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On Lyric's Minor Commons

By

Daniel Benjamin

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

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in

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Abstract

On Lyric's Minor Commons

by

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Doctor of Philosophy in English

and Designated Emphasis in Critical Theory

University of California, Berkeley

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On Lyric's Minor Commons studies how minoritized writers use lyric poems to create alternative forms of collectivity. I argue that poets like Amiri Baraka, Frank O'Hara, M. NourbeSe Philip, and Jack Spicer use lyric poetry's undetermined multiplicity of voicing and reading for various social and political aims. These poems become spaces for politics: they conjure and mobilize collectives of action and feeling. My argument complicates generic and historicist critiques that associate lyric voice with the reinforcement of humanism. While lyric is often considered to be the genre of individual subjective experience, I read lyric as the genre of the collective who can voice or read it. For the minoritized poets I discuss in this dissertation, lyric's collective is not the unmarked hegemonic universal, but another commons. The politics of difference often emphasizes the individual relative to the collective; my readings show how the "black poem" or the "queer poem" offer a commons of their own. These poems are minor in their position vis-à-vis the unmarked hegemonic universal, and also minor in their alternative prefiguring of a different form of sociality without a coercive and majoritarian impulse. By calling these invocations *commons* rather than *particularisms*, I argue that these writers figure minoritized identities as forms of collectivity rather than fixed identifications.

I begin with a reconsideration of the Romantic lyric, a primal scene for the association of lyric with the unmarked and abstract subject. Through reading Dorothy Wordsworth's Journals in apposition to some of William Wordsworth's poems, I suggest a version of lyric reading that does not merely reproduce the subject, but instead exposes language to alternative reiteration through a contingent holding. Lyric's attempt to capture experience in language, I argue, makes that experience into a commons. I then turn to more specific invocations by three mid-century U.S. poets, Amiri Baraka, Jack Spicer, and Frank O'Hara. Baraka and Spicer use lyric poems to call collective subjectivities—queerness and blackness, respectively—into being. Poems, for them, become utopian queer or black spaces par excellence: as Baraka writes, "Let the world be a black poem." I complicate this utopian impulse by asking whether poems can offer security against despair. Across O'Hara's bright sociality, and Spicer's alienation, I find their poems offer various and contradictory sites of entry that account for how experiences of joy and negativity interfuse one another. The dissertation concludes with a discussion of M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*, whose commons is also internally differentiated, speculative, and without assurance. This poem, I argue, assembles a universality of aesthetic

judgment as an ecstatic community that is radically indeterminate, yet posited nevertheless. Throughout these investigations I emphasize how the collective is not a lamentable or optional feature for these poets: rather than using lyric to plumb the depths of personal experience, they use it to imagine and create various emergent commons.

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Introduction: “A Universal Poem”

“If we must die,” begins Claude McKay’s famous 1919 sonnet—but who is we? In McKay’s description of the context around his writing of the poem, the “we” seems clearly rooted in the “Negro people” and even more particularly, “we Negro railroad men” to whom McKay first read the poem:

Our Negro newspapers were morbid, full of details of clashes between colored and white, murderous shootings and hangings. Traveling from city to city and unable to gauge the attitude and temper of each one, we Negro railroad men were nervous. We were less light-hearted. We did not separate from one another gaily to spend ourselves in speakeasies and gambling joints. We stuck together, some of us armed, going from the railroad station to our quarters. We stayed in our quarters all through the dreary ominous nights, for we never knew what was going to happen.

It was during those days that the sonnet, “If We Must Die,” exploded out of me. And for it the Negro people unanimously hailed me as a poet. Indeed, that one grand outburst is their sole standard of appraising my poetry. It was the only poem I ever read to the members of my crew. They were all agitated. Even the fourth waiter - who was the giddiest and most irresponsible of the lot, with all his motives and gestures colored by a strangely acute form of satyriasis - even he actually cried. One, who was a believer in the Marcus Garvey Back-to-Africa Movement, suggested that I should go to Liberty Hall, the headquarters of the organization, and read the poem. As I was not uplifted with his enthusiasm for the Garvey Movement, yet did not like to say so, I told him truthfully that I had no ambition to harangue a crowd. (*A Long Way From Home* 29-30)

McKay describes a group whose inner cohesion increased due to the violence of outside forces. The “we” of Negro railroad men are forced into proximity by fear and nervous expectation. McKay’s poem replaces an externally produced agitation—clashes and violence—with the agitation of a poem that itself “exploded out of me.” This outburst comprises the substance of a future identification, McKay’s being “hailed” by the Negro people as a poet. It is as if the poem again becomes an external agitation, as its possible crowd-raising function immediately appears before him in the words of one of his hearers.

The first line of the poem similarly balances the internally and externally created conditions of collective expression and identification, a balance that continues throughout the poem as a whole.

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursèd lot.
If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!

O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back! (*Harlem Shadows* 53)

“If We Must Die” places the violence to which black people are subjected into the conditional. Black collective resistance counterbalances that violence in the next clause. McKay weighs the interpellating violence of anti-blackness against black resistance to that violence. While the “we” is first stated under the sign of that conditional risk of death, the completion of the conditional is a burst of fiat that places agency back in the hands of the collective. Thirteen collective pronouns are scattered throughout the poem’s fourteen lines, often both subject and object of fiat: “O let us nobly die,” “let us show us brave.” In McKay’s poem the *we* comes into existence not only through the violence that surrounds it but also through the force and energy of its own speech.

While the poem powerfully accomplishes the existence of a collective in resistance, the contours of that “we” remain understated. Some characteristics may still be discerned. As Marcellus Blount has argued, the poem explicitly “builds its contrasts...between...man and beast,” with a less explicit suggestion that the “militant selves of the poem are in fact specifically male” (234). The poem’s lack of a specific delimitation of the “we” notwithstanding, it was widely read in the context of the race riots in the summer of 1919. As McKay describes the poem above, it was the “sole standard” for his status as a black poet. In the immediate months after writing the poem, “If We Must Die” was printed three times in Harlem’s left and black magazines, *The Liberator*, *The Messenger*, and *The Crusader*, and thereafter, “within a month, the poem was republished in weekly and monthly periodicals across the United States” (Aberjhani 166).

Yet the poem’s lack of any specific reference to black people made it open to various other significations—and McKay himself seems to have been open to these readings. In 1954, he reflected on the poem and its reception:

“If We Must Die” is the poem that makes me a poet among colored Americans. Yet frankly I have never regarded myself as a Negro poet. I have always felt that my gift of song was something bigger than the narrow, confining limits of any one people and its problems. Even though many of my themes were racial, I wrote my poems to make a universal appeal. When “If We Must Die” was first published in 1919, it was denounced by many conservative white leaders as evidence of a new spirit among Negroes. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge read it into the records of Congress. But times change and so I was not at all surprised when during the Nazi air blitz on Britain, an English anthologist requested the use of “If We Must Die” for an anthology of verse. But I was surprised by what happened when I turned on my radio one morning in 1944. A commentator was telling about the death of a young white American soldier on the Russian front. The commentator went on to say that the youth was a lover of poetry and he proceeded to read one of five poems which had been discovered on the dead youth’s body. And he read “If We Must Die.” The commentator did not mention the name of the author, Claude McKay, nor did he state that the poem was the work of a colored

man. Perhaps he did not know. But I felt profoundly gratified and justified. I felt assurance that “If We Must Die” was just what I intended it to be, a universal poem. And wherever men are oppressed with their backs against the wall, abused, outraged, and murdered, whether they are minorities or nations, black or brown or yellow or white, Catholics or Protestants or pagans, fighting against the terror, “If We Must Die” could be appropriately read. (Bontemps, *Anthology of Negro Poetry*)

McKay notes the changing ways in which his poem was understood over twenty-five years. At first the poem’s association with blackness seems to be a construction out of McKay’s control. Both in its initiating function with respect to his own blackness, and in its status as a sign for the “spirit among Negroes,” McKay views the poem’s blackness as a “narrow” confinement, imposed from outside. In this construction, minoritization is a limitation. Blackness is a particular relative to another, future “universal” context that the poem would later achieve. A more critical reading might still maintain this dichotomy, describing the poem’s later universality as the result of an ideological operation in which the abstract universal that had previously viewed the poem as a recalcitrant particular now marks the poem as a sign of the universal. For McKay however, the universal movement that “If We Must Die” takes on decades after the 1919 race riots is a liberation from unnecessary restriction.

Yet the poem’s openness to multiple re-contextualization is precisely what makes “If We Must Die” a black poem. McKay’s appropriation of the sonnet form, as Houston Baker has suggested, participates in the dialectic between “mastery of form” and “deformation of mastery” common to many Harlem Renaissance writers (*Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* 50-52, 85). McKay at once takes on the sonnet form as a mask, and transforms the sonnet into a black form. Perhaps for all artists, the use of received forms implies a repetition with a difference. But for black artists in particular, the opening of a purportedly universalist text into a particularist repetition calls into question the nature of that universality. In other words: “If We Must Die” both masters and deforms the mask of universality. The poem’s invocation of blackness is located at this fault-line of blackness’s distinct position and the purported universality of a Western poetic tradition.

This distinct position, however, is always-already a sociality—a multiplicity—a commons. McKay’s remarks approach a certain understanding of lyric that privileges the replaceable singularity of the lyric speaker: that anyone can voice or read a lyric. But “If We Must Die” requires its individual speakers to situate themselves in collective struggle. In its lyric form, the poem summons not a single black speaker but a black collectivity. Regardless of whether another, differently-shaped collective can re-appropriate the words of “If We Must Die,” it will be because of that collective’s resemblance to the poem’s invocation of blackness.¹

This dissertation attempts to offer other possibilities for thinking about lyric, minority, and universality than those which McKay’s comments reflect. In *On Lyric’s Minor Commons*, I argue that minoritized writers use lyric poetry to create alternative forms of collectivity. Lyric, often associated with singular voice, always implies a collective that can voice or read it. While that collective is frequently understood to be the featureless and abstract universality of “the human,” I look here to

¹ In another afterlife of “If We Must Die,” a handwritten copy of the poem was found following the Attica prison uprising by a reporter for *Time* magazine, which reprinted an image of the first quatrain and misidentified the poem as original. Two issues later, none other than Gwendolyn Brooks wrote a letter upbraiding *Time* for failing to recognize “one of the most famous poems ever written” and cited it in full (see Caplan 12).

writings that conjure other forms of commons. The texts I examine in what follows use lyric poetry's undetermined multiplicity of voicing and reading for various social and political aims. Beyond arising from minoritized poets, the commons these lyrics conjure are minor in their alternative prefiguring of a different form of sociality without a coercive and majoritarian impulse. In some of these poems, lyric calls into being particular and defined communities: "Calling all black people" (to quote Amiri Baraka) rather than an abstract humanity. In others, like M. NourbeSe Philip's book-length poem *Zong!*, lyric creates a speculative commons, where what gives voice and who is invoked remain in question, and open to those who would add their voices to the poem's ongoing reading. Lyric's capacities go beyond invoking a putatively universal human subject: lyric conjures impossible or actual political communities, imagines what it might be to speak with the voices of the dead, makes direct demands on listeners for action or speech. The contemporary critical landscape has made it difficult to read these kinds of invocations by constructing lyric as humanist abstraction, and minoritized writing as particularist.

In both theories of "lyric humanism" (associated with the New Criticism and its followers) and critiques of lyric (from as varied sources as the Frankfurt School, deconstruction, Language writing, and New Historicism), the human functions as the horizon for lyric. Theories of lyric humanism identify lyric with the capacity to give voice to human subjectivity, as universal and reiterable through the process of reading. Helen Vendler writes:

A lyric is meant to be spoken by its reader as if the reader were the one uttering the words. A lyric poem is a script for performance by the reader. It is, then, the most intimate of genres, constructing a twinship between writer and reader. And it is the most universal of genres, because it assumes that the reader resembles the writer enough to step into the writer's shoes and speak the lines the writer has written although they were the reader's own [Quotes Frost, "The Road Not Taken"]... We do not listen to him; we become him (*Poems, Poets, Poetry* xlii-xliii)

The imagined speech of lyric, and the communication that imagined speech implies, implicitly requires a universality: the reader "resembles the writer," and "is to be transformed" into him. As such, the shared humanity must either be recognizable in advance, or be the conclusion of the poem's successful operation of sympathy. Vendler writes elsewhere: "It is indispensable, then, if we are to be made to want to enter the lyric script, that the voice offered for our use be 'believable' to us, resembling a 'real voice' coming from a 'real mind' like our own" (*The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* 133). Whether the believable reality of the human functions as ground or as horizon, there is a circular thinking here. But for humanists, this is not a vicious circle. Lyric depends upon the universality it is also said to produce, but that is also a feature of the human as a self-identical concept.²

The critique of lyric humanism has come as a part of a broader critique of humanism; hence notable critiques by Theodor Adorno³ and Paul de Man. More recently, Virginia Jackson and Yopie

² Recent revisionist theories of lyric by Mutlu Konuk Blasing and Oren Izenberg are critical of humanism, but allow psychoanalysis and analytic philosophy to function as cypher-humanisms of a sort, replacing the humanism that can't work with one that supposedly will.

³ In Adorno's critique of lyric, the withdrawal from the social is an "idiosyncratic opposition" to the forces of reification and alienation that are characteristic of capitalism ("Lyric Poetry and Society" 40). In attempting to voice the human free from social restraint, lyric poetry indicates the limitations placed upon the human by the subjection of society. Lyric does not succeed by its own lights, but rather in its demonstration of the very relationship of the subject to society manifest

Prins have associated even this critique of lyric with what they call “lyricized” assumptions. Their New Historicist diagnosis describes the “reading practice” of “lyricization” as a “tendency to read ‘the lyric’ as a genre defined in terms of subjective expression” (“Lyrical Studies” 523). This challenges what Prins calls “anthropomorphic” readings, in which “we try to insert the human in the places—or poems—where it is least certain” (Prins, “Voice Inverse”, 46). Rather than disagreeing with (e.g.) de Man’s critique of anthropomorphism, Jackson and Prins characterize that very reading (of lyric as anthropomorphic) as lyricized. But even within this critique, other possibilities for reading lyric emerge. Jackson’s book *Dickinson’s Misery* follows more sympathetically the contours of “lyric reading,” beginning by noting the strange and contingent processes that turned Emily Dickinson’s lines on the backs of receipts or at the ends of letters into lyric poems. Viewing lyric as the function of a *reading practice* allows Jackson to suggest other reading practices that attend to poems more in their historical context. But it seems to me that we can also dwell longer on the benefits of, as well as the problems with, lyricization. If we understand that to read lyrically is to read for voice, the person, and an assumed connection between reader and poem, then perhaps we can imagine other forms of lyrical reading that treat those aspects more speculatively.⁴

This is the approach taken by Barbara Johnson in her response to de Man’s deconstructive critique of lyric. Johnson notes that we can distinguish between anthropomorphism and personification, with the former treating the definition of the human as given, and the latter treating the human as awaiting definition—and, perhaps, even eluding terminal definition:

Not only does anthropomorphism depend on the givenness of the essence of the human and personification does not, but the minglings of personifications on the same footing as “real” agents threatens to make the lack of certainty about what humanness is come to consciousness. Perhaps the loss of unconsciousness about the lack of humanness is what de Man was calling “true ‘mourning.’” Perhaps the “fallacious lyrical reading of the unintelligible” was exactly what legislators count on lyric poetry to provide: the assumption that the human *has been* or *can be* defined so that it can be presupposed without the question of its definition’s being raised as a question—legal or otherwise. Thus the poets would truly be, as Shelley claimed, the “unacknowledged legislators of the world,” not because they covertly determine policy, but because it is somehow necessary and useful that there *be* a powerful, presupposable, unacknowledgment. But the very rhetorical sleight of hand that would instate such an

through the sounding forth in language that pretends to an individualism. Robert Kaufman has recently elaborated some of the possibilities that emerge out of this critique, arguing that lyric’s subjectivization of objective language gives it a particular power in gesturing to other possibilities at the level of the concept, and therefore at the level of politics more broadly. Baudelaire’s poetry, Kaufman writes, “discovers critical (not consolatory or redemptive but probing) formal means to wrest a sense of aura precisely from aura’s absence; it discovers how to particularize particularity’s disappearance, how to invest the seeming unavailability of reflective experience with the charge and force *of* reflective experience (so that one might be enabled to reflect, for starters, on what it means to appear to have lost reflective capability itself)” (Kaufman, *PMLA*, 214). Kaufman’s Kantian-Adornian-Baudelairean vision of poetry is officially “springboard for a rational, noninstrumentalized, noncoercive constructionism” (“Red Kant” 713). But while coercion in the form of law is absent, this constellation strongly (perhaps even *coercively*) identifies poetry’s capacity with a version of the conceptual. While agreement, for Kaufman’s Kant, remains fictive, this still creates a limiting structure for the kind of collectivity poetry can intend. It is not clear how noncoercive agreement can follow the form of coercive agreement without retaining its narrowing structure. I return to Kantian possibilities for reading lyric in chapter 4.

⁴ I pursue this discussion in chapter 1.

unacknowledgment is indistinguishable from the rhetorical structure that would empty it. Lyric and law are two of the most powerful discourses that exist along the fault line of this question. (316)

It seems to me that these readings allow us to understand the motions of lyric reading as generative rather than limiting; contra de Man, the human need not be the final “level” to which lyric (and the deconstructive critique of lyric) points.⁵ In both lyric and law, Johnson notes, “the human” seems taken for granted but is actually being created and defined. Lyric’s space of unacknowledgment can legislate, with powers whose extent are yet to be determined. Fred Moten continues with the metaphor of law in his analysis of Robert Cover’s description of “the fecundity of the jurisgenerative principle”: “What if,” Moten writes, “the imagination is not lawless but lawful?...Will law then have been manifest paralegally, criminally, fugitively, as a kind of ongoing antisystemic break or breaking...? [I]he jurisgenerative principle is a runaway. Gone underground, it remains, nevertheless, our own anarchic ground” (“Jurisgenerative Grammar (For Alto)” 128). That lyric has been aligned with the legislation of the human does not mean that lyric cannot also legislate otherwise. Lyric’s humanism limits lyric’s invocation to a single focal point—and in refusing that humanism we can allow lyric to invoke multiply and minorly.

This study follows the spirit of Johnson, Moten, and others engaged in affirmative deconstruction—allowing the terms of lyric, as Judith Butler and Joan Scott write of feminism, to “be reused and rethought, exposed as strategic instruments and effects, and subjected to a critical reinscription and redeployment” (xiv).⁶ The following chapters offer examples of lyric reading as a space of reinscription and play, as speculative and generative. While I agree with Jackson and Prins that viewing lyric as a reading practice enables this reading otherwise, I am also suggesting that 20th century writers operating in the lyric mode are themselves engaging in this reinscription. For the writers at the center of my dissertation, using lyric as a means of invoking *queerness* or *blackness* rather than invoking the *human* was itself a project of affirmative deconstruction. While many writers in this period directly rejected and refused lyric,⁷ these writers use it to other ends.

In an infamous polemic, Ron Silliman claimed that constructivist literary experimentation fell to the purview of those privileged by history (i.e. straight white men), whereas those previously excluded from the subject would prefer to write in more traditional forms, occupying a position they had heretofore been denied.⁸ Silliman was strongly criticized by fellow writers who were explicitly in

⁵ See, similarly, Jonathan Culler’s essay on “Apostrophe.”

⁶ For a few examples, see Gayatri Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*; Butler, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*; Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice*. Derrida’s later writings are often cited as “affirmative,” and I discuss some of these in chapter 4; but as early as a 1986 interview, Derrida says: “I have constantly insisted on the fact that the movement of deconstruction was first of all affirmative—not positive, but affirmative...To say that deconstruction is negative is simply to reinscribe it in an intra-metaphysical process. The point is not to remove oneself from this process but to give it the possibility of being thought” (*Points* 211).

⁷ See Marjorie Perloff, who writes that Language poetry’s critique of lyric “must be understood as part of the larger post-structuralist critique of authorship and the humanist subject” (“Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject” 406-407).

⁸ “Progressive poets who identify as members of groups that have been the subject of history—many white male heterosexuals, for example – are apt to challenge all that is supposedly ‘natural’ about the formation of their own subjectivity. That their writing today is apt to call into question, if not actually explode, such conventions as narrative, persona and even reference can hardly be surprising. At the other end of the spectrum are poets who do not identify as members of groups that have been the subject of history, for they instead have been its objects. The narrative of history has led not to their self-actualization, but to their exclusion and domination. These writers and readers – women, people of color, sexual minorities, the entire spectrum of the ‘marginal’—have a manifest political need to have their stories told. That their writing should often appear much more conventional, with the notable difference as to who is the subject of these conventions, illuminates the relationship between form and audience” (cited in Silliman and Scalapino 51).

the “experimental” camp.⁹ His argument, however, does reflect a dominant understanding of lyric: that in its purported universality, lyric produces the subject as privileged by history, which is to say, normatively white, male, cis, and straight. As Vendler writes, lyric “deliberately strips away most social specification (age, regional location, sex, class, even race)” (“Introduction to *The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets*” 129). The new lyric studies, in subjecting lyric to a historicist approach, promises to correct this bias. Sonya Posmentier’s recent study *Cultivation and Catastrophe: The Lyric Ecology of Modern Black Literature* offers one such possibility; as Angela Hume has written in review of this text, “Posmentier models possibilities for what we might call transnational lyric reading... a mode of reading that considers how a range of cultural and environmental influences that transgress national borders inform a poet’s practice” (114).¹⁰

I am not certain, however, that an emphasis on historical particularity can adequately account for the innovative uses of lyric by those excluded from the abstract universal. Political imperatives have led minoritized writers to emphasize difference, which has often been reflected in a literary-critical historicist nominalism. But as Denise Ferreira da Silva has argued, for the “others of Europe” to embrace their historicity vis-à-vis abstract universality is to maintain the structure of this universal.¹¹ My contention in this project is that minoritized writers often reject the status of a recalcitrant particular waiting to be absorbed by abstract universality. They instead conjure other forms of being that offer alternative commons. Recent theoretical approaches have reflected this perspective, in the “ontological turn” in black studies (by writers like Silva, Moten, and Christina Sharpe) and the “anti-anti-relational turn” in queer studies (by writers like José Esteban Muñoz and Sara Ahmed).¹² So too have intersectional studies that, rather than viewing the intersection of identity as an ever-more-specific point on a map, look to overlapping structures of identity that grow ever more collective (I am thinking of recent works by Nadia Ellis and Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley).

Moten has suggested that blackness has a privileged capacity to conjure “a subalternity of universality, a subalternity of ensemble” (*In the Break* 163). The “undercommons” that Moten and Stefano Harney explore shows that exclusion from the universal is a position of strength for developing other forms of collective life. Monique Wittig makes a similar argument with respect to Djuna Barnes; “all minority writers (who are conscious of being so),” she writes, “enter into literature obliquely” (65). This different “angle of approach” affords a special perspective on literature’s necessary oscillation between generality (its openness to the experience of others who read it) and particularity (the individual point of view):

Since Proust the subject has never been the same, for throughout *Remembrance of Things Past* he made “homosexual” the axis of categorization from which to universalize. The minority subject is not self-centered as is the straight subject. Its extension into space could be described as being like Pascal’s circle, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. This is what explains Djuna Barnes’ angle of approach to her text—a constant shifting which, when the text is read, produces an effect comparable to what I call an out-of-the-corner-of-the-eye perception; the text works through

⁹ See Leslie Scalapino’s exchange with Silliman, as well as Rae Armantrout, “Why Don’t Women Do Language-Oriented Writing?”

¹⁰ I engage more directly with Posmentier’s reading of *Zong!* in chapter 4.

¹¹ See the introduction to chapters 2 and 3 for more on this question.

¹² I adopt the term “anti-anti-relational” turn from Drew Daniel’s review of Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia*.

fracturing. Word by word, the text bears the mark of that “estrangement” which Barnes describes with each of her characters.

[...]

