, in particular atrocities.

<sup>278</sup> For Stanley Cavell's account of passionate utterance as a mode of aesthetic experience and judgment, see: Stanley Cavell, *Philosophy The Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2006). For Sianne Ngai's substantive engagement with Cavell, see: Sianne Ngai,

Perhaps the so-called privacies of lyric speech can also act as such passionate measures for where, when and how we are distanced from actionable publics, publics where commonality is not premised upon the self-consistency of participants but on mutual limits. In what would come to be the ninth section of *Of Being Numerous*, Oppen quotes a question from Rachel Blau DuPlessis when she was a young poet at Columbia University about a dialectic between intensity of seeing and distance from other people: "'Whether, as the intensity of seeing increases, one's distance / From Them, the people, does not also increase' / I know, of course I know, I can enter no other place" (NCP, 167).<sup>279</sup> The knowledge gleaned from the making of poetry doesn't enshrine a speaker or poet in a state of self-understanding but is a process or "course" of subjecting one to where and how thought happens. Oppen draws out the para-tactical "happening" of thought, speech, and person in the next couplet: "Yet I am one of those who from nothing but man's way of thought and one of his dialects and what has happened to me / Have made poetry" (NCP, 167). Sincerity is not a resolution of this distance between intensive seeing and "Them" but an expansion of what speaking, thinking, and seeing occurs among. Oppen, like Pound and Zukofsky before him, is adamant that speech and perception occurs among others, with others, and through others. The survival of public life may depend on what we say and how we say it.

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*Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 38–40.

<sup>279</sup> In his interview with Dembo, Oppen describes the province of this quotation: "Yes, I quoted from a letter I received from a very young student at Columbia, Rachel Blau, 'whether as the intensity of seeing increases, one's distance from them, the people, does not also increase.' It was a profound and painful question that I had asked myself in her words. And that's what you are asking me again, for all that I've written a whole poem to establish, if I could, the concept of humanity, a concept without which we can't live. And yet I don't know that poetry is not actually destructive for people... It does lead to the growing isolation of the poet; there is not question in my mind about it" (L.S. Dembo, "Interview with George Oppen with Dembo," *Contemporary Literature* 10, No. 2 (Spring, 1969), 173). Page range for article is 159–177.

## THE TRAGIC QUESTION OF US: Correspondence and Antagonism in New American Poetry

And you know, I didn't want to lose my world. I'm older. I crave power—[laughter] In fact I so crave power that between power and love, until this moment obviously I've chosen the wrong one. That's how powerful it matters. And you know I wrote those essays—they're infin—They're incontestable, or something. Ha ha ha! I mean they're not readable... Gregory Corso was in Buffalo this year. I was asked to read. I never read in a coffee house in my life. I never spent an hour in jail. You know I—I'm the white man. I'm that famous thing, the white man. The ultimate paleface. The noncorruptible, the good. The thing that runs this country, or that is this country. And thank God—And in fact the only advantage I have is that I didn't, so I can stand here among men who have done what I couldn't do, can't do.

— Charles Olson, "Causal Mythology," *1965 Berkeley Poetry Conference*<sup>280</sup>

At this late-point in what would become an epic three-hour talk that mixes brief readings of his work with reflections on his career as a poet, Olson evokes himself as the *imago mundi* of the authorizing fiction of the "paleface," that prime mover of settler-colonialism, that saw its reflection in not just the performers but the majority of attendees of the 1965 Berkeley Poetry Conference (BPC).<sup>281</sup> How should we read such a gesture? It seems at once sarcastic and sincere, self-deprecatory and bombastic, in that he is clearly speaking *as* that famously powerful "thing, the white man," yet he repeatedly credits the "social action" of poetry to those who are not him, on the outside of coldwar America politics, "who have done what I couldn't do, can't do." Olson presents a similarly contradictory attitude earlier when he declares that the social action of poetry lies not in a "republic of words" (attributed to William Carlos Williams) but in the actual "selves" assembled "here, this week, poets of America." In the next breath, he pivots: "And I don't mean America. I saw Ezra Pound, like an Umbrian angel—listen to anything that's said—going to see LeRoi Jones,

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<sup>280</sup> Charles Olson, *Reading at Berkeley* (Berkeley: Coyote Press, 1978), 32. Based on a transcription from the audio file of the three-hour lecture available at the Bancroft Library, University of California.

<sup>281</sup> Though many of the larger lecture events were held on campus at California Hall, the conference was housed in the somewhat autonomous entity of UC Berkeley Extension, likely due to implicit and explicit opposition between the attendants and the existing administration of UC Berkeley on the heels of the Free Speech demonstrations from September 1964 to January 1965 that largely targeted the policies of then president, Clark Kerr. It is important to note, too, that many of the Free Speech organizers, including Mario Savio, had just arrived back on campus following their participation in Civil Rights activism in the South, where they developed activist strategies. For the relationship between the Free Speech Movement and Civil Rights Movements, see: Leigh Raiford's talk "The Free Speech Movement and the Unfinished Work of Civil Rights at UC Berkeley," delivered at *The Operation of the Machine Panel*, UC Berkeley, October 1, 2014. A published version of the talk can be accessed at *Remaking the University*, eds. Michael Meranze and Christopher Newfield: <http://utotherescue.blogspot.com/2014/10/the-free-speech-movement-and-unfinished.html>.



which—I mean, I saw.... If there's a world to be left, it's simply society."<sup>282</sup> But, of course, neither Pound nor Jones were not *there* in any corporeal sense, just as their agonistic attitudes toward normative concepts of "America" and its economic, social, and political orders got them imprisoned as either a traitor or a violent threat to the public. By Olson's account, it would seem that the agency of their words lies precisely in the fact that they offer dialectical counters to the very myths that Olson excavates and gives breath to from the podium.

In Ed Dorn's documentary lecture, based largely on his travels with African-American photographer Leroy Lucas across former and present Shoshoni, he self-consciously refers to his performance as playing the part of "the Indian" in LeRoi's absence. The talk largely takes aim at what he takes to be the dubious trustworthiness of being a poet, particular when speaking or acting the part of an American involves claiming a national identity, consciously or unconsciously, as a form of individual validation. For one, introducing one's self as a poet within an ethnographic situation or project doesn't make one legible as either a distinctive person or a set of interests, histories, and practices. More likely it forces one back into a dialogue in which indigeneity or poverty is made relative to national culture, a culture in which seeing and being seen is mediated by not only the explicit colonial violence of resettlement but the placeless measure of "money." Dorn jokes that not having money, to some degree, makes one "un-American," and it is precisely the refusal to make products or sale or court a tourist economy that draws Dorn to both the linguistic and territorial history of the Shoshoni and how it manifested to him as something parallel to transient life premised upon a refusal of national community:

And I would again maintain that most of us are not Americans who think we have the possibility of living. Anytime someone comes through Pocatello who looks like a criminal, or a fugitive, a bum, somebody weird looking... I immediately recognize them as the people that I want to walk beside, to be near, to talk to, to be with. Because they are precisely the people who for one reason or another have compromised their allegiance to the thing that might destroy us all, including them. And they've taken that risk. Maybe they haven't taken it voluntarily... But they maintain it. The man who doesn't belong in a community is probably the man to pay attention to. The old idea of the stranger is still very strong.<sup>283</sup>

Dorn not only acknowledges the differences between being a voluntary or involuntary fugitive—a distinction many of his contemporaries failed to parse—but how their strangeness is a measure of their turning against the destructive interiority of a national "community." To be on "the inside of a nation," Dorn states somewhat elliptically, is to be related to others as cops and "part of the constabulary" (25). Everyone is watching everyone within the "sovereign local community of wherever it is" (26).

Who ends up being policed are the few people left who don't know see, know, or speak themselves as part of the nation, a fact resonant not just with the Shoshoni but with the black nationalist who aligned themselves with the Black Arts Movement. In an uncanny moment, Dorn turns the lecture inside out and directs his own reflexivity about being a poet-observer as an address to the listening/surveilling audience: "You know who they are. They are that few. They're

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<sup>282</sup> *Reading at Berkeley*, 15.

<sup>283</sup> Edward Dorn, *The Poet, The People, The Spirit* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1976), 29. This pamphlet is based on a typescript transcribed by Derryll White and edited by Bob Rose from Dorn's lecture give on July 21, 1965 at the BPC. The lecture is based on a trip Dorn took with the photographer Leroy McLucas (who supplies the cover and rear photo) across Shoshoni land present and past.

recognizable.” He carries this “you” into a series of statements about Shoshoni linguistic and geographic isolation, settling finally on an image of a pressurized, delimited non-existence that carries many echoes with Jones mid-60s poetics and Fanon’s anti-colonialist writings: “They have no existence at all except in those hovels... Now they are the most *wretched* of the earth” (26). It should be said that such a statement was patently false as a cultural and historical diagnosis. Neither contemporary self-conceptions within Shoshoni culture or past and future projections of their collective equate present poverty with non-existence. Perhaps what is most telling is how Dorn frames this statement from “the Indian” of the BPC in terms of an encounter between different forms of placelessness and non-belonging within a horizon of paranoid violence. It would take other poets and lives to fill out this picture.

Everett LeRoi Jones (Imamu Amiri Baraka) wasn’t there, but we can compare what he did with his words elsewhere to Olson’s ironic grandstanding as the “great Paleface” and Dorn playing the dual parts of the “Indian” and the ethnographer.<sup>284</sup> In an illustrated series Baraka wrote and assembled with Fundi (Billy Abernathy), “In Our Terribleness” (1970), Baraka and Abernathy give us wholly different account of what it is like to be *in* form:

Ask me what I am—  
The rhythm of being is the reason for being.  
The sanity of form is illness wholeness rightness  
nigger love a magic being  
the dipping interior resurrect constant continuous  
the way the nigger walk<sup>285</sup>

Though these conference lectures and this lyric fragment are by no means generically parallel speech acts, the first difference to note is that Jones and Abernathy begin their announcement of this “magic being,” a black body walking, with a question that inverts the very presumption of unilateral speech: “Ask me what I am.” The lines that follow, in suit with syncretism of American blues and African music of call and response, answer in kind. What they answer with are not just stereotypical associations of black bodies with innate rhythm, superstitious belief, and virile swagger but also a complex adequations of feeling and idea that makes this experience ineluctably black, marked off by prepositions that multiply the syntactical combinations. Rhythm *of* is reason *for* being. The power of experimental formation—what the New American poets put such trust in, and what they felt distanced them from mainstream lyric poetry—is not just a wholeness or an intrinsic rightness but also an *illness*. This black body doesn’t just dip or swerve according to a metronome of breath but also to whatever obstructs or endangers its existence. The seemingly casual, ordinary freedom of going for a walk—perhaps *the* lyric commonplace for expressing or encountering transience in both

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<sup>284</sup> For the sake of biographical fidelity, I will use LeRoi Jones when referring to work written prior to his name change to Imamu Amiri Baraka in 1968 after his conversion to Islam and immersion in the syncretic revolutionary Africanism of Kawaida. When commenting on a range of work that bridges this change, I will use Jones/Baraka.

<sup>285</sup> Amiri Baraka and Fundi (Bill Abernathy), *In Our Terribleness* (Bobbi-Merrill, Indianapolis, 1970), 10. Pages are in fact unnumbered.

British and American poetry<sup>286</sup>—becomes a magical act, in that the balanced fall of a body calls forth, or resurrects, new ways of answering to the racialization of “what I am.”

We can think of this lyric Baraka wrote with Abernathy as an answer to not only the painful over-determination of a mobile black body—one that was shaped through decades of enslavement, Southern Black Codes, and Jim Crow policies—but also the vagrant wager we tracked first in Whitman’s lyric speech. A “you” calls back with the same language that has been used to render it static, stationary, or inspiring of terror. However, similar to Whitman’s emphasis on self-opacity and encounter, we can also read this enactment of “what I am” as an assertion *against* the solicitation of a projective, mythical “I,” exploding not just the immediate interpellation of “our terribleness” into a universal lyric scene but also a conscription of blackness to the broader cultural, social, and intellectual formation that was “New American poetry.” Taking a counter-factual tack into literary history, this chapter is an experiment in thinking through what can be communicated by an assertive absence from a conversation. Though Jones never read his poems at the BPC or delivered his planned lecture—“Poetry and Murder”—his dramatic work, poetry, and poetic writings composed parallel to the event offer us a generative counter-model of transient sociality, one premised on substantiating existing social antagonisms that render certain lives into objects of promise, fear, or violence.

The particular constellation of bi-coastal poets at the BPC seems obvious in retrospect. The conference was organized by Donald Allen—along with Robert Duncan, Richard Baker, and Tom Parkinson, then a professor in the UC Berkeley English department—as a way to publicize the popular anthology, *The New American Poetry: 1945–1960* (1960). But, as we have seen, merely ascribing the range of social, political, and aesthetic ideas circulating among their poems and poetics to the tastes of Allen or, say, to the racism and patriarchy that undoubtedly structured these postwar avant-gardes (and Olson put on gratuitous display) doesn't quite capture the range of agreements, disagreements, and self-revisions among the expanded cohort of those poets who were involved, directly or indirectly.<sup>287</sup> These antagonisms are not just present in the literary works themselves but in the networks of affiliation, curation, and publishing that both preceded and followed from the BPC and Allen’s anthology. As early publishers of each other’s literary work, Jones/Baraka found common cause with his contemporaries like Olson, Dorn, Robert Duncan, and Robert Creeley when it came polemical literary journals, leftist activism, and critiques of moral and ethical “goods” that were becoming increasingly entrenched through European and American colonialism that was intensified following WWII. As with the field-based poetics of William Carlos Williams, the “New Americans” saw poetry as a necessary antagonist to pathological individualism and capitalist theories of value that refused more historically and socially situated models of personhood as well as forms of solidarity premised on culture as a common property. They also refused to buy into the notion that the lyric was an extension or dramatization of an ego or that the “subject” of a poem was a

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<sup>286</sup> For a history of walking poems in American poetry of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, see Roger Gilbert, *Walks in the World: Representation and Experience in Modern American Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

<sup>287</sup> It should be noted that the original volume somewhat polemically contained both examples of “New American” poetry and statement about poetics. A subsequent volume of poetic statements, *Towards a New American Poetics: Essays & Interviews*, was edited by Ekkehart Faas and published by California-based Black Sparrow Press in 1978. It included prose by many of the conference attendees: Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Gary Snyder, Robert Creeley, Robert Bly, and Allen Ginsberg.

conscious selection around which the language of the poem could be epiphanically organized.<sup>288</sup> Finally, there is a shared concern for addressing intimate and historically mediated forms of violence, particularly as assertions of individual will hinge into forms of solipsism, anger, and misogyny. But they could also be guilty of the latter, just as their rejection of an ego-based poetry could authorize objectifications of cultural otherness or the obfuscation of an imperious universality by way of the vague sanctioning of mystery or myth.

Where Jones/Baraka diverges most from the other “New American” poets is not in his innocence to these charges but in his increasingly insistence, throughout work of the late 1960s and early 1970s, that underlying these social critiques was a more basic violence woven into everyday life and history of the African diaspora in America, from slavery to the present. But in order to assert this complex fact, Jones/Baraka dealt first with how both white and black poets relied upon racial abstractions and how those abstractions informed various kinds of myths about creativity, community, and oppositional culture. Blackness had to be broken apart, syncopated as both experience and idea, a rhythmic fiction, so that its internal contradictions and external effects could be articulated through new forms of cultural production and political solidarity that developed organically out of the racial roots of capitalism in America and abroad. These reactions to the poetic present were exclusive, not complementary, positions. Staking a position in a voice or in a dialogue became a sort of ethical test for Jones/Baraka where he could sound where mutuality or reciprocity failed, where imagination found its limits, and where antagonism was necessary to give edges to a personal reality, even when those edges were found against friends and contemporaries who seemingly shared many of the same goals for social transformation through artistic practice.

To give a sense of the diverse historical landscape these poets occupied, the chapter moves through a wide range of contemporaneous works by Jones/Baraka and other BPC poets, using three terms—correspondence, antagonism, and magic—as anchoring yet divergent concerns. As with a genealogy of transient socialities and their provisional publics, a sufficient history of this literary situation hinges not on how these common concerns produced something like a stable ethical ground, what Olson calls a “world,” for identification or recognition. Rather, it hinges on how these poets repeatedly restate the problem of mutuality within different formal, social, and historical constraints. Writing on Lester Bowie's *Numbers 1 & 2*, LeRoi Jones put the problem best: how does one sustain an ensemble in which artists are simultaneously “making themselves fully known to each to other” by doing radically different things?<sup>289</sup> It is through practical differences that these poets constitute a striking version of what we might call postwar democratic culture.<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>288</sup> From Creeley's interview with Linda Wagner: “So I don't choose my subjects with any consciousness whatsoever. I think once things have begun—that is, once there are three or four lines, then there begins to be a continuity of possibility that they engender which I probably do follow. And I can recognize, say, looking back at what I have written, that some concerns have been persistent, e.g., the terms of marriage, relations of men and women, senses of isolation, senses of place in the intimate measure. But I have never to my own knowledge begun with any sense of ‘subject.’” (*Tales Out of School*, 45–46.)

<sup>289</sup> Amiri Baraka, “Review of Lester Bowie's *Numbers 1 & 2*,” *Downbeat*, May 2, 1968, 26.

<sup>290</sup> For a useful overview of how theoretical approaches to non-identity intersect with critiques of existing democracy in America, see Ross Posnock, “Politic of Non-Identity.” Posnock draws his notion of “non-identity” principally from the anti-systemic, essayistic experiments and critical philosophy of Theodor Adorno for whom the concept of non-identity emerges out of his concurrent work on *Negative Dialektik* (1966) and *Ästhetische Theorie* (drafted between 1961 and 1969, published posthumously in 1970). For a useful overview of the concept of negative dialectics with

## Correspondences

Nature is a temple where living pillars  
Sometimes let pass confused speech;  
Man crosses through forests of symbols  
Which watch him with intimate eyes.