But whatever one chooses to do on the practical level as a writer, when it comes to the conceptual level, there is no other way around—one must assume both a particular and a universal point of view, at least to be part of literature. That is, one must work to reach the general, even while starting from an individual or from a specific point of view. This is true for straight writers. But it is true as well for minority writers. (65, 68)

Writers like Barnes—and, I would add, Claude McKay—open up the possibility for a fractured relationship to the universal. To write lyrically from a black or queer perspective, when lyric normatively wipes away social distinction, is to conjure a different kind of commons: it is not only a particular, but a different way to move to generality.

My project focuses on the period after Barnes and McKay, and perhaps depends upon modernism’s abandonment of a certain mandatory generality in the avant-garde, and localist dispersion away from a monolithic understanding of culture. I think the cultural independence of Amiri Baraka’s Newark and Jack Spicer’s San Francisco owes much to these modernistic innovations, in their eschewing appeal to a purported mainstream. Nonetheless, I would be cautious about placing too much emphasis on a developmental narrative here. Writing from the Romantic period (as we shall see) makes similar possibilities for alternative commons at the exact moment when a more abstract humanist understanding of poetry was being defined. My approach to literary history in general is not to describe the limits on what authors and texts can do, but to describe the possibilities to which they gesture. Our readings can open these possibilities—and my dissertation’s move across periods suggests, I hope, alternative historical itineraries that are not necessarily developmental. That said, the mid-twentieth century seems like an especially fertile ground for this project. Political movements by minoritized groups in this period offered blackness and queerness as modes of collective belonging, without assuming in advance what form that collectivity would take.

A coincident theoretical discourse for this new writing of sociality comes from a constellation of European thinkers who attempt to recast relationality and community from an abyssal standpoint that would seem to make the discourse of community impossible. For Jean-Luc Nancy, Maurice Blanchot, and Derrida (among others), the disastrous consequences of Stalinism and Nazism call into question any kind of politics that would “stem from the will to realize an essence” (Nancy, *Inoperative Community* xl). Nonetheless these authors attempt to understand the commons even as it must be unworking, unavowable, to-come. In the contemporary historical moment, this new thinking of the commons is urgently characterized by ecological crisis that recasts the position of the human in the world.¹³

I begin my dissertation by turning to the primal scenes of lyric’s humanism in the Romantic period. In chapter 1, “Lyric Theory in Apposition,” I read Dorothy Wordsworth’s Journals alongside her brother William’s description of the poet as a “man speaking to men,” and John Stuart Mill’s description of poetry as overheard speech “of the nature of soliloquy.” Mill’s and Wordsworth’s descriptions have become suspect in Jackson and Prins’ critique of the “tendency to read ‘the lyric’ as a genre defined in terms of subjective expression.” In contrast, I argue that the Journals mark language’s capacity to enter into commonness, to make common, without taking individual possession. This making common, I argue, is lyric reading; I read these prose fragments as

¹³ Cf. Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History.”

lyric for their interest in the capacity of writing to make relation between the self and what is other to the self. Comparing Dorothy Wordsworth's interest in the "delicious spot" to William Wordsworth's interest in "spots of time," I argue that lyric's attempt to enclose experience in language is an enclosure that immediately becomes open. Against the grain of enclosure's disastrous effects on English commoners, writing's enclosure is a beneficent capacity that makes other enclosures possible.

An interlude follows, "Writing the Community of the Future," in which I compare the collaborative writing of the Wordsworths to that of Bruce Boone and Robert Glück, founders of San Francisco's New Narrative movement in the late 1970s. These four writers share a definition of writing as the collective activity of walking and seeing together, and then finding those sights and sounds and walks repeated in language. New Narrative emerged in the wake of Language poetry's anti-lyric critique; and I argue that from the present view, Boone and Glück's response appears as an apposite alternative that detraumatizes that critique's iconoclasm. Boone and Glück also share with the Wordsworths an interest in the very small community—of friendship, of sex, of writing—functioning as a kind of image, however obscure, for the larger community, both already present and to come. Boone's writing, in particular, on earlier gay coterie poets like Jack Spicer and Frank O'Hara sets the terms of the chapters that follow, which reconsider the writings of Spicer and Amiri Baraka as invocations of queerness and blackness, respectively, that go beyond particularism.

In these two chapters, I consider analogous developments towards a politically invested lyric by Baraka in the 1960s and Spicer in the 1950s. For Baraka and Spicer both, poetry becomes a particular solution to political problems; through poems, these writers ask urgent political questions: How are we going to organize our collective life? What "we" can we assemble, and what can that "we" do by speaking and acting together? These political questions are questions of lyric, questions of how voice can become multiple. In chapter two, "A Black Poem and a Black World," I trace Baraka's turn from the lyric of individual experience to the lyric of collective experience, which coincides with his turn from Beat to Black Nationalist poetics. While in his Beat period, Baraka valorized the artist's individual rebellion against the hegemonic universal, poems from *Black Magic* (1969) discover a "we" that is an alternative commons, as he writes in "Black Art": "We want a black poem. And a/Black world/Let the world be a Black Poem." Poems like "Black Art" call the black world into being, and at the same time are animated by it. Their ebullient worldmaking fiats often come alongside sharp turns of invective. Baraka's writing on music offers a model for this back-and-forth in which destruction and invocation lie close alongside one another. I address Baraka's homophobic invective directly in a second interlude, "The Negative as Resource," in which I consider what it would mean to understand Baraka's homophobia as itself a queer text, following Marlon Ross's reading of Baraka's "camped dozens." The performative repetition of violent language, in "Black Art" and elsewhere, might (on this reading) gesture towards alternative structures and contexts for language's violence. Ultimately, a reparative approach to Baraka's homophobia might fall short—as indeed Baraka himself, in the 2000s, directly recanted homophobic language from this period.

The proximity of abjuration and avowal resonates similarly in my discussion of Jack Spicer's poetry in the next chapter, "This Is How We Dead Men Write To Each Other." For Spicer, the serial poem models a utopian sociality that rejects the alienated individuality of the single poem. The latter, Spicer writes, are "one night stands filled (the best of them) with their own emotions, but pointing nowhere, as meaningless as sex in a Turkish bath." Spicer describes his own *After Lorca* (1957) as epochal in reflecting his understanding that "Poems should echo and reecho against each other... They cannot live alone any more than we can." This turn, while frequently read formally (thanks in part to Spicer's own later commentaries), comes alongside Spicer's involvement with the Mattachine Society, an early homosexual activist group. While working with the Mattachine, Spicer

was interested in finding a social form that would transform individual alienation into a political and social identity. His involvement was brief and ultimately disappointing, but I argue that the poem becomes the site of queer political work that the Mattachine (for Spicer) failed to be. For Spicer, queerness becomes a form of relation paradigmatically located in poetry, that writing has a special ability to conjure—as with blackness, for Baraka.

The following interlude tempers these utopian tendencies. In “Two Ribbon-Wrapped Hearts,” I read Spicer alongside Frank O’Hara, in considering how the overwhelming joy of queerness and its negative relationship with the mainstream might be collaborative experiences, embedded within each other. I begin with a discussion of O’Hara’s ebullient gay bar poem “At the Old Place”—in which Spicer makes an unflattering appearance as an avatar of shame. Yet I argue, through reading some other Spicer texts, that shame and alienation can themselves be collective experiences, and especially when submitted to poetic repetition. Poetry can hold shame and joy together, allowing affective entry not only through identification but through holding contradiction. O’Hara’s metaphor for this space of contradiction is “the heart,” which both moves and is still, contains and exceeds.

The final chapter, “On Ecstatic-Aesthetic Universality—In *Zong!*,” picks up from the ecstatic movement between positions that O’Hara’s “heart” metaphors evince. I argue that M. NourbeSe Philip’s book-length poem offers aesthetic experience as an undetermined exposure towards communality. As readers we are not merely consuming the poem, which emerges from Philip’s reading of a 1781 court decision regarding a slave massacre; instead the poem dislocates us and redirects us towards others. In *Zong!*, this means a relation with the dead that does not require their representation, but instead puts readers into community with them; we do not ventriloquize their voices, but put our voices alongside theirs. The difficult form of *Zong!* creates this community by eschewing identification with the slaves for a more various experience, dispersed among many voices and languages. My argument moves through Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment* to argue that aesthetic experience as such requires this ecstatic movement. The sociality assembled by aesthetic judgment is a de-structured collectivity. The *sensus communis* of *Zong!* is not an *a priori* universality, but a radically undetermined collectivity that is posited nevertheless. *Zong!*’s thematic interest in discovering this form of collective relation in spite of the rejected humanity of the murdered slaves is redoubled in its formal questioning of how writing can make voice heard in modes otherwise than the humanist lyric.

In moving from the Wordsworths to the 20th century and then back to Kant again, I am not suggesting that the Romantic period must remain the singular standpoint for lyric. Instead I am looking to model a critical approach where literary history offers a set of possibilities rather than a set of limits. The standpoint for these possibilities is the present—a present that can make various itineraries through the literary past. These readings are attempts to find the communities that poems seek. They appreciate the agency of poems in creating different worlds, by attempting to replicate that agency in the critical attempt to describe and inhabit them. They ask if criticism, too, can be a form of writing that necessarily needs other people—that invokes a form of being together—that calls into being a lyric commons.

Chapter 1: Lyric Theory in Apposition

This contrast of Coleridge and Wordsworth is not meant to devalue the former but to disclose a missed connection in England between philosophy and poetry, one that became a great divide. It is not philosophy that can be my concern; my solicitude for its health would seem, rather, misplaced. The question is, rather: Can we take poetry as seriously as Coleridge took Wordsworth, expending a similar quality of intelligence? (Geoffrey Hartman, *The Unremarkable Wordsworth* xxix)

And can we take Dorothy Wordsworth's lyricism as seriously as William and Coleridge took her?¹⁴ This question is not meant to devalue her male counterparts, but to find (through Dorothy Wordsworth's writing) a guide to breaking down anti-lyric readings that would halt the possibilities for making common that lyric could offer. Following Dorothy Wordsworth, using her writings as a guiding thread, this chapter attempts to locate lyric in apposition, in a horizontal relation that does not hierarchize. In the works of Dorothy and William Wordsworth, writing—which is to say, the shared activity of walking and seeing together, and then finding those sights and sounds and walks repeated in language—provides a non-traumatic differentiation. The event of writing puts into relation without necessarily organizing hierarchically. I read the Wordsworths in apposition to more paranoid readings surrounding the question of lyric: specifically, the pretension that lyric belongs to the human as a self-identical concept (“man speaking to men”) that has been subject to New Historicist critique by Romanticists.¹⁵ In reading these texts in apposition to more paranoid readings, I am also seeking to find in these authors a lyric theory of apposition, a mode of relation where “human” and “nonhuman,” “language” and “experience,” “domestic” and “sublime,” might appear next to each other without either term taking priority. As Hartman asks at the start of *The Unremarkable Wordsworth*, this reading aims to dissolve “false dichotomies or reversible oppositions, including that between ‘denken’ and ‘dichten’” (xxix). And Hartman's writing provides my guide, in other ways. Hartman writes, of Wordsworth's “Peele Castle”: “Perhaps he is afraid of returning to the ‘spot’ in his mind that still wounds him, the drowning of his brother, its irreversibility, and the feeble wishfulness of every notion of supernatural-natural sympathy” (*Wordsworth's Poetry* 287). This is a typically Hartmanian sentence where relations of entailment come as nothing more than supervening effects of adjacency; this chapter follows this style's aesthetics.

1. Mill's imprisonment

Poetry and eloquence are both alike the expression or uttering forth of feeling. But if we may be excused the seeming affectation of the

¹⁴ Hartman asks: “What if, in Derrida's *Glas*, the right-hand commentary had been on Wordsworth rather than Genet, to accompany the left-hand column on Hegel?” (*Unremarkable Wordsworth* xxvii). One question this chapter asks: What if Hartman's *Wordsworth's Poetry* had concerned the prose of the sister rather than the verse of the brother?

¹⁵ I follow Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's distinction between paranoid reading and reparative reading: “The reparative reader, Sedgwick writes, ‘has room to realize that the future may be different from the present...to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did’ (25). A reparative reading of lyric refuses the paranoid posture that seeks to discover what lyric is covering up; it also refuses the modernistic view of literary innovation as a cataclysmic event that destroys what has come before.

antithesis, we should say that eloquence is *heard*; poetry is *overheard*. Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude, and bodying itself forth in symbols which are the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the poet's mind. Eloquence is feeling pouring itself forth to other minds, courting their sympathy, or endeavoring to influence their belief, or move them to passion or to action.

All poetry is of the nature of soliloquy... (John Stuart Mill, "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties," 348-349)

What is a Poet? To whom does he address himself? And what language is to be expected from him? He is a man speaking to men... (William Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*," [1802 version] 300)

Opposites converge upon each other in these oft-quoted passages, these primal scenes for anti-lyric theory. Does poetry speak only to itself? Or is it the voice of a man speaking to men? If poetry's voice is the human voice, present to itself and to all men, this distinction collapses. Anti-lyric theory reifies that collapse. But I want to de-traumatize these scenes, tease out from them other possibilities for other listenings, other hearings, other speakings.

Yopie Prins and Virginia Jackson have pursued a critique of "lyricization" as a reading practice. It is, they write, the "tendency to read 'the lyric' as a genre defined in terms of subjective expression" ("Lyrical Studies" 523). This critique challenges what Prins calls "anthropomorphic" readings, in which "we try to insert the human in the places—or poems—where it is least certain" (Prins, "Voice Inverse", 46). Prins asks: "Why do we insist on reading literally what the Victorians understood to be a metaphor?...How can we reverse our tendency to read these poems as the utterance of a speaker, the representation of speech, the performance of song?" ("Voice Inverse" 44).

We should reverse this tendency, Jackson and Prins argue, for historical reasons: it is inaccurate to the contexts of the writing, and constricts our understanding of how these poems operate towards a singular "lyricized" form. Jackson and Prins call on critics to "develop different approaches to different centuries, taking into account generic shifts in the production and circulation of poetry and insisting on the cultural specificity of poetic genres rather than assuming the continuity of 'the lyric' as a transhistorical, transcultural phenomenon" (Prins, "Historical Poetics," 233-234). Thus their reading of lyric theory is negative—they treat lyricization as an unfortunate phenomenon that obscures our capacity to read poems in their cultural specificity. On the one hand, this is a critique of critical practice: Jackson and Prins (especially in their polemical *Lyric Theory Reader* anthology) trace the ways critics have constructed and, in their view, reified the lyric. But on the other hand, theirs is a philosophical claim that challenges lyric reading itself as a transcendental philosophy that ontologizes voice. Jackson writes:

The metaphor of voice bridges the otherwise incommutable distance between one "solitary cell" and another, between two otherwise mutually exclusive individuals, two "soliloquies." Most importantly, it does so by claiming to transcend the historical circumstances of these individuals or performances, by placing "us" in the same

metaphorical moment with the “speaker” (“listening...in the next” solitude, or becoming that speaker ourselves). (*Dickinson’s Misery* 132)

Here she draws upon a less frequently cited passage from John Stuart Mill’s “Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties” (1833). The Millian metaphor of voice, Jackson argues, “bridges” and “transcend[s]” difference. Jackson elides from the act of listening to “becoming that speaker ourselves,” because for Jackson, that is the work of the metaphor of voice. To imagine hearing a voice across historical distance is, for Jackson, to imagine that voice as an abstraction equally enterable by any listener. I hear the voice, therefore I can become the speaker.

Jackson critiques lyric reading for moving from my hearing a voice, to my imagining its speaker, to my imagining myself equally substitutable with that speaker. I would like to slow this process down. Jackson’s description of lyric as a *reading practice* rather than a *genre* makes it possible for us to imagine other lyric readings: to dwell longer on possible benefits of lyricization. For Jackson, history is the antidote to lyricization; I call this *anti-lyric theory* because it posits both “lyric” and “lyric theory” as objects for historical critique rather than opportunities for theorizing ensemble. While one might attempt a historically-minded lyric reading that still sees the lyric metaphor as potentially of interest,¹⁶ our aim here is to discover lyricization’s possibilities that would move away from a historicizing fix. What kinds of reading can emerge from the imagining that follows a voice? If we understand that to read lyrically is to read for voice, the person, and an assumed connection between reader and poem, then perhaps we can imagine other forms of lyrical reading that treat those aspects more speculatively.

But in a Jacksonian spirit, let’s return to the original context for Mill’s “solitary cell” remarks (though I must insist, against the grain of anti-lyric theory, that “context” not be synonymous with history; this project attempts to hear lyric’s untimely echo, not fix it to its moment). Mill begins by considering the aria “Dove sono” from Mozart’s *Marriage of Figaro*:

Who can imagine “Dove sono” *heard*? We imagine it *overheard*. The same is the case with many of the finest national airs. Who can hear those words, which speak so touchingly the sorrows of a mountaineer in exile: –

“My heart’s in the Highlands – my heart is not here;
My heart’s in the Highlands, a-chasing the deer.
A-chasing the wild-deer, and following the roe –
My heart’s in the Highlands, wherever I go.”

Who can hear those affecting words, married to as affecting an air, and fancy that he *sees* the singer? That song has always seemed to us like the lament of a prisoner in a solitary cell, ourselves listening, unseen, in the next. (“Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties” 350)

Lyric reading, for Mill, requires the reader to “imagine” or “fancy” a speaker. The rhetorical, even apodictic nature of Mill’s phrasing notwithstanding, these claims are framed as questions: even in Mill’s attempt to describe the power of the metaphor of voice, he calls out for its counterfactual. He describes what becomes an essential facet of “lyricized” reading as how things “seem[] to us.” (Anti-lyric readers, somewhat paradoxically, do answer Mill’s call with their own names. Who can hear these affecting words and not fancy seeing the singer? Presumably Jackson, for one.)

¹⁶ For this, see Zimmerman, *Romanticism, Lyricism, History*.

Mill's is a synesthetic imagining: what I "hear" becomes what I "see," the seeming is a crossing of senses. Mill's choice of passage might seem indicative of these confusions. Robert Burns plays on the familiar puns of "hart" and "heart," "deer" and "dear."¹⁷ Thus the sedimented history of a small poetic pun allows the human body to displace onto an animal, and vice versa. It is in language's separateness from humans, its status as a historical object, that these words can have meaning. Perhaps that history allows "heart" and "hart," "deer" and "dear," to transfer without putting the human at risk, knowing that the animal is always that on which the human is projected, never the other way around. But Mill asks us to "imagine," to "fancy," and in doing so we may move from this context to the other possibilities it suggests.

The act of hearing, then, is not so apodictically established that we cannot ask: Is Burns' heart here now, as I hear it? Does the heart hear? Does the hart hear? Is it not the singer that we see, but the words themselves, resolving a pun that voicing alone makes undecidable? Or perhaps the call of the poem, according to Mill, is not truly to see—but to *not-see*; to see only in "fancy," or "fancy" that you could. I am suggesting, then, that what Mill asks us to imagine—that we can hear the sound of a voice from one solitary cell in another—is not the assertion of a transcendent presence that ontologically bridges the gap between one cell to another. Lyric reading, even in Mill's version, is a dynamic, risky, and perhaps impossible act of imagination or fancy. As Jack Spicer lyrically reads Burns, "The dog/In my heart howls continuously at you, at me. 'Surrender./I do not know where my heart is.'"¹⁸ Or as Virginia Woolf lyrically reads Shakespeare, "Fear no more, says the heart in the body; fear no more" (*Mrs. Dalloway* 139). Lyrical readings create an imagined adjacency of listeners to singer, spreading out a soliloquy until it no longer sings only to itself.

Mill's metaphor of imprisonment places our listening in a separate cell from the singer, though a neighboring one. While the cell of the listeners appears potentially populous ("ourselves listening"), it seems that the singer's cell must be solitary: we must imagine that the soliloquy comes *as if* no one was hearing. If there is already a cut between singer and listener, perhaps there is another cut in this "as if"; and perhaps they are the same cut. The cut is the separation between cells that makes possible the fiction of overhearing rather than direct speech; the cut is the separation between a silent soliloquy and a song out loud; between a self-presence speaking to itself and voice's possible openness towards the numerous. The cut opens the individual voice to the possibility of otherness, other hearers and singers, those who will carry the song out of the solitary cell, use it as their escape

¹⁷ Examples include Thomas Wyatt's "They flee from me...", Andrew Marvell's "The Nymph Complaining for the Death of her Fawn," and many others.

¹⁸ The full passage reads:

The howling dog in my mind says "Surrender" at eight points
of the compass. North, South, East, West, combinations.
Whether
He means me or you to me I am not certain. A color-blind
person can read signals because red is always at the top and
green at the bottom. Or is it the reverse? I forget, not being
color-blind. The dog
In my heart howls continuously at you, at me. "Surrender."
I do not know where my heart is.
My heart's in the highlands
My heart is not here
My heart's in the highlands
A-chasing the deer. Dog
Of my heart groans, howls
Blind to guesses. The deer
Your heart and guesses, blandly seek water. ("Love Poems" 7, *My Vocabulary* 385)

I return to this text in the interlude following chapter 3.

route. This imagination goes in the other direction too: Mill imagines imprisonment because of how the song takes hold of the singer, how the singer does not belong to herself when in the throes of song; and how that song captures its listeners, takes them out of their context and places them in a cell alongside.

We might query the politics of adopting this metaphor of imprisonment today. “If it is not a city, it is a prison,” writes Tongo Eisen-Martin: “If it has a prison, it is a prison. Not a city” (“Faceless,” *Heaven is All Goodbyes* 10). But a metaphor of imprisonment, as avowedly abolitionist poets like Eisen-Martin show us, can work towards the ends of destroying the prison. I would argue that there’s something abolitionist about Mill’s lyrical reading, in attending to how even the totally enclosed voice needs its listeners, and in letting the cry of the prisoner escape the cell. If the prisoner’s song can be heard in the neighboring cell then the walls are not so sturdy—“This wall is not real, how can it be real?/It’s only made of concrete and barbed wire,” as Lucinda Williams sings—if voice can get through them, what else can? But to turn the “solitary cell” into the transhistorical self is to insist that the self is a cell, an imprisonment; lyrical reading, I argue, shows us otherwise.

Mill’s lyric reading, I want to suggest, can be seen as a horizontal, apposite relationship, where listeners imagine themselves cozied up alongside the singer, as close as could be without being present. I enclose myself to be alongside your enclosure. Close in imagination; close in the cut. Anti-lyric theory views Mill’s lyric reading as more vertical: I place myself in the position of the singer because my self is a transcendent and ontological property; there is no cut, just essence.

Sarah Zimmerman has traced how a certain reading of Mill made possible the very idea of the “romantic lyric” that Jackson and Prins have been at work dispelling. However, as she writes, that idea is still redoubled in their criticism of it:

Although recent historical approaches have inflected the other major genres, key underlying assumptions about Romantic lyricism have remained surprisingly stable since John Stuart Mill’s pithy definitions in “What is Poetry?” (1833). Drawing largely on his reading of William Wordsworth, Mill severs “eloquence”—which seeks a social world—from “poetry,” which turns away from that same world. He thereby invests the lyric with an aura of detachment from quotidian concerns and a defining drive toward transcendence. In an important if not immediately apparent sense, this view has persisted well into the 1990s, leaving intact key tenets of such critics as M.H. Abrams and Northrop Frye, who cast Romantic lyricism as an inward-looking form. Abrams and Frye accept as necessary the ways in which the poet “turns his back on his audience”; *influential Romantic new historical critiques have, in effect, reinforced this paradigm by elaborating the ideological implications of a desire for transcendence without interrogating the preeminence of that desire in characterizing the period’s lyric impulses*. For Abrams, the mode’s privacy works toward a spiritual self-renewal; for new historicists, this orientation coincides with the repression of traumatic social events. Yet these critics agree that Romantic lyricism relinquishes sociohistorical immediacy for the sake of a cultivated disinterestedness. (ix-x, emphasis added)

We’ll return later to how new historicist criticism reads William Wordsworth in this limiting way, and other possibilities that might exist for our reading of it; but for now, what Zimmerman teaches

us is how a certain reading of lyric becomes almost a primal scene for Romanticism. For the new historicists, lyricism represses traumatic social events; but this very idea of lyricism functions in a kind of traumatic repetition, unable to be dispelled even in its critique. Mill reads Wordsworth; Abrams repeats Mill; and critical reactions to Abrams nonetheless grant the Millian premise. This is less a haunting passion across generations, than a kind of vertical organization of lyric where each generation must mean the same thing.

This reading is symptomatic of anti-lyric theory's claim that repetition is the repetition of presence. Zimmerman writes: "Recovering from very different social crises, each of these critics follows a path from political engagement, to disillusion, to a desire for an aesthetic remedy to sociohistorical trauma. Within these contexts, the poetic form each associates with a pure, aesthetic arena comes to seem less transcendent, and more embedded in particular moments in the lives of influential poets and critics" (6). Mill reads Wordsworth as himself, then Abrams reads Mill as himself; and the historicizing of this reading does not loosen its hold. Rather it echoes lyric's identification with the repetition of man (sic); man across time, man reading man. Even to historicize this repetition as "embedded...in the lives of influential poets and critics" just moves the metaphorical repetition of man to the living repetition of man; and finally, in new historicist critique, that living repetition gets placed into the family crypt. Lyric here is still a reading practice, not a genre; but that reading practice looks like a closed system of traumatic repetition.¹⁹

The solitary, for anti-lyric theory, is a site of transcendence or transhistorical identity. But what if the solitary is in more dynamic relation with the collectivity from which it supposedly flees?

2. Dorothy Wordsworth's enclosures

It has been an important feminist-historicist project to remind us that the supposedly solitary experiences that spark William Wordsworth's poetics (and poetic project) belong to a collective that includes Dorothy Wordsworth. In continuing that project here, I seek to go beyond a negative critique of the maleness of the Romantic lyric, to understand what we can learn from adding Dorothy Wordsworth's poetics. Dorothy Wordsworth is a lyric theorist, because the question of lyric theory, for this chapter and this dissertation, is the question of how poetry can metaphorically or literally bring voices together: and therefore, the question of lyric theory is the question of how writing can make relation, between the self and what isn't the self, between the self and another self.

Feminist criticism has contrastingly valorized Dorothy's writings (with respect to William's) for their privacy and domesticity, for how her writing does *not* create a mind observing the world according to a certain paradigm of romantic lyricism. The identification of a self in relation to the phenomenal world is the paradigm of poetic production against which the more "domestic" details of the Journals are opposed. These divisions depend upon the identification of lyric with retreat, the disidentification of mind and nature, and the ascription of lyric as masculine and life-writing as feminine.²⁰ Zimmerman's cautions against the haunting force of a reified conception of lyric here

¹⁹ I differ from Zimmerman in her reading of what lyricism's potential is. She writes: "The Romantic lyric was thus an ideal vehicle for writers facing the rhetorical challenge of a widening distance between themselves and expanding reading audiences, because two of the mode's qualities—a sense of immediacy and of intimacy—combined to create a poetics of presence" (31). A "poetics of presence" is not this dissertation's aim; but I am interested in how immediacy and intimacy can generate possibilities that anti-lyric theory's critique of presence fails to comprehend.

²⁰ For example, Margaret Homans, an early advocate for the Journals, writes: "This discussion will include only those passages [from letters and journals] which themselves suggest that they be read as works of the imagination: passages in which she takes up a traditional poetic project such as the construction of a myth of origins, or the identification of a self, creative or not, in relation to the phenomenal world. Large sections of the letters and journals concern family news and domestic details, and her way of mingling imaginative passages with domestic ones is part of her evasion of

equally apply. While placing Dorothy's writings at the opposite end of a gendered and lyricized axis from William's has been an important way of giving value to her writing, perhaps we can eliminate this axis altogether.

Nothing is lacking from Dorothy's Journals.²¹ They are not "the raw material the poet reworked, like a photograph of the bridge at Arles;" they do not require the removal of "lines which were regarded as either too prosy or productive of too heterogenous a whole," manipulating the journals into "miniature imagist poems."²²

But if we refuse to describe the Journals as something like "history" opposite William's "poetry," then we must add, conversely, that nothing is lacking in William's poems either. And we will find that Dorothy Wordsworth's Journals themselves provide us with the critical tools to break down these definitions and polarizations. Wordsworth's Journals can offer a conception of lyric that is expansive enough to encompass their difference to William's poems. Wordsworth's Journals offer a critique of the "lyricized" assumptions that have characterized William's poems; and investing the Journals with a revised lyric function of their own allows us to position the two Wordsworths together in an encompassing vision of their contribution to lyrical writing and reading. Rather than asserting the necessity of difference between Dorothy's Journals and William's poems, we can find a loose, reparative sameness: not self-identical but reiterative, not disastrous but dependent, not transcendent but vulnerable; in short, an ecological and lyrical relation.

Dorothy Wordsworth's Alfoxden Journal begins like this:

20th January 1798. The green paths down the hillside are channels for streams. The young wheat is streaked by silver lines of water running between the ridges, the sheep are gathered together on the slopes. After the wet dark days, the country seems more populous. It peoples itself in the sunbeams. The garden, mimic of spring, is gay with flowers. The purple-starred hepatica spreads itself in the sun, and the clustering snow-drops put forth their white heads, at first upright, ribbed with green, and like a rosebud when completely opened, hanging their heads downward, but slowly lengthening their slender stems. The slanting woods of an unvarying brown, showing the light through the thin net-work of their upper boughs. (141)²³

traditional poetic powers" (44). See also Anne Mellor's discussion of "Masculine Romanticism" (145), as well as Comitini, Ehnmen and others; for a critical view, see Wolfson: "the paradigms still tended to gender polarities—'masculine' egotism, sexism, and power; diffuse and permeable 'feminine' subjectivity—that seem to me to be most compelling for the Wordsworths in the aberrations" (*Romantic Interactions* 185).

²¹ Cf. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, "There's nothing wrong with us" (*The Undercommons* 20).

²² Rachel Brownstein notes that the Journals "are commonly presented to classes as the raw material the poet reworked, like a photograph of the bridge at Arles" (48). In 1940, Hyman Eigerman produced a volume published by Columbia University Press entitled *The Poetry of Dorothy Wordsworth*. As Eigerman describes the contents, the "pieces were written by Dorothy Wordsworth...without open recognition of their character as poems" (introduction, unpaginated). Eigerman continues: "it is not only permissible but obligatory that scholars who come after the Imagists and free verse should do their duty as the literary executors of the past." Eigerman's versifications occasionally require "manipulations" other than the addition of line breaks—removing "lines which were regarded as either too prosy or productive of too heterogenous a whole"; linking a subject and predicate unlinked in the original; or "excision of a marring word or phrase" such as "as it were." In the 21st century, Eigerman's versions have appeared in *Poems for the Millennium* (2009); Lucy Newlyn also supplies line breaks to passages from the Grasmere Journal, and finds they resemble "miniature imagist poems" ("Dorothy Wordsworth's Experimental Style" 345).

²³ Citations from the Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals are from Woolf's edition. All other citations from Dorothy Wordsworth's writings are from Ernest de Selincourt's edition.

The language here enters (and enters its readers) into a complex web of interrelation, indicated by the varieties of prepositions with which Wordsworth marks connections: green paths are channels *for* streams, wheat is streaked *by* water, the hepatica spreads *in* the sun, light shows *through* the upper boughs. Not one mode of relation, but many: the passage is indeed “populous,” though despite the metaphorical language of the country “peopl[ing] itself,” in human-like relation without a human organizing principle. In this passage’s only simile, one flower is compared to another: the snowdrops like a rosebud. Nature compares only to itself, with no thought of a human observer for whom these various beings arrange themselves.

Perhaps we should say: not no observer, but no *single* observer, for in the Alfoxden Journal even those verbs whose subjects are human beings refer only the plural (Dorothy, William, and Coleridge) rather than singular. There is no singleness, only interrelation, and this seems proper to a journal that inaugurates the heroic period of collaboration between the Wordsworths and Coleridge. Language from the Journals, like the descriptive language of nature in this entry, is shared between the Wordsworths and Coleridge, and language interweaves throughout all three of their writings; as Pamela Woolf writes:

Many expressions are shared between the Journals and the poetry. The poets have usually been seen as the beneficiaries, even the exploiters... We cannot know which of the writers, William or Dorothy, first remarked that ‘the road to the village of Holford glittered like another stream’²⁴... Dorothy’s Journal rather confirms a group activity than provides new phrases and observations for a poet’s borrowing... The Alfoxden Journal, more intensively than the Grasmere, is written with two other intelligences in and around it. Dorothy’s own powers of natural observation and description flourished in this context. (“Alfoxden” 130-132)

Without understating the truth of the “exploitation” narrative, Dorothy Wordsworth’s own writing makes the case for a heuristic of symbiosis, a reading practice that assumes a mutually reinforcing collaborative relation rather than prioritizing individual production.²⁵ The “group activity” that the Journal confirms is as much the writers who participated in it, and the outside world that it describes. The Journal militates against a thinking of the proper, marking instead language’s capacity to enter into relation, to make inter-relation, without taking possession.

One dramatic example of such a sharing appears in William’s poem “A Night-Piece,” which seems to depend, considerably, upon Dorothy Wordsworth’s Journal.

²⁴ In Woolf’s edition of the *Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, this and other concordances are copiously recorded.

²⁵ I’m indebted here to Seulhee Lee’s formulations of “heuristic optimism,” in conversation and in forthcoming work.

A Night-Piece

The sky is overspread
With a close veil of one continuous cloud
All whitened by the moon, that just appears
A dim-seen orb, yet chequers not the ground
With any shadow – plant, or tower, or tree.
At last, a pleasant gleam breaks forth at once,
An instantaneous light; the musing man
Who walks along with his eyes bent to earth
Is startled. He looks about, the clouds are split
Asunder, and above his head he views
The clear moon, and the glory of the heavens.
There in a black-blue vault she sails along,
Followed by multitudes of stars, that small,
And bright, and sharp, along the gloomy vault
Drive as she drives. How fast they wheel
away,
Yet vanish not! The wind is in the trees,
But they are silent; still they roll along
Immeasurably distant, and the vault,
Built round by those white clouds, enormous
clouds,
Still deepens its interminable depth.
At length the vision closes; and the mind,
Not undisturbed by the deep joy it feels,
Which slowly settles into peaceful calm,
Is left to muse upon the solemn scene. (In
Wu, *Romanticism* 426)

24th. Walked between half-past three and half-past five. The evening cold and clear. The sea of a sober grey, streaked by the deeper grey clouds. The half dead sound of the near sheep-bell, in the hollow of the sloping coombe, exquisitely soothing.

25th. Went to Poole's after tea. The sky spread over with one continuous cloud, whitened by the light of the moon, which, though her dim shape was seen, did not throw forth so strong a light as to chequer the earth with shadows.

At one the clouds seemed to cleave asunder, and left her in the centre of a black-blue vault. She sailed along, followed by multitudes of stars, small, and bright, and sharp. Their brightness seemed concentrated, (half-moon).

26th. Walked upon the hill-tops; followed the sheep tracks till we overlooked the larger coombe. Sat in the sunshine. The distant sheep-bells, the sound of the stream; the woodman winding along the half-marked road with his laden pony; locks of wool still spangled with the dew-drops; the blue-grey sea shaded with immense masses of cloud, not streaked; the sheep glittering in the sunshine. Returned through the wood. The trees skirting the wood, being exposed more directly to the action of the sea breeze, stripped of the net-work of their upper boughs, which are stiff and erect like black skeletons; the ground strewn with the red berries of the holly. Set forward before two o'clock. Returned a little after four. (142)

Susan Wolfson notes that “William’s poem is different from Dorothy’s journal, most obviously in turning a perceptual scene into a drama of ‘mind’” (*Romantic Interactions* 174). One is tempted to go farther than that—in the Journal, the processes are hardly described as perceived; perception occurs in the passive voice (“was seen”). The movements in the sky are presented with what seems to be complete independence from human observation. The juxtaposition “Went to Poole’s after tea. The sky spread over...” suggests an ontology in which “the sky” and the movement of people are alongside one another, and not linked by the transcendental act of a human mind.

The poem’s double (or triple) negative, “not undisturbed”, seems to be what sets it most at odds with the Journal: the entry seems to be so far from the articulation of disturbance. Rather the event in the journal is captured by ongoingness. This seems to be an indifference by the observer to the events she observes; this has often been articulated, in criticism, as an effacement of the observer, whether in an attempt to portray the scene without the observer in it, as a picturesque, or a

refusal of subjectivity.²⁶ But what we in fact see here is that human actions exist alongside “observed” actions, without apparent priority given to one or the other. Take for example this sequence of descriptions: “...the sheep glittering in the sunshine. Returned through the wood. The trees skirting the wood...” (Jan. 26th). Humans, animals, and trees are all the subjects of verbs rendered into adjectives—it is not, as some critics have said, that Wordsworth’s sentences lack verbs, just that the subject-verb-object structure, and its apparent fixing of action to a single point, does not appear. Both in Wordsworth’s observation and in what she observes, then, the punctual event that might be a location of disturbance is replaced by a characteristic ongoingness in which the act of description does not function as a break, but rather a marking of what is already occurring.

Yet this word, “undisturbed,” echoes back across the Journal, an instance of Dorothy’s lyric reading of her brother’s poems.²⁷ The word itself becomes the site of a loose and contingent enclosure, which Dorothy Wordsworth’s prose writings persistently figure as a contingent and provident holding. For Wordsworth even the domestic is this kind of holding; if “the house inside seems a continuation of nature outside” (Woof, “Writer” 107) this is not to rely upon one or the other as a source for metaphor or value.²⁸

February 1st [1798]. About two hours before dinner, set forward towards Mr Bartelmy’s. The wind blew so keen in our faces that we felt ourselves inclined to seek the covert of the wood. There we had a warm shelter, gathered a burthen of large rotten boughs blown down by the wind of the preceding night. The sun shone clear, but all at once a heavy blackness hung over the sea. The trees almost *roared*, and the ground seemed in motion with the multitudes of dancing leaves, which made a rustling sound distinct from that of the trees. Still the asses pastured in quietness under the hollies, undisturbed by these forerunners of the storm. The wind beat furiously against us as we returned. Full moon. She rose in uncommon majesty over the sea,

²⁶ On the picturesque, see Nabholz, and for a critical perspective, see Stewart. On the refusal of subjectivity, the view is widespread; see for example, Zimmerman: “to decline to be the writing subject has traditionally meant to disavow the period’s privileged role” (121).

²⁷ Later in this chapter we will address William’s poems more directly; but it is worth noting here the readings of Neil Hertz and Anne-Lise François, for whom “A Night-Piece” similarly challenges the individuality and self-presence of the mind. By separating observer, pensive traveller, and writer of the poem, Hertz notes, “The poem Wordsworth chose to write does not take that continuity [between those three figures] for granted: rather, he seems in this case to have gone out of his way, by writing in the third person, to insist on the disjunctive nature of the self” (24). For François, the poem belies any observational economy based on sense-certainty by the observer about what he observes: “The enigma of diurnal motion and cosmic time, unassimilable to human perception, is not solved, only transposed to a quieter key, as the semicolon follows on the exclamation mark. One way to put what the lines are doing in asserting yes, x, no, y, without explaining the relation between x and y would be that they render the nullity, vanity or inconsequence of a certain kind of sense-certainty—there is no doubt that the wind is in the tree(s); it could not be more present—there is no loss or deficiency of sensory plenitude, yet for all that, it cannot fill the sonic void of the stars” (“Unspeakable Weather” 159). In teaching “A Night-Piece” alongside its corresponding passage in the Alfoxden Journal, I have been struck by how quickly my students came to these insights, as if Dorothy’s text proleptically taught them to read William’s.

²⁸ Along these lines, two critics have noted Wordsworth’s preference for simile and metonymy over metaphor in the Journals. Lokke describes that preference as reflecting that Wordsworth’s “sense of community is a decentered network of associations connected by proximities that present constant challenges to social and aesthetic hierarchies as well as to fixed individual identity” (28). Newlyn, similarly, notes that simile allows Wordsworth to stay “resolutely grounded in the known, familiar world: a world that is tightly bounded by habit and association, in which the same mountains are seen reflected in the same lakes, the same paths walked with the same companions, day after day” (“Dorothy Wordsworth’s Experimental Style” 340).

slowly ascending through the clouds. Sat with the window open an hour in the moonlight. (143-144)

The “warm shelter” is made possible only by the “wind of the preceding night”; the enclosure the walkers create is contingent, emerging from the conditions of the storm that has already occurred, and yet also before the storm to come for which these furious winds are “forerunners.” The past and future disasters do not foreclose the possibility of retreat, nor is retreat meant to forestall against them.²⁹ The “heavy blackness” of the coming storm is not so foreboding that the walkers are eager to hide from it. Rather, Dorothy notes the “asses pastured in quietness under the hollies, undisturbed”: a sign of forbearance through interrelation between animal and plant. However terrifying the *roaring* hollies might be to the walkers, the trees provide a shelter for the asses. When the walkers return to Alfoxden House, a more secure retreat from the coming storm, they sit “with the window open an hour.” Even the security of the retreat must remain an open margin, an enclosure that is at once open.

A similar interplay between being circumscribed and being affected comes in the same location (under the hollies) a few weeks later:

17th [February 1798]. A deep snow on the ground. Wm and Coleridge walked to Mr Bartelmy's, and to Stowey. Wm returned, and we walked through the wood into the Coombe to fetch some eggs. The sun shone bright and clear. A deep stillness in the thickest part of the wood, undisturbed except by the occasional dropping of the snow from the holly boughs; no other sound but that of the water, and the slender notes of a redbreast, which sang at intervals on the outskirts of the southern side of the wood. There the bright green moss was bare at the roots of the trees, and the little birds were upon it. The whole appearance of the wood was enchanting; and each tree, taken singly, was beautiful. The branches of the hollies pendent with their white burden, but still showing their bright red berries, and their glossy green leaves. The bare branches of the oaks thickened by the snow. (146)

Wordsworth finds “a deep stillness...undisturbed,” but that “undisturbed” is qualified—“undisturbed except for the occasional dropping of the snow.” This barely seems to register as a disturbance: the sounds that the journal gently arrests are “slender,” “occasional.” If the stillness is not undisturbed, it is certainly not disturbed. Rather the possibility of disturbance that seems to hover behind this entry comes in the fragility of the scene and its uncertain susceptibility to capture. The isolating and enclosing gaze—“each tree, taken singly”—and the “whole appearance of the wood” coexist here. The hollies, pendent with snow, are at once dependent for their beauty on other ecological forces, and yet can be seen as independent, “singly,” as they are “still showing their bright red berries.”

Woof notes that the above passage is a remarkable reading of some lines from Cowper, or else, that it reflects that reading: “Stillness, silence, low sounds, slender notes, and the winter scene, make up a cluster that reminds us that D had long been a reader of Cowper: ‘...The redbreast

²⁹ See Jacques Khalip on disaster: “to look upon disaster is to see and meditate on the deviant mutability of persons and things...As a spatial coincidence of hazard *with* vulnerability, disaster provokes reflections on the possibilities of living under and *through* conditions undesirable” (2, 6).

warbles still, but is content/With slender notes...where'er he rests he shakes/From many a twig the pendent drops of ice...' (*The Task* vi. 76-83)" (285). The Journals teach us that this relation is nothing like plagiarism or exploitation; it is more like the pendency of snow on a branch, a contingent but no less beautifying entering into relation.

Thus we can see the provident enclosures of these two entries as entering into relation with William's use of "undisturbed" in "A Night-Piece." As Woolf writes of the cooperative nature of the writing community at Alfoxden: "Their sharing accounts for words and images common to all three writers, yet individual in effect...Talking and arguing about the choice of words would ensure that certain selected words would be remembered and could come to be used in later writing, whether Journal or poem" ("Interesting" 48). The echoing and reechoing between these texts resists the assertion of absolute difference between these forms of writing that coexist alongside one another. This is precisely what Dorothy Wordsworth's Journal descriptions do with what they describe. Even with the term "undisturbed" we are caught up in the logic of doubled supplemental negation—the Latin verb *turbare* already means "to disorder, to disturb" (*OED*). If "not undisturbed" is the only difference that the reassertion of mind makes, it is not much of a difference at all, and more a weak supplement that only indicates the fact of repetition. The cocooned negatives suggest that disturbance and its negation need not be starkly polarized opposites, but instead the limits of a more benign reiteration.

3. Enclosure ruined enclosure; or, what resembles the apocalypse but isn't

AIDS ruined death. (Dennis Cooper, "Dear Secret Diary," *Wrong* 93)

Perhaps having 'enough' was unimaginable to men who wrote about crop yields, rents, improvements, productivity, economic growth, always *more*, as it has been incomprehensible to twentieth-century historians living in constantly expanding market economies, albeit on a finite planet. Something critics might have understood better was the pride of ownership that small farmers also displayed which was the other side of self-importance. Something they missed entirely was the constantly negotiated interdependence of commoners, their need of each other. (J.M. Neeson, *Commoners: Common Right, Enclosure and Social Change in England, 1700-1820* 41)

Always falling into a hole, then saying "ok, this is not your grave, get out of this hole," getting out of the hole which is not the grave, falling into a hole again, saying "ok, this is also not your grave, get out of this hole," getting out of that hole, falling into another one; sometimes falling into a hole within a hole, or many holes within holes, getting out of them one after the other, then falling again, saying "this is not your grave, get out of the hole"; sometimes being pushed, saying "you can not push me into this hole, it is not my grave," and getting out defiantly, then falling into a hole again without any pushing; sometimes falling into a set of holes whose structures are predictable, ideological, and long dug, often falling into this set of structural and impersonal holes; sometimes falling into holes with other people, with other people, saying "this is not our mass grave, get out of this hole," all together getting out of the hole

together, hands and legs and arms and human ladders of each other to get out of the hole that is not the mass grave but that will only be gotten out of together; sometimes the willful-falling into a hole which is not the grave because it is easier than not falling into a hole really, but then once in it, realizing it is not the grave, getting out of the hole eventually; sometimes falling into a hole and languishing there for days, weeks, months, years, because while not the grave very difficult, still, to climb out of and you know after this hole there's just another and another; sometimes surveying the landscape of holes and wishing for a high quality final hole; sometimes thinking of who has fallen into holes which are not graves but might be better if they were; sometimes too ardently contemplating the final hole while trying to avoid the provisional ones; sometimes dutifully falling and getting out, with perfect fortitude, saying "look at the skill and spirit with which I rise from that which resembles the grave but isn't!" (Anne Boyer, "what resembles the grave but isn't")

To sum up the previous section, a Dorothy-Wordsworthian enclosure (whether of language or of physical space) appears as a contingent and benevolent gathering. Criticism of William Wordsworth's poetry has made it difficult to see enclosure this way: as his enclosures have appeared as either a defensive maneuver against political transformation (especially the enclosure of the commons), or as *omphalos* that rather than sheltering, gestures to apocalypse. To combine these readings is to turn lyric into a traumatic repetition (and denial) of history, with history's violence displaced onto the imagination.

In this section I would like to work away from this reading, through an understanding of Geoffrey Hartman's "spot syndrome" as itself a benevolent repetition. Hartman shows William-Wordsworthian lyric to be a non-identical mimesis of self-presence, not just the idiosyncratic assertion of self-presence, because its presence is repeatable and returnable without creating either identity or apocalypse.

The spot, in Hartman's discussion, is paradoxically both an instance of singleness, "centroversion," and isolation; and the possibility of repetition, return, and the making of multiplicity. The spot offers "the idea of a point of powerful stasis, a concentration and fixation of power" (*Wordsworth's Poetry* 85); it "expresses a fascination with the single or fixed" (121).