Charles Baudelaire, "Correspondances"<sup>291</sup>

The power of correspondences hinge, as Walter Benjamin would later point out, on their capacity to emphasize the relation over the identity of terms, as in the speech of a "man" who passes through these symbolic landscapes that mix natural and cultural history—"forests of symbols"—in order to evoke this confused relationship in his speech.<sup>292</sup> Correspondence also provides a formal model for how a concept—aesthetic, social, economic, or political—can be constructed between two opposed places, moments, or point of view. As it becomes part of a series, this dyad unfolds or devolves into new sets of oppositions that make up whatever "community" correspondences circumscribe. Writing on theories of community he extracts from postwar poetics, Stephen Voyce has argued that "constructing one's singular autonomous identity" and mapping this singularity on to "relations between a multiplicity of singular beings" enabled many of these New American Poets to imagine their "open forms" as a type of "mutual aid" in which persons could "entangle, and disperse." Form became an analogy for community. But this transient entanglement was always aspirational, as the notion of a "mobile, permeable community" and its "unqualified equality" relied on certain analogies between form and politics that sometimes elided the social tensions that constituted these claims for both autonomy and collectivity.<sup>293</sup> The complicated history of Olson's term as a teacher and rector of Black Mountain is a perfect example of this

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the broader "Frankfurt" school, see Susan Buck-Morss *Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: The Free Press, 1979).

<sup>291</sup> Translation is mine, though I based it largely off of Geoffrey Wagner's example in *Selected Poems of Charles Baudelaire* (New York: Grove Press, 1974). The original French: "La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers / Laisser parfois sortir de confuses paroles; / L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symbols / Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers."

<sup>292</sup> In the "Baudelaire" section of Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, he quotes a letter Baudelaire wrote to his friend and naturalist, Alphonse Toussenel, about his theory of correspondence: "I've been saying for a very long time that the poet is *supremely* intelligent . . . and that *imagination* is the most *scientific* of faculties, for it alone can understand the *universal analogy*, or what a mystic religion calls *correspondence*." (Arcades, J8). Benjamin notes later that the correspondences related to what he deemed Baudelaire's "allegorical imagination," evoking the process by which a word "calls forth an image" and the image "could determine the meaning of the word." (Arcades, J24, 3). Benjamin's *flaneur* was a walking example of such correspondence with the commodity form in its need to see and be seen and to exist only through this structure of empathy and recognition as determined by urban spaces of consumption.

<sup>293</sup> Stephen Voyce, *Poetic Community: Avant-Garde Activism and Coldwar Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013) 63, 100.

tension, as the aesthetic and educational potential of Black Mountain's collectivist ethos never overcame the dissolving force of individual personalities or aesthetic agendas.<sup>294</sup>

In the case of individual literary texts, the work of interpretive criticism is not to abstract these correspondent forms, whether they are posed in letters or as lyrical speakers, into discrete claims or principles for aesthetic activity. Autonomy, for example, is a practical process in which a self-applied *law* adapts a set of social and historical precedents to a present problem—not a concept dissociable from the social histories of racialization, gendering, etc.<sup>295</sup> The work then is to situate ourselves, as critics, in proximity to what Edward Said calls the "concrete reality about which political, moral and social judgments have to be made."<sup>296</sup> Subtending critiques of normative postwar American culture are, for example, histories of racialization and violent masculine performances that present through negative or reversed images. Capturing these simultaneous facets requires a similar method of "contrapunctal reading" Said used to chart the direct and indirect narrations of imperialism, though our focus here will be on how lyric speech and form can embody both a dominant perspective and reflect resistances to it.

Reading through the program of the BPC, the list of seminar titles provides a fantastic ledger of 20<sup>th</sup>-century aesthetics: Robert Duncan, "Psyche-Myth and the Moment of Truth"; Jack Spicer, "Poetry and Politics"; Gary Snyder, "Poetry and the Primitive"; Charles Olson, "Causal Mythology"; Ed Dorn, "The Poet, the People, the Spirit"; Allen Ginsberg, "What's Happening on Earth"; and Robert Creeley, "Sense of Measure." Taken together, the poets and events of the BPC presented a dramatic convergence of theories of community, poetic form, historical materialism, mythology, psychoanalysis, and epistemology. Following the lectures, seminars would meet for two hours over a five day stretch, from 1 to 3pm and then 3 to 5pm, with no real break between. Readings either showcased longer readings by well-known poets or groups of site-specific communities of poets,

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<sup>294</sup> For an account of Olson's term as a teacher and then rector of Black Mountain, as well as a rather tendentious overview of the college as a whole, see Martin Duberman, *Black Mountain: AAn Exploration in Community* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009). For a more nuanced account of the intellectual background of the poets that came to be associated with Black Mountain, see Miriam Nichols *Radical Affections: Essays on the Poetics of Outside* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010).

<sup>295</sup> Contra recent attempts to recuperate aesthetic autonomy against claims for identity-based critiques or politics, I see "correspondence" as a way to think through how histories of racialization or gender performance take on particular forms within individual correspondences. For Walter Benn Michael's arguments against "diversity" as a critical category or hermeneutic "trick," see Michael's *The Trouble With Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality* (New York: Picador, 2006). In a 2014 interview with Gavin Mueller at George Washington University, Michaels notes how criticism that takes into account art's relationship to the social contingencies of race or gender ignores what he takes to be the principle importance of "art's autonomy." Autonomy not only entails a separateness from market conditions but also a separation between what an artwork "means" and whatever meaning an audience gives to it. Interview is accessible at: <http://edges.gmu.edu/interview-walter-benn-michaels/>

<sup>296</sup> Edward Said, "Secular Criticism," in: *The Edward Said Reader*, ed. Moustafa Bayoumi and Andrew Rubin, (New York: Vintage, 2000), 230. In evoking "contrapunctal reading," I am referencing Said's method for reading the articulation and development of imperialism out of minor phrases, narrative structures, and historical characterizations in *Culture and Imperialism*, (New York: Vintage, 1993), 51–66.

such as young poets from the Bay Area.<sup>297</sup> The schedule was grueling, occurring over a twelve-day span during June, and demanded a kind of bizarre and singular confluence of energies that, as Creeley reportedly claimed, could never be repeated.

Peripheral to the billed presenters, there were also extensive readings by local poets and emissaries from artistic and activist groups around the country, including John Sinclair and Charles Moore from the Detroit Artists Workshop (who had hosted LeRoi Jones, Diane Di Prima, and Robert Creeley for readings, among others). Additionally, the Bay Area had become a site of convergence for Civil Rights and Free Speech movements, racial revolutionary vanguardism, and anti-Vietnam-War activism.<sup>298</sup> What many of these presenters and attendees seemed to be after were different ways of talking about poetry as a collective and critical labor that could confront the democratic failures of life *at* ongoing war, *under* capitalism, and *within* the totalizing threat of the bomb.<sup>299</sup> Though many of the larger lecture events were held on campus at 101 California Hall—now, ironically, home to high-level administrative offices—the conference was officially sponsored

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<sup>297</sup> In addition to readings by the lecture/seminar conveners, there was a large range of poets who read, many of whom were not included in the *New American* anthology. John Wieners read the second night, introduced by Creeley. Robin Blaser, George Stanley, and Richard Duerden read on July 17<sup>th</sup>, introduced by Robert Duncan. Allen Ginsberg introduced a reading by John Sinclair, Lenore Kandel, Ted Berrigan, and Ed Sanders on July 19<sup>th</sup>. Ron Loewinsohn, Joanne Kyger, and Lew Welch read on July 24<sup>th</sup>, again introduced by Robert Duncan. Two large group readings of "New Poets" took place on July 18<sup>th</sup> and July 25<sup>th</sup>, and included: Jim Boyack, Robin Eichele, Victor Coleman, Bob Hogg, Stephen Rodefer, David Franks, Gene Fowler, Jim Wehlage, Eileen Adams, Doug Palmer, Sam Thomas, Gail Dusenbery, Drum Hadley, Lowell Levant, and Jim Thurber.

<sup>298</sup> Robert Creeley Papers (1950–2011), Stanford University Library, M0662. For example, included in Creeley's papers alongside a BPC broadside (in which Jones is still included in the program) is a leaflet for a "Mass Drive for Peace on Saturday, July 24<sup>th</sup>, in Oakland" which included a petition being circulated by the Vietnam Day Committee and other groups. A further meeting is discussed at the Merritt Park Community Meeting where "Vietnam, world peace, poverty, and racial discrimination will all be discussed." For the relationship between the Free Speech Movement and Civil Rights Movements, see: Leigh Raiford's talk "The Free Speech Movement and the Unfinished Work of Civil Rights at UC Berkeley," delivered at *The Operation of the Machine Panel*, UC Berkeley, October 1, 2014. A published version of the talk can be accessed at *Remaking the University*, eds. Michael Meranze and Christopher Newfield: <http://utotherescue.blogspot.com/2014/10/the-free-speech-movement-and-unfinished.html>.

<sup>299</sup> Here is a quote about the communitarian ethos and aesthetic philosophy of the collectivist arts group Detroit Artists Workshop found among Creeley's papers that captures the collectivist spirit of the BPC: "Poetry (or any art) does not need to be "sullen" (solus:alone) any more. We are now in a period of expanded consciousness in all the arts, the most immediately important aspect of which is the transcendence of what is understood as the 'ego' (in the accepted--worst--sense of that word). Left alone, without any real criticism (i.e. "constructive" criticism from those who are involved in the same thing you are, no from diletantes & culture/vultures, 'art lovers' &c), the artist's peculiar ego swells, he becomes deadened to his mistakes, he after a while can't bear real criticism, he's defensive, gets more atomized, separated, alone, can't talk to anyone, everyone else is crazy: becomes (alas!) the old "romantic" figure, misunderstood, one man against the world--no good. NOW is the time to find out what's wrong with your work, NOW, at least get an inkling of what other real people will think of it, how it communicates, &c." (Creeley Papers, Box 11, Folder 4.)

by the somewhat autonomous entity of UC Berkeley Extension, likely due to implicit and explicit opposition between the attendants and the existing administration of UC Berkeley on the heels of the Free Speech demonstrations from September 1964 to January 1965. The demonstration was organized by students, like Mario Savio, who had just returned from civil rights struggles in the South and saw the university system's movements against labor activism on campus by then president, Clark Kerr, as connected to a broader struggle for civil liberty. One of the conference organizers and frequent introducer to the convened poets, Thomas Parkinson, was one of the two members of the faculty senate to be quoted at length in a "Message on the Proposed Solution to the Free Speech Controversy" addressed from the faculty to "Colleagues and Friends in the State-Wide University, Members of Others Colleges and Universities, Fellow Citizens" in which he condemns the administration's violation of constitutional right to free speech and argues for a full amnesty for all students, faculty, and community members involved in demonstrates.<sup>300</sup>

In explicit and implicit ways, the relationship between aesthetic practice, concepts of labor, and political activism were very much *the* subject of conversation. In a sort of postmortem interview with Linda Wagner about his experiences at the BPC, Creeley remarked that he continued to question whether the "university was reflecting a public concern with the arts rather than some institutional concern that wants to gain [the artists] as materials for its own activity."<sup>301</sup> He goes on to remark that the conference was successful as a form of publicity yet it suffered from a "curious indifference to us as persons," including the poet's basic needs like shelter, food, and familial accommodations.<sup>302</sup> When Jack Spicer gave his lecture on "Poetry and Politics," he not only referenced anti-war and free speech activism but spoke about his own personal decision to not sign a loyalty oath to the State of California that cost him his status as a graduate student and job as an instructor in the Linguistics department at UC Berkeley. His poem, "Berkeley in the Time of Plague," captures the sense of doom and farce that colored the moment. Written in ballad-like quatrains with alternating rhymes and fairly regular, ten-syllable lines, the poem ends: "Plague took us, laughed, and reportioned us, / Swelled us to dizzy, unaccustomed size. / We died

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<sup>300</sup> A copy of this official memo signed by members of the UC Berkeley Academic Senate can be found in the papers of Josephine Miles at the Bancroft Library, MSS 86/107c, Carton 9.

<sup>301</sup> Transcript of "Sense of Measure," Creeley Papers, Box 1, Folder 2, 30. Hereafter this transcript will be cited as "Sense of Measure" with a page number.

<sup>302</sup> "I came away from the [Berkeley Poetry Conference at] University of California, for example, feeling in one sense misused indeed, because we were subject to a structure that was very uncomfortable and did not permit our free movement within it. Even such simple things as the fact that we were not given any help with housing, we were not given any parking space for our cars, we were told that it would cost \$75 to purchase a parking permit for this two-week period because there was no other means offered. In other words, there was a curious indifference to ourselves as persons, having the very real problems of our families with us. At the same time we were, curiously, stars. We were given great use in this way. The University of California at the time of my going out planned a publication of the seminar, which was happily dropped; and we were recorded endlessly and by people as far flung as a professor from the Sorbonne. National Educational TV was there, not to film on location but to interview us outside of that. But I do question the context if the arts are to be treated only as further subject matter for universities; if that's what they're after, they miss the point entirely (Sense of Measure, 31).



prodigiously, it hurt awhile / But left a certain quiet in our eyes."<sup>303</sup> Using his signature balancing of anachronism and topicality, Spicer charts a painful, queer line of experience that can be read in direct counter to the social and political entitlement driving Olson's "paleface" routine. The totalizing content of a plague, parabolic to the ongoing war in Vietnam and crises of conscience in America, has the perverse effect of radically inflating one's size and agency in the world at the very moment that it takes "our" life. At the same time, the "plague" produces a kind of sinister calm others might see as a meditative life resolved with itself and its world, a soul at peace (which, "we" know, is war).

Jones's absence was clearly a relief to some of the white poets who felt interpolated in his turn against hegemonic whiteness of culture. Of course, the reasons Jones didn't attend are as complicated as they are speculative and get to the core antagonism that I will seek to develop here. During the time of the conference, Jones was overseeing the first international production in London of his play, *Dutchman*, largely about a racialized confrontation between a Jewish woman, Lula, and a black man, Clay, that ends in a stabbing (an explicit double to his proposed lecture topic, Poetry and Murder). Olson himself refers to *Dutchman* obliquely in his talk. Writing to Tom and Valerie Raworth from Placitas, New Mexico on June 23, 1965, Creeley notes:

I just heard that LeRoi is to be there in London for the opening of *Dutchman* this summer, hence won't be at the Berkeley conference after all—so I'm given his teaching job, and Ed in turn gets the reading and lecture I'd had—which somehow is happier, at least from my point of view. I think LeRoi is so committed to cutting out all whites it could only have been a bitter mess.<sup>304</sup>

Though Creeley falls short here and elsewhere to recognize the relation between the two events—a play about racial violence and the growing refusal to think of cultural production outside the logic of white hegemony and colonialism—it is worth accounting for the ways, as we will see, he stays in a kind of correspondence with Jones/Baraka throughout their personal and poetic transitions. Creeley never stopped advocating for Baraka, either. Up until the late 1990s, Creeley was writing letters to the administration of SUNY Buffalo in order to get him a regular teaching gig.

The most obvious difference between Baraka's work in the mid to late 60s and Creeley's concomitant approaches to lyric is Creeley's obsession with questions of privacy: where it comes from, what one can do with it, and what it does to you. Though his first novel, *The Island* (1963), is very much obsessed with the social lives of ex-patriots living in Majorca where Creeley lived among many other transient writers, it is also deeply concerned with the kinds of isolation that cultural work produces or necessitates. In Creeley's lyrics of this time, the drama of reading is in tracking the ways his signature thin and steeply enjambed line fracture a simple vocabulary into stunted pieces, creating a series of recursive linguistic fragments in which his speakers seem as desperate to make contact with others as they are afraid of what will the process will expose.

What is less characterized in criticism of his lyrics and lyrical series is how he positions this linguistic self-consciousness in relation to socio-political questions of violence both personal and systematic, as in the dawning consciousness of individual responsibility to ecological disaster. In "The Writer's Situation," Creeley situates his own interest in versions of "post-political" agency in relation to ongoing violence of the Vietnam war, the growing perception of environmental crises,

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<sup>303</sup> "Berkeley in The Time of Plague," *My Vocabulary Did This to Me: The Collected Poetry of Jack Spicer*, ed. Peter Gizzi and Kevin Killian (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 5. All citations of Spicer's poems come from this collection.

<sup>304</sup> *The Selected Letters of Robert Creeley*, eds. Rod Smith, Peter Baker, Kaplan Harris (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 289.

and the state of political resignation he saw "advanced younger people" to the election of Nixon in 1969. And even where he seems to distinguish the "post-political" from the revolutionary militancy of Black nationalists, he seems to recognize the joint imperative on new forms of public presence:

Possibly political agency is regaining an active contest. But really the advanced younger people of this moment are, if anything, *post*-political, just that the available political agencies seem to them so bankrupt. The militant part of the black community might be the one revolutionary group still intent on political possibilities... I think [young activists] wanted renewal of a kind of *presence*, in public life, possessed of a demonstrable integrity, even one apart from the usual conditions of political activity. They wanted someone to be literally there.<sup>305</sup>

The fact that he describes this "very deep shift in the conception of human relations and use of the environment" in terms of an "active contest" *between* apolitical, militant, and post-political forms of engagement suggests each tactic, like the demotic iterations of his poems, is a necessary inflection of a common problem: a failed public "presence." Regardless of whether Creeley's poetry could or should embody a clarity of "political involvement," he acknowledged that "art" was inextricably caught up with politics: "I don't see that art and politics, or that order of present experience involved with the post-political, should all be kept separate. I don't see how they can be."<sup>306</sup> Failed acts of communication didn't preclude this inseparability.

What is perhaps most jarring, then, is the persistent lack of fit between Creeley's extensive mapping of intimate insecurities and his contemporaneous sense of the radical insecurity of social life caused by free-market "Economism," nuclear weaponization, and American imperialism.<sup>307</sup> As Alan Marshall notes, one could read his attention to the insecurity of "common" language, as Creeley does in a 1991 lecture in part on the first Gulf War, "Some Senses of the Commonplace," as a pun on the "vexed relationship between public and private, social and intimate."<sup>308</sup> A verbal commonplace—phrasing that makes systematic violence seem banal, tedious, trite—might be stretched, broken, or contorted to include "what is uncommon." But even "wrenching of syntax," as Marshall notes, can fail if it doesn't incorporate "intractable details" or put internal pressures on *who*

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<sup>305</sup> "The Writer's Situation," *The Collected Essays of Robert Creeley* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 517.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, 518.

<sup>307</sup> Like many of the other "New American" poets like Zukofsky and Olson, Creeley read, or at least was aware of Vladimir Lenin, who developed a specific sense of the term "Economism" in "What is to be Done?" [1902] in *Collected Works* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), 347–530. Creeley cites the title of Lenin's essay in an article he assembled for the Summer 1980 issue of *Artforum*, "Some Place Enormously Moveable?: The Collaboration of Arakawa and Madeline H. Gins" in *Collected Essays of Robert Creeley* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) 423. Charles Olson mentions "what historically shrinking Lenin talked his mouth off about" in a letter to Creeley on June 9, 1950 (Charles Olson, *Selected Letters*, ed. Ralph Maud (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 109. Though it goes through many iterations and internal critiques within Marxist circles, "Economism" has come to function as a sort of commonplace for the rationalization of all social and political processes in terms of economic logics, a tendency Lenin himself criticizes among Social Democrats as well as revolutionary leftist factions.

<sup>308</sup> *American Experimental Poetry and Democratic Thought*, 226.

is being spoken.<sup>309</sup> Strikingly, it is this pressure that Jones/Baraka's militancy seems to provide, as it taps into Creeley's persistent anxiety about when and where our sense of "common cause" with the suffering of others really comes from. Glossing his own lyric speech—"fear of being overly hurt / by the brutal exigencies were / what pushed and pulled / me too common cause" ("Sonnets" *The Old Days*)—Creeley writes: "I mean, I certainly didn't *please* myself by saying it. I thought, you know, did one begin with an initial intent to help share in the common ills and exposures of other people? Was there some intensive initial *commitment* to the needs and facts of others?"<sup>310</sup>

In a letter Creeley wrote to Jones on October 21, 1963, he speaks admiringly about Jones's ability to use music to make a "sharp context" for thinking the history of racial performance and parody "where it is, as apart from any generalizing sense of 'understanding' in a specious and god knows ugly sense." Jones's poems manage to balance an intense feeling of "location" both in personal details (about Jones's grandfather) and more general social "positions" (like bebop and black middle-class fears of newcomers): "I think in that way the book which they note you are at work on, the whole situation of the present negro intellectual—the ambivalence of where they can be, thinking of that middle class again." Creeley reports in choppy phrasing that the problem with the Vancouver Poetry Conference (that took place in 1963 and was a model for the BPC) was that those assembled "were working re people of what comes after you, and that skip at times displaced me, for one. What I mean is, without you, Ed, Bob [Robert Duncan] et al as the 'sequence' literally there, it's very hard to 'place' anything."<sup>311</sup> Aside from not being able to write out the thought *as* a sentence, Creeley can't seem to imagine the historical "sequence" of his and other poems, much less the performative sequence of the conference, without Jones's intervening absence. And one could make a stronger claim: Jones's work helped Creeley substantiate his own poetics of self-displacement, to see it as a part of history. This influence didn't imply agreement or a subscription to a common ideology.

In Creeley's preface to the selected edition of Whitman's poems that Creeley edited, he notes how Whitman helped him see a radically different use value for poetry, one that embraced the multiplicity of pressures and divergent desires of a speaker or actor across the span of a phrase:

I had grown up, so to speak, habituated to the use of poetry as compact, epiphanal instance of emotion or insight. I valued its intensive compression, its ability to 'get through' a maze of conflict and confusion to some centre of clear 'point.' But what did one do if the emotion or terms of thought could not be so focused upon or isolated in such singularity? Assuming a context of necessity multiphasic, a circumstance the components of which were multiple, or, literally, a day in which various things *did* occur, not simply one thing—what did one do with that?

In short, what one "did" with the multiphasic character of experience and expression in the space of a poem, particularly one anchored in the first-person speech of a speaker, was the measure of its success. And not only was this the measure of a discrete poem but of how poems entered into relation, either within a series, across a journal, or in the hypothetical public of a conference. Jones was a part of this ensemble.

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<sup>309</sup> Ibid., 227–28.

<sup>310</sup> Tom Clark, *Robert Creeley and the Genius of the American Commonplace* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 100. Clark's text is also useful for its extensive excerpting and commentary on Creeley's work in relation to particular "commonplaces" of American culture.

<sup>311</sup> *Creeley Letters*, 272.

For the second issue of low-budget, mimeographed "newsletter" Jones edited with Diane Di Prima (from 1960 to 1962), *The Floating Bear*, he composed a short prose piece called "Revue" that took Cecil Hemley of the *Hudson Review* to task for his condemnation of the anthology for its "eccentric version" of American poetry. It is worth reading Jones's response at length, not only because it captures the personal and collective aspirations that Jones saw embodied in the "situation" the anthology captured but also because it was an early indication of Jones's willingness to foreground violent revolt as a legitimate response to systematic oppression:

Liberals are disparaged by anyone attempting to demonstrate Taste or Feeling (sensibility) as separate from Situation. Nothing shd present itself outside of certain recognized conditions. The negroes in the south cannot utilize violence to achieve their ends (whatever? schools, homes, jobs? Why bother? But if you don't want another man to handle your life . . . you might, just might, mind you, have to kill him) because they admit (officially) that there is some common utopia each of them wants/ collectively. If this is true, they are stuck, perhaps, for another hundred years. But the minute some intrepid soul prints up, say, a manifesto, declaring exactly what, just he, himself, alone, uncontrolled by the NAACP or KKK or Fischer Baking Co, wants, (and not 'wants' proceeding from the demands of some abstract social situation . . . but wants proceeding from what we hope can still be recognized as some personal ethics, morality, or attitude that is contingent for the most part on rational discrimination and perhaps the logical accretion of historical example). Then perhaps these 'wants' will not be so common: and then perhaps, someone's list might definitively have to do with homicide.

Jones pits himself (and the work of poetry) against the false consensus of "Liberal" morality that sanctioned racial violence and suppressed explicit struggle by arguing for historical progress through "rational" debate. As Jones points out, the whole premise of a social situation that can be debated in common presumes that "we" belong to the same world at all and not uneven realities. The focus of poetry should not be consensus, then, but *dissensus*, or the divergent tastes, feelings, and social realities that make up any "situation." Echoing the language of laboring "in the break" put forward by Fred Moten, Anthony Reed writes:

The political value of black experimental writing, therefore, does not lie in its advocacy or its themes but its commitment to the 'aesthetic break' where consensus slips away and new thinking breaks through. Consensus names a certain way of being together that can become unconscious, unthought, and simply procedural. The moment of dissensus is a moment of desubjection, of dedisciplining knowledge and promoting thinking as radical unlearning."<sup>312</sup>

Because the artificial character of forms are not necessarily beholden to ontologies "of race, language, and culture," they can serve as witnesses to truths "that would not make [themselves] present in the impossible telling of the tale."<sup>313</sup> Yet there are also aspects of subjectification that one doesn't simply *unlearn* but also continues to rehearse, like the performative gesture of self-determination one finds in the *ars poetica* Jones wrote up for inclusion in Allen's supplemental anthology of poetic prose, "HOW YOU SOUND???" Jones converts a lyrical self-pronouncement

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<sup>312</sup> Anthony Reed, *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 22.

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

into an emphatic structure of call and response in which this “YOU” calls for a salvaging “I”: “I CAN BE ANYTHING I CAN. I can make poetry with what I feel useful & can be saved out of all the garbage of our lives.”<sup>314</sup>

Though Baraka would later critique these early identifications with “young wizards... [like] Whalen, Snyder, McClure, O’Hara, Loewinsohn, Wieners, Creeley, Ginsberg,” as well as early versions of himself, as bohemian failures, we can see how these critiques are less based upon a radical break with the past and more a redefinition of what exactly is being resisted through present-tense of art. Though the “New American” poets he was in dialogue continued to see themselves as embattled outsiders, their differing accounts of practicing poetry from “the outside” or “the margins” led them on divergent formal paths as well. We can see this focalized early on in an exchange Jones had with Robert Duncan over “Black Dada Nihilism” (published in *The Dead Lecturer*, 1964). Initially, Jones borrows Duncan’s own mytho-poetical language (as well as Olson’s fascination with Mesoamerican history) to substantiate the tragic necessity of violence:

I am, more than anything, starting at what I hoped was the apocalyptic to try to clear some ground to get whatever else I can say, in, and at the level of other western statement, which, no matter how abstract or tenuous, still has that thick and continuous History of Ideas to support it. A literature ought to purpose its own myths . . . my myths, if they are to retain any of the force of the 'local,' and at the same time the mysterious (or universal, &c.) have got to come out of such conflicts as the Dada. . . I want to give the whole social bust of . . . 'the history of the black men in the West' a ground in local mystery. And the social (as those racist conflicts, &c.) is itself an occasion, perhaps the most powerful . . . because of the potential tragedy involved. What that play of mine, The Toilet is about (in Kulchur 9). As there, e.g., the question of 'us' becomes the heart of the tragic.<sup>315</sup>

Where Jones shifts the mythical register, however, is in what it takes to tell this tragic history of “us”—blackness within the racial hierarchies of “the West.” Jones not only positions this “black dada” figure or persona in relation to Western aesthetics (“Mondrian”), American imperialism (“dead Montezuma”), and African spirituality (“Damballah”) but also the more “local” history of black minstrelsy, thought, music, and sport the United States (“For tambo, willie best, dubois, Patrice, mantan, the bronze buckaroos. / For Jack Johnson, asbestos, tonto, buckwheat, billie holiday” (DL, 63–65).<sup>316</sup> The “field” of cultural action, to use William Carlos Williams’s term later adapted by Duncan, is both tragically broad and constricted, in that this black subject can think of itself amidst this Western “History of Ideas” (modernism, dada, etc.) yet finds its agencies delimited to nihilistic gestures, screaming, rape, and murder. That these are forms of agency also projected on black bodies from a fearful white “public” as well as an intellectual-cultural history that solicits blackness

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<sup>314</sup>“HOW YOU SOUND???” *The LeRoi Jones/ Amiri Baraka Reader*, 16.

<sup>315</sup> LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) to Robert Duncan, April 24, 1963. This series of letters sent between Jones/Baraka and Duncan is collected in the Robert Duncan Papers at the University Library Special Collections at Washington University, MSS-12903958.

<sup>316</sup> LeRoi Jones, *The Dead Lecturer* (New York: Grove Press, 1964). Hereafter cited as DL with page number.

to its revolutionary cause ("Sartre... we beg him to die")<sup>317</sup> seems to be precisely the point. The poem ends in a tragic parenthetical plea, at once patronizing and plaintive, for the "shamed" African god to save "us" from the very logic of murder: "(may a lost god damballah, rest or save us / against the murders we intend / against his lost white children" (65).

In response to this letter from Jones, Duncan both acknowledges the particularity of black experience and racial hatred but also sublimates it into a more general spiritual register. The distinctly black collectivity Jones struggles to locate outside the logic of racial hatred and retributive violence is conscripted into Duncan's own spiritual counter to the history of colonialism:

The Black Dada Nihilismus has got a real out-rage. It got at me, of course, with its racism; the black vs. white—and that part is the twist of something false, false-dark as the poem knows there is a false-light. But the terror, the retribution for the enslaved, thwarted man each of us knows, and the prayer to damballah 'rest or save us' comes true. Damballah as the sky is Father of us all (and if white children are 'lost,' then so are black dada nihilismus [sic] babies). What is grievous is that the 'rape the white girls. Rape their fathers' is the same Baron Samedi Dead-Christ uprising that you see in your friends 'with their [unclear] spilling / and restless for tiling tips on dark liver / lipo sucking splinters front he master's thigh': and you or I might find the 'Master' here to be actually this Lord of the Dead (every god has his aspect in some rite, and we do too)... I'm one of Damballah's lost white children—but Damballah, Lord of the Rainbow, does not paint in black and white—I'm one of his lost children and so are you, and we know it in a kinship closer than this lie of race.

Strikingly, Duncan can both acknowledge the punishing consequences of racial fictions and a history of black enslavement and yet, seemingly in the next breath, dissociate this history with a version of the now familiar liberal humanist maneuver, "we are all Africans." In lyrical fashion, Duncan is trying to turn on this notion of a common "Master" and address Jones ("I'm one.. and so are you") as part of an *aesthetic* kinship of "lost children," akin to the Neverland of "outcasts" in the *New American* collection.<sup>318</sup> In the poem and letter, Jones is playing on the fact that the acknowledged

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<sup>317</sup> Sartre served as a real interloper between Fanon and the Western philosophical discourses. *Black Skin, White Mask* was written as a response to Sartre's introduction, "Orphée Noir," to Leopold Sédar-Senghor, *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* (Partis, 1948) and Sartre wrote the introduction to *Wretched of the Earth*. Sartre's introduction as also published in translation the same year as Baraka's *Dead Lecturer* as "Black Orpheus," trans. John MacCombie, *The Massachusetts Review* 6, no. 1 (Autumn 1964–Winter 1965), 13–52. Jones/Baraka inevitably encountered Fanon through Sartre's framing, but was also reading Sartre's writings as well. For Fanon's English texts, see: Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask* [*Peau noire, masques blancs*], trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008); "Concerning Violence," *The Wretched of the Earth* [*Le Damnés de la Terre*], trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1968). Coincidentally, Grove also published Allen's anthology three years earlier.

<sup>318</sup> In another letter responding to Baraka's series, "Crow Jane," Duncan writes: "But all of us are living as men did in the Alexandrian world slaves or when not slaves painters or conspirators as hermits and outcasts of the dominant order. The gods do come int hem, and of the 'classical' world had 'Hermes-Thorth' we have our strength in World father - Damballah... Let Crow Jane be one of my 'saints' or blessed ghosts. "on somebody Me, once. Now / I am her teller." ... As Kasier Kennedy yesterday vows 'We will risk our cities in nuclear war'; and we who live in their cities pray

"Masters" of one's aesthetic practice (he names Duncan as one) has its analog in the socio-economic system of the slave trade and plantations. *Hearing* the difference really matters, just as race is not simply a "lie" but a fact of black or white life that troubles and inflects other forms of affiliation as well as claims to personal loss. Uncannily, Duncan even questions the content of the sociality Jones's posits in the final quatrain of "Black Dada" in the last line of his letter—"Who is 'us'?"—even while he proceeds with his own answer to the question.

How then do we, as retrospective readers, find ourselves in this dialogue? This recursive process, staged between persons and poems, seems tragic precisely because *this* lyrical "us" remained misaligned with, or perhaps unintelligible to, the collectivist aspirations of the *New American* "outcasts." Telling is Jack Gilbert's description—a contributor to what "San Francisco Renaissance" and attendant of Jack Spicer's "magic workshop" offered through San Francisco State<sup>319</sup>—of this communities of poets who would be assembled in Donald Allen's anthology and at the BPC conference, who saw themselves as an "American Underground" of "bohemians" that "live marginal existences, own few things, win no awards, and publish prolifically in fugitive amateur magazines." The equation of a transient existence with literary originality is explicit.<sup>320</sup> This mythology of the transient or bohemian poet is echoed perhaps most strongly in the Beat poetics of Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, but also to a lesser degree in the work of Gilbert's mentor, Jack Spicer, and many of the poets affiliated with the Black Mountain School. The idealized language of autobiographical intensity and bohemianism that often covered over intrinsic racial and gender divides between who had access to such "undergrounds" and how different populations performed, or were sanctioned for, playing the fugitive.<sup>321</sup> Gilbert's terms themselves suggest this logic of substitution whereby a collective history of resistance to enslavement and repressions of fugitive bodies—The Underground Railroad and Fugitive Slave Act—becomes a more general description of marginal poets. The tragedy is even more acute when we think of how Jones/Baraka felt and continued to feel a common cause with various intersectional critiques leveled at ego-centric poetry, academic discourse about "the arts," as well as the "US military-industrial complex" and its attendant norms of sociality, sexuality, and material life—what Gilbert derides generally as "the status quo."

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for the demise of civilization before we are done in—but how silly that is, I pray for the demise of civilization with no belief at all that I won't be done in long before." Robert Duncan Papers, Washington University, MSS-12903958.

<sup>319</sup> See Michael Davidson, *San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>320</sup> Jack Gilbert, "The Landscape of American Poetry in 1964," *Poets on Poetry*, ed. Howard Nemerov (New York: Basic Books, 1966), 110–11. Gilbert attended the "Magic Workshop" at San Francisco State University run by Jack Spicer.

<sup>321</sup> W. J. Harris argues the "autobiographical" mode became a weapon for Baraka in a way that it wasn't for his fellow postmodernists: "The postmodernists, feeling that the years after World War II were impersonal, repressed, and conformist, created a highly individualistic autobiographical poetry to counter the times. Such avant-gardists as Frank O'Hara and Allen Ginsberg, in their very different styles, wanted to put 'real people,' including themselves, into their poems and to detail them in all their charming oddness.... Amiri Baraka felt the same urge to rebel against conformity and anonymity, and from the rebels he learned to use the autobiographical mode as a weapon." (W. J. Harris, *The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka: The Jazz Aesthetic* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1986), 39).