Its show-place is still nature but reduced to one center as dangerous as any holy site. This site is an *omphalos*: the navel-point at which powers meet, the "one" place leading to a vision of the One. To describe it, the poet later resorts to the figure of an abyss (*Prelude* VI.594) which is a kind of verticalized point and a variant of the "narrow chasm" and "gloomy strait" (VI.621) he has actually crossed...In its quality of omphalos, this place of places is at once breach and nexus, a breach in nature and a nexus for it and a different world. (122)

We might be tempted to link the "verticalized point" of this description of the Wordsworthian spot to the vertical version of transcendence that Jackson and Prins ascribe to a Millian lyric (see above). The combination of the Jungian language of centroversion and the mythological language of the omphalos similarly might suggest that the Wordsworthian spot looks something like an abstract

universalism typified through an egotistical sublime, a falling deeper and deeper into the self. In his reading of “The Vale of Esthwaite,” Hartman describes the Wordsworthian spot using almost gothic language: “The spot he seeks and avoids is the place of his own imagination which hides in the valley the consciousness of its separateness. He strays, willing unwilling as in a dream, toward a center which is his separated yet therefore vulnerable self. In that centric spot an apocalyptic wounding takes place: it is associated with sacrifice, with druids, an iron coffer marked with blood, the putting out of eyes, suicide, murder, the black center of a wood, a deep dungeon” (87). The spot is the site of apocalyptic wounding; and if the spot is at the core of a sense of self, it makes self-constitution itself apocalyptic.

It might be too easy, then, to see “spot syndrome,” or the repeated returning to a spot, as a traumatic repetition. To return to the spot, on this reading, is to return to the scar on which the self was formed. Hence the self itself is included *as scar*, as a retreat that is also a wound. Consider Marjorie Levinson’s remarks on “Tintern Abbey,” for a version of this reading:

“Tintern Abbey” evinces the poet’s desire to house his experience, past and future, in a mental fortress: a Peele Castle of the mind. Or, the project of “Tintern Abbey” is to render Tintern Abbey a ‘memory *locus*,’ a portable resort and restorative...The inmate of such a structure—priest, poet, hermit—is not, of course, the political enthusiast but the poet of “the philosophic mind,” the mind that “keeps its own inviolate retirement”...“Tintern Abbey” originates in a will to preserve something Wordsworth knows is already lost. At the same time, it arises from the will to deny this knowledge. (23-24, 37)

The mind on such a reading is a defense mechanism against social change, and its status as retreat is an ideological construction that refuses the movement of history. But again, such a reading turns the spot of time—the self—the poem—into a traumatic form whose function is abstract and apocalyptic. The historical reading, that sees the spot as repressing social change, and the poem’s enclosure as a traumatic repetition of political enclosure, is no less of a closed system than the abstracted mind it critiques: trading the abyss of imagination for the abyss of history gives no greater purchase on the generative capacities of the poem.

Instead, what if we imagine spots of time (poems, selves) as contingent gatherings, horizontally organized and entered into—“temporalized, reintegrated in the stream of life”?

It is hard to decide whether the first or second member of the partitive construction “spots of time” should be emphasized. If we derive the origin of the notion from Wordsworth’s attraction to specific place (the omphalos or spot syndrome) and notice that “spot” is subtly used in two senses—as denoting particular *places* in nature, and fixed *points* in time (“islands in the unnavigable depth / Of our departed time”)—the emphasis would fall on the initial word. But the natural pull of the phrase, and the fact that these spots are not only *in* time, like islands, but also creative of time or of a vivifying temporal consciousness, throws the emphasis to the second noun and evokes a beaconing “time-spot.” The concept is, in any case, very rich, fusing not only time and place but also stasis and continuity. The fixity or fixation that points to an apocalyptic consciousness of

self is temporalized, reintegrated in the stream of life. (Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry* 212)

Hartman picks up here on Wordsworth's own movement from 1799 to 1805 to 1850, the revised description of "spots of time" as possessing a "fructifying virtue," then a "vivifying virtue," and finally a "renovating virtue."³⁰ More than giving life, the spot restores it, suggesting that what is life-giving is not necessarily exceptional. While the spot is fixed, it functions for Wordsworth as a *temporalized* and *reintegrated* apocalyptic consciousness.

Following Hartman's claim that for Wordsworth, the self "is a mesocosm: at the boundary of all realms, and himself their boundary" (198), let us consider the "middle" (1805) version:

There are in our existence spots of time
Which with distinct pre-eminence remain
A vivifying virtue, whence, depressed
By false opinion and contentious thought,
Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight
In trivial occupations and the round
Of ordinary intercourse, our minds
Are nourished and invisibly repaired –
A virtue by which pleasure is enhanced,
That penetrates, enables us to mount
When high, more high, and lifts us up when fallen.
This efficacious spirit chiefly lurks
Among those passages of life in which
We have had the deepest feeling that the mind
Is lord and master, and that outward sense
Is but the obedient servant of her will.
Such moments, worthy of all gratitude,
Are scattered everywhere, taking their date
From our first childhood – in our childhood even
Perhaps are most conspicuous. Life with me,
As far as memory can look back, is full
Of this beneficent influence. (1805 XI.257-278)

Spot syndrome is its own remedy. And I suggest that it is not only the scattering of spots throughout life that offers their virtue, but that their beneficent influence comes in their repetition. To return to a spot, even an apocalyptic spot, is to make that spot not the apocalypse. An apocalypse that can be revisited resembles the apocalypse, but isn't. This resemblance then becomes a vivifying virtue, and if it shows the mind's mastery over outward sense, it is a playful mastery in which either outward sense or the imagination itself threatens a total dominance, but withdraws. Life fills with the beneficent influence not through the intensity of these moments but through their dissipation in reiteration.

Reiteration does not weaken the spot of time, but gives it a different kind of power, which Hartman explains. Reiteration's power—lyric's power—is the "the counter-balancing promise that 'All shall survive.' The divine hiatus, the revolutionary severance of new from old, is never total: the previous order, as if nothing could die absolutely, remains latent, waiting to return" (*Wordsworth's*

³⁰ See 1799 I.290, 1805 XI.259, and 1850 XII.210 respectively.

Poetry 50). In this passage Hartman describes nature as “a paraclete, *the* paraclete.” But there is a less clearly spoken movement from nature as paraclete to *poetry as paraclete*. This is to say that poetry has a kind of resemblance to the unapocalyptic experience of the world, perhaps because it becomes indistinguishable from it. Note Hartman’s comments on chronology: “In most poems we need only respect the structural sequence, according to which XIV does indeed come after VI. But in *a poem also autobiography, and in which the act of composition may itself produce a further biographical event*, two other sequences may have to be kept in mind. They are the biographical and the compositional order of events” (*Wordsworth’s Poetry* 61, emphasis added). Hartman follows the aesthetics of the spot of time, in which the acts of remembering—the acts of writing—the acts of reading—scatter themselves into life, vivifying, renovating.

Poetry and experience become almost indistinguishable for Hartman. For example, he writes: “poetry, like the world, can only house an imagination which is a borderer, which will not disdain earthly things” (*Wordsworth’s Poetry* 67). Poetry and the world are houses for experience with open windows, like the house in Alfoxden after the storm, whose shelter is more a temporary holding environment than a fixed and permanent structure. Hartman writes similarly of Spenser: “Spenser’s peculiar power to make this world a truly autonomous realm, mediating between the historical and the apocalyptic, yet somehow independent of either. Poetry is itself such a special realm of self-encounter, enabling the passage from one state of self-consciousness to another, and with the least damage” (125). I do not think we need to describe poetry as *representing* experience to understand these claims of identity. Perhaps we can understand them instead as claims of *non-differentiation*, of refusing to understand a separation between experience and what recounts that experience. We saw this level playing-field, paradigmatically, in Alfoxden. Here is Hartman on Alfoxden: “Now Alfoxden—but Alfoxden is more than a place, it includes the steady company of Dorothy and Coleridge—restores once and for all his [William’s] faith in continuity. Knowing that ‘All shall survive’ he leaves Alfoxden easily, and goes to Germany, and thence to Sockburn and Grasmere” (166). Wordsworth’s faith in continuity, or non-differentiation, is a faith in steady company, not a faith in solitude’s powers of imagination but in sociality’s perseverance. That sociality includes writing as an important element; not a medium, but a non-human material to which humans relate, and by which they understand themselves.³¹

What does it mean to describe poetry as a “surrogate companion and substitute love-object that makes further substitution possible” (François, “A little while” 135)? The sublime discussions of the imagination at the Simplon Pass and at Snowdon that become the main focuses of Hartman’s text seem like unlikely candidates for this task: too grand, too *sui generis*, too apocalyptic. But very near these great episodes are offerings that model, I think, lyric’s more gentle power. At the *Prelude*’s conclusion, immediately following the Snowdon episode, Wordsworth directly addresses Coleridge: “What we have loved/Others will love, and we may teach them how – ” (1805 XIII.444-445). While these lines follow a dramatic description of the two friends as “Prophets of Nature,” the aim of this prophecy seems importantly constrained. What Wordsworth and Coleridge love, beyond nature, is each other, and thus in the teaching they offer, they are both instructor and object. Wordsworth

³¹ Hartman’s claim that nature is the paraclete skips a step that perhaps goes without saying for Wordsworth—that nature is God. This note is only to add that we might dwell on the consequences of preferring *God as paraclete* to other versions of divinity. Poetry’s approximation of divinity then works in the paracletic realm: not necessarily visionary but in between, companionable. In a later essay Hartman writes of Wordsworth’s late poem “A little onward...”: “The status of poetry becomes uncertain here, since poetry seems to be neither oracular-visionary speech nor a purely reflective, mediated kind of language. It is both, undecidably: the poet being Major Man, free of guidance, and the source rather than the dupe of oracles, but also one who continues to live in this problematic area of divine intimations” (“Words, Wish, Worth,” *The Unremarkable Wordsworth* 92).

positions himself and Coleridge as both transitional objects and guides to that transition. Earlier, near the Simplon Pass episode, Wordsworth gives an image of this process:

O friend, we had not seen thee at that time,
And yet a power is on me and a strong
Confusion, and I seem to plant thee there!
Far art thou wandered now in search of health
And milder breezes – melancholy lot –
But thou art with us, with us in the past,
The present, with us in the times to come.
There is no grief, no sorrow, no despair,
No languor, no dejection, no dismay,
No absence scarcely can there be, for those
Who love as we do. (1805 VI.246-256)

Through this retrospect
Of my own college life I still have had
Thy after-sojourn in the self-same place
Present before my eyes, have played with times
(I speak of private business of the thought)
And accidents as children do with cards,
Or as a man who when his house is built,
A frame locked up in wood and stone, doth still
In impotence of mind by his fireside
Rebuild it to his liking. (1805 VI.296-395)

Elsewhere Wordsworth says that the poet has “a disposition to be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present” (“Preface” 300). Here it is friendship that paradigmatically creates the poetic disposition of refusing the force of absence. In these passages Wordsworth presents poetic thinking as a playing with thought, with place and person, in “impotence of mind.” *I plant thee there* is a paracletic lyrical methodology: poetry offers a substitute and speculative presence that can violate the facts of history and rebuild them to our liking.

4. Dorothy Wordsworth’s enclosures (2)

Well, before I tell you, I must have led my sheep to pasture and found some shade, confident of their containment. It must be noontime, which is the most sempiternal of hours in the day. The sweet competitiveness of other shepherds who know my reputation as a poet and lover must be about me, electric. And, I must be in the right place. A clearing or glade, a hillside outcropping of round rock one happens upon, with the long golden hair of the grasses matted and soft. The locus amoenus.

... *Often I am permitted to return to a meadow.* If that spoken line were piped in through an intercom, you would still know right away it was poetry. *This is someone unnamed saying something to someone unnamed, either in a particular context or in the realm of forms, I am not him, and I want you to hear it.* Come into earshot. In what kind of place is all the

hearing overhearing? The kind of place where all the looking is onlooking. The *locus amoenus*. (Brian Blanchfield, “On the Locus Amoenus,” *Proxies* 24)

I found a strawberry blossom in a rock, the little slender flower had more courage than the green leaves, for *they* were but half expanded & half grown, but the blossom was spread full out. I uprooted it rashly, & felt as if I had been committing an outrage, so I planted it again—it will have but a stormy life of it, but let it live if it can. (Dorothy Wordsworth, *Grasmere Journal* 31 January 1802 [61])

Dorothy Wordsworth, too, takes up “I plant thee there” as a lyrical methodology throughout her writings. Often this imaginative landscaping is to do with friendship. Consider, for example, these two passages from the *Grasmere Journal*:

Above at the top of the Rock there is another spot—it is scarce a Bower, a little parlour, one not *enclosed* by walls but shaped out for a resting place by the rocks & the ground rising about it. It had a sweet moss carpet—We resolved to go & plant flowers in both these places tomorrow. We wished for Mary & Sara. (23 April 1802 [91])

I sate a while upon my last summers seat the mossy stone—William’s unemployed beside me, & the space between where Coleridge has so often lain. (14 May 1802 [99])³²

In these passages the discovery of a spot—enclosed, shaped, moss-softened—brings with it an imagination directed past and future, to those that were there and to those—flowers, friends—who will have been there. These resting-places are, then, not fixities: instead they are necessarily mobile even if only in the imagination. Throughout her writings, and especially in her *Recollections of a Tour in Scotland* (1803), Wordsworth is obsessed with such spots. The Dorothy-Wordsworthian spot appears as a provident repose; a locus amoenus; a place for the mind to rest, and then to carry away from its precise context. Her lyric theory is the movement of these movements.

It is worth first emphasizing Wordsworth’s tendency to describe nature as relating to nature primarily. This ecological thinking enters into the writing in the preference of nature as metaphor for nature. In one celebrated description, “The moonshine like herrings in the water” (*Grasmere Journal* October 31 1800 [30]), metaphor functions as only the barest of differences. The light reflected in the water looks like something that one might in fact see in the water; the difference that the imaginative description adds is small. But other descriptions might suggest more of a human influence. Wordsworth repeatedly describes leaves as sheltering trees: “The country very wintry—some oaks quite bare—others more sheltered with a few green leaves” (*Grasmere Journal* 8 November 1800 [31]); “One beautiful ash tree sheltered with yellow leaves—one low one quite green—some low ashes green—A noise of boys in the rocks hunting some animal” (*Grasmere Journal* 16 November 1800 [32]). We might be tempted to call this something like pathetic fallacy, an ascription of human values where none are present. But what we in fact find, across Wordsworth’s writing, is an interest in this kind of provident enclosure as a mark of nature’s self-sufficiency. The gathering of enclosure—the gathering of language—mimics the gathering that nature already offers.

³² Cf. Frank Ocean: “Keep a place for me / I’ll sleep between you, it’s no thing.”

Early in the Scotland tour—begun by Dorothy, William, and Coleridge just two months after the birth of William’s son—we see that these kinds of enclosure, of earth enclosing earth, challenge the division between the homely and the unhomely.

Here saw a specimen of the luxuriance of the heath-plant, as it grows in Scotland; it was in the enclosed plantation (perhaps sheltered by them). These plantations appeared to be not well grown for their age; the trees were stunted. Growing irregularly, they reminded me of the Hartz forest near Goslar and I was pleased; besides Wm. had spoken to me two years before of the pleasure he had received from the hether plant in that very spot. Afterwards the road, treeless, over a peat-moss common—the Solway Moss; here and there an earth-built hut with its peat stack, a scanty growing willow hedge round the kail-garth, perhaps the cow pasturing near, —a little lass watching it, — the dreary waste cheared by the endless singing of larks. (17 August 1803 [197])

It seems that the enclosed plantation does not shelter the heath-plant, but the other way around: “it was in the enclosed plantation (perhaps sheltered by them).” “Perhaps” qualifies much of the endless singing of relation that Wordsworth marks. “Perhaps the cow pasturing near,—a little lass watching it,—”: Wordsworth begins to turn the unremarkable heath-plant, dreary or luxuriant, into a William-Wordsworthian scene of provident repose. Here, what is “dreary” and where is “luxuriance”? Wordsworth is pleased by the irregular growth, by how it reminds her of an earlier journey, and of being told of her brother’s journey to the same place that she now passes through. When the Journal later uses language from “Tintern Abbey” to describe self-sufficiency—she describes a lake surrounded by mountains as a “more deep seclusion,”³³ and two days later, a glen as “all in all”³⁴—it is a reminder that for Dorothy Wordsworth, what is self-sufficient and enclosed in its moment may also gesture out to other moments.

The enclosing capacity of earth—the enclosing capacity of language—is also an opening capacity, and the sea lochs of Scotland are perhaps the clearest indications of this.

This was the first sea-loch we had seen. We came prepared for a new and great delight, and the first impression which Wm. and I received, as we drove rapidly through the rain down the lawn of Arrochar, the objects dancing before us, was even more delightful than we had expected; but, as I have said, when we looked through the window, as the mists disappeared and the objects were seen more distinctly,

³³ “But whatever the mountains may be in their own shapes, the farm-house with its pastoral grounds and corn fields won from the mountain, its warm outhouses in irregular stages one above another on the side of the hill, the rocks, the stream, and sheltering bay, must at all times be interesting objects. The household boat lay at anchor, chained to a rock, which, like the whole border of the lake, was edged with sea-weed, and some fishing-nets were hung upon poles,—affecting images, which led our thoughts out to the wide ocean, yet made these solitudes of the mountains bear the impression of greater safety and more deep seclusion” (1 September 1803 [312]). Compare: “Once again / Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs, / Which on a wild secluded scene impress /Thoughts of a more deep seclusion, and connect/The landscape with the quiet of the sky.”

³⁴ “The impression was, as we advanced up to the head of this first reach, as if the glen were nothing, its loneliness and retirement, as if it made up no part of my feeling: the mountains were all in all” (3 September 1803 [331]). Compare: “For nature then...to me was all in all.”

there was less of sheltered valley-comfort than we had fancied to ourselves, and the mountains were not so grand; and now that we were near to the shore of the lake, and could see that it was not of fresh water, the wreck, the broken sea-shells, and scattered sea-weed gave somewhat of a dull and uncleanly look to the whole lake, and yet the water was clear, and might have appeared as beautiful as that of Loch Lomond, if with the same pure pebbly shore. Perhaps, had we been in a more chearful mood of mind we might have seen everything with a different eye; the stillness of the mountains, the motion of the waves, the streaming torrents, the sea-birds, the fishing-boats were all melancholy; yet still, occupied as my mind was with other things, I thought of the long windings through which the waters of the sea had come to this inland retreat, visiting the inner solitudes of the mountains, and I could have wished to have mused out a summer's day on the shores of the lake. From the foot of these mountains whither might not a little barque carry one away? Though so far inland, it is but a slip of the great ocean: seamen, fishermen, and shepherds here find a natural home. We did not travel far down the lake, but, turning to the right through an opening of the mountain, entered a glen called Glen Croe. (29 August 1803 [289-290])

In the sea lochs, some seemingly incommensurable metaphorical associations intersect. The things relating to the sea—waves, torrents, wrecks, fishing-boats, seaweed, seashells, and sea birds—are “all melancholy,” perhaps recalling associations from William Wordsworth’s poems where the sea is the site of unchosen movement, death, and the force of necessity.³⁵ In contrast, the lake is a site of repose, “inner solitudes” and clear water almost (except for its situation) as beautiful as Loch Lomond. Can these be reconciled? It seems that perhaps they may not: Dorothy notes that while their eyes find the scene melancholic, “with a more chearful mood of mind we might have seen everything with a different eye.” The scene retains the capacity for both stillness and motion. While the sea loch offers repose for all the tumultuous waters of the sea, in imagination it also offers the possibility of being carried away. Again, there seems to be little difference here between what the human associations do and what the earth itself does.

The Dorothy Wordsworthian spot offers a capaciousness for an imagined, future repose, while simultaneously recalling past experience. Its stillness and its mobility are thus nearly indistinguishable, as what makes rest possible in the spot is also what makes the spot not only itself.

We had before seen the lake only as one wide plain of water; but here the portion of it which we saw was bounded by a high and steep, heathy and woody island opposite, which did not appear like an island, but the main shore, and framed out a little oblong lake apparently not so broad as Rydale-water, with one small island covered with trees, resembling some of the most beautiful of the

³⁵ From just *Lyrical Ballads*, consider “We are Seven” (“And two are gone to sea”), “Michael” (“he was driven at last/To seek a hiding-place beyond the seas”), and “The Brothers,” not to mention, of course, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” For more on the sea, see Kevis Goodman, “‘Uncertain Disease’: Nostalgia, Pathologies of Motion, Practices of Reading.”

holms of Windermere, and only a narrow river's breadth from the shore. This was a place where we should have liked to have lived, and the only one we had seen near Loch Lomond: —how delightful to have a little shed concealed under the branches of the fairy island! the cottages and the island might have been made for the pleasure of each other. It was but like a natural garden, the distance was so small; nay, one could not have forgiven any one living there, not compelled to daily labour, if he did not connect it with his dwelling by some feeling of domestic attachment, like what he has for the orchard where his children play. I thought, what a place for Wm.! he might row himself over with twenty strokes of the oars, escaping from the business of the house, and as safe from intruders, with his boat anchored beside him, as if he had locked himself up in the strong tower of a castle. We were unwilling to leave this sweet spot; but it was so simple, and therefore so rememberable, that it seemed almost as if we could have carried it away with us. It was nothing more than a small lake enclosed by trees at the ends and by the way-side, and opposite by the island, a steep bank on which the purple heath was seen under low oak coppice-wood, a group of houses over-shadowed by trees, and a bending road. There was one remarkable tree, an old larch with hairy branches, which sent out its main stem horizontally over the road, an object that seemed to have been singled out for injury where everything else was lovely and thriving, tortured into that shape by storms, which one might have thought could not have reached it in that sheltered place. (23 August 1803 [246-247])

This passage closes with a brief meditation on a solitary figure, a familiar William-Wordsworthian image;³⁶ but what is singled out here is an injured tree that is the only counter-indication to a scene of flourishing. The flourishing that is found here is not merely a beautiful spot in its own time, however. It gestures both to future, imagined times—imagining William living there—and to past times—a comparison with Rydale Water and Windermere, lakes near the writers' home in Grasmere. The spot is “so rememberable, that it seemed almost as if we could have carried it away with us;” but the rememberable thing about it is its capacity to enter into a chain of remembrances. The spot is “simple”—common—and its enclosure is its capacity to be common.

While this above scene made itself easily available for memory and transplantation, other scenes seem more unsettling, and less susceptible to this kind of lyrical thinking. The trio of travelers found such a “strange mixture of soothing and restless images, of images inviting to rest, and others hurrying the fancy away into an activity still more pleasing than repose” on an island in Loch Lomond:

We had not climbed far before we were stopped by a sudden burst of prospect, so singular and beautiful that it was like a flash of images from another world. We stood with our backs to the hill of the island, which we were ascending, and which shut out Ben Lomond

³⁶ Hartman: “The solitary figure (even a single, tree, VI.76) is a common part of the Wordsworthian landscape; yet if it forces the eye, and so returns him to the realm of externals, it also embodies the idea of something absolute— independent of nature even when within nature. It is a border image, or omphalos” (*Wordsworth's Poetry* 239).

entirely, and all the upper part of the lake, and we looked towards the foot of the lake, scattered over with islands without beginning and without end. The sun shone, and the distant hills were visible, some through sunny mists, others in gloom with patches of sunshine; the lake was lost under the low and distant hills, and the islands lost in the lake, which was all in motion with travelling fields of light, or dark shadows under rainy clouds. There are many hills, but no commanding eminence at a distance to confine the prospect, so that the land seemed endless as the water.

What I had heard of Loch Lomond, or any other place in Great Britain, had given me no idea of anything like what we beheld: it was an outlandish scene—we might have believed ourselves in North America...[describes two islands]...These two islands, with Inch-ta-vannach, where we were standing, were intermingled with the water, I might say interbedded and interveined with it, in a manner that was exquisitely pleasing. There were bays innumerable, straits or passages like calm rivers, landlocked lakes, and, to the main water, stormy promontories. The solitary hut on the flat green island seemed unsheltered and desolate, and yet not wholly so, for it was but a broad river's breadth from the covert of the wood of the other island. Near to these is a miniature, an islet covered with trees, on which stands a small ruin that looks like the remains of a religious house; it is overgrown with ivy, and were it not that the arch of a window or gateway may be distinctly seen, it would be difficult to believe that it was not a tuft of trees growing in the shape of a ruin, rather than a ruin overshadowed by trees...