The fact that we can reconstruct some notion of correspondence amidst these blindnesses rests to a large degree with the fact that these poets continued to read and write to each other and occasionally publish each other's work in low-budget journals or experimental presses. Much of the internal friction to the New American ensemble was also generated by the willingness of its poets to put up a fight not only against "them" but also to concepts of "us." Both Baraka and Spicer, for example, welcomed controversy and opposition. Their caustic speech was hurled at female and male writers alike—Denise Levertov, Ishmel Reed, Barrett Watten, to name some famous examples—presumably because they believed that opposition was useful or could produce something, something like the determinedness of a social, political, or even affective purpose—even if it also reinforced entrenched prejudices and hierarchies.<sup>322</sup>

Robert Creeley, on the other hand, struggled in a more fundamental way with appearing as a sober person, let alone a writer, in public, a difficulty paralleled by his struggle to compose a lyrical form in which he could feel open, situated, yet intimately constrained. In a lecture called "Contexts for Poetry" he gave at the 1963 Vancouver Poetry Conference, just two years before the BPC, Creeley remarked:

But when I'm writing, you see, that business of Olson's, 'He left him naked, / the man said, and nakedness / is what one means . . .' In order to be in that state of nakedness, I have to be where—it isn't so much distraction—but where I can open up this equally small thing,

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<sup>322</sup> The impasses between Baraka and his contemporaries persisted in numerous contexts, both within circles of black experimental writing and between the conflicting legacies of the "New American Poetry," especially those who claimed links between certain "avant-garde" formal practices and Marxist socio-political critique. Ishmael Reed, for example, has written a moving autobiographical essay about his many encounters with Baraka since the 1960s, detailing how both the public and private faces of Jones/Baraka's oppositional mode shaped the careers of other black writers. See: Ishmael Reed, "LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka and Me," *Transition* 114, Gay Nigeria (2014), pp. 13-29. For an example of a more recent run-in, one can look to Barrett Watten's confrontation with Amiri Baraka at the "Poetry in the Sixties" conference at University of Maine, Orono in 2008, which bled out from a response to Watten's prepared multimedia talk on the turn towards "Language" poetry to an improvised debate in a cafeteria the next day. What Baraka seemed to largely reject was Watten's use of Ernest Laclau's "empty signifier" concept to describe a series of charged symbols in the social and political organizing of the Bay Area, including Ginsberg's use of Buddhist chants and Mao's *Little Red Book* (sold by the Black Panthers to UC Berkeley students in order to raise organizing funds). Baraka contended that these symbols had practical and spiritual meaning within particular socio-cultural contexts that Watten's structuralist aesthetic argument at least leveled out, but more likely effaced, particularly since the rhetorical concept was setting up the emergence of a "Language" poetics out of his 60s narrative. Watten defended his characterization of "empty signifiers" as a provocation to think through the inherited cleanliness of symbols (book as "sign" of a revolution) as opposed to the actual messiness of cultural history and symbolic economies. Interestingly enough, Carla Harryman put on a performance of *Dutchman* with poets Lee Ann Brown and Mark McMorris as Lula and Clay. Watten has published a retrospective essay on the conference, "Thinking Through Orono: After Poetry of the 1970's (2008)" in a special issue commemorating Burton Hatlen in *Paideuma* 40 (December 2014) and a series of responses to the events at Orono on *jacket 2* in January of 2014, marked Entry 2 and Entry 3 (Accessed at <http://jacket2.org/commentary/entry-2> and <http://jacket2.org/commentary/entry-3> respectively on April 1, 2017).



and feel it with the intensity of all the perception that I . . . that the ego bit can recognize, and then destroy the ego by its own insistence. It's shy in other words.<sup>323</sup>

Creeley goes on to acknowledge that his constant worry over being heard or seen in the act of writing also made him seek after contexts in which:

only certain kinds of feelings can come. In other words, after all, when you've got the fort, like all the guns mounted and ready to blast until you're utterly safe, and you let out this little, agonized thing . . . it skips around the room, you know, and you're embarrassed. . . . At the same time, you see, one is struck with one's actuality, at the same this is the only point I can begin. (13)

Exposure or vulnerability is not the end point of lyrical speech or composition, then, but the place one starts from, precisely because it creates the subsequent work of thinking how *my* mode and necessity for exposure comes into conflict with "you." Preserving such constraints was also, for Creeley and others, a reason for using the kind of "common" vocabulary one finds in poets like Williams or Langston Hughes. When talking to Linda Wagner, Creeley distinguishes the given ordinariness of words from what he takes to be common "[modes] of address."<sup>324</sup>

It is a realism of such "commonplaces" that Williams, Hughes, and even Baraka were persistently interested in, precisely because it was by bending ordinary language that lyrics could register how our familiarity with persons or ideas shift within the social rhythms of conversation. How we think such reticence and antagonistic attitudes together will be the subject of the next two sections. It is in their correspondence that we can understand a contrapuntal relation between an honesty about the violence in "our" speech and a hope for more self-critical lyric measures through which to assess "our" present failures to realize an actually existing democratic culture.

## Antagonisms

The social and aesthetic antagonisms we have been tracking between the New American poets were staged internally within Jones/Baraka's poems and through the various stylistic transitions that constituted his varied career. Perhaps the one consistent thread throughout Baraka's many changes is not just his hope for the structural transformation of American culture and politics but his sustained critique of the principle of reciprocity. It was the fiction of reciprocity that often papered over the intricate subordinations and silencing that was a part of so-called "democratic" exchanges and empty guarantees for political equality. His persistent emphasis on a person's lived point of view shares much with the so-called "perspectivalism" of philosophers and critical theorists like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Fanon, each of whom were opposed to abstract political schemas like idealized unions or universal concepts, albeit for differing reasons. Both the style and content

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<sup>323</sup> "Contexts of Poetry," Robert Creeley Papers, Box 28, Folder 248, pages 12 and 13. Note that this lecture has been reprinted as a pamphlet in the CUNY "Lost and Found" Poetics Document Initiative: *The 1963 Vancouver Poetry Conference / Robert Creeley's Context of Poetry; with Daphne Marlatt's Journal Entries*, ed. Ammiel Alcalay, Series 1, No. 5 (Winter 2009).

<sup>324</sup> Robert Creeley, *Tales Out of School: Selected Interviews* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 27.

of Fanon's anti-colonialist writings in particular had a deep impact on Baraka, his Black Arts collaborators, and international discourses of African and American solidarity. *Black Skin, White Mask* (1952) hinges between political critique and a general biography of a colonized subject, drawing out the unevenness of democratic debate or public visibility in a colonial setting. In the "Concerning Violence" chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Fanon makes his case for the overthrow of the native/settler dialectic of colonial life in terms of a confrontation with the universality of a perspective: "The native's challenge to the colonial world is not a rational confrontation of points of view. It is not a treatise on the universal, but the *untidy* affirmation of an original idea propounded as an absolute."<sup>325</sup> The distinctly embodied and spatialized realities of the settler and the colonized could not be recuperated by some conceptual "higher unity." Rather, Fanon insisted on analyzing the settler colonial system according to the Aristotelian logic of "reciprocal exclusivity."<sup>326</sup> It is this kind of reciprocal exclusivity that we also find in Baraka's adaptation of Marx to his phases of cultural nationalism and Third World solidarity.

Distinguishing political agency from how one appears, or is judged, in public was relevant not just to colonial resistance within European colonial contexts but also to debates about the place of violent self-defense and self-determination in black nationalist critiques of American democracy.<sup>327</sup> Taking common cause with Malcolm X, whose assassination provoked Jones's shift from LeRoi to Amiri Baraka, Jones/Baraka sought to pose in his lyrics an experiential reality that was both inside the discourses of race and outside forms of legally and politically sanctioned behavior, particularly conduct criminalized as disorderly or done with violent intent. Like Malcolm and Fanon, Baraka knew the modes of cultural identification and collectivist politics that he enacted in his poems were precisely the styles of speech and comportment that led one to be judged as a danger that, like transients, appeared to have everything to gain and nothing to lose.

As we saw with "In Our Terribleness," Baraka openly courted both the private and public position of the threatening racialized figure as well as the kinds of violence, both projected and reflected, that such a figure evoked. When we look at the range of poems in the book *Dead Lecturer* (1964)—often described as the transitional point between his "bohemian" phase of the late 50s and early 60s and his more militant, afro-centric mid-career and late poetics—we can see his early identification with writers of the European and American avant-gardes morph into highly reflexive

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<sup>325</sup> *Wretched of the Earth* [*Le Damnés de la Terre*], 33.

<sup>326</sup> "The zone where the colonized live is not complementary to the zone inhabited by the colonizers. The two zones are opposed, but not in the service of a higher unity. Obedient to the rules of pure Aristotelian logic, they both follow the principle of reciprocal exclusivity. No conciliation is possible, for of the two terms, one is superfluous" (*Wretched of the Earth*, 38–39).

<sup>327</sup> Fanon's attitude toward an untidy politics of non-relationality has its analogues, too, in Western theories of public life. Hannah Arendt was a thinker who understood democracy to be the fact of "being seen and heard by others" from different positions, embodied by the *polis* of the Athenian agora. The "meaning of public life" is derived from the instability of experiential difference and its subsequent (mis)recognition. Yet, we see the more conservative character of her "public" emerge, however, in her writing about the black nationalism of Malcolm X and the Black Panthers where she dismisses their claims to the tactic of violent self-defense and advocates for what she takes to be the broader "power" of liberal coalition building. See Hannah Arendt's *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt & Brace, 1970).

lyrics about the place from which this largely transient tradition speaks. In “A Poem for Speculative Hipsters,” these debts and oppositions are laid bare:

He had got, finally,  
to the forest  
of motives. There were no  
owls, or hunters. No Connie Chatterleys  
resting beautifully  
on their backs, having casually  
brought socialism  
to England.

Only ideas,  
and their opposites.

Like,  
he was *really*  
nowhere. (76)

There is no doubt this casual band of socialists, speculating on cultural origins and political futures, would correspond roughly to aspects of Jones's "New American" fellows he had befriended, corresponded with, and published. But Jones is not just calling others out. He is also satirizing a version of what “he” was with them. The speaker narrates a sort of passage through Baudelaire’s “forest of symbols” (borrowed from “Correspondances”) into yet another symbolic landscape: “the forest / of motives.” Baudelaire, of course, had become a sort of touchstone for American avant-gardes, particularly those that linked a progressive politics with the confluences of urban life. This oblique reference has an echo, too, in *Dutchman*, as Clay, a hipster himself, is accused of being “a black Baudelaire” by his hyperbolic female antagonist, Lula. Being Baudelaire, Lula insists, is the opposite of being a “black nigger.” The shift from “symbols” to “motives” in the poem is telling, though, as it suggests what is at stake in this hipster’s non-belonging or transience is not just what is shown or said but how its inflection is heard, like a note in an instrument.

Given this is a lyric marked as *for* hipsters, how should we understand this speaker’s relationship to this generic masculine placeholder “he”? One could read the pronoun, like “us,” as a site of deeper conflict between of a speaker and a figure who goes in search of some affirmative idea, something to build a cultural and political future upon, but finds only opposing concepts—a kind of infinite ironic regress. This lack of determination is amplified by the fact that “he” remains in third-person with no grammatical counterpart—he, she, or they. “He” is, both in person and in syntax, *really* nowhere, precisely because “he” is not only at odds with an existing reality but also at odds with the very means by which one goes searching for a functional alternative that could be actualized in and as a sociality. So, even if he might identify with these “ideas” of futurity, symbols of some mythic past, or attitudes of erotic freedom, he will not belong to them in any substantive way. The verbal litany of negatives—no, No, nowhere—only turns up a series of objects as equally unreal or transitional as the one before.

Whether one takes this lyric as a scathing parody directed at a postwar American cultural “scene” or as an admonition to those who would identify with such exclusionary “ideas,” it is the negation of life that is *real*. The serious joke about being “*really* nowhere” echoes back to Jones/Baraka himself, too, when we consider that he would base so much of his critical, dramatic, and poetic labor in negating what’s there. How does one create a formal extension of specifically black content—to borrow Olson’s maxim—when black life has been rendered as property or systematically displaced from the very spheres and practices in which one sustains a social being? How does one make this nowhere heard, seen, felt?

To some degree, one might foreground the very impossibility of the act. And there is a long lineage of acting out impossibility in African-American literature. Anthony Reed, borrowing from Charles Chesnutt, argues that many black experiments with literary form amount to a form of "conjunction." Acting as a "witness" to both the artifice of race and a mode of being, form attempts to capture what narrative cannot, in large part because the content of the would-be tale has already been effaced.<sup>328</sup> This includes tales of how blackness might be saved or redeemed. Reed discusses the early emphasis of W. E. B. DuBois, one of Jones/Baraka's most consistent interlocutors, on the "time of encounter" over moral, ethical, and political definitions of blackness:

In their form, the early sections of *Souls* point to a more radical solution than the ways we often read Du Bois, emphasizing the time of the encounter rather than the being of the Negro. Recuperating that radical kernel, the attempt to surpass the 'limits of allowable thought,' illuminates the sense of politics in this book. (13)

Du Bois's refusal to narrate "how it feels to be a problem" is an open revolt against a particular politics of expression in which being racialized entails a certain set of ethical obligations or personal destinies, as in the generic shape of racial uplift narratives that were often of a piece with sentimental or temperance novels. Reed emphasizes, too, how Du Bois veil functioned as a formal process. It draws together while separating, creating internal divergences in the very process of expression, a distinction that Baraka mapped on explicitly to black music in his 1968 essay, "The Changing Same: R&B and New Black Music."<sup>329</sup>

Though the postcolonial contexts of the United States might seem more historically diffuse and geographically mediated, there is a repeated emphasis in his essays and poetry following his visit to Cuba in 1960 on the colonial pre-histories of now unconscious cultural connotations of "color." Reflecting on the representations of civil rights struggles in news media in "the last days of the american empire (including some instructions for black people)" (1964), Jones writes: "It is the blackness of the sufferers, their absolute existence as a *different race*, that cheapens any further social description as to what, actually is going on? Explanation is a selfish act."<sup>330</sup> Similarly, Jones writes in "expressive language" (1963), that ordinary speech compounds this reciprocal exclusivity by extending both social hegemony and racial fantasy into the simple usage of words:

Speech, the way one describe the natural proposition of being alive, is much more crucial than even most artists realize. Semantic philosophers are certainly correct in the final dictation of words over their users. But they often neglect to point out that, after all, it is the actual importance, *power*, of the words that remains so finally crucial. Words have users, but as well, users have words. And it is the users that establish the world's realities. Realities being those fantasies that control your immediate span of life.<sup>331</sup>

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<sup>328</sup> *Freedom Time*, 56. For a detailed reading of the relationship between black literature and North America, the Atlantic slave trade, and the financial logic of capital, see Ian Balcum, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

<sup>329</sup> "The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)" (1968), *Baraka Reader*, 186–210.

<sup>330</sup> LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, *Home: Social Essays* [1966] (New York: Akashic Books: Renegade Reprint Series, 2009), 215.

<sup>331</sup> *Home: Social Essays*, 192.

Though Jones's pragmatic notion of speech has all the movements of a dialectic, he is also careful to note the fact that "one's terms" and "mode of speech" are authorized by one's functional position within a social hierarchy, such that the use of "words themselves become, even informally, laws." Addressing the formalization of "social hegemony" in speech would entail undermining the very appearance of a universal language: "As no blues person can really believe emotionally in Pascal's God, or Wittgenstein's question, 'Can the concept of God exist in a perfectly logical language?' Answer: 'God don't never change'" (192). Not only is *my* God not *your* God, despite the shared term, but the lived fact of this divergence shapes the way artists improvise with the relation between aesthetics and ethics (whose inseparability he, again, took from Wittgenstein).<sup>332</sup> Objectifying the cultural and social contexts of speakers, particularly the structural logics and cultural fantasies of white supremacy, doesn't resolve these conflicts but rather restores the verbal and musical tensions between abstractly equivalent positions.

Baraka's theories of language use and aesthetics have their roots, too, in the hybrid traditions of African-American music. As William J. Harris, Nathaniel Mackey, and Paul Gilroy have noted, the transnational migration of call-and-response patterns of choral field music migrate to more intimate dialogues between blues lyricists and their instruments reflect the very substance of social life.<sup>333</sup> Thematizations of "the blues" and adaptations of blues form are everywhere in *The Dead Lecturer*, for example, such as the repetition of specific words or phrases works to draw into rhythmic relation disparate uses. Take the word "motive." When reading "A Poem for Speculative Hipsters," it is hard not to hear a literal resonance with the prior appearance of the metaphorical phrase, "the forest of motives," in the serial poem Jones dedicates to the black activist and early proponent for violent self-defense, Robert Williams, in Cuban exile, "Rhythm & Blues (1". "The symbols hang limply / in the street. A forest of objects, motives, / black steaming Christ / meat wood and cars / flesh light and stars / scream each new dawn" (DL, 44). The poem, which begins with Jones's signature open-but-never-closed parenthetical, works through a variety of stanzaic structures, sharp enjambments, and sentences that run across double-line breaks. The rhythms of having a black body and committing it to the performative history of the blues is rendered through a range of complex symbols that evoke an explicit history of objectification, exploitation, and homicide. And rather than identify with these lifeless bodies, the speaker of the poem asserts its life as both *against* and *resonant with* their "simple motion": "I live against them, and hear them, and move / the way they move. Hanged against the night, so many / leaves, not even moving" (DL, 44). Later in the poem, the forest of "motives" reappear as incorrigible movements, akin to dance or laughter, that assert an action "so secret it creates": "An incorrigible motives. / An action so secret it creates. / Men dancing on a beach. / Disappeared laughter erupting as the sea / erupts" (DL, 44). Unlike the self-permissions of Olson's "Projectivist Verse" (published first by Jones in *Yugen*) or Robert Duncan's "Often I am Permitted to Return to a Meadow," the fold Jones makes in his field

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<sup>332</sup> The notion that aesthetics and ethics are inseparable Baraka took not from the history of black music but from his reading in Wittgenstein. In his 1963 essay, "The Revolutionary Theatre," he writes: "Art is method. And art, 'like any ashtray or senator,' remains in the world. Wittgenstein said ethics and aesthetics are one. I believe this" (Home, 238).

<sup>333</sup> For close readings of the "changing same" within black musical and poetic culture, see Nathaniel Mackey, "The Changing Same: Black Music in the Poetry of Amiri Baraka," *Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones): A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Kimberley W. Benston (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1978), 119–135 and Paul Gilroy, "Sounds Authentic: Black Music, Ethnicity, and the Challenge of a 'Changing' Same" *Black Music Research Journal* 11, No. 2 (Autumn, 1991), 111–136.

is not a generalized potential of poetic form or myth to "mimic much of loss," but an ecstatic action asserted through a long and bloody play with one's life as a symbolic object.<sup>334</sup>

Part of the social character of Jones's "transitional" lyrics, then, comes from the fact that he experimented with sociological and cultural roles that "rhythm and blues" provided for black communities, particularly in the absence of other forms of political and cultural enfranchisement. Like DuBois account of "sorrow songs" in the context of Southern Baptist congregations in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), the "blues" was for Jones an affirmation of the sociality, improvisatory form, and expressive qualities of African culture in America at a time when full citizenship was inconceivable and day-to-day survival was often a violent struggle through the privations of Jim Crow segregations, lynchings, and the criminalization (and growing incarceration) of black men. Yet, one could find in the subtle lyricism and syncretic sound of blues performance a "psychological correlative that obscured the most extreme ideas of *assimilation* for most Negroes."<sup>335</sup> Blues traditions within American focused on the mimesis of "vocal effects" (instead of reproducing fixed notes or scales) to create an art indistinguishable from the experience of life, adapting the call and response patterning of African music to dialogues between lyric and instrumentation, or a speaker and a choral refrain.<sup>336</sup> The rhythms, in short, were intrinsically interpersonal.

The seeming historical, subjective, and thematic fluidity of postwar poetry also led to abstractions of blackness from both the social situations and the formal conditions in which it was constructed or contested. In *Black Chant*, Aldon L. Nielson describes the stylistic permissions of "postmodernism" as a sort of Trojan horse for "the ahistorical relationship between racial metaphors of blackness and self-made notions of white hegemony. The white subject, in effect, speaks to itself, in order to create its own 'racial consciousness.'" It is this "self-constituting" racial logic of white supremacy, itself a fictional project, that produces what Nielson calls "frozen metaphors" (as opposed to exchangeable ideas) which can signify an entire racial discourse regardless of whether they are being used to differentiate between a self and an imagined other. Nielson's likens these frozen metaphors to Pound's luminous detail: "[The frozen metaphor] operates much as the 'charged detail' of Pound, or the 'objective correlative' of Eliot. And located at the vortex of this racial structure is the one signifier which, even when unspoken, serves as the organizing principle of the entire discourse, the white man's name for the nonwhite, the signifier 'nigger.'"<sup>337</sup> From *Blues People: Negro Music in America* (1963) forward, Jones made a career out of distinguishing the actual

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<sup>334</sup> Robert Duncan, *The Opening of the Field* (New York: Grove Press, 1960).

<sup>335</sup> "Blues People," Baraka Reader, 31.

<sup>336</sup> Baraka on the social and cultural origins of African-American blues: "Blues-playing is the closet imitation of the human voice of any music I've heard... And it seems right to conclude that the African and blues scales proceed from this concept of vocal music, which produces note values that are almost impossible to reproduce on the fixed Western tempered scale, but can nevertheless be played on Western instruments... if we think of African music as regards its intent, we must see that it differed from Western music in that it was a purely *functional* music. Borneman lists some basic songs common to West African culture: songs used by young men to influence women (courtship, challenge, scorn); songs used by workers to make their tasks easier; songs used by older men to prepare the adolescent boys for manhood... It was, and is, inconceivable in the African culture to make a separate between music, dancing, song, the artifact, and a man's life or his worship of his gods." (Baraka Reader, 30–31).

<sup>337</sup> Aldon L. Nielson, *Reading Race: White American Poets and the Racial Discourse in the Twentieth Century* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 4, 6.

experiences of "black" people from the frozen metaphors of a dominant "white" culture. This included the racial ideologies that white poets used to shore up spurious universalisms or comfortable bourgeois rebellions that Jones sends up above by way of the hipster figure and D. H. Lawrence's frustrated aristocrat, Connie Chatterley (and her class-crossing affair with the emasculated gamekeeper, Oliver Mollers).

Jones/Baraka staged this encounter between black experience and racial projection most acutely in the play that, in timing and idea, took the place of his BPC lecture on poetry and murder. The setting for *Dutchman* (1964) is rather simple. Clay, a young black man, is riding on a subway train when he is confronted by Lula, a slightly older white Jewish woman. Baraka, then Jones, has said that he wrote *The Dutchman* in a single night after seizing upon the metaphor of the ghost ship.<sup>338</sup> According to 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century nautical lore, the Flying Dutchman was a Dutch ghost ship that could never meet land, forever hovering just above the horizon as the portent of an immense storm or catastrophe. The Dutchman's nautical purgatory was said to result from the guilt of its crew committing some dreadful crime. In Baraka's subway ghost ship, a largely self-contained dialogue ensues that takes place entirely within the moving confines of the train, ending ultimately in the murder of Clay. Just before his murder, speaking to Lula and anyone else who might overhear, Clay addresses the very process by which black people have been rationalized into fantasy objects for charity or uplift:

Don't make the mistake, through some irresponsible surge of Christian charity, of talking too much about the advantages of Western rationalism, or the great intellectual legacy of the white man, or maybe they'll begin to listen... all these fantasy people. And on that day, as sure as shit, when you believe you can 'accept' them into your fold, as half-white trustees late of the subject peoples.<sup>339</sup>

What Clay is describing here is a sort of tipping point between racial fantasies and the stories "civilized" people tell themselves about their own moral progressiveness or political righteousness. It is at the very moment when subjugation seems totally rationalized to the subjugators that these "fantasy people[s]," most of which are resigned to "clean hard useful lives, sober, pious and sane," can finally see clearly who has made them into black and blue objects. To break this cycle, Clay addresses this limit of acceptance to the very heart of our speech, the other side of the lyric scene, declaring a willingness to murder "you."<sup>340</sup> But the anger and hate cycles further, bending in on itself, as Clay's speech is closed by Lula's knife.

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<sup>338</sup> The ghost ship or the *stultifera navis* (ship of fools) has been a recurrent motif in Western European accounts of mad, placeless, or undocumented peoples. The anarchist German writer who lived in Mexico after renouncing his passport following their growing requirement after World War I, B. Traven, wrote his novel about an undocumented American sailor, *Death Ship* (Knopf, 1934), who is condemned to labor-unto-death in international waters because he cannot provide documentation for either an extended family or a national past. In *Histoire de la Folie* (Librairie Plon, 1961), Michel Foucault opens his discussion of the institutionalization of madness by discussing the coercive displacement of lepers and criminals unto roving ships during the European middle ages.

<sup>339</sup> LeRoi Jones, *Dutchman and The Slave* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1971), 36. All citations come from this edition.

<sup>340</sup> For this concept of the mainstream "scenic lyric" based on highly wrought images of personal struggle and epiphany and its contrasts to postmodern experiments with the self as a rhetorical and

One could describe the dramatic structure of *Dutchman* as an ontological bind. Tenjomula Olaniyan describes Clay, for example, as split between being an “individual” and standing in for a “genus.”<sup>341</sup> Fanon describes a version of this bind in *Black Skin, White Mask*, where to “be black” exists only “in relation to the white man.” One’s affective reality is over-written by a “epidermal racial schema” in which blood is black and black is cannibalistic, fetishistic, backward, etc.<sup>342</sup> Uncannily, both Fanon and Jones situate their drama of epidermalization in the semi-public space of a train, resonant with legal and Civil Rights struggles over rights to public resources and transit as *Plessy vs. Ferguson* and Rosa Park’s bus boycott. Long before Lula jabs the actual knife, she ridicules Clay, his name a play on the malleability of his person, for what she projects as his artistic aspirations: “the great would-be poet,” “A black Baudelaire.” She pushes deeper, too, accusing him of trying to pass for what “white” culture wants him to be—a “middle-class black bastard,” “Ol’ Thomas Woolly-Head”—accusations Baraka would later turn on both himself and others. She addresses him as the source of the violence he might imagine or direct toward others: “You’re a murderer, Clay, and you know it.” Clay counters Lula’s accusations with the measure of his body: the beating of his heart, or what it feels like for him to be alive, changing through each moment. None of these seem to stick, as Clay grows more anxious, doubtful, cruel. Importantly, Lula’s character is a part of this schema of frozen metaphors, as Clay refers to her as the white film and stage actress, “Tallulah Bankhead.” Lula is an anti-semetic, femme-fatale type who both over-sexualizes Clay and threatens to undermine his masculinity at once.

These typologies begin to break down when they are subjected to what rhetoricians call equivocation. Technically, equivocation is understood as a logical fallacy in which a single term is asked to do two or more jobs at once, as in “I have the right to be free, therefore it is right for me to be here.” Disparate functions are conflated or confused in homologous sounds. We see this, for example, in Clay’s resignation to the “insanity” of his people, a “people” he, ironically, can’t even claim to be a part of: “My people’s madness. Hah! That’s a laugh. My people. They don’t need me to claim them. They got legs and arms of their own. Personal insanities. Mirrors. They don’t need all those words” (35–36). A racially encoded “insanity” diverges from these personal experiences of madness, just as the generalized solidarity of “my people” breaks down when we consider that such terms are the very ways in which conflicting interests “claim them,” often to shore up their own fantasies about themselves. Where one goes to get outside these equivocations? Simply turning the tables—murdering the oppressor—neither negates the history of racialization or posits some form of social existence beyond the morbid fact.

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discursive construct, see Charles Altieri, *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), in particular his chapters on John Ashbery and Adrian Rich.

<sup>341</sup> Tenjomula Olaniyan describes the typological process as initiated by Lula as dividing “Clay into two: the *individual*, Clay; and the *genus*, black middle class. She knows everything about the latter and very little about the former, which is not surprising since the genus is the realm of sweeping fireworks and frozen identities, while the individual is the field in/of motion” (78). See Tenjomula Olaniyan, *Scars of Conquest/Masks of Resistance: The Invention of Cultural Identities in African, African-American, and Caribbean Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>342</sup> Fanon writes: “In the train, it was a question of being aware of my body, no longer in the third person but in the triple. In the train, instead of one seat, they left me two or three. I was no longer enjoying myself. I was unable to discover the feverish coordinates of the world. I existed in a ripple: I was taking up room. I approached the Other . . . and the Other, evasive, hostile, but not opaque, transparent and absent, vanished.” (*Black Skin, White Mask*, 90–92).



Like Jones's speculative hipster, the “us” of this moving train doesn't resolve into a definitive position but rather fans out into new forms of open antagonism and dislocation. When he reflected back on the theatrical productions during his so-called “Black Arts” phase at the Black Arts Repertory Theater in Harlem, Baraka notes how “white art” and “white culture” became static fetish objects against which the “eclecticism and idealism and metaphysics of the Black Arts Movement” could style itself. This was positive in the sense that it enabled artist to oppose “cultural aggression and bourgeois ideology,” but negative in that it leveled out differences between “Gorky or O'Casey and Tennessee Williams and Kipling.”<sup>343</sup> Michael Davidson echoes this self-critique in when he takes Baraka to task for basing his dismissal of white bohemians and intellectual on a “homophobic image of the artist.”<sup>344</sup> Throughout [Jones] *The Dead Lecturer* and his collection [Baraka] *Black Magic: Poetry, Sabotage, Target Study, Black Art, 1961–1967* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), we see similar antagonisms played out through more propositional political language of a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist lineage.

But even in these more overt sabotages, he is still dealing with a persistent lyric question about how we figure out who is speaking to whom, from where, and with what “motives.” Blunt assertions of black bodies get crisscrossed by enduring class antagonisms within black communities or perpetuate forms of misogyny that sublimate losses of male power into threatening female figures. Lula's racial double exists in the form of Jones's sister, generalized as a middle-class black woman in “Hymn to Lanie Poo,” or in the cruel folkloric turn on black maternity in “Crow Jane.” Along with Davidson, we might also note that Baraka's explanation of mass bombing in terms of the existentialist penchant of “white males” for the “nonrealistic” or “nonphysical” falls short of his own Marxist commitment to critiques of alienation and capitalist labor value. The military-industrial complex approaches this scale of violence or nuclear abstraction not just because of some misinterpretation of Jean Paul Sartre but because actual labor conditions and forms of interracial solidarity are intentionally obscured by nationalism and the othering of “enemies” to a normative democratic way of life. This is also the very history of how transient life was produced as a coherent social category.

Any engagement with the role of antagonism in Baraka's poetics also has to also consider the ways in which his many biographical phases embody the dialectical imperative of changing *my* self and *my* practices in order embody necessary changes in *our* world. Nathaniel Mackey is perhaps the critic most attuned to both the contradictions in Jones's early identifications with “Beat/Projectivist aesthetics” as well as the residual influence of poets like Duncan, Olson, and Creeley on Baraka's later work. Mackey explains Jones/Baraka's biographical turns in terms of a living engagement with the oblique, improvisatory character of traditional African music as well as American jazz. Every moment of definition and self-certainty is subjected to a tensile “testing,” much like a musician might “worry” a note. Taking “The Clearing” (from *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (1961)) as his example, Mackey notes how the explosive openness of Baraka's speech acts become “[s]omething of a treadmill or a stuttering effect results, the sense of someone caught in a rut being heightened by the dead-ending oppositions.” This constant movement between and among oppositional terms or attitudes is not just a formal strategy to emphasize process and relationality over the individual ego, as it was in Olson, Duncan, and Creeley, but to dramatize the “over-determination” of blackness as beyond rational or beyond human and therefore subject to juridical,

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<sup>343</sup> Amiri Baraka, “Not Just Survival: Revolution (Some Historical Notes on Afro-American Drama)” in *Daggers and Javelins: Essays, 1974–1979* (New York: Quill, 1984), 46–47.

<sup>344</sup> Guys Like Us, 144. For a more extended analysis of constructions of masculinity in Duncan's coterie, see Andrew Mossin's *Male Subjectivity and Poetic Form in “New American Poetry”* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010).

social, and political "rationalization."<sup>345</sup> But Baraka also figures his opposing "parts" as resources for other writers, as in a sort of post-thumous poem, titled "leroy" (included in *Black Magic*) that begins with an intimate yet angelic vision of his mother "looking sad across the campus in the late 20/s / in the future of the soul, there were black angels / straining about her head" and ends in a version of a Whitmanic address:

May they pick me apart and take the  
useful parts, the sweat meat of my feelings. And leave  
the bitter bullshit rotten white parts  
alone (BR, 224)

The revisionary speaker is no longer simply "black" but an amalgamation of racialized parts. Even in his most dismissive volume against white culture, the "I" remains a reflection of an uneven history of race. None of these parts could be wholly known to the other.

Mackey's reading of his "about-faces" runs against the typical narrative of Jones's conversion to Amiri Barak. Critics typically describe the change as a choice between a universalizing, a-racial bohemianism and a racially particularized Marxist politics—from the margins of whiteness to the militant fringe of multiracialism.<sup>346</sup> What this narrative presumes, of course, is that white homosexuality or white avant-garde communities were absent of a racial character and that "bohemian" aesthetic values were divorced from self-conscious and highly situated subject positions. But this conflicted history of identifications of avant-garde poetics with bohemianism brings us back to one of our fundamental questions about transience as such. Either it appears like a universal experiment with social, moral, and aesthetic norms and must be refused as a whole or its agonistic parts must be adapted to the more particularly struggles, in Baraka's case, with the present histories of slavery and colonization.

We can also think of Jones radical transitions between attitudes and perspectives in terms of a formal engagement with a range of contemporary black experience that emerge out of constant displacement, either from historical record or definitions of human sociality.<sup>347</sup> Whether Baraka was

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<sup>345</sup> Mackey, 131. Mackey describes Baraka's defamiliarization of racial signifiers as a process of circumventing overdetermination: "The defamiliarization encountered in the poems, that is, betrays a sense of the world as not only determined or conditioned but *over*-determined. This overdetermination is what their obliquities do battle with, seeking to expose, by circumventing, the partiality of common sense, of any consensually-constituted reality's necessary eclipse of unassimilable truths" (Mackey, 129).

<sup>346</sup> Olaniyan's description of Baraka's turn from bohemianism to afro-centric cultural references is indicative of his biographical explanations: "Soon to be dubbed 'King of the East Village' and already married to middle-class Jewish woman 'as protection against Bohemia,' Baraka's graduation into the 'white' world could not have been easier... But there is a world of difference between the margin of white America and the margin of multiracial America. Baraka at this time confused the two, imagining his bohemian revolt to be also a black (from his color code) revolt against bourgeois values. His aesthetic propositions were a-racial, lacking any specificity in regard to the African-American condition. Every dissenter against bourgeois norms, from whatever race, class, or group, was welcome. An empowering African-American identity was no more than a non-bourgeois American identity. (Scars of Conquest / Masks of Resistance, 74)

<sup>347</sup> Postcolonial and critical race theorists have revised versions of a Hegelian-Marxist dialectic that obscure the role of racialized "conquest" in shaping more abstract economic narratives of historical

trying to establish a new kind of public housing in Newark or create a truly revolutionary black theater, Jones/Baraka never stayed still, living out the theory and praxis of Olson's Heraclitean "will to change" in ways that exceeded most of his "postmodern" contemporaries and mentors.<sup>348</sup> The provisionality of poetic forms; hybridities of history, counter-history, and myth; and "conjectural" subjective experience—all of which add up to something like the enduring and contradictory appeal of "transience" as such—were central to substantiating a commitment to radical change while, at the same time, insufficient for fleshing out the disparate stakes for those who participated in these transformations.<sup>349</sup> As Jo Freeman (aka Joreen) noted in her talk at the 1970 Southern Female Rights Union meeting in Beulah, Mississippi, structurelessness can become its own form of tyranny in which power is masked by the so-called informality of the rules.

As long as the structure of the group is informal, the rules of how decisions are made are known only to a few and awareness of power is limited to those who know the rules. Those who do not know the rules and are not chosen for initiation must remain in confusion, or suffer from paranoid delusions that something is happening of which they are not quite aware.<sup>350</sup>

But making the rules explicit, as Jones and his contemporaries were adept at doing, didn't solve the problem either. "Paranoia" was a psycho-social reality for a poet who could be a part of these rebellions against the rules of writing poetry and telling a cultural history while also being

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development from feudalism to industrialism. This has the effect of ignoring the more basic dispossession of the humanity and cultural history of the "native" in its new role in the settler/native dyad. The notion of "social death" emerges out of work by Hortense Spillers, Fred Moten, Jared Sexton, Fred Moten, and Frank Wilderson III who articulate both performative and ontological versions of blackness constituted by the fundamental dispossession of social life. See Jarod Sexton's "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism," *InTensions* 5 (Fall/Winter 2011), 2–47; Fred Wilderson III "Social Death and Narrative Aporia in 12 Years a Slave," *Black Camera: An International Film Journal* (The New Series) 7, No. 1 (Fall 2015), 134–149; Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2003).

<sup>348</sup> See Lytle Shaw's chapter "Baraka's Newark: Performing the Black Arts" in *Earthworks: From Place to Site in Postwar Poetics* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012), 89–116.