Beyond we had the same intricate view as before, and could discover Dumbarton rock with its double head. There being a mist over it, it had a ghost-like appearance (as I observed to Wm. and C.) something like the Tor of Glastonbury from the Dorsetshire hills. Right before us, on the flat island mentioned before, were several small single trees or shrubs, growing at different distances from each other, close to the shore, but some optical delusion had detached them from the land on which they stood, and they had the appearance of so many little vessels sailing along the coast of it. I mention the circumstance, because, with the ghostly image of Dumbarton Castle, and the ambiguous ruin on the small island, it was much in the character of the scene, which was throughout magical and enchanting—a new world in its great permanent outline and composition, and changing at every moment in every part of it by the effect of sun and wind, and mist and shower and cloud, and the blending lights and deep shades which took the place of each other, traversing the lake in every direction. The whole was indeed a strange mixture of soothing and restless images, of images inviting to rest, and others hurrying the fancy away into an activity still more pleasing than repose; yet, intricate and homeless, that is, without lasting abiding-place for the mind, as the prospect was, there was no perplexity; we had still a guide to lead us forward.

Wherever we looked, it was a delightful feeling that there was something beyond. Meanwhile, the sense of quiet was never lost sight of...(251-253)

Moments of repose, of benevolent enclosure offered by the earth, dissolve into moments of ecstatic yielding, where boundaries fail, one thing appears to be another, and the very worldliness of the scene gets called into question. The prose of this passage deals with the difficulty of understanding a “sudden burst,” a “flash of images;” a remarkable series of coinages (“intermingled...interbedded and interveined”) shows, perhaps, a method of dealing with such strangeness. A familiar concatenation (“intermingled”) provides the model for describing unfamiliar ones.

Thus while it might seem strange to say first that the vista appears from “another world,” and then compare it to something familiar (the Tor of Glastonbury), this is not a domestication of strangeness, but a willingness to make the enclosures of language—of memory—of experience—themselves proliferative. If a “lasting abiding place for the mind” is lacking, there is yet “no perplexity; we still had a guide to lead us forward.” The dynamic interaction of rest and movement reveals the moments of rest to be brief and contingent spots, but no less vivifying for their brevity. The sense of quiet that survives the strange mixture is a contingent quiet; a speculative enclosure.

The attention to “blending lights and deep shades” recalls a tendency of Dorothy Wordsworth’s writing that is perhaps strongest in the Alfoxden Journal, but persistent across her work: an attention to what Rei Terada calls “*particularly ephemeral perceptual experiences*, perceptions that seem below or marginal to normal appearance” (*Looking Away* 3). The anti-sociality of phenomenophilia raises interesting problems for the Journals. While they are often described as private texts in comparison to the public nature of her brother’s poetry,³⁷ Woolf’s editorial work of comparison to the published works of Coleridge and William has helped relocate Dorothy’s works in a small community of writers who shared language in ways that resist the identification of the solitary coiner of a phrase; for instance, in this note on the passage from the Alfoxden Journal correspondent to “A Night-Piece” discussed above:

The similarities of words and phrases in D’s and W’s accounts probably existed from the beginning, and no doubt sprang from the shared experience of the night sky and their own conversation. Can we know, for instance, whether the ‘black-blue vault’ of ‘A Night-Piece’ and the Journal does not itself owe something to an earlier phrase of C’s that he put in his notebook: “—one black-blue Cloud Stretched, like the heavens o’er all the cope of Heaven”. (278)

Part of what matters here is the insistence on communal rather than individualist production. But to return to Terada, it seems important for Wordsworth’s journal entries that they are directed to a wider community of writers, even if they notably rejected a broader publicity. Terada distinguishes the phenomenophile from a public writer—specifically in her argument, from Kaja Silverman’s world spectator who “also belongs to a community of world spectators for whom one of the main purposes of language is to enable the comparison of perceptions,” thus moving “from perception to language” (22). The phenomenophile, on the other hand, “recedes from language to mere phenomenality: *because* no one can share (or appropriate) one’s merely suspensive, illusory, or ephemeral perception, phenomenophilia becomes a way to get away, or imagine getting away, from other people” (22). This crux of privacy and publicity seems particularly fraught for Wordsworth,

³⁷ See Zimmerman for a discussion of “the cost to the poet” of “exposure to reading audiences” (113).

who (as is often quoted) once wrote in a letter: “I should detest the idea of setting myself up as an Author” (cited, e.g., in Lokke 18). But what kind of tool for the passage from “mere phenomenality” to language is a lyric poem? To be certain, lyric as a genre is at least speculatively opposed to the nonce perception, but its submission to language is one that uniquely tropes the impossibility of that submission, the possible irreducibility of perception, and the nature of the gap created by reiteration in language. The language of a lyric poem is a resistance to language as conceptuality, and its non-giveness need not be experienced only as a givenness-to-come; instead the lyric movement from one subject to another, across time, can be a function of difference whose irreducibility is speculatively engaged, rather than an asserted unity.

It is not surprising, then, that articulations of the Dorothy-Wordsworthian spot in the Scotland journal are deeply intermingled—interbedded—interveined—with lyrical reading:

But we came to one spot which I cannot forget, a single green field at the junction of another brook with the Arey, a peninsula surrounded with a close row of trees, which overhung the streams, and under the branches we could just see a neat white house that stood in the middle of the field enclosed by the trees. Before us was nothing but bare hills, and the road through the bare glen. A person who has not travelled in Scotland can scarcely imagine the pleasure we have had from a stone house, though fresh from the workmen’s hands, square and sharp; there is generally such an appearance of equality in poverty through the long glens of Scotland, giving the notion of savage ignorance—no house better than another, and barns and houses all alike. This house had, however, other recommendations of its own; even in the fertile parts of Somersetshire, it would have been a delicious spot; here, “Mid mountain wild set like a little nest,” it was a resting-place for the fancy, and to this day I often think of it, the cottage and its green covert, as an image of romance, a place of which I have the same sort of knowledge as of some of the retirements, the little vallies, described so livelily by Spenser in his *Fairy Queen*. (31 August 1803 [299-300])

The spot emerges out of a conjuncture of earth with earth: a field at the junction of two brooks, trees surrounding a peninsula, overhanging the trees. The space for a human-made enclosure, the “neat white house,” has been prepared in advance; the human space, then, becomes something of a reading of the non-human space, not a violent intrusion but an approximative mimesis; an attempt to non-violently replicate what has already been provided. Saree Makdisi describes the William-Wordsworthian spot of time “not as ‘natural,’ but rather...as a human potential for experience and practice; which is exactly what nature itself is in Wordsworth’s poetry – a *human* potential” (52). The Dorothy-Wordsworthian “delicious spot” shows the proximity of human potential and natural providence. The technology to link these is a lyrical reading that pulls the spot out of its own time, linking the past (“it was a resting-place for the fancy”) to the present (“to this day I often think of it”) through a conditional thinking of the spot’s possible transplantation: “even in the fertile parts of Somersetshire, it would have been a delicious spot.”

Dorothy Wordsworth’s reading of the spot is so much a lyrical reading that her very knowledge of it is “*the same sort of knowledge* as some of the retirements, the little vallies, described so livelily by Spenser.” The spot prompts her to recall the text from the *Fairy Queen*, slightly misremembered: “Emongst wide waves sett, like a little nest” (2.6.12). Dorothy Wordsworth lyrically

reads Spenser and lyrically reads the spot, carrying them both with her for a productive transplantation into other contexts. To know this spot is to make it available for such a return and repetition; to place oneself in the spot (the text), to let the text (the spot) carry one away elsewhere, to feel the force of the waves from within the nest. This is not to say that the spot is already text,³⁸ but to say that a certain reading of the spot and a certain reading of poetry come together, in making experience available through the changes of repetition, through a removal from context that makes other contextualizations possible.

5. “William had been working at the sheepfold”

Perhaps, in truth, there is nothing *to say*. Perhaps we should not seek a word or concept for it, but rather recognize in the thought of community a theoretical excess (or more precisely, an excess in relation to the theoretical) that would oblige us to adopt another *praxis* of discourse and community...Nor am I claiming, on the contrary, to forge alone the new discourse of community. Neither discourse nor isolation is what is at stake here. I am trying to indicate, at its limit, an experience—not, perhaps, an experience that we have, *but an experience that makes us be*. To say that community has not yet been thought is to say that it tries our thinking, and that it is not an object for it. And perhaps it does not have to become one. (Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* 25-26)

Far more than we have lost is left us yet.
(William Wordsworth, “Michael,” *Lyrical Ballads* 279)

Obsessed, bewildered
By the shipwreck
Of the singular
We have chosen the meaning
Of being numerous. (George Oppen, “Of Being Numerous,” *New Collected Poems* 166)

For Dorothy, the primary context is always William’s writing, and her contributions to it. What changes if we understand his work the same way, if we understand William-Wordsworthian solitude as shot through with shared labor and collaboration?

“Resolution and Independence,” as paradigm of William-Wordsworthian egotism and self-sufficiency (and most open to parody),³⁹ is perhaps best suited to reveal these connections. The

³⁸ There are some such instances, however, in the Scotland journal, for example this description of a Highlander: “His appearance was in the highest degree moving to the imagination: mists were on the hillsides, darkness shutting in upon the huge avenue of mountains, torrents roaring, no house in sight to which the child might belong; his dress, cry, and appearance all different from anything we had been accustomed to. It was a text, as Wm. has since observed to me, containing in itself the whole history of the Highlander’s life—his melancholy, his simplicity, his superstition, and above all, that visionariness which results from a communion with the worldliness of nature” (28 August 1803 [286]). This moment is always-already a text. Newlyn describes it as a “spot of time” (*All in Each Other* 196).

³⁹ I’m not that interested in Lewis Carroll’s parody itself, but here is how the poem is introduced:
‘It’s long,’ said the Knight, ‘but very, *very* beautiful. Everybody that hears me sing it—either it brings the *tears* into their eyes, or else—’

Wordsworthian speaker literally cannot hear the voice of the other on whom he depends for his renewed feeling, and so, “He with a smile did then his words repeat.” This poem emerges out of two social contexts that it seems to occlude. The first is perhaps over-familiar to readers of Dorothy Wordsworth’s writing. William did not come upon the leech gatherer in a “lonely place:” he was walking with Dorothy, whose account appears in the *Grasmere Journal*. (Wherein another infamous context flashes up: Dorothy’s account of the meeting is added a week after the encounter, on a day when William “talked much about the object of his Essay for the 2nd volume of LB” (3 October 1800 [23])).

But perhaps more dramatically for our purposes: the loneliness that “Resolution and Independence” recounts was not William’s at all. It was, first, Coleridge’s: the poem’s writing followed Coleridge reading the “Verse Letter to Sara” that would become “Dejection.” Dorothy recounts her reaction to these verses:

Wednesday 21st [April 1802]. William & I sauntered a little in the garden. Coleridge came to us & repeated the verses he wrote to Sara—I was affected with them & was on the whole in miserable spirits. The sunshine—the green fields & the fair sky made me sadder; even the little happy sporting lambs seemed but sorrowful to me. (89)

Coleridge’s dark feelings spread to Dorothy, and then from her even to the lambs, the green fields, the fair sky.⁴⁰

When these feelings also spread to William’s poem, why do we suddenly perceive them as so existential, so *singling*? What if, rather than describing William’s occlusion of the social occasions of this poem as a defensive maneuver, we read “Resolution and Independence” as fully shot through with the social, with the meaning of being numerous, as it is another repetition? In an 1805 journal of an Excursion on the Banks of Ullswater, Dorothy gives us a model for this kind of promiscuous reiteration:

‘Or else what?’ said Alice, for the Knight had made a sudden pause.
 ‘Or else it doesn’t, you know. The name of the song is called “*Haddock’s Eyes*.”’
 ‘Oh, that’s the name of the song, is it?’ Alice said, trying to feel interested.
 ‘No, you don’t understand,’ the Knight said, looking a little vexed. ‘That’s what the name is *called*. The name really is “*The Aged Aged Man*.”’
 ‘Then I ought to have said “That’s what the *song* is called”?’ Alice corrected herself.
 ‘No, you oughtn’t: that’s quite another thing! The *song* is called “*Ways and Means*”:
 but that’s only what it’s *called*, you know!’
 ‘Well, what *is* the song, then?’ said Alice, who was by this time completely bewildered.
 ‘I was coming to that,’ the Knight said. ‘The song really is “*A-sitting On A Gate*”:
 and the tune’s my own invention.’ (*Through the Looking-Glass* 174-175)

While Carroll is probably joking about the poem’s two names (“The Leech-Gatherer” and “Resolution and Independence”), he picks up on the problem we are discussing here; especially if the many names of this parody can be read as a benevolent reiteration and not a bewildering one. The Knight’s anxiety that the song bring tears, or else, mirrors Wordsworth’s response to criticisms by Mary Hutchinson (his then-fiancée): “I am exceedingly sorry that the latter part of the Leech-gatherer has displeased you, the more so because I cannot take to myself (that being the case) much pleasure or satisfaction in having pleased you in the former part” (14 June 1802, *The Early Years* 366).

⁴⁰ William’s poem “Ode: Intimations of Immortality” seems also to reflect these lines from Dorothy’s journal: as there too, sunshine and young lambs bounding fail to give the speaker joy.

The trees on the larger island on Rydale Lake were of the most gorgeous colours; the whole Island reflected in the water, as I remember once in particular to have seen it with dear Coleridge, when either he or Wm. observed that the rocky shore, spotted and streaked with purplish brown heath, and its image in the water were indistinguishably blended, like an immense caterpillar, such as, when we were children, we used to call *Woolly Boys*, from their hairy coats. (7 November 1805 [413])

To whom does the recollected description belong? It does not matter because it is an instance of reiteration and merger coming fast upon each other. William and Dorothy see the lake and it reminds Dorothy of how she used to see it with Coleridge; how either Coleridge or William described it reminds Dorothy of how she used to speak of caterpillars as a child. Through reiteration the object merges with its description, “indistinguishably blended.” The “we” of this final memory becomes a heuristic for the entire scene, an opening towards collectivity that does not require the collective to have any kind of self-possession or clear definition; it is an *unworking* “we,” to use Jean-Luc Nancy’s term;⁴¹ a “we” working against individuation and the proper.

In a reading of William’s poem “Michael,” Susan Eilenberg writes that “property is what Wordsworth wishes his poetry to resemble” (91). The poem, she argues, is “a work of usurpation” on account of the narrator’s transformation of the land from physical property into “emotional property” or “literary property” (98, 92-93). The Grasmere Journal records a version of this poem’s slippage:

After Dinner we walked up Greenhead Gill in search of a Sheepfold. We went by Mr Ollifs & through his woods. It was a delightful day & the views looked excessively cheerful & beautiful chiefly that from Mr Oliff’s field where our house is to be built. The Colours of the mountains soft & rich, with orange fern—The Cattle pasturing upon the hill-tops Kites sailing as in the sky above our heads—Sheep bleating & in lines & chains & patterns scattered over the mountains. They come down & feed on the little green islands in the beds of the torrents & so may be swept away. The Sheepfold is falling away it is built nearly in the form of a heart unequally divided. Look down the brook & see the drops rise upwards & sparkle in the air, at the little falls, the higher sparkles the tallest. (11 October 1800 [26])

William worked all the morning at the Sheep-fold but in vain. He lay down in the afternoon till 7 o clock but could not sleep—I slept. My head better—he unable to work. (18 October 1800 [27])

William worked in the morning at the sheep-fold. (20 October 1800 [28])

Wm had been unsuccessful in the morning at the sheep-fold. (21 October 1800 [28])

⁴¹ Though Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney translate *La communauté désœuvrée* (1986) as *The Inoperative Community*, I want to emphasize that there is a working in unworking. To be sure, Nancy refuses the labor of a certain kind of mobilization of community towards essence. But his opposition offers the details of another work: centripetal, ecstatic, interruptive, and incomplete, emerging from the exposure of finite singular beings to each other. The translators in fact render *désœuvrement* as “unworking” in the text itself, following Pierre Joris’s earlier translation of Blanchot; but the co-translators chose “not to inflict upon the reader an unrecognizable word” in the title (156).

Wm composed without much success at the Sheep-fold. (22 October 1800 [28])

W burnt the sheep fold—a rain night. (9 November 1800 [31])

William had been working at the sheep-fold. They were salving sheep—a rainy morning. (11 November 1800 [31])

Eilenberg notes: “Her entries make no distinction between the structure of stone and the structure of words, composition and hard physical labor. It sounds as if the poem were made out of the same stuff as the landscape” (90). To say that William’s “working at the sheep-fold” is the same as Michael’s working at the sheep-fold is a sign of usurpation and incorporation. Marjorie Levinson’s critique of this usurpation stands in almost directly for a critique of lyric as such. She writes: “The narrator, self-designated a poet, does not merely symbolize or stand in for Luke; he *is* Luke, reincarnated and sublimed, as it were” (74). Compare Helen Vendler: “A lyric is meant to be spoken by its reader as if the reader were the one uttering the words... We do not listen to him; we become him” (*Poems, Poets, Poetry* xlii-xliii). But what if lyric—and “Michael”—could appear as a more benign reiteration? Not a usurpation but a placing oneself alongside—not an abstract universality but a particular recontextualization—not a proprietorial enclosure but a proliferative one?

The poem opens with an ambiguously numbered second-person address, inviting the poem’s readers to walk the same steps as the speaker: “If from the public way you turn your steps/Up the tumultuous brook of Greenhead Ghyll...” (1-2). The speaker invites us into a scene of both enclosure and opening: the mountains appear athwart the walkers, “face to face,” but the speaker encourages “courage! for around that boisterous brook/The mountains have all opened out themselves,/And made a hidden valley of their own” (5-8). Like the sea lochs in Scotland, a change of aspect transforms a claustrophobic enclosure into a proliferative one. The scene is “in truth an utter solitude” (13), though this line follows an enumeration of the various beings that nonetheless people the valley: “alone/With a few sheep, with rocks and stones, and kites/That overhead are sailing in the sky” (10-12). “Michael”’s speaker prepares us for the tale with these oscillations, guiding us along their boundary—suggesting that contrasting aspects might characterize a middle ground, rather than dialectical opposites.

By the end of the preamble the object of that address becomes, specifically, poets: “youthful Poets, who among the hills/Will be my second self when I am gone” (38-39). Thus the story’s sympathy-enriching virtues extend beyond the feeling of the speaker who first felt singled out by them. The tale that “led me on to feel/For passions that were not my own, and think/(At random and imperfectly indeed)/On man, the heart of man, and human life” is thus removed from the limitations of individual biography (30-33). If this “struggling heap of unhewn stones” (17) is something like the William-Wordsworthian spot, we should note that from the very start the spot resists a localization to a single person’s memory or experience. The poem seeks to common the spot, to follow the proliferative capacities of its enclosure. A similar expansiveness appears in the story itself, in Michael’s changed associations with place following the birth of his son:

But soon as Luke, full ten years old, could stand
Against the mountain blasts; and to the heights,
Not fearing toil, nor length of weary ways,
He with his Father daily went, and they
Were as companions, why should I relate
That objects which the Shepherd loved before
Were dearer now? that from the Boy there came
Feelings and emanations—things which were

Light to the sun and music to the wind;
And that the old Man's heart seemed born again? (194-203)

The passing down of pleasure seems to go in a different direction here: it is not that Michael passes on a love for pastoral objects to Luke, but that Luke's companionability enriches Michael's sensations. The sensations are not passed on as property is passed on; instead, their strength expands the more people who share in them. Yet this is not merely a dialectical reversal of a generational logic, but a distributed capacity for feeling that moves outside any kind of propriety. It is not even clear that the boy has the maturity to experience the pleasures as his father does; the vague "Feelings and emanations" seem to give a pleasure to sun and wind, but we do not hear of the boy's own enjoyment.

In his moving address to his son, Michael describes a sharing of tasks that is similarly unmoored from an Oedipal regularity of repeating generations. The work that was "for us" becomes "a work for me" (386-387); but rather than seeing this as a tragic reversal, Michael instead asks that Luke "—do thou thy part;/I will do mine.—I will begin again/With many tasks that were resigned to thee" (392-394). Michael cannot deny the breaking, and the poem's heavy enjambment and caesurae offer a formal mirror. The sheepfold itself is such a formal mirror: it is meant to be a reminder for Luke, a vivifying spot:

I knew that thou couldst never have a wish
To leave me, Luke: thou hast been bound to me
Only by links of love: when thou art gone,
What will be left to us!—But, I forget
My purposes: Lay now the corner-stone,
As I requested; and hereafter, Luke,
When thou art gone away, should evil men
Be thy companions, think of me, my Son,
And of this moment; hither turn thy thoughts,
And God will strengthen thee: amid all fear
And all temptations, Luke, I pray that thou
May'st bear in mind the life thy Fathers lived,
Who, being innocent, did for that cause
Bestir them in good deeds. Now, fare thee well—
When thou return'st, thou in this place wilt see
A work which is not here: a covenant
'Twill be between us; but, whatever fate
Befall thee, I shall love thee to the last,
And bear thy memory with me to the grave.'
The Shepherd ended here; and Luke stooped down,
And, as his Father had requested, laid
The first stone of the Sheepfold. At the sight
The old Man's grief broke from him; to his heart
He pressed his Son, he kissed him and wept;
And to the house together they returned. (401-425)

The sheepfold is meant to function for Luke as an image of the links of love and of the memory of his fathers. For Michael, the sheepfold functions as a proleptic substitute grave—perhaps for both

Luke and for himself. While certainly a real piece of space, even in this scene of its making, its reality is entirely bound up with its capacity to conjure, its *as if* function, as “a work which is not here.”

The sheepfold resembles a heart, Dorothy tells us: “The Sheepfold is falling away it is built nearly in the form of a heart unequally divided. Look down the brook & see the drops rise upwards & sparkle in the air, at the little falls, the higher sparkles the tallest” (11 October 1800 [26]). In the poem’s preamble the speaker links the sheepfold to his own experience of “the heart of man” (33) and the future, desired “delight of a few natural hearts” (36). The sheepfold resembles the heart, which is to say that it does not hold the love it represents fully: “There is a comfort in the strength of love; / I will make a thing enduring, which else / Would upset the brain, or break the heart” (450-452). The heart is a metaphorical holding environment through which feeling yet can pass.⁴² Wordsworth’s poem is an approximative mimesis that attempts to build such a holding environment by taking us close to the sheepfold, to the building of the sheepfold, inviting us to join in that work.

Susan Wolfson notes that “we perform the equivalent of reading the stones for the story they mark, and so join the community that can tell the tale” (*Questioning Presence* 89). In reading “Michael” we are asked to read the stones reparatively, as a renovating spot. In so doing we choose to take comfort in this tale, to let the sheepfold be a loose gathering that we too can enter rather than a sign of failure and of loss. The sheepfold’s functions as an image do not require it to directly stand in for the things it represents; the connections that the sheepfold makes possible emerge when we place it into our hearts—place it alongside our own emotions—place ourselves alongside it, walking up the tumultuous brook of Greenhead Ghyll, the drops rising upwards. “Michael” invites us to join the unfinished project of working at the sheepfold.

As I have argued in this chapter, lyric is that invitation: neither a retreat from the social, nor a reification of “the human,” it is a particular and speculative form of invocation and communization. To read lyrically is to join that project, and to invite others to follow you there.

⁴² I return to metaphors of the heart in the third interlude.

Interlude 1: Writing the Community of the Future

When the charm fails, it's our fault! If good shows through, we willingly credit La Fontaine. What can you do with the literature of the past? Save it? It's often disgusting; and how impossible to accept anyone's blind spots, particularly the past's. So here and there we altered. We apply cosmetics, make a brighter picture. It's not better, only different. If it's better for us, that will all change in a hundred years. Trust history on this, not us. You always live with your times. We hope you like it.