<sup>349</sup> I borrow here from Stephen VOYCE's persuasive summary of critical consensus around postmodern poetry in Britain and North America: "This now canonical axiom of postmodern thought challenges modernity's intransigent monumentalism and its myth of a universal selfhood by conceiving of subjectivity as something provisional, transitory, nomadic, and diasporic, wherein a position of permanent displacement is said to register an ideal of ideological flexibility" (VOYCE, 11). But as VOYCE notes, this mythic "rootlessness" betrays the fact that postmodern socio-aesthetic "movements" (combining aesthetic polemics with activist organizational strategies) like the Women's Liberation Movement in the US and Caribbean Artists Movement in the UK sought forms of structure and collective organization to combat systematic racism and gender discrimination. See: Stephen VOYCE, *Poetic Community: Avant-Garde Activism and Cold War Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 1–27.

<sup>350</sup> A later version of this talk was published by Jo Freeman as "The Tyranny of Structurelessness," *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 17 (1972-73), 151-16. The citation here is from the earlier version of the talk, which can be accessed at: <http://www.jofreeman.com/joreen/tyranny.htm>.

beleaguered by rules of law that criminalized one's racial position, one's queer sexual practice, one's resistance to patriarchy.

A pivotal idea that Jones took away from the intersectionality of Black Nationalism was that social justice should be premised upon spiritual, cultural, and historical difference. This included the very notions of public life and civil discourse that supposedly guaranteed democratic due process, like the supposedly neutral right of "speech" parodied by the early "Language" poet, Robert Grenier, in an early essay for *This*: "I HATE SPEECH."<sup>351</sup> Hatred is not only an agency of speech but a limitation on the communication of experience and ways we appear to each other. The fact that African-Americans experience ordinary reality differently had to be registered in the art itself, which was not an extension of some indeterminate subjective potential but a concrete determination from racial abstractions. A recent critic of Jones/Baraka, Alex Houen, takes him to task for what he takes to be the lapsing of a revolutionary politics into exclusionary acts of violence. Houen quotes Jones from "The Legacy of Malcolm X and the Coming of the Black Nation": "Nations are races... Race is feeling. Where the body, and the organs come in." (63). The purpose of Black Arts, Houen argues, was to characterize this extant "racial feeling" and to mobilize it for revolutionary political and social change. Why then does Baraka locate the historical and cultural discourses of racialization in somatic feeling? Or, to put it differently, what difference does a body make to lyric speech?

The oppositional attitude of Baraka as well as other Black Arts writers, like Sonia Sanchez and Larry Neal, is often pitched against spiritual and political abstractions of blackness that divorce it from the practical roles it plays within disparate communities. But when Houen tracks the development of "race feeling" in "Black Dada Nihilismus," he reads the "performative production of race" as "less a matter of affirming African American images and more one of hate-speech against whites" (71). Of course, as Du Bois has shown, an African-American image *is* a white image, and vice versa. Houen himself seems to acknowledge this fact when he claims that "The intensity of aesthetic violence that the poem calls for seems more to indicate that 'dada nihilismus' lacks a positive black character of its own." (71). But despite this absence, Houen still reads the lines—"Rape the white girls. / Rape their fathers. Cut the mothers' throats"—as lyrical instruction from and as biographical endorsement.

If we recall Baraka's letter to Duncan, we might remember that in "Black Dada Nihilismus" a sense of conflict quite literally makes up the black dada figure. The poem is not a vehicle for the violent intentions of a speaker but a lyrical field in which a history of racialization is mediated through the formal differences of an I and a you. Jones even seems to anticipate these kinds of accusatory readings in another poem from the collection, "A Poem for Neutrals":

Yellow skin, black  
skin, or the formless calm of compromise. They will not come  
to see, or understand you. They will call you 'murderer',  
as new songs for their young. (73)

To say that individual acts of murder could undo either deep-seeded structures of oppression or enact collective modes of resistance would be willfully naïve, a fact palpable to Jones/Baraka from

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<sup>351</sup> The brief essay fragment in which the phrase "I HATE SPEECH" appeared, often considered a sort of manifesto for Language writing, "On Speech" was included in the first issue of *This* 1 (Winter 1971), edited by Robert Grenier and Barrett Watten. The issue also contains a running commentary by Grenier on Creeley's work, in particular his collection *Pieces* (Scribener, 1969). For a discussion of Grenier's gesture and essay, see the Introduction to *In The American Tree*, ed. Ron Silliman (Orono, ME: National Poetry Foundation, 1986).

the many "murders" he witnessed within his over-lapping artistic and activist communities. But by incessantly foregrounding changing conceptions of speech and self, Baraka was not simply "exorcizing" these "dark" feelings but trying to show how hard it was to locate or claim a positive black experience, even if he took full confidence from the fact that his writing couldn't be from anything else.

As we turn now to look at Robert Creeley's multifarious definitions of poetic "measure," we will see how his "sense" of the compositional process shares in and diverges from Jones/Baraka's antagonistic aesthetic. Both submit concepts of experience, personhood, and expressivity to constant formal tests. Baraka's musical counterpoints finding their formal parallel in Creeley's constant worrying of communication.

### **Distances between Me and You**

So I cannot say that communication in the sense of telling someone is what I'm engaged with. In writing I'm telling something to myself, curiously, that I didn't have the knowing of previously. One time, again some years ago, Franz Kline was being questioned—not with hostility but with intensity, by another friend—and finally he said, "Well, look, if I paint what *you* know, then that will simply bore you, the repetition from me to you. If I paint what I know, it will be boring to myself. Therefore I paint what I *don't* know." And I write what I don't know, in that sense... And I feel that when people read my poems most sympathetically, they are reading with me as I am writing with them. So communication this way is mutual feeling with someone, not a didactic process of information.

— Robert Creeley, Interview with Linda Wagner, *Tales Out of School*<sup>352</sup>

How does lyrical speech communicate a "mutual feeling" that, at the same time, remains unavailable as something "I" know about either "you" or myself? By refusing an instrumentality to poetic "communication," Creeley is taking a position on a well-traveled question in Western aesthetics about the difference between expression and knowledge and whether the latter emerges from the former (or the former suspends the latter).<sup>353</sup> Writing might ultimately be *self*-directed, but both this "self" and the possessiveness of "my" speech are calibrated in relation to their social implications—reading *with*, writing *with*. What looks like a refusal of communication, then, is in fact a recursive attempt to posit an ethics of address where self-telling bears the responsibility of saying more than what "I" think "you" know, trusting that these pronomial shifters take their meaning from their conjunctural tissue. A poem is a poem because it cannot be paraphrased and therefore substituted by a supplementary narrative.<sup>354</sup> In speech act theory and pragmatic linguistics, we might

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<sup>352</sup> *Tales Out of School*, 26.

<sup>353</sup> Perhaps the first theorists to advance a unified theory of aesthetics, Benedetto Croce, argued for aesthetics as a non-conceptual means of expressivity. Kant attributes a similar capacity in art in his formulation of aesthetic judgment, though the subjective universality of aesthetic experience is ultimately subject to the higher legislative faculty of reason. For broader discussions of the role of expression in aesthetics, see: Charles Altieri, *Reckoning with the Imagination: Wittgenstein and the Aesthetics of Literary Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

<sup>354</sup> Paul Valéry, a writer important to Creeley, defined poetry as the difference between language that serves a transactional function, like asking for a cigarette and getting it in return, and language that

locate Creeley's emphasis on *not*-knowing the meaning of what "I" or "you" say to each other in the performative and illocutionary dimensions of communication. Particularly in situations of propositional ambiguity, both speaker and interlocutor rely upon contextual clues, affective coloring, and sedimented social histories in order to grasp the spirit and intention of what is said. It is important, as Creeley emphasizes, that Franz Kline made his claim about painting within the context of an intense conversation with a friend, just as his many of his lyrics are written "*For Love*."

Foregrounding the opacity of both subject and object often stalls our critical attempts to understand a poem in terms of its avowed or recurrent thematic concerns, such as a speaker's struggle with the permissions and constraints of love in marriage. The emphasis shifts to *why* motifs recur and iterate over time. In *For Love*, for example, one of the most consistent "subjects" is that of the "the fool," a figure, disposition, and trope that Creeley situates in relation to a variety of prior fools, including Hart Crane, whose ecstatic stumbling and stuttering is evoked within the first poem of the volume. That Hart Crane serves as a sort of ensign for the consequential iterations of "the fool" is significant, not the least because Crane's excessive verbage couldn't be more different from Creeley's tight-lipped, impacted style of speech.

"Le Fou," the second poem of the volume that Creeley dedicates to his long-time correspondent and mentor, Charles Olson, begins: "who plots, then, the lines / talking, taking, always the beat from / the breath." (CP, 111). The verbal logic here is subtractive, in the sense that the plotting of lines is scored by subtle extractions and modifications of words, which has the dual effect of emphasizing the facticity of language but also obstructing the emphatic progress of "the breath." One might say that "Le Fou" is as much an homage to Olson as it is a rebuke to his projective ideals, in the sense that iterations of the word "slow" (slow/slowly/slower) not only hone attention but suggest that such intensive movement is not so easily gained. And like many of Jones's poems of the time, this notion of the unfinished yet intensive series of statements, each nested in what follows, is heightened orthographically by the absence of the closing parenthesis. In "A Counterpoint," Creeley writes:

Let me be my own fool  
of my own making, the sum of it

is equivocal.

One says of the drunken farmer:

leave him lay off it. And this is  
the explanation. (CP, 136)

The brief lyric is not an apologia for playing the part of "the fool" (a recurrent figure in Creeley's self-deprecating catalogue) but a playing out of the social consequences of this human type. The *sum* of foolish actions is equivocal. The speaker can neither justify its foolishness through retrospective explanations nor avoid foolishness by disavowing its foolish indulgence for a more sober and rational approach. Equivocality, itself a rhetorical "fallacy" based on the mobilizing two disparate meanings for a single homophonic term, becomes a feature of "making" itself, in which "I" exist in

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formalizes an uncertainty of reference that it makes the message impossible to exchange. Creeley discussed the importance of Valéry's book, *Monsieur Teste*, on his early poetry and prose. Jones/Baraka, too, was a reader of Valéry, as evidenced by his melancholic and deeply satirical poem from *The Dead Lecturer*, "Valéry as Dictator." Jones's poem puns on Valéry's apolitical notion of sonic effects in poems: "Herds, the / herds / of suffering intelligences / bunched, / and out of / hearing. Though the day / come to us / in waves."

counterpoint to what I should or could do as a lover, a friend, or an interlocutor in conversation (Creeley's most frequent social roles in *For Love*).<sup>355</sup> "The Whip" offers a similar equivocation in the form of a lonely, chauvinistic, and angry speaker. Unable to sleep next to "she," seemingly obsessed with a memory of "another woman I // also loved, had / addressed myself to in // a fit she / returned," the speaker convolutedly frames its presentation of her conciliatory gesture ("she put // her hand on / my back") convolutedly as a counter-factual thought: "for which act // I think to say this / wrongly" (CP, 146). The breaking of the "I" before and after the double-line breaks also dissociates the speaker from the grammar of these actions, creating a sense of a vertiginous lag between what is being said and who is saying it.

If there is something like a consistent social aspiration in Creeley's poetics, it is this notion that by moving against and finding its own limits, lyrical speech can become something like a social fact, which he defines here as an equivocal "sum." In other words, the sum is one voice measured against another. Of course, this equivocalness is achieved by a guarded gesture—leave him (or me) alone—unlike the voiced oppositions and targeted threats of Baraka's poetics. We can see this guarded posture again in a poem from the same volume, "A Form of Adaptation," which begins: "My enemies came to get me, / Among them a beautiful woman" (CP, 141). The poem is a strange sort of male fantasy, in that it both positions the speaker as the object of attraction and the attraction as a scene of surveillance: "And they watched her and both of us carefully" (CP, 141). The turn made at the end of the poem suggest that love is possible, to be trusted, even in this scene of sublimation and scrutiny. The poem never asks: *is* this love? One can act *for* love even in situations where love hardly seems like the operative concern. Such is the perverse notion of persistence that the Fool provides, as well, in that the fool makes the consequences of misrecognition into a real, adaptable prospect. "The Wind," part of the second sequence of *For Love*, describes this adaptation as the supersession of fact by feeling: "Whatever is to become of me / becomes daily as the acquaintance / with facts is made less the point, / and firm feelings are reencountered" (CP, 164).

Emotion, as Pound pointed out, is an inherently relational process. In letters and conversations, Creeley would often echo Pound's maxims that "Only emotion endures" and that "Nothing counts save the quality of the emotion."<sup>356</sup> But one cannot judge the poem based on whether a certain emotion seems true or false in the sense that it leads us back to a clear or definite sense of a person who feels. Recorded in a poem, it becomes a fact in its own right, even if the context for that fact might eventually shift over the course of the poem. One of the best early commentators on Creeley's work, Charles Altieri, has described the effect of Creeley's lyrical series as a series of conjectures within overlapping systems, such that a consistent emotional "detail" might resonate within "multiple contexts":

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<sup>355</sup> A common example of the "fallacy of equivocation" is when one is making an argument and uses a word to mean two different things, creating an ambiguity that some orators might claim for specific effects. An example provided by the Texas State Department of Philosophy is helpful: "I don't see how you can say you're an ethical person. It's so hard to get you to do anything; your work ethic is so bad." See: <http://www.txstate.edu/philosophy/resources/fallacy-definitions/Equivocation.html>.

<sup>356</sup> Creeley is quoting from Pound's collection of essays and notes, "A Retrospect," published in *Pavannes and Divagations* (1918). He references these maxims specifically in his discussion of sincerity with Linda Wagner following the BPC: *Tales Out of School*, 32–33.

In traditional poetics, specific systems—both formal and conceptual or dramatic—establish a single, overriding structure of relationships. In a poetics of conjecture, on the other hand, systems are allowed to overlap: Their task is not to define but to place by composing the particular in terms of the difference and similarities with other objects, events, and thoughts occurring in a process of thinking. Each relationship presents one possible use for the particular, and as relationships expand we begin to get some measure of how the specific detail attains significance (or significances) within the multiple contexts constituting an agent's human condition.<sup>357</sup>

What becomes the "subject" of the poem is not simply the absorptive subjectivity of a speaker but the "modes of relationship" themselves as well as the "field of poetic reflection."<sup>358</sup> While this description seems accurate, both in terms of Creeley's poetics and the proofs of his poems, we might ask the further question of why the "multiplicity" of these systems does not in itself explain why one system is more appropriate than another, or what systems of understanding might be entirely absent from these overlaps? What I want to try to put my finger on is precisely this difference Jones/Baraka and Creeley help us think between assuming one has a significance that can't be known or communicated and beginning from a position that has, for concrete historical and political reasons, been relegated to an object for others to own, fear, enjoy, or violently speculate upon.

On July 23<sup>rd</sup>, two days before the end of the twelve-day conference at UC Berkeley Extension, Creeley gave a lecture entitled "Sense of Measure" (uncannily in the same time slot Jones would have lectured). Creeley's talk, coming after rambling lectures from Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer, Gary Snyder, Charles Olson, and Ed Dorn, argued in a sort of informal fashion for the necessity of thinking past the "subject" of a poem (its thematic content) to a more active sense of the constraints any act of writing or speaking finds itself among. Creeley repeatedly makes the self-effacing joke that "writing doesn't count," a statement reflective of both poetry's place in the world and the self-conscious cultivate of metrical patterning. But what he suggests he means, through his contradictions, is not that poetry doesn't fall into or benefit from the abstract patterning of sound we know as "academic metrics" but that he wants to expand what and who "counts" in the process of making and reading poems. Amidst this multiplicity of measures, Creeley notes in particular Charles Olson's notion of "metrics" as a mode of mapping. "I'm taking 'measure' here to imply many things... I'm taking it as a response to the actual, almost the topography, of or [sic] the actual ground, in no metaphoric sense, of where it is that one is moving, or in relation to what one is moving. In other words, how does one gain a use of that place where he or she is—in no sentimental or enlarging way? How do you get to ground...? (4). There is a critical capacity for the conceptual blindness of action to generate social possibilities that would otherwise be unavailable in our failed or frozen metaphors that simply reproduce sentimental versions of contemporary life. But is this desire to differentiate lyrical speech from given patterns of self-reflection and social reproduction, a hallmark of transient poetics, a choice or an imposition?

Creeley notes at the beginning of his lecture that he is adapting his "sense of measure" from a short prose fragment that William Carlos Williams wrote for the first issue of Cid Corman's *Origin* (Spring, 1954). The essay fragment echoes much of Williams's other prose about the necessity of adapting "worn out" poetic forms to the relative content of the "modern world," including its

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<sup>357</sup> Self and Sensibility, 112.

<sup>358</sup> Ibid., 115.



speech patterns, belief systems, and ways of life. In answering a question from Victor Coleman about a prior reference to Williams's statement in Creeley's seminar, Creeley quotes a passage from Williams's autobiography in which he describes the drunken speech of Pompey and Antony in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. Williams wrote: "Now the supreme versifier among us, when he got the chance to show what he could do, and dared to do, followed the same though. Pompey and Antony, when they got a binge on, were shown to measure their measure, their idiom, after a loosed mode" (3). Creeley leans in particular on Williams's turn from a "statement" towards a foreign "idiom" of excessive drinking, which was itself relatively foreign to Williams's physical discipline: "were shown to measure their measure their idiom" [statement] . . . "when they got a binge on [idiom]" (6). Drinking becomes the measure of *their* reality, which Williams analogizes to the physical release from discipline. The poet, in taking measure of a measure, undertakes a recursive process, in that the way different speech "goes" is folded into or put into dialogue with other ways of acting. Creeley likens it to the process of walking, wherein each step is the result of multiple agencies active at once:

As [Robert Duncan is] saying, it's like a man taking each step. Each step has got to be taken one by one because the only possibility of walking is the one step, one step, one step. You can't say, 'I'm going to the store now,' for instance [Laughter]. There can't be any proposal that can exist beyond the step by step progress. Now I'm interested in the fact that it's Pompey and Antony because there's no context like this for these persons suddenly to be present and the fact that he gives 'idiom' the sense of relation to their activity. (4)

To paraphrase Creeley, the activity generates the idiomatic measure and not necessarily some reflexive notion of historical fidelity to the speech or culture of the Roman triumvirate. This is both a radically optimistic and dangerous idea. If writing, and by implication reading, cannot fall back on a prior "context" to explain the meaning or implications of one's actions, one risks acting in oblivion to the very social and political conditions that shape who is heard and how. Yet, at the same time, this inability to narrate one's progress from one word to the next is necessary to dislocate a writer and reader from established patterns of thinking, moving, and relating to others:

[Williams] spoke of having had Michael come out to his house in Rutherford and demonstrate to him the actual steps of the Greek dance so that he might—not follow; here's were the words get curious, because he wanted to step in the surety of a pattern. Not simply one that was something informed by 'time,' but he wanted to have the assurance of a step that would allow him to walk... How he was in that sense so severely disordered that to regain [verbal] articulation took very concentrated and difficult activity. (4)

For Creeley and his interlocutors, speaking in patterns and advancing through space with one's body become analogous formal activities, particularly when one's perceptual faculties have been radically disordered by a trauma. Throughout the rambling talk, Creeley keeps looping recursively back to this parallel that Olson and Williams provide between poetic formation and corporeal (dis)articulation. He extrapolates a notion of poetic form that was not merely a report or description of history but a constantly shifting articulation of a person that could not be based upon the self-evidence of any prior structure or mode of intelligibility.

I remember, for example, Williams's response to the projective verse essay. He said in a note, it's as if the whole area had been opened. He said everything leans on action, on the verb... Olson had shifted the whole concern of poetry to something apart from any descriptive term. That is poetry was not to report, or not to talk about, or not to

tell you things in this sense, but was an activity intrinsically evident in its own structure.  
(4)

Creeley opposes this immanent production of forms to the reified articulations of "gossip," where the "social world" and the "self" seem like a series of casual and repositionable objects. But this intrinsic evidence of activity, for Creeley and many of his contemporaries, was premised upon the idea that we were all somehow equal in actualization. Creeley demonstrates this assumption in the lecture by walking up to the blackboard with logical notation, by writing an A and a B where A stands for "the poem" or a "point in space" and B stands for "all that could confront it" in order to "gain relation to it" (4). To dispel what he takes to be his increasing vagueness, he quotes Zukofsky's claim that "if anything is, then all things are," itself a riff on Spinozan ethics and a rebuttal to the notion that any word is a "place for an argument" (4). In other words, Creeley wants to think of a receptiveness to confrontation and resolute idiosyncrasy in a poem that doesn't reproduce the polarization of argument. Whether this is successful, though, ultimately depends on what is considered a worthy set of "actions" for a lyric to perform.

Though it might seem highly sublimated, there is an inherent social responsiveness to Creeley's notion of a poetic measure based on a kind of transient dialectic between speech and structure. He notes a story Denise Levertov passed on about Williams's unease during the first orbit of the Earth by Russian Cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin. The lack of any prior context for such a singular act was both thrilling and terrifying at once, particularly if one thinks of this loss of any sort of human or humanistic scale as a poetic problem. Speaking later to Linda Wagner, Creeley refers his sense of measure repeatedly to this crisis of human scale, though he focalizes it in his distrust in thinking of himself as an "identity" somehow extractable from where and how "myself" is used:

the thought of myself—that specious concept of identity—but, rather, to what I am as simple agency, a *thing* evidently alive by virtue of such activity... What uses me is what I use and in that complex measure is the issue. I cannot cut down trees with my bard hand, which is measure of both tree and hand. (34, my emphasis)

Mutual feeling, at least in this instance, would seem to entail a mutual use-value, where my agency is both enabled and limited by the things "I" communicate with, including ideas I have about myself and others as "persons."<sup>359</sup>

Interestingly, this is the kind of reciprocal "bracing" that Whitman himself imagined in the strange ecology of "Song of the Broad Axe." Whitman builds up a conflicted notion of a great democratic culture out of his strange method of attributing affective dimensions to the very tools of deforestation and urban settlement. The inaugurating description of the axe quickly moves from a description of a "weapon" to a human form: "Weapon shapely, naked, wan / Head from the mother's bowels drawn, / Wooded flesh and metal bone, limb only one and lip only one."<sup>360</sup> The

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<sup>359</sup> In Creeley's notion of mutual use-value as a measure for poetry, we can hear an echo with a broader tradition of phenomenological explanations of how "things" take on human qualities, and vice versa. In his series of radio talks, *The World of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues: "Our relationship with things is not a distant one: each speaks to our body and to the way we live. They are clothed in human characteristics (whether docile, soft, hostile or resistant) and conversely they dwell within us as emblems of forms of life." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, trans. Oliver Davis, (NY: Routledge, 2004), pg. 63.

<sup>360</sup> Whitman, Walt, *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings: Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Michael Moon, (NY: W.W. Norton, 2002), pg. 155-6. This poem, "Song of the Broad-Axe," appeared originally as "Broad-Axe Poem" in the 1856 edition and then again as "Chants Democratic" in 1860.

poem then scales out in a kind of emphatic serial gesture that Creeley would never grant himself: "Shapes of Democracy total, result of centuries,/ Shapes ever projecting other shapes,/ Shapes of turbulent manly cities,/ Shapes of the friends and home-givers of the whole earth,/ Shapes bracing the earth and braced with the whole earth." (1892, 164).

Though Creeley would never perform this kind of democratic rematerialization, he was largely sympathetic with Whitman's attempts to use experiments in lyric grammar to reimagine social relations. In Creeley's introduction to his selection of Whitman's poems, he wrote how Whitman's form was based on "[a]ssuming a context of necessity multiphasic, a circumstance the components of which were multiple." To say that the process of writing is inextricable from the social content it engages, transforms, and, in the form of a lyric, addresses to another, however, is not to say that the two processes of formation are identical. In Creeley in particular, these visions of openness and transient encounter are countered by the subsequent ethical burdens and reactionary violence of individuals to such exposures, including melancholic or nihilistic speakers who struggle to find affirmation in a person or culture that doesn't reflect their own trauma or privation.

Fittingly, critics of Creeley have long pointed out the limits to his model of lyrical reflexivity. Charles Altieri, for example, notes how the serial plasticity of the "I" and the "you" within the grammatical "field" enables Creeley's subject positions to "become one, many, and again one," which, given the presiding tenor of dissatisfaction and self-conscious scrutiny, has perhaps the unintended effect of making his poems and pronouns seem like infinite play within a "flexible cage." For Altieri, Creeley escapes this sense of being penned in by accepting "various forms of foolishness and inadequacy that are a large part of what one is."<sup>361</sup> But we might add that this "foolishness" and "inadequacy" has itself a social and cultural history, much like the tramp clown of Pierrot, that also contribute to "what one is." This is not say that Creeley gets out of his narcissistic traps by simply historicizing his own position but that the pathos of his poems is generated in part by the fact that "I" and "you" are already a part of a radically delimited field in which only a certain range of dispositions toward one's isolation or adequacy are considered intrinsically meaningful.

As responses to Jones/Baraka's work show us, it is also important to historicize anger as a social phenomenon, as in discerning where it comes from, who performs it, and what it exists in relation to. Michael Davidson differentiates Creeley's "anger" from what he calls "Affirmative Action Panic" and largely class- and race-based gender trouble deriving from changes in the U.S. economy and shifting gender roles in the workplace, both blue and white collar, where the presence of "woman, queers, and racial minorities" suddenly rendered the presumed invisibility of heterosexual masculinity visible. Davidson argues that Creeley's rage is "less directed at the threat of feminization than at limits of masculine roles that constrain him but which he feels obliged to perpetuate."<sup>362</sup> This rage against one's limits results in speakers hurling accusations at a wife or lover that are shown, in the end, to be unjustified and are thus reabsorbed by the speaker as a kind of masochistic self-damage. This doesn't mitigate or apologize for the misogynistic moments in Creeley or Baraka, but for Davidson it suggests that performances of anger or rage are part of a larger structure of violence sustained through institutionalized norms of masculinity and heterosexuality. Their poems should also give us pause to think, as Creeley said in a late lecture at the New College in San Francisco, about why rage can become so expected, common, or banal, particularly for persons who give up the calm of being a readily legible subject.<sup>363</sup>

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<sup>361</sup> *Self and Sensibility*, 127–128.

<sup>362</sup> *Outskirts of Form*, 146.

<sup>363</sup> Clark, 95.

## Magical Ethics

Words are things just as are all things—word, iron, apples—and therefore they have the possibility of their own existence.

Robert Creeley, *Tales out of School*<sup>364</sup>

One could read this notion that words get away from us and take on a sort of alien existence as an easy alibi for saying things one regrets. Yet it also seems an apt description of how aporias of knowledge and the blindnesses of anger get folded into the seeming self-possession of a lyric speaker, as if he or she were speaking for more than themselves. In this final section, I want to follow out the implications of a rather uncanny mutual interest in the ethics and performance of “magic” in Baraka and Creeley. For both, “magic” is a term for the social agency of poetry. It is also a way to describe how words perform kinds of ethical relations that preserve the unevenness not only within speakers themselves but between “you” and “I.”

When Ludwig Wittgenstein took up the treatment of magic by Sir James Frazer in *The Golden Bough*, a book influential to T. S. Eliot and other modernists like Robert Graves, he criticized Frazer for his mistake in associating a belief in magical practice with the will to effect specific results.<sup>365</sup> We can find the point in question within the first section of *The Golden Bough*, where Frazer lays out what he takes to be the two principles of “sympathetic” magical thinking as such, differentiating the so-called “Law of Similarity” from the “Law of Contact or Contagion”:

First, that like produces like, or that an effect resembles its cause; and second, that things which have once been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance after the physical contact has been severed... From the first of these principles, namely the Law of Similarity, the magician infers that he can produce any effect he desires merely by imitating it: from the second he infers that whatever he

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<sup>364</sup> *Tales Out of School*, 50.

<sup>365</sup> For a useful analysis of T. S. Eliot's engagement with *The Golden Bough*, including his eventual republication of an abridged edition through Criterion Press in 1959 and edited by Theodor H. Gaster. One can find traces of Graves's text in many of the *New American* poets, particularly Duncan and Creeley. Creeley credits Graves for giving him the notion that the survival of poets and poetry is itself a magical process. He writes: “[If] you are a poet, you will know that presence of fate... The obedience of a poet's gratitude, for this, is the authority which you hear in his poems, and it is obedience to a presence which is, if you will, that which is not understood, ever; but which he characterizes as all that can happen in living, and seeks to form an emblem for, with words.” (*The Collected Essays of Robert Creeley* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 95–96).

does to a material object will affect equally the person with whom the object was once in contact, whether it formed a part of his body or not.<sup>366</sup>

Frazier characterizes the charms that infer agency through similitude of effects as "Homeopathic," akin to the mimesis, where charms based on "contagion" demonstrate an "association of ideas by contiguity" as well as belief that things "which have once been in contact with each other are always in contact."<sup>367</sup> There is a tension, though, in each of these characterizations, as Frazier goes on to insist that these convictions, based on spurious logical notions of similitude and contiguity, are not actually based on self-conscious "thought" (as his earlier notion of "principles of thought" implies) but rather unverified assumptions about "natural law" (i.e. Newtonian physics). The presumed hierarchy of knowledge becomes explicit when he declares that it is a mental deficiency of the "primitive magician" that cannot reflect on these "abstract principles" in order to raise such associations beyond "bastard art" to the level of "science." The problem, then, is not that magical is impractical but that it has been misapplied, or applied by the wrong minds to the wrong explanations of the world. What is more, it lacked a legitimate agent (or notion of agency) to link its claimed effects with plausible causes.

When Wittgenstein read *The Golden Bough* (or, rather, it was read to him) while he was working on *Philosophical Investigations*, he made the simple point that all Frazier had done, in explaining magical practice as mistaken, was make its definition of magic plausible to its assumed readers, a Western European "us." To give just one example, when discussing the tradition of an Australian tribe to knock out the front teeth of a young boy as a male rite of passage, Frazier writes: "The reason of the practice is obscure; all that concerns us here is the belief that a sympathetic relation continued to exist between the lad and his teeth."<sup>368</sup> In answering to this projection of a reading public, Wittgenstein argued that Frazier's explanations capture neither *why* a practitioner would exercise a belief in magic in a particular *way*. Wittgenstein uses as his example the ritual burning of a human effigy during the Gaelic Beltane fire festival, which he suggests has obvious empirical links to cultural histories of human sacrifice. But if we explain the allure of such a ritual in terms of sympathetic effects—likeness between human and effigy—our explanations never approach the "inner nature of the [magical] practice," which Wittgenstein further defines, perhaps counter-intuitively, as "all those circumstances in which it is carried out that are not included in the account of the festival, because they consist not much in particular actions which characterize it, but rather in what we might call the spirit of the festival."<sup>369</sup> Magic became an occasion, as Thomas de Zengotita has noted, for Wittgenstein to think through how subjectivity spread "out into context," such that figure/ground terms like "spirit" or "character" referred not simply to "personal feelings or

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<sup>366</sup> James George Frazier, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 12.

<sup>367</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>369</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, ed. Rush Rees, trans. A. C. Miles (Nottinghamshire, UK: Brynmill Press, 1979) 14e.

historical facts" but meaningful contexts that were not contingent on particular speech acts.<sup>370</sup> What was at stake was the "ethical depth of ritual."<sup>371</sup>

It is through the cultural concept and practice of magic that we can see various lines of thinking about poetics, ethics, and community become further entangled among New American poets. Recurrent throughout their writing is an interest in the problem of how language can communicate something like a collective agency, one that is not reducible to the will of its speakers yet actively shaping their speech nonetheless. What is "communicated" in a lyric is not a subjective experience addressed to another person but, to borrow William Carlos Williams term, a "field" of actors. And if Creeley's statement about the alien character of words offers an uncanny parallel to Jack Spicer's hope to write poems with "real lemons" in them, it is because their poetry, for all its formal and thematic differences, shares this basic concern with how particular images or series of phrases model the pressure of the "outside" on speech acts. In his 1957 book *After Lorca*, built in part out of an extended conceit of a one-sided (from Jack only) epistolary dialogue with the dead poet, Spicer writes out his dream for poems of real, decaying things:

Dear Lorca... I would like to make poems out of real objects. The lemon to be a lemon that the reader could cut or squeeze or taste... We have both tried to be independent of images... to make things visible rather than to make pictures of them (phantasia non imaginary)... But things decay, reason argues. Real things become garbage... Yes, but the garbage of the real still reaches out into the current world making *its* objects, in turn, visible—lemon calls to lemon, newspaper to newspaper, boy to boy. As things decay they bring their equivalents into being. (JCP, 133)

This serial evocation of "equivalents," distinguished not only by who says them to whom but where they occur in the grammar of a sentence, generate what Spicer calls "correspondence." Unlike Baudelaire's more lyric-bound theory of correspondent images, Spicer seeks out these correspondences from a more expanded field: through translations across languages, times, geographic distances.

Spicer also nests these desires for poetry to draw out these sympathetic relations among discrepant things in publicly intimate gestures, often asking far too much from his friends or his companionable ghosts. In the fragment of a letter to Robin Blaser that he includes in a book of lined verse that came out the same year, *Admonitions*, Spicer phrases the hope of glancing, erotic correspondence mirrored in the methods of magic:

The poems belong nowhere. They are one night stands filled (the best of them) with their own emotions, but pointing nowhere, as meaningless as sex in a Turkish bath. It was not my anger or my frustration that got in the way of poetry but the fact that I viewed each anger and each frustration as unique... So don't send the box of old poetry to Don Allen. Burn it or rather open it with Don and cry over the possible books that were buried in it... Things fit together. We knew that—it is the principle of magic. Two inconsequential things can combine together to become a

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<sup>370</sup> Thomas de Zongitita, "On Wittgenstein's *Remarks* on Frazer's Golden Bough," *Cultural Anthropology* 4, no. 4 (November, 1989), 395.

<sup>371</sup> On Wittgenstein's *Remarks*, 397.

consequence. This is true of poems too. A poem is never to be judged by itself alone.  
A poem is never by itself alone.<sup>372</sup>

A poem, like a particular “anger,” should be judged not only by what it says but what that feeling or speech is a consequence *of*, as well as the kinds of relations each act *effects*. Almost every one of these “nowhere” poems are dedicated or addressed to another person: For Nemmie, For Ebbe, For Russ, For Ed, even For Jack. The syntax of Spicer's seriality is textual, then, but it is also social, erotic, and biographically self-referential, in that it develops forms of intimacy and connection across poems and people that, like his example of Yeats, hover somewhere being alive or being dead to each other. Like the correspondences between Baraka's violent sabotages and Creeley recursive privacies, Spicer's addresses these inconsequential things in order to make them into consequential relations. These relations don't refer back to a static notion of identity or social belonging but rather stage what Judith Butler has called a “grammar of intersubjectivity” in which exposure entails interdependence.<sup>373</sup>

Voicing the interdependence of parts of speech with isolated parts of our social world can feel less like self-assertion and more like falling under a spell. When Robert Creeley visited Beloit College from June 30<sup>th</sup> to July 1<sup>st</sup> in 1970 to give a two-part talk, spells were very much on his mind, as he had been reading broadly in literary histories and anthropological studies of magic. He titled his talk “Poetry and Magic.”<sup>374</sup> He was attracted to the analogs between magical practice and poetic composition precisely because the two seemed like wholly obsolete, irrelevant, or discredited forms of belief according to the value system of industrial capitalism. Both are premised on acts of de-individuation, as in ritual practice or incantation, and their efficacy relies upon the networks of persons and things in which they are situated. The emphasis is not on *who* is speaking but *what* is said, independent of the speaker. In lyrical fashion, Creeley analogizes this self-cancelled state to the condition of “going under *your* spell,” but also to the institutional process of learning how to spell in grammar school. He spends a good portion of the meandering talk quoting from various books he had been reading about the topic, putting these theoretical notions of magic in dialogue with what it means to defend the practice of poetry at a time when the Vietnam war was ongoing and the collective paranoia of the cold war was very real. In their fidelity to the constraint of whatever social situation they are practiced, neither poetry or magic make recourse to the kinds of abstractions that justify the local intensities of violence or loss in terms in terms of calculations of death tolls versus strategic gains. One you start counting off the sublime numbers of the dead, Creeley suggests, you begin to realize that our capacity to “reason” such loss is what makes us paranoid about “rationality”

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<sup>372</sup> Jack Spicer, “Letter to Robin Blaser,” *Admonitions*, 163.