...In the middle of this discussion a seraglio of women passes by them. Each is covered with lovely swathes of the finest cloth. Beneath their long garments you can see wonderful dyed-leather zones studded with precious jewels. Silver and gold adorn their full gussets and from the peaks of tall conical hats flutter and shimmer scarves of every color. "What are these, dear father, wearing the beautiful clothes!" "Nothing," says the old man, alarmed. "They're a bird called goose, that's all." The young man's face suffuses with delight. "Father, father dearest, let's leave our forest and live with these marvelous birds. We'll wear what they wear and sing what they sing and be with them forever. Father dear, can't we be geese too?" (Bruce Boone and Robert Glück, "Bob and Bruce's Version of La Fontaine's Version of a Medieval Boccaccio Story," *La Fontaine* 33-34, 36-37)

Reading Dorothy and William Wordsworth together and reparatively, as I have done above, implies a version of lyric that does not depend on starkly dichotomized theorizations in which the imagination is positioned opposite history. Such a version of lyric might also dispel Language poetry's iconoclastic opposition between the insular "lyric of fetishized personal 'experience'" and the immanent community of reader and writer that a more anti-subjective form of poetics requires (Silliman, Harryman, Hejinian, et al., "Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry: A Manifesto" 262). But I wonder if we can refuse to refuse this iconoclasm—or at least refuse to sweep away Language poetry along with its apparent prohibitions.⁴³ I am interested in a reading of literary history in which apposition is more generative than opposition. In the 21st century, we do not have to either join or dissent from the more dramatic theoretical claims of Language poetry (e.g. the analogy between the commodification in language and in capital; and conversely, between the disruption of language and the disruption of social conditions); instead we can consider the diverse forms of writing that Language poetry makes possible.

⁴³ Here it is perhaps worth noting that Language poetry's more prohibitive tendencies—especially in the theoretical salvos of Ron Silliman, Charles Bernstein, and Barrett Watten—contrast strongly with much of the poetic work itself. In a study of women Language poets, Emily Critchley notes: "The proliferation of manifesto-like essays and talks by a handful of the male poets—despite numerous protestations against such a mode—has, it seems, been partly responsible for falsely hegemonising the movement. It has also meant that Language work has come to be viewed with suspicion...as a form of writing with overreaching claims to positive interventions in society of a political (anti-capitalist) order. Meanwhile, the movement has overlooked many of the women whose "alternative" aesthetic and political (and often feminist) interests importantly overlap with Language writing and at times in significantly more subtle and innovative ways" (9-10).

Looking to San Francisco's New Narrative writers, who worked in the margins and in the wake of Language poetry's theoretical salvoes, might suggest modes for pursuing this apposite reading. Robert Glück writes on the relation between Language poetry and New Narrative:

If I could have become a Language poet I would have; I craved the formalist fireworks, a purity that invented its own tenets. On the snowy mountain-top of progressive formalism, from the highest high road of modernist achievement, there was plenty of contempt heaped on less rigorous endeavor. I had come to a dead end in the mid-seventies like the poetry scene itself. The problem was not theoretical—or it was: I could not go on until I figured out some way to understand where I was. I also craved the community the Language Poets made for themselves.

The questions vexing Bruce [Boone] and me and the kind of rigor we needed were only partly addressed by Language Poetry which, in the most general sense, we saw as an aesthetics built on an examination (by subtraction: of voice, of continuity) of the ways language generates meaning...

Warring camps drew battle lines between representation and nonrepresentation—retrospection makes the argument seem as arbitrary as Fancy vs. Imagination. But certainly the “logic of history” at that moment supported this division, along with the struggle to find a third position that would encompass the whole argument...

I wanted to write with a total continuity and total disjunction since I experienced the world (and myself) as continuous and infinity divided. That was my ambition for writing. Why should a work of literature be organized by one pattern of engagement? Why should a “position” be maintained regarding the size of the gaps between units of meaning? To describe how the world is organized may be the same as organizing the world. I wanted the pleasures and politics of the fragment and the pleasures and politics of story, gossip, fable and case history; the randomness of chance and a sense of inevitability; sincerity while using appropriation and pastiche. When Barrett Watten said about *Jack the Modernist*, “You have your cake and eat it too,” I took it as a great compliment, as if my intention spoke through the book. (“Long Note on New Narrative,” *Communal Nude* 13-14, 18)

From this not-so-distant historical perspective, it seems it is in our best critical interests to have our cake and eat it too.⁴⁴ This is to say that adding New Narrative to the story of the 20th century avant-

⁴⁴ Along these lines, compare the two prefaces to *Guide to Poetics Journal*. Lyn Hejinian's preface describes the multiple and various energies that *Poetics Journal* tapped into: “a site for the practice of self-reflection and intensive redefinition as concomitant to broad social and aesthetic engagements; it is also a site for continuing incipience, a site for perpetual, open-ended, and curious becoming” (2-3). Whereas Watten once again takes the opportunity to state the claims of Language poetry's interventions: “The ‘turn to language’ of the 1960s and 1970s was a site for skepticism on claims to unmediated ‘presence,’ but it was also a return to the social incomprehension of the material text...[*Poetics Journal*'s] indeterminacy of genre is linked directly to the ‘turn to language’ itself...” (13). One could see these two as competing tendencies, but if so, then the fact that neither wins is our victory.

garde is not a detraction from Language poetry; that a resuscitation of lyric still learns from Language poetry's insistence on the communalizing possibilities of poetry; that as before, a praise of Dorothy ought to enable us to see William better, not worse.

For Bruce Boone and Robert Glück, conversation and gossip offer a version of a lyric theory: they track the movement of language, as it repeats and is repeated and sounds and resounds, where what matters is not just what words are said, but how and in whom they echo.

“What do you trust?”

“Not who but what? Jack, I trust gossip.”

Jack sat next to me; he looked worried, said, “Gossip is crude.” I reasoned that the depth he missed in a single story could be found collectively in a hundred. He cocked his head, attentive, so I became interesting. “The people who know your story are as important as the plot. Gossip registers the difference between a story one person knows and everyone knows, between one person's story and everyone's. Or it's a mythology, gods and goddesses, a community and a future.”

Jack took my hand. That was exciting. I finally stopped smiling, let desire bewilder and reorganize us. He asked, “What do you mean by community?”

“Ecstatic sexuality.”

“Whew.” (Glück, *Jack the Modernist* 10-11)

Gossip reminds us that truths are local, and that communities can make their own truths. Claire Marie Stancek, in a study that apposes Mary Robinson's *Lyrical Tales* (1800) to Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*, notes: “Minimized (feminized) and shunned, gossip stands ‘by the side of traditional gentlemanly forms of conversation...Robinson's gossip, in the simplest terms, is speech that lends itself to multiplication and repetition in order to emphasize its condition as heard speech, whether by foregrounding its repeated status, or by enacting repetitions in the moment of its utterance” (5-6). In the stories of Boone and Glück, gossip constantly tropes its own possible generality. How far can this story repeat? Can it tell me something not only about this or that person, but about this or that community? “It's scandal's defining of boundaries that interests me, what is inside and what is outside—it's one way a community organizes itself, tells itself its story about what is forbidden and expected” (Glück, *Elements* 15). Gossip turns over and over again the different stories and evidences that describe how we relate to each other. It brings politics and sex into literature without making them into something that they are not.

The oscillation between text and metatext, a favorite turn in New Narrative writing, has a similar function to gossip: it allows language to turn itself over, back and forth, without creating a hierarchical relation.

Bruce Boone and I have thought about one tactic, the use of “text-metatext,” where the text is a narrative (with its time span, characters, and action), and the metatext is a running analysis, its point of view based on the future, or a real community. It embodies the critical spirit of the audience that measures the effectiveness of literature—and other manifestations of its community—according to its own experience and ideas. The metatext can be in the form of an essay, or meditation; it can have its own characters and stories. A simple

narration can put the reader on the far side of the proscenium arch. The metatext cuts naturalistic illusion. It includes the reader, it asks questions, asks for critical response, makes claims on the reader, elicits commitments. In any case, text-metatext takes its form from the dialectical cleft between real life and life as it wants to be. (Glück, “Caricature,” *Communal Nude* 94)

If this is a “dialectical cleft,” its turns are definitively “temporalized, reintegrated in the stream of life,” to quote Hartman again (*Wordsworth’s Poetry* 212; see chapter 1 above). This dialectic is not pushing towards one final synthesis; its turns are not organized by a single goal. Instead the dialectical cleft is a cut in which I can rest, a space made by writing for the reader to move with others.⁴⁵ Text-metatext becomes the occasion for a lyrical reading in which the movements of writing become my movements, and the movement of those movements creates a form of community that can be specific or speculative.⁴⁶

As with the Wordsworths and Coleridge, Boone and Glück are friends walking together and talking together in a political situation that seems ambiguously post-revolutionary (the Stonewall or the Bastille), both full of possibility and repression, looking for moments in their pasts and presents that gesture towards possible futures.

It seems to me that I was bringing up some of these questions in an indirect way with the story about Mission Dolores and the monstrosity, the one I told you earlier. Yet if it is clear to me that a person ought to regard each absence in their life as Utopian in its content, it is far less clear to me how such a content calls us to acts of praxis, to futures of realization. But these meditations too, as I am sure you realize, have something to do with loss. They are a kind of lament I am making with words... [I]n a sense what I am actually asking is—who should a person tell their story to, and what are the consequences? When you tell something to someone, doesn’t it change their life forever? For me such questions bring with them a great sense of melancholy, as if in interrogating language I come that much closer to some bedrock loneliness inseparable from history itself. But perhaps I should really say prehistory—since I don’t believe that these foreclosures are fated to remain forever. And what does narrative open up to, if not human love, called into existence for the first time.

Perhaps you think of this as simply poetry. But for me these thoughts are all the more convincing because they are based on the

⁴⁵ Or as Dodie Bellamy and Kevin Killian put it in the introduction to their anthology of New Narrative writing: “New Narrative seems scooped out of dialectic, like a banana split” (xiv).

⁴⁶ A few paragraphs earlier in this essay, Glück writes: “I read a story at a gay reading about being queer-baited. The audience responded throughout with shouts of encouragement and acknowledgment. Afterward people told me I got it right. I read the same story to an appreciative university audience, and afterward people said they liked my transitions. I hope they *were* innovative transitions, and, who knows, this audience might become a community of writers. But the first audience showed a spirit of collectivity in the authorship, where both audience and writer are responsible to their community. This responsibility is not moral blackmail. It releases the writer from the burden of psychology and gives the writer access to history. The writer is a member of a community and will rise and fall with it. Here begins a truly collective writing” (“Caricature,” *Communal Nude* 93).

still unsolved problems of my real life. More convincing as thoughts because they remain insoluble as problems—this side of a human future in love.

Poetry? I can only tell it to you again. These are the real problems of my life. Though perhaps I should say Bob's life too. (Boone, *My Walk with Bob* 35-36)

The real problems of my life, of Bob's life, and perhaps of your life too, are catalyzed by an imagined sway of the monstrosity in the Mission Dolores that pulls Bruce back into his history and forward into the future. My loneliness is not my prison, but a condition for a narrative that opens me to you by means of language that in describing our distance offers the possibility of bridging it. If the narrative marks foreclosures, then it also marks the hope that those foreclosures are temporary. The consequences of the story are its gesture towards multiplicity, to actual and imagined hearers and readers and tellers to come.

There is a relation, then, between the small community—of the Wordsworths and Coleridge; of Boone and Glück—and more expansive forms of community. But the relation does not have to be precise.

Brother Leo's funeral and the events that followed it became one of those rich associative nexuses of a past you tend to return to—though with perceptions that get altered as new layers keep on being added—to think through the structural problems of your life. And reading between these lines I hope to find some continuities—ideas, you can't help but hope, that have gotten more human by becoming more historical. The religious communities of my past, I think, stand for political communities in my present, and these in turn for a community of the future that exists only in dreams. (Boone, *Century of Clouds* 31)

The small community is in a relation of approximative mimesis to the bigger communities, touching them and next to them. Boone's interest in these kinds of communities extended into his research into poetic coteries, specifically queer coteries led by authors to be considered later in this dissertation, namely Frank O'Hara and Jack Spicer. Boone, and the other New Narrative writers who followed his lead in this study, were animated by the conviction that the poetic coteries of the past might, however obscurely, stand in for the literary communities they were seeking to form in the present. Likewise, they hoped that their nascent forms of community could suggest the contours of the utopian community of the future. In the next chapter I take up this study with an examination of the attempts by Amiri Baraka and Jack Spicer to make poems that would be spaces for black and gay political community (respectively).

But for neither Boone and Glück, nor Spicer and Baraka (as we shall see), does writing precisely image the community of the future in a utopian exposition. Rather, along the paracletic lines discussed earlier in relation to Hartman's reading of William Wordsworth, writing allows for a coextension and mystical relation in which past, present, and future are mutually invigorating. Writing, speculatively and without assurance in advance, creates the space for these communities to touch. In Christian theology, the paraclete offers love and teaching on earth, and also a promise of a return. The paraclete is there when God is not there to allow us to keep God close to us. The paraclete promises the time to come, and helps us keep our faith in it.

But in offering love and teaching on earth, the paraclete also helps us to get there. As Anne-Lise François writes, the paraclete is “a surrogate companion and substitute love-object that makes further substitution possible” (“A little while” 135). Dorothy Wordsworth’s *Grasmere Journal* begins with this paracletic aim, serving as a double substitute:

I resolved to write a journal of the time till W & J return, & I set about keeping my resolve because I will not quarrel with myself, & because I shall give Wm Pleasure by it when he comes home again.
(May 14 1800 [1])

Writing is a substitute for William in two senses. First, a substitute that Dorothy uses to avoid quarreling with herself, a substitute presence while he is gone. But at the same time, writing supplies a substitute for *Dorothy’s* experiences that will give *William* pleasure. Writing’s substitution becomes an aid to resolve, goes beyond its own self, and then becomes a force of pleasure in others, proliferating in the shared writing that Dorothy and William would undertake over the next few years. It is paracletic: its substitution bridges a gap by making other substitutions possible.

Between text and metatext, one community and the next, conversation and gossip and truth, writing is a middle way in which we magically coexist. “When I reject the opposition between myself and the rest of nature, wonder replaces terror. I redefine my health as an enormous complex web, an ecology. I enter an enchanted realm whose magic is simply that I coexist with other organisms” (Glück, “Between Life and Death” 193). This coexisting is the lyrical reading of conversation, of sex, of friendships, as enclosures that endlessly open: “the skin unfolding unendingly like the Virgin’s mantle, and the nerve endings drone with pleasure” (Glück, “The Best Lube,” *Communal Nude* 242).

Lyrical reading attempts to bring death into life, to refuse their dichotomization, to make space for experience and thought and alternative reiterations. Glück lyrically reads Frank O’Hara—“But is the/earth as full as life was full, of them?”

Life can only understand itself, but that is not the whole story. Since I could not mourn Ed, I could not recognize his death. I could not acknowledge his *presence* in my life as a dead person. That is, I could not bury him, so I was “maintained” outside of life. *As death is full*. I needed to pull over a moment. *As death is full*, as though in the full sunlight. Some rain splashed on my face—I felt it. It made me want to lift my face and make a vase with my arms. In my mind I lifted my arms into the shape of a vase, another word in the language of Ed’s death. (*About Ed* 147)

Writing makes the shape of a voice in which we enter and repeat through our reading, our making of another word and another language. The small space we make for a particular other and the large space we make for an unknown other stand in for each other; and I find continuities between them; they are sustaining, locating, intimate, shared.

The physical details should be so intimate they bring the story past the show-and-tell stage of psychological nuance into a shared sensory region; the politics should touch as close as t-shirts or socks. Speaking through the story, I’d want to hear voices that sustain me: from my friends; from the gay, feminist, and left communities; and from the community of writers, living and dead. I think these voices

would locate our afternoon—and afternoons in your life too—in the history of our times. (Glück, “Preface,” *Communal Nude* 82)

I would make images of people in my stories so they would have the pleasure of seeing themselves. With every person named, life would be tangled in the text. I wanted people to feel they had a stake in this writing and credit it and affirm it and give it a community and social life it could have only if *many* people saw their representations there, not just *one* person. Not just myself—since I could now tell about others. Politeness, pressure, related to people’s responses to what you had written. Your text could not begin until people were able to start loving and hating you on account of it. Finally I wanted a text so tangled up with others that it would be their intentions, and not mine, that gave it such place as it would have in a large social history. (Boone, *Century of Clouds* 50)

After dinner he slept I read German, & at the closing in of day went to sit in the Orchard—he came to me, & walked backwards & forwards, we talked about C—Wm repeated the poem to me—I left him there & in 20 minutes he came in rather tired with attempting to write—he is now reading Ben Jonson I am going to read German it is about 10 o clock, a quiet night. The fire flutters & the watch ticks I hear nothing else save the Breathings of my Beloved & he now & then pushes his book forward & turns over a leaf. (*Grasmere Journal* 23 March 1802 [82])

By bringing Dorothy and William and Bruce and Bob next to each other, touching close, gossiping, I want to think a version of history—a version of lyric—that allows for these dis- and re-locations: lyric’s untimely echo, walking backwards and forwards in the orchard and the Mission Dolores, breathing and fluttering together, tangling up with communities living, dead, and yet to come.

Chapters 2 and 3: Queerness as Poetry / Blackness as Poetry

Introduction

The previous chapter attempted to establish, through a reading of Dorothy Wordsworth's writing alongside some of William Wordsworth's poems, that every poem's *I* is also a *we*—and not necessarily an abstract and unmarked “we” but a particular one, open to particular others. Poems—like the Wordsworths' paradigmatic “delicious spots” and “spots of time”—are moments of both fixity and mobility that open to others through revisiting in memory and language. The lyric reading of these texts, even between Dorothy and William, differs in its extension. Dorothy's texts aim at the smallest of collectivities (herself, William, and Coleridge, most often), while William's often intend all of humanity or, as we saw in “Michael,” the “youthful Poets, who among the hills/Will be my second self when I am gone.” Yet whatever their apparent original communities, our lyric reading can open these collectives further and make more and other commons of language in their various and differing reiterations. To read lyrically is to build these commons.

I turn now to two authors who invoked particular communities with their poems, and used lyric as a technology for calling these forms of collectivity into existence. For Amiri Baraka, a *black poem*, and for Jack Spicer, a *queer poem*, are texts that at once express a particular position and invoke *blackness* and *queerness* into being. For both these writers, their collective identities appear as utopias paradigmatically located in poetry, forms of relation that writing especially conjures. Their discovery of poetry as such a technology comes slowly for each, as they moved from lyrics that prioritize individual experience to lyrics that invoke collectives. At times, the invocations I discuss are *perlocutionary*, calling into existence a collective that does not yet exist, or to which the speaker can only gesture but not yet belong. At other times they are *illocutionary*, coming into existence as they are called. Between these two forms of performative utterance are the conditions of political identification and self-understanding through which Baraka and Spicer moved in the periods that I discuss in this chapter.

My studies of these two authors thus proceed somewhat biographically, tracing how these authors arrived at these texts. This is not because the life is necessarily so important to the poem, but because for each the change—from “I” to “we,” from speaking outside the collective to speaking within it—happened in the context of political transformations that made different collective positions possible. Yes, the “I” is always already a “we”—but the connections between an “I” and a “we” that is black, a “we” that is queer, belong to particular moments in the history of these identifications.

Understandings of minority writing often emphasize difference, marking the moments in which a black or queer “I” disidentifies or separates from the unmarked “we.” For these theorists, attempts to universalize minority experience do violence to this particularity. David Palumbo-Liu, for example, writes: “Minority cultures, that is, those cultures which have been marked as differing significantly from what is construed to be the dominant culture, have always had a particularly problematic relationship to the concept of the universal: the dominant has declared itself precisely *as* universal, the quality of universality in turn is affirmed as the pre-requisite for anything seeking entrance into the dominant culture” (188).⁴⁷ Indeed much literary criticism and theory of minority cultures place highest emphasis on the historical specificity of groups deemed outside the universal

⁴⁷ Palumbo-Liu's essay appears in a 1995 special issue of *differences* on universalism; see also essays in that volume by Joan Scott and Naomi Schor. See also Monique Wittig, “The Point of View: Universal or Particular?,” José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, and Heather Love, “Queers _____ This.”

as an alternative. Rather than seeking access to a supposedly trans-cultural, trans-historical universality, this mode of theorizing refuses it.

But the valorization of historicity may only strengthen the force of universality, as Denise Ferreira da Silva has argued. In her theorization of the “transparent ‘I’”—her name for “Man, the subject, the ontological figure consolidated in post-Enlightenment European thought” (xvi)—Silva notes that both universality and historicity reproduce it:

As a consequence, the racial subaltern is always already inscribed as a historical subject who finally comes into representation as a transparent “I” when articulating an emancipatory project. In this way, this formulation rehearses transparency, the modern ontological presupposition, when deploying universality and historicity as the privileged modern ontological descriptors: it suggests that racial emancipation comes about when the (juridical and economic) inclusion of the racial others and their voices (historical and cultural representations) finally realizes universality in postmodern social configurations. (xxiv)

Silva calls for a theory that would “not stop at a critique of (the failure of juridical and economic) universality just to hold onto the promises of historicity” (7). The logic of exclusion and inclusion still leaves the others of Europe as an exteriority to be engulfed by universal reason.

In the spirit of Silva’s critique, I am interested in discovering what forms of commons come into view when universality remains open to alternative definition outside the abstraction of universal reason. I am following here Judith Butler’s call for “an opening towards alternative versions of universality that are wrought from the work of translation itself” (*Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* 179), and elsewhere, for “the term ‘universality’...to be let permanently open, permanently contested, permanently contingent” (“Contingent Foundation: Feminism and the Question of ‘Postmodernism’” 8). Butler directs us to the concrete moments of translation as contingent moments of universality.⁴⁸ In what follows, rather than seeing *black* and *queer* as markers of particularity relative to either an abstract or a translative universality, I look to understand blackness and queerness as forms of commons themselves. As alternative collectivities, alternative commons, blackness and queerness resist the hegemony of universality not by seeking recognition or inclusion, but by establishing a separate way of saying “we.”

These questions are political as much as they are aesthetic. The poems I will examine here occur proximate to their authors’ engagements with the political possibilities of black and gay identification—Spicer with the Mattachine Society (an early gay movement organization) and Baraka with Black Nationalism. It might seem as though there is a clear distinction between these two engagements and their relation to literature, as Baraka very explicitly aligned his art-making with his political organizing and Spicer did not. The critical conversations around these two authors understand these alignments very differently. Baraka’s poetic innovations in the early 1960s have been totally obscured by the political actions he took; his polemics against apolitical forms of poetry seem to have hidden the fact that a political poetry is poetry, too. Spicer’s turn to collectivity, on the

⁴⁸ Silva queries Butler’s Hegelian faith in translation and the “concrete” universal: “If one opts for the ‘concrete’ universal, the particular will flourish, but a viable political project will need to rely on always already historic (linguistic or cultural) others who will aid in their own emancipation as ‘cultural translators’ informing their universal (Western feminist) other by telling her how it works at home, in the recess of their ‘local cultures,’ where, before entering the political struggle for hegemony, her people rest peacefully in oblivious cultural transparency” (6).

other hand, is understood largely through either the formal terms (the serial poem) or the occult terms (poetic dictation) in which he himself described his poetry in an influential series of lectures (see *The House that Jack Built*). While recent archival work by Kevin Killian restores Spicer's involvement in the Mattachine to the attention of critics, that period is not seen to be decisive by most of Spicer's readers.