<sup>373</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005). As a consequence of making “myself” recognizable in terms of “ethical norms and conflicting moral frameworks,” (8) the “I” becomes “dispossessed” of an absolute reality, narratively “substitutable,” yet, at the same time, indicative of the counter-fact of “being constituted bodily in the public sphere,” (33) exposed to others.

<sup>374</sup> The transcript and audio recording for this talk are at the Rare Book Library at Washington University in the Robert Creeley Papers (MSS-031), Box 23, Folder 186. Pagination for the two-part “Poetry and Magic Workshop” at Beloit College used is from the transcripts. Inline citations differentiate between the two days of the talk with roman numeral and corresponding page numbers.

itself. A certain paranoia sets in that comes from a sudden “consciousness of a differentiation of experience—it really comes of a consciousness of community experience.”<sup>375</sup>

The idea he keeps looping back to through both personal and historical examples of “magic” is that the “power” for *transformation* is never something a single person “possesses” but rather occurs across a situation. I quote him at length because it gives you a sense of how “magic” plays out as a prosaic form:

I mean, to be the kid who owned something that was agency for transformation, you know, for transforming the situation of others was really not attractive because again it seemed to me that in that circumstance the ego—willy nilly came in as an insistence, that you either had to say, look it's my football but you can play with it and I don't want to play with it. You can even have it, you know... of which, let's say, to get to the apparently what's the root sense of the word that magic comes from, 'magh' [spelled em-ay-gee] is Old Persian, which means, [page break] at least in the dictionary I was using, let me see if I can find it. It means 'to be able,' 'to have power,' but again here I think the English here distorts. I think it isn't to have power, in a sense like a car in the garage, I think it's to have, it's like Lawrence 'not I but the wind that blow through me.' It's to be possessed by the power in the sense that—of almost like pentacostal Baptists or to feel the power in you and to be able, I think is the more accurate sense of it and it means also it means a situation of 'mighty' or e.g. possessed of power. (I, 16–17)

What distinguishes magic as a process or ability from instrumental reasoning, then, is that it one doesn't use magic to will certain results. What is more, one cannot claim ownership over what poetry or magic effects: “The lovely thing about this situation [of magic, being made subject and object of other forces] is that nobody—literally that nobody can own it.” He cites Olson's belief in particular that poets are valuable social beings because they have an “ability to anticipate, and/or [perceive] and/or intuit 'the future'” but that this ability is limited by the equal prospect that claiming its effects often results in figures or speakers “being struck dumb or dead” (II, 4). In performing this possession by agencies other than one's own, magical speech acts reflect back on the poet/speaker, too, as they call into question “knowledges that I most simply and accurately and decisively seem to have” (I, 19).

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<sup>375</sup> Creeley relates this anecdote about an early experience he had in a seminar at Harvard to contrast the immanent measure of experience to the quantification of war's damage through death tolls: “Or I remember literally in a class of mine some years ago, this was a freshman honor seminar, we were talking about a book of Ashley Montague's and he was much concerned with the effects of radiation. Radiation and the atom bomb, hydrogen bomb, the cobalt bomb being the terrors of the 50s and this particular student was really a bright and sensitive young man, said well, of course, it is true that we may and thus by killing possibly 20 to 50,000 people but in the larger view—I thought wow man, look out, I mean, you can't begin with that, you know, you can't begin with the rationality that speaks of 20 to 30 to 40 to 50 thousand people. I mean, you can't begin with that, that's the point. Once you have begun obviously you can continue until any numbers, you know, that you choose to end with... that's an extraordinary—not only is it inhuman but it's now entered into the—I mean, one thing about reason they never told us, is that it's the—I think that reason is the stronghold of paranoia. It's obviously the vocabulary of paranoia because reason only comes as a consciousness of a differentiation of experience—it really comes of a consciousness of community experience” (I, 21–22).



Of course, poetry has long been associated by its detractors with uselessness or promoting agency of the most unthinking, imitative, or solipsistic kind. But Creeley is insistent that the refusal of existing definitions of reasonable intent is not a willful ignorance towards one's situation but rather a reclamation of "loci" for new forms of conduct: "I'm not for example plugging ~~hopefully~~ for some intentional dumbness toward the situation of information but I'm trying to say that kinds of loci for the resolution and/or proposal of human conduct, ~~I think~~ have to be regained." It is not that a purposeful grappling with meaning and materials isn't at work, it is just that "intent" is not isolatable to any isolatable aspect or player in a process. He tells the story of a group of "Irishmen" who get together to make a communal decision after debating upon the pros and cons of certain courses of action.

Having done so, they then go out and get stoned out of their heads and they make another decision. And then if they choose between/the two decisions are the same that's obviously munificent indeed. If they are not the same, I guess they repeated the process, ~~you know~~. Or do something else, or forget the whole thing. . . . For example, if I were to have to say to you how is that I'm even here this night or how I happen to be sitting on this—in a science lab or theater or whatever in Beloit, Wisconsin—I mean, how could I possibly find the rational explanation for that fact. Or how could I even begin to consider that I am any—you know, anywhere in the world, as some discreet instance of intent. (I, 12)

Unlike New Critics who use this dissociation of the poem-as-artifice from authorial intention as a way to enforce certain reading and institutional practices, Creeley takes this movement away from the authorial ego as a way to re-think the capacities of poetic form apart from "moral qualities" by which we judge a person's actions (I, 22). This difference is heard, to, in Creeley's repeated pun in this talk and in other prose writings on the "discreetness" of his lyrics, precisely because what is communicated in a lyric can neither be separated from the social world (discrete) nor valued for its intentional unobtrusiveness (discreet). Rather, the "point" of poetry, if there is one, is to achieve a kind of "trans-personal power" more closely related to the transitivity of situated experience in which binaries like male or female, ordinary or high-culture, become not only reversible but recursive constructions.<sup>376</sup>

Transpersonality, like literary affiliation, has its limits. Even while Creeley and Spicer use various personal, historical, and cultural occasions for magic and its denigrated practitioners—witches, poets, activists, queer lovers—to excavate assumptions about efficacious relations between reason, individual will, and civilizational progress, the radically situational character of poetic agency can also assume a certain normative character of both experience and ethical life. In a prose paragraph included

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<sup>376</sup> Masculine or feminine characteristics become a spectrum in a magical process, as he notes quoting Eric Naumann's writing on shaman traditions: "Even in a later period the male shaman or seer is in high degree 'feminine' since he is dependent on his anima aspect and for this reason he often appears in woman's dress, thus the woman is the original seeress" Creeley also draws upon the example of a Tibetan expatriate community in Seattle, Washington where children played with their 900-year-old tablets to show how magic can afford a certain fluidity between the rarefied objects of sacred practice and everyday experience: "It would be like writing phone numbers on and changing the music a little bit here and there. Letting the kids play with them therefore, part of the page would be missing, you know, really piss on them, shit on them—you know like stir the soup with them... [The] experience of the ritual was not apart from the experience of the casual. In fact it entered and transacted in everyway with the experience of the casual" (I, 24).

within *Black Magic*, “Black People!” Baraka uses lyrical apostrophe as way to disenchant concepts of money and property and individual right, as well as the racial and social hierarchies these words enshrine:

All the stores will open if you will say the magic words. The magic words are: Up against the wall mother fucker this is a stick up! Or: Smash the window at night (these are magic actions) smash the windows daytime, anytime, together, let's smash the window drag the shit from in there. No money down. No time to pay. Just take what you want. The magic dance in the street. Run up and down Broad street niggers take the shit you want. Take their lives if need be, but get what you want what you need. (BR, 224)

*This* magic doesn't just release bodies and commodities from their wooden brains so they can be used. It also aligns languages that have been severed by the ordinary logistics of racism and primitive accumulation: want and need, the expressive body and the spaces through which to express it. Interrupting the circuit of alienation, dispossession, and wealth of accumulation comes through retributive, destructive acts directed as the material mediations of social life: walls, windows, stores, etc.<sup>377</sup> Potentially, such tactics paint these speculative antagonists into a corner, setting them up as targets for further repression or incarceration. Baraka is also flirting with a certain *formal* impossibility attributed to the lyric: making shit move. Crucial to the effectiveness of Baraka's magical summoning of a “Black People” is that this people both exists to be addressed but is also dislocated a social space with these words have their desired effect. The “you” is divided into both a real and speculative entity, yet one that needs to be spoken if blackness and want and need could exist through the same riotous voice or body.

This schism is reproduced on the level of who constitutes a readership for *Black Magic*. Wittgenstein would remind us that the effects of Baraka's magical words are as indefinite as who might hear themselves in this language game, overheard by both black and white readers, allies and enemies alike. This “you” serves as a sort litmus test, in that hearing it as either a *permission* or a *threat* also signals to “us” our various positions within a violent history of subject formation, racialization, and access to capital. What I take Baraka to be trying to make “us” hear and feel, then, is how momentary and embattled any moment of social cohesion really is, and how much the “magic” of such speech is that it draws together radically disparate orders of necessity—a poem, a people, a public—while also leaving their divisions intact. Magic was not a general aesthetic operation but a racially encoded tactic—*black* magic—that referenced a history of prohibitions, demonizations, and sublimations of African ritual within the context of slavery, interpreted variously by practitioners of jazz, the blues, Black Arts, and community organizers.

It is worth remembering, too, that the magical agency of Baraka's compositions was taken quite seriously. The story is well-known but bears repeating. When Imamu Amiri Baraka was arrested for illegally possessing two revolvers in the Newark riot in July 1967, precipitated (though not only in response to) the beating of a black taxi driver by the Newark police, a portion of “Black

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<sup>377</sup> For contemporary resonances between riots and aesthetics, one could look to writings of the French Situationist International, who were one of the first European avant-garde artistic groups to engage what they saw as the socio-cultural implications of the 1965 Watts riots in Los Angeles. Not only did they identify the history of discriminatory policing and access to resources (housing, jobs, public space) as a root cause for the violence that ensued in Watts, much of it *between* black and Asian residents of the neighborhood, but they also suggested the riots would serve as a durable flashpoint for international resistance and solidarity. See: *The Situationists and the City*, 177–96.

People!" was read aloud by the presiding judge, Leon Krapp, during Baraka's trial as evidence of both his violent intentions and his potential culpability in inciting the riot in the first place. Krapp sentenced Baraka to two-and-a-half years in prison, though support from the ACLU as well as public statement signed by other poets (Creeley, Ginsberg, Di Prima, Olson, Levertov, Ashbery, among them) led to a retrial and subsequent acquittal. This is just one of the many instances of poetry being held responsible for scandal or social crisis in court, a situation Baraka had faced with his co-editor of *the floating bear, a newsletter*, Diane Di Prima, a few years earlier in the FBI's charges of obscenity for the publication of a portion of his re-writing of Dante's *Inferno* (and its appropriations by Eliot and Joyce) in the novel *The System of Dante's Hell* that featured a gang-rape in an all-male military barracks (charges also detailed obscenities in a short piece, "Riposte," by William S. Burroughs). In his piece on "The Trial of LeRoi Jones," Theodore R. Hudson notes how the conversation between Trapp and "The Defendant Jones" was based in large part around the circumstantial evidence of his writings (and seemingly their outsized, violent agency). After Trapp notes a "shocking excerpt forma speech which you delivered on September 15, 1967 at Muhlenberg College," Baraka responds "Did I have the guns then too?" After reading the statement "Unless we black people can come into peaceful power and begin the benevolent rule of the just, the next stage of our rebellion will burn Newark to the ground," Trapp turns to Jones and declares his "considered opinion that you are sick and require medical attention."<sup>378</sup> In these two successive exchanges, one sees the shift from the magical effect of speech (your lecture and poem *are responsible for* the riot) to the placating institutionalization of insanity, which has the odd effect of both legitimizing the threat he poses as a speaker while also placing Jones's hope for black power and justice outside the bounds of reason. Baraka's "magic," like institutional definitions of madness or transient life, becomes an ambiguous legal placeholder for a peripheral mode of agency coded as dangerously ambitious and hopelessly misguided.

If there is a commonality to the magics of Spicer, Creeley, and Baraka, it is that the practice of magic drew together seemingly non-correspondent or antagonistic persons and things. Since magic had to be done *with* others, it implied a way out of the privacy of the individual and toward a social and aesthetic "measure." In a "'Statement' for Paterson Society" that LeRoi Jones and Diane Di Prima published in Number 6 of the *Floating Bear*, Creeley describes how "a poet" attempts in the poem something like the "final obliteration of himself," akin to the "anonymity of any song." Paradoxically, Creeley suggests that the way to such self-obliteration and "scrupulous localism" as he finds in William Carlos Williams is through the "most personal, wherein the man leaves the environment of years and faces."<sup>379</sup> Spicer thematizes the self-othering materiality of language most explicitly in his definition of the poem as a series of verbal artifacts—"furniture"—to be provided by agencies other than himself—ghosts, Martians, radio signals. In his Vancouver lecture, he links his compositional method to a process of "Dictation," akin to W. B. Yeats occult practices, which Peter Gizzi glosses as creating "a shared place" between a "poet and the poem's ghost-texts." As active collaborators, poet, texts, and prior lives create a habitable form to sustain "a commerce between the

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<sup>378</sup> Hudson, 51. See: Theodore R. Hudson, "The Trial of LeRoi Jones," *Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones: A Collection)*, 49–53. I am also indebted in many readings to Hudson's comprehensive study of Jones/Baraka's work—fiction, drama, and poetry—published as *From LeRoi Jones to Amiri Barka: The Literary Works* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1973).

<sup>379</sup> *Floating Bear*, 53.

living and dead even after the death of the author."<sup>380</sup> Though Spicer was dismissive of determinate links between a poetry and a politics, he did frequently thematize the peculiar rules and affiliations of poets as social or ethical principles. In the opening to his lecture at the BPC on "Poetry and Politics," Spicer quickly makes the point that the purpose of his talk is not to eschew Vietnam as a problem but to figure out how poetry thinks through this process by which "enemies" are constructed, demonized, and ultimately eradicated or externalized: "The point is that, essentially, the enemy—as I think I quoted in one poem from Rosa Luxemburg—is in your own country." The conscious decisions one makes about what is included in a poem or a low-budget, niche magazine—like *Floating Bear* or *Open Space*—not only pre-figure but enact relations between subjects of conflicting social and political affiliations.<sup>381</sup>

We could think of the transient ensemble of New American poets, then, not as a cohesive group premised on mutual, empathetic understanding or democratic transparency but rather as a messy coalition. In the contested spaces of social and political life, one of the benefits of having a substantial opposition is that it lends both sides greater determinacy. One claim is measured against another, even if this measure is contingent upon the constraints of the conversation or debate itself. And as critical race theory has emphasized, there is an important difference between claiming the benefits of an "identity" position and acting out its implications. The very relationality of identity or identification—even I have to identify with a concept of myself—is often obscured when it functions as a set of static characteristics or ideological expectations imposed by notions of social, political, or critical order. But even if one doesn't subscribe to proscribed identifiers of racism, imperialism, or gender, their structural effects are as much beyond our choice as they are effects of our attempts to articulate less tragic versions of "us."

Writing on the messy work of coalition building, Bernice Johnson Reagon described what she takes to be the necessity of feeling mortally vulnerable to others with whom we make common acts of resistance. At the West Coast Women's Music Festival in Yosemite in 1981, Reagon, there as both a feminist thinker and member of the all-female a cappella group *Sweet Honey in the Rock*, likens her shortness of breath to the struggle of coalition work:

But when you bring people in who have not had the environmental conditioning, you got one group of people who are in a strain... I wish there had been another way to graphically make me feel it because I belong to a group of people who are having a very difficult time being here. I feel as if I am gonna keel over any minute and die. That is often what it feels like if you're *really* doing coalition work. Most of the time you feel threatened to the core and if you don't, you're not really doing no coalescing.<sup>382</sup>

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<sup>380</sup> *House that Jack Built: The Collected Lectures of Jack Spicer*, ed. Peter Gizzi (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 183.

<sup>381</sup> "Poetry and Politics," *House that Jack Built*, 149–72. The Rosa Luxemburg text that Jack Spicer is referring to here, "Either/Or," was a call-to-arms in Spring of 1916 in which she decries the transformation of the international socialist struggle into a national liberal party, the German Social Democrats, producing internal tensions that undermine their organizational strength against a common enemy. See: Rosa Luxemburg, *Selected Political Writings*, ed. Dick Howard (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

<sup>382</sup> "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century," *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000) 356.

One doesn't disarm these threats through the staging of a conference or the serial elaboration of a field-based poetics but rather finds ways to put radically dissimilar "wants and needs" in conversation. Such collective antagonism, elaborated over the expanded field of lyrics and lectures and letters, is what is necessary to give an edge to Whitman's transient notion that: "You will hardly know what I mean / Yet I will be good health to you nonetheless." They give the placeless a place. The *New American* anthology and the BPC conference were such landmark events not because they represented stable definitions of where American poetry was and would go but because they provide us with concrete occasions for thinking through the conflicts that these poets help objectify, often despite themselves. And perhaps mutual limitation and the ongoing character of struggle is more important than any single affirmation a poet could provide, precisely if democratic culture and sociality is to have some of kind of future that it can't or shouldn't know in advance. Parsing this history is also important for understating how versions of these issues persist today, particularly in conversations about the intersections between race, politics, and avant-garde poetics across the increasingly institutionalized identities of poetry writing/thinking as well as poetry's social mediations via various digital networks and publishing outlets.<sup>383</sup>

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<sup>383</sup> Both the journals *Boston Review* ("Race and the Poetic Avant-Garde," edited by Dorothy Wang) and *Lana Turner* (see in particular Cathy Park Hong's "Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde" in Issue #9) published special issues in 2015 and 2016 about the relation between race and definitions of avant-garde poetics at a time when social media was also increasingly debating the role of race in "experimental" writing, particularly in the work of Conceptual poets like Kenneth Goldsmith and Vanessa Place. These debates parallel, in uncanny ways, the internal debates that developed around the racial politics of New American poetry.