My work in this chapter attempts to restore Spicer's politics and Baraka's formal innovation. In so doing, I am also wagering that something can be learned by reading queer invocation and black invocation alongside one another. These apposite readings are not meant to suggest exclusivity, separating blackness from queerness or even marking queerness as white; though Baraka himself does hold this view in the mid-1960s, and Spicer too defines homosexuality against blackness (as I shall later discuss). Alliance between these two poets may not have been possible in their own moment, and my stipulating the benefits of an apposite reading in the spirit of intersectionality is perhaps as anachronistic as describing Spicer's poetics as "queer" decades before that term would have been intelligible in such a context. My reading attempts to repair this unaccomplished solidarity with the help of a theoretical orientation that views solidarity between oppressed peoples as a necessary challenge. As Bernice Johnson Reagon says in a 1983 speech on the politics of coalition: "It must become necessary for all of us to feel that this is our world. And that we are here to stay and that anything that is here is ours to take and use in our image. And watch that 'our'—make it as big as you can—it ain't got nothing to do with that barred room" (365).⁴⁹ For Reagon, the "our" we need to survive is not an abstract generality of all people, but a group whose composition depends on changing political exigency: "That's why we have to have coalitions. Cause I ain't gonna let you live unless you let me live. Now there's danger in that, but there's also the possibility that we can both live—if you can stand it" (365). I follow black feminism's insistence on finding in diverse experiences of gender, sexualization, and racialization not division or the reification of individualized experiences, but possibilities for a greater collective politics.

From the perspective of the intersectional politics and poetics of this chapter, queerness and blackness are identifications that themselves have the structure of solidarity, rather than being fixed and essential. As Butler recently has written, synthesizing Stuart Hall and José Esteban Muñoz's arguments on identification: "Identification passes through a difference that cannot be denied or overcome... [I]dentification is at the same time disidentification, defined by noncoincidence and difference" ("Susceptibility/Solidarity" 5). If neither blackness nor queerness denotes a fixed and essentialist identity, but instead open to multiplicity and variety, then reading blackness and queerness together would not see these as exclusive markers of identity but as openings to a further thinking of solidarity. The anachronism of this reading, then, is not only the importation of more contemporary theoretical models to the poetry of the 1950s and 1960s, but the belief that our reading of these movements together today can aid our thinking of solidarity and coalition across experiences of sexualization and racialization. The texts I read in this chapter speak in their moment to urgent questions of political life, through questions of poetics. In our moment, these same questions interrogate our political capacities for solidarity through our critical capacities for a certain kind of reading. These poems are asking: How are we going to organize our collective life? What "we" can we assemble, and what can that "we" do by speaking and acting together? These political questions are questions of lyric, questions of how voice can gather and reiterate.

⁴⁹ See Barbara Smith's anthology *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983), in which Reagon's speech appears, and Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga's anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981).

Chapter 2: A Black Poem and a Black World

When I look at the sky, it becomes a homosexual sky. When I sit in a chair, it becomes a queer chair. I exhale queer atoms. Words are homosexual when I use them, or do I *attract* queer words? (Robert Glück, “Queer Voice,” *Communal Nude* 245)

But a man is supposed to write about what he knows and feels, can understand about the world and his life in it. If I fill a book up with 8,000,000 white people, it is still Negro material; a Negro put them there, colored them (white) with the pigment of his experience. And whether or not I label each page “written by coon,” the fact of the thing is that each page, and the experience, etc. on the page, was collected by that coon too. And, finally, it is my world, too. Get to that. (Baraka, “Black Writing,” *Home* 187)

We want a black poem. And a
Black World.
Let the world be a Black Poem.
(Baraka, “Black Art,” *Black Magic: Poetry 1961-1967* 117)

“Black Art” places black world-making and black poem-making on a similar plane. The making of a black poem and a black world look like the same action, and that action is undertaken by the poem’s romantic fiat. What makes a poem apt to do this kind of work—the work of generating blackness as world, blackness as generative and regenerative space, blackness that can belong to the voice that speaks it and to others to whom this voice calls? To get to this question I want to trace how Baraka understands blackness and black art in the 1960s.

Baraka’s 1965 departure from the East Village to Harlem and then Newark—from the Poet’s Theatre to the Black Arts Repertory Theatre, from *Yugen* and Totem Press to Jihad Publications—underscores a tumultuous decade in which “blackness,” in his thinking, took on various functions. From the standpoint of Baraka’s departure, this was a movement *towards blackness*, as he wrote in his introduction to *Home: Social Essays* (1964):

But one truth anyone reading these pieces ought to get is the sense of movement—the struggle, in myself, to understand where and who I am, and to move with that understanding...And these moves, most times unconscious (until, maybe, I’d look over something I’d just written and whistle, “Yow, yeh, I’m way over there, huh?”), seem to me to have been always toward the thing I had coming into the world, with no sweat: my blackness...But my tendency, body and mind, is to make it. To get there, from anywhere, going wherever, always. By the time this book appears, I will be even blacker. (22)

It may seem like a paradox that blackness is something at once seemingly fixed—“the thing I had coming into the world”—and dynamic, a vector that perhaps cannot be reached, but can increase. Baraka took a similarly developmental perspective when prefacing *Black Magic: Poetry 1961-1967* in 1968. In the earlier works collected in that book, he writes, there is a “preoccupation with death, suicide...Always my own, caught up in the deathurge of this twisted society” (np). But even here

there is “a spirituality always trying to get through,” one that triumphs in the final section, *Black Art* (1965-1966): “*Black Art* was the crucial seeing, the decisions, the actual move.”

In the poems from the earlier parts of *Black Magic*, respectively named *Sabotage* and *Target Study*, a lyric “I” struggles under the weight of its limitations. Baraka cites “A Poem Some People Will Have To Understand” in the preface as one of the early poems that were “trying to see, trying to understand”:

A POEM SOME PEOPLE WILL HAVE TO UNDERSTAND

Dull unwashed windows of eyes
and buildings of industry. What
industry do I practice? A slick
colored boy, 12 miles from his
home. I practice no industry.
I am no longer a credit
to my race. I read a little,
scratch against silence slow spring
afternoons.

I had thought, before, some years ago
that I'd come to the end of my life.
Watercolor ego. Without the preciseness
a violent man could propose.
But the wheel, and the wheels,
wont let us alone. All the fantasy
and justice, and dry charcoal winters
All the pitifully intelligent citizens
I've forced myself to love.

We have awaited the coming of a natural
phenomenon. Mystics and romantics, knowledgeable
workers
of the land.

But none has come.
(Repeat)
but none has come.

Will the machinegunners please step forward? (6)

The speaker of the poem attempts to locate himself on axes of location, race, and profession: forms of collectivity given in advance that comfortably define an “I” in relation to them. While we can see some discomfort with these forms of belonging, perhaps more important is the description of the way in which the “I” relates to them. The speaker shies away from a relation in which his individual “practice” offers “credit.” In a contemporary essay that coined the term “tokenism,”⁵⁰ Baraka critiques “the setting up of social stalemates or the extension of meager privilege to some few

⁵⁰ Brad Gooch notes that this essay “introduced the work *tokenism* into the language. Picking up on the term a few weeks later on the radio, Martin Luther King, Jr., credited both *Kalchur* and Jones” (*City Poet* 388-389).

‘selected’ Negroes in order that a semblance of compromise or ‘progress,’ or a lessening in racial repression, might seem to be achieved” (“Tokenism: 300 Years for Five Cents,” *Home* 90). This is the logic by which an individual can be a “credit/to my race,” a social logic in which individual gain offers a semblance of collective progress. The “I” of the poem that grimly questions its position, considers suicide, and doubts its own desires is a product of this debased social ontology. The crisis of the “I” is always already a crisis of a “we.”

As the speaker finds his own loves and desires lacking in definition, the poem dreams of another kind of subject. “Mystics and romantics” are different kinds of “workers” practicing a different kind of “industry.” In projecting another kind of collective subject, the poem invokes a new relation between individual and collective. The poem is agnostic about its ability to name what the new work is. It attempts to call it into being without being able to describe it fully. The “we” who awaits the “mystics and romantics” and “machinegunners” is an unsure mirror of those new subjects that the inadequacies of the “I” call into being. The poem lives in the space between an “I” uncomfortable with its self-definition and a “we” able to be named and invoked but not yet inhabited. The poem’s call is perlocutionary at best, standing on the border of the collective that it invokes and attempting to discern its boundaries. If the “I” of this poem is a “watercolor ego,” the “we” of this poem is an incomplete line-drawing, one that awaits the form and solidity of “step[ping] forward.”

In “A Poem Some People Will Have To Understand” Baraka begins to test the poem’s capacity to function as an organ of collective politics. That test involves an intense pressure on the “I” that reflects the evolving status of the “individual” in Baraka’s critical writing in the early 1960s. While the individual first appears to be a locus of resistance to the mainstream, Baraka soon becomes critical of how individual protest can be absorbed into an abstracted white universalism. The biographical locus for this turn is Baraka’s visit to Cuba and conversation with the poet Rubi Betancourt on a 14 hour train ride during which the two “talked almost continuously”:

I tried to defend myself, “Look, why jump on me? I understand what you’re saying. I’m in complete agreement with you. I’m a poet... what can I do? I write, that’s all, I’m not even interested in politics.”

She jumped on me with both feet as did a group of Mexican poets later in Habana. She called me a “cowardly bourgeois individualist.” The poets, or at least one young wild-eyed Mexican poet, Jaime Shelley, almost left me in tears, stomping his foot on the floor, screaming: “You want to cultivate your soul? In that ugliness you live in, you want to cultivate your soul? Well, we’ve got millions of starving people to feed, and that moves me enough to make poems out of.” (“Cuba Libre,” *Home* 57)

Baraka highlights this moment in the poem “Betancourt” from *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*, and again in his autobiography, calling it “a turning point in my life... I was never the same again” (163, 165); and (as cited above) in the opening essay of the volume that accounts for his move towards blackness. Baraka’s very involvement on this trip was as a “token”—he was part of a select group of African-American writers chosen to join a Fair Play for Cuba Committee delegation immediately after the revolution. (He replaced Langston Hughes who was unable to join.) At the time Baraka was a rising star in Beat circles in New York, publishing *Yugen* and Totem Press with his

wife Hettie Cohen.⁵¹ Totem's pamphlets included Charles Olson's *Projective Verse* (1959); Yugen's first issues included work by Allen Ginsberg, Diane Di Prima, and William S. Burroughs.

Why does the charge of bourgeois individualism stick so close to Baraka in his "Beat" period? In a 1963 essay on "Black Writing," Baraka identifies the black man in America as a "natural non-conformist" (*Home* 188). This reflects a tendency, present in Baraka's work into the 1960s, to valorize the individual as a locus of resistance to the mainstream. Nathaniel Mackey has argued that this marks a continuity between Baraka's "Beat" and "Black nationalist" periods: the transition between them, he argues, is "not a very difficult one," as "Baraka's gravitation toward blackness has [more] to do with an idea of negation than with the *blackness* of blackness" (*Discrepant Engagement* 28).⁵² In the "Black Writing" essay, Baraka explicitly aligns black resistance to the white mainstream with Beat artistic resistance to the mainstream:

The most serious problem facing Negro writers, it has seemed to me, and again it is pretty much the same that faces any negro, is that for so long now the white man has told him that his, the Negro's, version of America and the world is shameful fantasy. That such an America, or world, does not really exist. But then this same kind of lie has been told to white people too, especially to those white people who also had a version of America that did not agree with the merchant's reality. So that for instance books by white writers like William Burroughs or Edward Dorn or John Rechy or Hubert Selby⁵³ show an America as alien to the fattest inhabitants of this society as any honest black man's emotional history. ("Black Writing," *Home* 187-188)

Black non-conformists and white non-conformists are aligned, according to Baraka, because of their relation to a false universality. Black emotional history and the Beat underworld alike refuse the universality of mainstream American whiteness by denying the totality of its world-definition, rebelling against a pre-defined notion of an "I" relative to a collective subject.

But black emotional history has a different relationship to white universalism than white rebellion: for it gives the lie to white universalism not only by being a particular that white universalism fails to capture, but by being a commons of its own that functions independently of whiteness. While white elective non-conformism and black natural non-conformism may align, that alignment is incidentally based on blackness's position separate from whiteness. In *Blues People* (1963) Baraka notes that trumpeters Bix Beiderbecke and Louis Armstrong "stood in similar places in the superstructure of American society: Beiderbecke, because of the isolation any deviation from mass culture imposed upon its bearer; and Armstrong, because of the socio-historical estrangement of the Negro from the rest of America" (*Reader* 42). In spite of this alignment, Baraka writes, "Armstrong

⁵¹ The first issue explains the title: "YUGEN means elegance, beauty, grace, transcendence of these things, and also nothing at all." The biographical note for LeRoi Jones in this issue notes that he is "working on translations of the German writer Wolfgang Boerchert."

⁵² While I disagree with Mackey on this point, this essay attempts to follow his careful attention to the relation between Baraka's music writing and his poetry.

⁵³ It is worth noting that two of these four writers (Rechy and Burroughs) are gay. In his essay "American Sexual Reference: Black Male"—marked for its homophobia—Baraka wrote: "The artist is the concentrate, as I said, of the society's tendencies—the extremist. And the most extreme form of alienation acknowledged within white society is homosexuality. The long abiding characterization of the Western artist as usually 'queer' does not seem out of place" (*Home* 247). We'll return to this alignment of homosexuality and blackness later in the chapter.

was not *rebellious* against anything with his music. In fact, his music was one of the most beautiful refinements of Afro-American musical tradition, and it was immediately recognized as such by those Negroes who were not busy trying to pretend that they had issued from Beiderbecke's culture" (42). Even understanding Armstrong as rebellious understates the musical tradition in which he works, denying blackness its appropriate status as a cultural base and position that offers an independent standard of judgment relative to which individual black cultural workers (and work) may relate. Armstrong's alienation with respect to mainstream white American society comes from his *belonging* to another tradition.

Meanwhile Baraka heaps special scorn on forms of black culture that accede to white universalism by attempting to be heard within it, granting the totality of whiteness as the only tradition in which to be heard. In this category he summarily and polemically groups African-American writing as a whole, which he compares negatively to black music:

...I think the reason there have not been a great many interesting Negro writers (in the United States) is that most of the Negroes who've found themselves in a position to become writers were middle-class negroes who thought of literature as a way of proving they were not "inferior" (and quite a few who wanted to prove that they were). Negro music does not suffer generally from such pathology, to show a specific contrast, simply because most of the great Negro musicians never felt the need to show anything in their playing but the power of their ideas. ("A Dark Bag," *Home* 144)

...the Negroes who were responsible for the best of the music were always aware of their identities as black Americans and really did not, themselves, desire to become vague featureless Americans as is usually the case with the Negro middle class...Negroes played jazz as they had sung blues or, even earlier, as they had shouted and hollered in those anonymous fields, because it was one of the few areas of human expression available to them. ("Jazz and the White Critic," *Black Music* 15-16)

Baraka's complaint about white universalism is that it can be the "great diluter of any Negro culture" (*Home* 127), turning it into a "vague featureless" component of a white supremacist America. Middle class black culture accepts this dilution, Baraka claims, as the cost of being heard within white supremacist America. The blues tradition, unlike middle-class African-American literature, expresses black true feeling without appealing to the authority of white cultural norms. The blues song is "the deepest expression of memory. Experience re/feeling. It is the racial memory" ("The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)," *Black Music* 178). Blues is an "autonomous music," Baraka writes in *Blues People*: "The materials of blues were not available to the white American...It was as if these materials were secret and obscure, and blues a kind of ethno-historic rite as basic as blood" (*Reader* 37). The blues tradition is independent of white universalism; the blues cry does not attempt to be heard within a white sphere.

While Baraka's Beat tendency honored the strength of the individual cry, he comes to see black individualism as an ideological mode of entry into white universalism. His polemic against James Baldwin and Peter Abrahams shows this about-face:

Where a great deal of public “sophistication” is allowed among oppressed people, the stupid misunderstanding can very quickly arise that one of them may be an “individual.” This is perhaps James Baldwin’s favorite word...Why should anyone think of these men as individuals? Merely because they are able to shriek the shriek of a fashionable international body of white middle-class society? Joan of Arc of the cocktail party is what is being presented through the writings and postures of men like these...But individuality is not merely the cross one select number willfully bears among the broken heads and lives of the oppressed... If one has nothing TO SAY but, “I can feel,” or, “I am intelligent,” there is really no need saying it. These things in themselves are very boring. So many people are intelligent and, you bet, sensitive. (“Brief Reflections on Two Hot Shots,” *Home* 137-139)

There is certainly some homophobia (by means of misogyny) in this critique,⁵⁴ but notable for our purposes is that Baraka comes to attack Baldwin and Abrahams *for their individualism*, the very characteristic for which he previously seemed to praise artists. Their individual shrieks do not resist the consensus, but seek to belong to it through emotional invocation of a shared humanity. Individuality here means that your feelings count as human among the other (white) human beings.

This is the background for Baraka’s epochal turn, in *Black Magic*, away from the lyric of individual experience towards a lyric of collective invocation. As is amply documented in Baraka’s autobiography and other texts, the death of Malcolm X was a turning point for Baraka’s move away from white society. A pair of poems from the *Black Magic*’s second section, *Target Study* (1963-1965), makes this turn apparent, originating from a similar first line.

Poem

For their clean bodies, and malcolm’s eyes
 I walk the streets confused and half sick
 with despair at what I must do, yet the doing
 as it’s finally possible, drags me on. The way out
 feeling inside where I reach, the stones and lights
 of new town, new black, new strength, new wealth,
 all come down, and back, and the length, of my
 health.
 My world.
 There’s not a feeling or fissure sailing
 to the stars. Not a strong lady dancing
 on the heads of fat white guys, who lick
 their bony lips or suck their grey fat teeth.
 You see the men who die of cancer and heart trouble.
 You see their niggers, fat men with freckles whose minds

⁵⁴ Baraka goes on to write: “They are too hip to be *real* black men, for instance—this is only, let us say, a covering to register their feelings, a gay exotic plumage as they dissemble in the world of ideas, and always come home with the shaky ones” (138-139). Baraka was criticized by black feminists and queer theorists like Cheryl Clarke, Michele Wallace, and Ron Simmons; I’ll return to these critiques later in the chapter.

are like endless garbage cans, full of blue rats and lies
and the stale vomit of dead Greeks. What is the soul to do
but expand. In the circle of being, the cycle of spirit, the closeness
of love when it's us who are loved, and made huge by some lady
we feel in our speech, or the image of home, in the valley of the blind,
we give them eyes, who we lost, where they drive the suitcases of
glassmenagerie windows, like it's illinois freaks popping their fingers
to Patti Page (who is, for future reference, a dumb bitch), if the world
was the man or the god or the song of some specific dier, what more
could you say about it? Who are you walking through the night, where
is this night, my heart expands in the darkness, and sings, if it can,

We say, you will never
understand yourself as an object.
You don't know how you got here,
where you're going, so what's all this bullshit
philosophy (*Black Magic* 85)

“Poem” is a *Hamlet*-like drama of a speaker weighing action to be taken. The action that the poem's speaker contemplates becomes a “doing” that is first unmoored from its subject, and then the proper subject of the action itself: “the doing/as it's finally possible, drags me on.” This poem depicts and is voiced by a heavily compromised subject that looks to see something outside it—“new town, new black, new strength, new wealth”—only to find those alternatives shut inside individual feeling: “all come down, and back, and the length, of my/health./My world.” From within the space of the “I”, action and change are only recursive twists around itself. “My world” does not appear to be a positive identification with the “new black” to which the poem's speaker looks; instead it is a defeated return inside the self. Though the poem seems to aim at a kind of development from first-person singular to second-person singular to first-person plural, that trajectory is short-circuited; and the interchanging between “we” and “you” and “I” in this poem produces only questioning. The “we” with which the poem concludes is an isolate “I” turning back on itself, a “you” interpellated without intimacy.

One might read “Poem” as modeling an ambivalence about political action that readers could productively enter through a characteristically lyric humanist reading, substituting my individual voice as reader for the individual speaker that “Poem” shows under pressure. David L. Smith makes such a reading elsewhere in Baraka's oeuvre, writing of the earlier poem “I Substitute for the Dead Lecturer”: “It is valuable precisely for its honest rendering of the difficult process of Baraka's movement toward political commitment. The fact that the poem contains no exhortations nor attacks does not diminish its actual political value, nor does its ambivalence undermine its potential to move others toward political commitment” (238). Smith identifies lyric's capacity with an exchange of one “I” for another. This reading approaches Helen Vendler's understanding of lyric as “meant to be spoken by its reader as if the reader were the one uttering the words...[T]he most universal of genres, because it assumes that the reader resembles the writer enough to step into the writer's shoes and speak the lines the writer has written although they were the reader's own” (*Poems, Poets, Poetry* (xlii-xliii)). The only difference is that rather than offering a putatively universal resemblance, Scott's reading assumes a shared political orientation; but the reading operates identically in enacting a substitution of one individual subject for another. The poem's political action, then, comes in its capacity to model a speaker's orientation or perspective that its reader might also occupy.

This reading strikes me as appropriate enough for Baraka's earlier work, but what changes around the time of the poem "Black Art" is not only the appearance of exhortation and attack, but a changed understanding of lyric's capacity. In "A Poem for Black Hearts," which begins with nearly the same first line as "Poem" and appears 25 pages later, concluding the *Target Study* section of *Black Magic*, lyric becomes a technology with a broader social and political function:

A Poem for Black Hearts

For Malcolm's eyes, when they broke
the face of some dumb white man, For
Malcolm's hands raised to bless us
all black and strong in his image
of ourselves, For Malcolm's words
fire darts, the victor's tireless
thrusts, words hung above the world
change as it may, he said it, and
for this he was killed, for saying,
and feeling, and being / change, all
collected hot in his heart, For Malcolm's
heart, raising us above our filthy cities,
for his stride, and his beat, and his address
to the grey monsters of the world, For Malcolm's
please for your dignity, black men, for your life,
black man, for the filling of your minds
with righteousness, For all of him dead and
gone and vanished from us, and all of him which
clings to our speech black god of our time.
For all of him, and all of yourself, look up,
black man, quit stuttering and shuffling, look up,
black man, quit whining and stopping, for all of him,
For Great Malcolm a prince of the earth, let nothing in us rest
until we avenge ourselves for his death, stupid animals
that killed him, let us never breathe a pure breath if
we fail, and white men call us faggots till the end of the earth.
(*Black Magic* 112)

In "A Poem for Black Hearts," the last before the beginning of the *Black Art* section of the book, a collective subject is called into being. The collective appears as what Malcolm's hands bless: an object of invocation, not a subject looking in on itself. It is remarkable to think of this poem as a second version of "Poem," or as emanating from the same impulse. The poem has no "I" that attempts to sing "if it can;" its "us" is called into being by Malcolm X.

I suggest that we read "A Poem for Black Hearts" as reflecting a transformation in Baraka's perception of the political capacity of poetry and lyric in particular as a genre of collective being and action. In a stunning alchemy, the object of elegy brings into being the collective subject that would mourn him. Malcolm, in this poem, is always collective: his eyes, hands, words soon become "all of him," and the praise for "all of him" reflects into "all of yourself." In this recuperative blazon, the naming of individual body parts does not create division and objectification: even a limb is not an isolate "I." The separately named limbs are always-already multiple. Their multiplicity gets reflected

in the collective subject that the poem calls into existence, the “us” the poem names, that is brought into existence in its reading. The “black man” that the poem addresses is not an individual, but “all of yourself.” Thus “A Poem For Black Hearts” insists that the substitution that will occur upon reading the poem is not of one “I” for another. Instead the poem encourages and allows its readers to see themselves as belonging to a collective subject-object, with no space at all between the poem’s invocation and the collective that it invokes.

The fiat “let nothing in us rest/until we avenge ourselves for his death” is the poem’s first time connecting first-person subject to verb. The relief of fiat at this poem’s conclusion owes much to Margaret Walker’s “For My People” (1939), which has a similar structure to “A Poem for Black Hearts,” beginning with a litany of “For” statements describing black people and ending with a utopian fiat. Here are four of the poem’s ten sections—the first and the last three:

For my people everywhere singing their slave songs
repeatedly: their dirges and their ditties and their blues
and jubilees, praying their prayers nightly to an
unknown god, bending their knees humbly to an
unseen power;

[...]

For my people blundering and groping and floundering in
the dark of churches and schools and clubs
and societies, associations and councils and committees and
conventions, distressed and disturbed and deceived and
devoured by money-hungry glory-craving leeches,
preyed on by facile force of state and fad and novelty, by
false prophet and holy believer;

For my people standing staring trying to fashion a better way
from confusion, from hypocrisy and misunderstanding,
trying to fashion a world that will hold all the people,
all the faces, all the adams and eves and their countless generations;

Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born. Let a
bloody peace be written in the sky. Let a second
generation full of courage issue forth; let a people
loving freedom come to growth. Let a beauty full of
healing and a strength of final clenching be the pulsing
in our spirits and our blood. Let the martial songs
be written, let the dirges disappear. Let a race of men now
rise and take control. (6-7)

In his 1999 essay on Walker, Baraka writes of “For My People”: “It is no accident that that poem, for instance, has touched so many. Because it comes from so far back, so way before ourselves that when we open our eyes our minds, she is telling us what we had up in us and never not understood but could not find the words again to say, so perfect were it said. Margaret is the human speech itself, raised like Du Bois or Langston, to reach past itself. To be itself, simple and open and daring to be paraphrased” (“Margaret Walker,” *Reader* 564).

Walker is probably the only black writer upon whom Baraka consistently calls upon in the 1960s amid his polemics against the middle-class nature of African-American literature. He cites “For My People” in the preface to *Black Magic* right before introducing a few words from “A Poem Some People Will Have to Understand” and describing *Target Study*, the second section of the book: “*Target Study* is trying to really study, like bomber crews do the soon to be destroyed cities. Less passive now, less uselessly ‘literary.’ Trying to see, trying to understand... ‘Will the machinegunners please step forward...’ trying, as Margaret Walker says, ‘to fashion a way,’ to clean up and move” (*Black Magic* np). For Baraka, Walker and Malcolm X must have been closely associated figures, as he also cites “For My People” (daring to paraphrase its final line) in his essay “The Legacy of Malcolm X, and the Coming of the Black Nation” as well: “All the large concentrations of Black People in the West are already nations. All that is missing is the consciousness of this state of affairs. All that is missing is that the Black Man take control. As Margaret Walker said in her poem “For My People”: *A race of men must rise, and take control*” (*Home* 278).⁵⁵

Paraphrasing Walker’s fiat into a more impersonal imperative is perhaps a succinct explanation of the difference between poetry and prose. The fiat, as Eric Lindstrom has recently observed, both commands and allows (*Romantic Fiat* 4). In Baraka’s fiat “let nothing in us rest/until we avenge ourselves for his death,” the poem emphasizes the recursivity of its own action. While this might seem like an exhortation to readers like Smith, perhaps more importantly the poem manages to make black collectivity, at the same time, the result of poetic invocation and the subject that makes that invocation possible. The next poem in *Black Magic*, the brief but more to the point “SOS,” perhaps summarizes this function:

Calling black people
 Calling all black people, man woman child
 Wherever you are, calling you, urgent, come in
 Black People, come in, wherever you are, urgent, calling
 you, calling all black people
 calling all black people, come in, black people, come
 on in. (115)

The invocatory capacity of the poem here is without any concomitant hostility, and most of all more assured about poetry’s illocutionary capacity to bring collectivity into being.

The homophobic slur at the end of “A Poem for Black Hearts” unsettles the poem’s invocation of black community. Not only is the poem’s turn against gay people seemingly irrelevant, but more generally, the proximity of negativity to the poem’s more positive opening. Baraka’s writing on black music perhaps can help us understand this. For Baraka black music is the model for the black world. This black world is both an already-existing independent world within white supremacist America—an independent tradition, separate from the Western music tradition—and a vision of a future world to come. On the one hand Baraka asserts the beauty and power of already-existing black feeling (as discussed above, in the blues tradition); on the other hand he advocates for blackness as a destructive force that will bring another world into being. These are not two sides of a dialectic aiming for a final synthesis; they are held together simultaneously.

⁵⁵ Walker’s own eulogy, “For Malcolm X,” has interesting resonances with Baraka’s, beginning with a broad address to “All you violated ones with gentle hearts;/You violent dreamers whose cries shout heartbreak,” and ending with an address to Malcolm X’s body: “Our blood and water pour from your flowing wounds./You have cut open our breasts and dug scalpels in our brains” (70). Like with “A Poem for Black Hearts,” whose title resonances with Walker’s first line, Walker’s poem performs the collapse of the collective who mourns Malcolm X with Malcolm X himself.

Black music takes up its structurally negative position in the United States to cast destructive spells against American cultural norms. For example, Baraka writes that John Coltrane's music (before *Ascension*) "seeks with each new onslaught to completely destroy the popular song" ("Present Perfect (Cecil Taylor)," *Black Music* 105). Baraka's motto for the "New Black Music," his grouping of avant-garde artists like Taylor, Albert Ayler, and Ornette Coleman who followed Coltrane's epochal work, is "Find the self and kill it" ("New Black Music," *Black Music* 171). But in the wake of this destruction, a new vision emerges: new possibilities that are not "the self," not "the popular song," not "beautiful": though as Baraka writes of Coltrane's *Live at Birdland*, "Beautiful has nothing to do with it, but it is" ("Coltrane Live at Birdland," *Black Music* 66). In those same liner notes Baraka writes: "If you can hear, this music will make you think of a lot of weird and wonderful things. You might even become one of them" (68). Thus destruction is an invitation: to become a weird and wonderful thing—to let the thing you hear become the thing you are. Its lyric invitation refuses to know in advance what kind of thing—person—song—will emerge from it.

For Baraka there is no contradiction between what is avant-garde, destructive, and anti-self, and what is expressive, emotional, and the source for current and future identifications. He writes: "[T]he New Black Music is expression, and expression of reflection as well...It is expanding the consciousness of the given that they are interested in, not merely expressing what is already there, or alluded to. They are interested in the *unknown*. The mystical" ("The Changing Same," *Black Music* 183). To *express*, then, is not merely to assert one's individuality. To express is to open the possibility for the unknown, for the other worlds that black people live in already and call into being. In a 1968 interview with Marvin X, Baraka says:

...you have to get to a language that reflects things that have not taken place yet. The language that we speak as conquerors will be different than that we speak now as slaves. The artist can maybe have a glimpse or vision of that sometimes. Sometimes I try to work out of a purely emotional language that sometimes doesn't even have much to do with English. It has to do with sounds, and silences, and emphasis, and using rhythms in certain ways. I've been doing this in poetry. But I think in plays it's the same thing: We have to get to a language that expresses the things that we need to have expressed; and that, I think, is going to move beyond this language. I think it's going to be a combination of what we understand as being Black language—the rhythms—but making reference to ideas that might not be completely known to us right now. That's gonna make the language different; that's gonna break up the sound of it in another way. Sometimes, I think, if you listen to Black music, you get an indication of what it might be. (20)

"Purely emotional language" is not an appeal to hegemonic white universality as the arbiter of emotional life. It does not even have to do with English. Black music offers an indication of this both in its dramatic avant-garde breaks from what previously seemed possible, and in the blues tradition that speaks the emotional life of black people.

In his most detailed essay on music from this period, "The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)," Baraka makes the connection explicit, coining the portmanteaus "James-Ra" and

“Sun-Brown” (205) to indicate the joint work that these artists are doing in making new worlds possible.⁵⁶

If you play James Brown (say, “Money Won’t Change You...but time will take you out”) in a bank, the total environment is changed. Not only the sardonic comment of the lyrics, but the total emotional placement of the rhythm, instrumentation and sound. An energy is released in the bank, a summoning of images that take the bank, and everybody in it, on a trip. That is, they visit another place. A place where Black People live.

But dig, not only is it a place where Black People live, it is a place, in the spiritual precincts of its emotional telling, where Black People move in almost absolute openness and strength. (“The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music),” *Black Music* 181)

Black music creates a space for black people. It demands that space be reordered, demands that a new world come into existence, another place free of white supremacy’s limitations on black life. But even as it makes this demand, it is also *already* a place where black people live: evidence that blackness is a world already in this world that prefigures the world to come. Again, these invocations oscillate between the perlocutionary creation of a new and separate world, and the illocutionary assurance of the capacity to exert power in the present. That linguistic movement is the very image of the minor commons’ power to shape the contours of another form of life while still aiming for greater power to do so.

And so: “Let the world be a Black Poem.” For Baraka the world that a black poem lived in was more than a world of poetry. In an *Ebony* essay from 1971 entitled “Black (Art) Drama is the Same as Black Life,” Baraka writes:

All of black energy must be harnessed for National Liberation, as actuality. The theater is one weapon in the arsenal, as nothing else. Art itself is one weapon in the arsenal although art, creation, is contained in every activity. But artists must organize people and must 1st organize themselves around the needs of people. The theater must be an institution for bringing change. Part of the cultural revolution, i.e., used to win the minds of the people...It must be out, in the community at least as energy and idea. The mass, the body, must be moved. *The head must function to move the body, if it actually is the head.* The art must be the common expression of the people...Create reality larger so it makes more impact isolated. Feed programs into the political reality of Black people. Your mind so hip, lets see it function out there in the real world next to Nixon’s and Mitchell’s or your local colored wardheeler...It is all art. Make the institutions you create multifaceted, just as a nation is. Take up the slack . . . we have

⁵⁶ In an earlier column Baraka appeals to avant-garde jazz musicians to “make sure they are listening to The Supremes, Dionne Warwick, Martha and the Vandellas, The Impressions, Mary Wells, James Brown, Major Lance, Marvin Gaye, Four Tops, Bobby Bland, etc., just to see where contemporary blues is; all the really nasty ideas are right there, and these young players are still connected with that reality, whether they understand why or not” (“Apple Cores #2,” *Black Music* 124).

no institutions. Recreate them. Rebuild. Give others ideas, and learn politics so that art will create politics and politics will create art. (82)

The ambitions that Baraka has for poetry and art go beyond propaganda; art and politics interfuse each other, as both expressions and motivators. Language breaks into something other than language, but that very action creates more language in turn: art must feed the political reality, *and* the political reality is all art. Around the time of “Black Art” Baraka was in the process of developing a broad curriculum of activities at Spirit House, the community theater he founded after moving to Newark in late 1965. One of Spirit House’s projects was Jihad Productions, which published poetry and drama pamphlets, and released three records. “Black Art” first appeared on one of these: drummer Sonny Murray’s album *Sonny’s Time Now* (1965), the first with Murray as leader; Murray played on several important albums of the period in groups led by Cecil Taylor and Albert Ayler. Jihad’s other two records were a collaboration with Sun Ra in a version of Baraka’s play, *A Black Mass*, and the R&B/spoken word album *Black & Beautiful...Soul & Madness*. (A few other poems from the *Black Art* section of *Black Magic* appear on this record.) These albums show how much Baraka was interested in creating a unified and far-reaching black culture. In the interview with Marvin X, he asks: “Why can’t Pharoah Sanders and Sam and Dave be talking, trying to get some things together, some common things? I’m not saying that everybody has to do the same thing, ‘cause that’s not going to be possible anyway, but they could reflect the same...let’s say, the profoundest meanings of Blackness in whatever they did, trying to raise us” (17).

Readers of “Black Art” who have opposed its manifesto of totalized political commitment with a more free understanding of poetry’s possibilities are perhaps understating the extent to which Baraka saw the two as united.⁵⁷ Or else, perhaps, they doubt that the former allows for the latter. But even the apparently anti-poetic claims with which the poem begins unite the destructive negative and the utopian positive:

Poems are bullshit unless they are
teeth or trees or lemons piled
on a step. Or black ladies dying
of men leaving nickel hearts
beating them down. Fuck poems
and they are useful, wd they shoot
come at you, love what you are,
breathe like wrestlers, or shudder
strangely after pissing. We want live
words of the hip world live flesh &
coursing blood. Hearts Brains
Souls splintering fire. (*Black Magic* 116)

These opening lines identify poetry with substantive objects (teeth, trees, lemons) and physical actions (shooting, breathing, shuddering). In the promiscuity of these identifications, poetry becomes anything so long as the poem says it is. We are as much in the realm of fiat as in the realm

⁵⁷ For example, Smith writes that the poem is “espousing a poetic which appears fundamentally anti-poetic... a rejection of order in favor of disorder and of art—poetry—in favor of activism, effectiveness and physicality” (239). Werner Sollors writes, “By becoming an ‘assassin’ the poem becomes political; and art merges with life leaving its artfulness behind...[T]he poem must abandon poetry in order to perform this function. ‘Black Art’ implies that poetry must die so that the poem can kill” (198-199).

thing, and most importantly to take an active role in changing the world: “Setting fire and death to/whities ass.”

The poem’s concluding positive invocations, then, are only the last in a series of efforts to bring action into being by bringing more poetry into being. The worldly action that the poem demands, the conclusion tells us, has always been *generating more poems*—generating more worlds—and while the demand for “poems that kill” emphasizes the destructive negative, the last lines of the poem emphasize the world-creating positive:

Let there be no love poems written
until love can exist freely and
cleanly. Let Black people understand
that they are the lovers and the sons
of lovers and warriors and sons
of warriors Are poems & poets &
all the loveliness here in the world

We want a black poem. And a
Black World.
Let the world be a Black Poem
And Let All Black People Speak This Poem
Silently
or LOUD (*Black Magic* 117)

As in “A Poem for Black Hearts” and in Margaret Walker’s “For My People,” the explosion of fiat feels like a triumphant release after a difficult tarrying with the negative. These closing lines begin with the negative conditions that the poem seeks to overcome: “Let there be no love poems written/until love can exist freely and/cleanly.” The lines recall the “unless” construction of the poem’s very opening, beginning with an interdiction but following it directly with the conditions of its exception. Far from being a total ban on love poems, the poem immediately asserts an alternative lineage for love outside the unfreedom that constrains it: “Let Black people understand/that they are the lovers and the sons/of lovers and warriors and sons/of warriors.” The poem rails against the false love of white humanism, and affirms that black love calls upon its own tradition separate from whiteness.⁵⁸

While these lines may seem in sharp distinction to the invective language earlier in the poem,⁵⁹ I have hoped to show that the earlier stanzas are themselves forms of fiat, attempts to make an already-existing black world more manifest in this one, and to make this world closer to the black world the poem hopes is to come. In his recent study of romantic fiat, Eric Lindstrom notes that the mode alternates “between the assertively sovereign mode of ‘let there be,’ and a quietist, ontologically charged ethic of ‘let be’...Unlike the sovereign exception of modern political theology, the fiat, ‘let’ form of divine utterance does not so much found a set it then stands apart

⁵⁸ Elsewhere, Baraka writes: “Race is feeling. Where the body, and the organs come in. Culture is the preservation of these feelings in superrational to rational form” (“The Legacy of Malcolm X, and the Coming of the Black Nation,” *Home* 275). For more on “the Baraka of surplus love,” see Seulghee Lee: “Love for Baraka is thus a constituted and essentially embodied starting-point rather than the space of political choosing. If Butler is right to suggest that there is no body-ontology that is not also a social ontology, then Baraka adds that the black body is the site of surplus ‘feeling’ that always comes from without but is also always locatable in the love-constituted black body” (74-75).

⁵⁹ For example, Smith writes that they are “pale and tepid” in comparison with the earlier parts of the poem: “vague, abstract and embarrassingly close to what Baraka’s opening line labels ‘bullshit’” (241).

from...Instead lyric fiat founds the order in which it later moves unassumingly" (*Romantic Fiat* 4, 10). This is the double movement of "Let the world be a Black Poem": Baraka's fiat makes his own poem both an invocation of the world to come and an image of that world, a space to exist already within it.

The final lines of the poem arrive at the "we" that has been animating all these movements: "We want a black poem. And a/Black world." As with "A Poem for Black Hearts," the "we"—"All Black People"—is at once what this poem invokes and what makes it possible. In the poems closing lines, Baraka calls upon the lyric technique of repetition—one poem voiced by many speakers—as the mode by which the black world is spoken into existence: "Let the world be a Black Poem/And Let All Black People Speak This Poem." The "we" of "All Black People" comes into existence by being the group that speaks "Black Art." And to speak this poem is not only to speak "Black Art" but to speak the poems and the worlds that "Black Art" invokes under its expansive rubric. Baraka's political lyric here opens up far beyond a supposedly rigid political mantra; its politics is horizontally open to the multiplicity of different poems—voices ("Silently/or LOUD")—worlds of the black people who speak it. The magical sense of "black art" as "the art of performing supernatural or magical acts; magic, necromancy; witchcraft" (*OED*) is operating here too; as Baraka writes in another poem from this period, "We need magic/now we need the spells, to raise up/return, destroy, and create. What will be//the sacred words?" ("Ka 'Ba," *Black Magic* 146). The *OED* also suggests that Baraka is responsible for the coinage of "black arts" as a description of "a cultural movement...which sought to promote the establishment of a characteristic and distinct African-American mode of artistic expression." As I have been arguing, for Baraka the sense of "black art" as "art made by black people" and the sense of "black art" as "art conjuring black people" operate simultaneously and together.

The magic of "Black Art" is above all to animate and make move. It should be no surprise that this requires both destructive force and utopian opening, a double movement that Baraka neatly describes elsewhere in a quip to critics of Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor: "There's a little group of regulars walking around nowadays saying they can't 'pop their fingers' to Taylor's music (or Ornette Coleman's, etc.). To them I can only say, there's definitely something wrong with your fingers" ("Cecil Taylor," *Black Music* 112). With "Black Art" as well as in this music, poetry creates the possibility for the movement of a body. If you find that a constriction of your body's movement and fail to find your body's movement in it, the poem demands that you move your body differently.

Interlude 2: The Negative as Resource

Here the negative becomes the resource for a certain mode of queer utopianism. (José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 13)

It may be that trauma constitutes a strange kind of resource, and repetition, its vexed but promising instrument. (Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech* 38)

I want to close my discussion of Baraka by dwelling on an element of the Barakan negative that sits uncomfortably: his homophobia, which pervades much of his writing of this period. The trajectory of Baraka's relation to homosexuality is as unique as the arc of his career as a whole. In his early life, Baraka had sexual relationships with men, recounted in his autobiographical novel *The System of Dante's Hell* (1965); while this text suggests a narrative of overcoming homosexual desire in favor of heterosexual desire,⁶⁰ Baraka reportedly had a sexual relationship with Frank O'Hara as late as the early 1960s (see Gooch, *City Poet*, 337-338, 369-370).

Along with Baraka's turn to Black Nationalism came an adoption of homophobic invective language that appears throughout both prose and poetry from the period. This did not pass without criticism. In a 1983 essay Cheryl Clarke described Baraka as a "rabid homophobe. Wherever he makes his homophobic statements, his sexist invective is not far behind" ("The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community" 194). Clarke is critical, in this essay, of the "black macho intellectuals and politicians...who consciously or unwittingly have absorbed the homophobia of their patriarchal slavemasters" (191).⁶¹ While she argues that homophobia among black people "is largely reflective of the homophobic culture in which we live," nonetheless, she says, "we cannot rationalize the disease of homophobia among black people as the white man's fault, for to do so is to absolve ourselves of our responsibility to transform ourselves" (190). Clarke puts the fight against homophobia in the context of black self-transformation towards justice and power, ideals close to Baraka's own at the time.

In 2008, Baraka himself would criticize the homophobic language prevalent in his writing of the 1960s in a new introduction to his book of essays from that period, *Home*:

One heavy and aggravating problem with these early writings is that I've long since changed my views on some topics. There is a neophyte Black Nationalist tag to this book, yet I have been a Marxist since the middle '70s. For instance, the homophobic language in several of the essays, including "American Sexual Reference: Black Male," using the word "fag" homeboy style to refer to the right-leaning liberalism of too many Americans, males as well as females, is wrongheaded and unscientific.

In actuality, the attack was on a social class made comfortable from the super-profits bombed and machine-gunned out of the Third World (and it should be obvious that there has grown a whole sector of Negroes participating in this as well). The sexual references

⁶⁰ For a reading along these lines, see Ron Simmons, "Some Thoughts on the Challenges Facing Black Gay Intellectuals."

⁶¹ In her 1978 book *Black Macho and the Myth of a Superwoman*, Michelle Wallace criticized Baraka's misogyny along similar lines, arguing that Baraka "had transformed Mailer's 'sexual outlaw' into the role model for the black revolutionary" (64).

come from a ghetto language which used homosexuality as a metaphor for weakness, when in all truth, physically, there were even in my own youthful experience very open homosexuals who could kick most of the straight dudes' behinds. Not to mention the homosexual giants we all have known, who have been out front sexually and politically. Now I must openly regret and apologize for the use of that metaphorically abusive term that was then part of my vocabulary. (*Home* 15-16)

It's not clear when Baraka's turn away from homophobia took place; in 2003, in the wake of the homophobic murder of his daughter and her partner, he decried "homophobic ignorant male chauvinism."⁶² More detailed biographical research into Baraka's personal life, and the political thinking he underwent during his years in Newark, will hopefully illuminate how these changes developed between the 1960s and the 2000s.

It might seem inappropriate to consider Baraka's life—his sexual partners, and even his changing political opinions—in considering the trajectory of his writing. But Baraka's life is always, for him, nearly indistinguishable from his text: his move from Greenwich Village to Newark and the political thinking that motivated that move, to cite the most prominent example, transforms the conditions of Baraka's text, and the conditions by which we read it.⁶³ The purpose of the previous chapter has been to illuminate the poetic implications of this move. Similarly Baraka's homophobia and homosexuality belong to his text—not merely because they are reflected in his writing—but

⁶² "Our hope is that our new Police Director in Newark is working to correct this hideous aberration. (HIMCN [Homophobic Ignorant Male Chauvinist Negro]). Imagine the Police and the Murderer have the same Philosophy...Even when the HIMCN put a gun to Wanda's head, the Piscataway police ho hummed and did nothinged my daughter and RAY RAY to their graves.

"The gob of spit that killed our little Shani motivated by the same philosophy [homophobic male chauvinism] did just the opposite, he murdered our little Shani and Ray Ray because they were Black, because they were women, because they were workers, because they did not live off stocks and bonds and other people's misery. But he also killed them, shot our little Shani and her companion Ray Ray, because he believed they were gay, he hated them because he thought they loved each other and this fake human with the mind of a nasty gob of spit on the floor felt that it was wrong for these two women to love each other, to want to be together rather than with him or with other men, black or white, like him. So this homophobic male chauvinist Negro hated them even more for that. For what he saw as a crime, being Gay, and rejecting his sorry Ignorant and very dangerous homophobic male chauvinist self...

"Who killed our little Shani, a dangerous psychotic Negro murderer who was anti women and anti-black women, that's what we mean by Male Chauvinist. Not just the word, but the most dangerous example of it, its not quite human personification..."

"Not only the actual ignorant negro homophobic male chauvinist black woman hating murderer, as a person, but as an idea, a philosophy, an ideology, roaming though so many minds, not merely the dangerous nut in the white house who despises most people, because most of the people in the world, as DuBois said, are colored people. Who slanders and lies about and invades other peoples countries just like the sick Negro we gotta find and lock up did, who robs them destroys their houses and murders them. The sick thing in the Caucasian crib has excuses for his invasions and robbery and murderers just like this sick homophobic mail chauvinist negro we still got to catch and arrest, will have. Excuses why one put up the confederate flag. Why the Negro think it's all right! That's national chauvinism or racism. Why Jungle Jim opposes Equal Rights Amendment for women's equality in DC and Cheetah, his murderous Negro mascot carry it out with violence. Why the reefer in the white house opposes Gay marriage and the killer roach we got on the run opposes it with murder." ("Who Killed Our Little Shani?")

⁶³ For a striking example, see Baraka's play *The Slave* (1964), which dramatizes very particularly his departure from his wife Hettie Jones and their children. For more on this, see Hettie Jones's account in her autobiography (*How I Became Hettie Jones* 219-222). She writes of the play's lead characters, a black revolutionary and his white ex-wife: "[A]s much as I refused to be Grace, Roi was adapting nicely to Walker Vessels" (222).

because the proximity of avowal and abjuration proves to be the region in which Baraka's black commons emerges.

I am not trying to say that the back and forth of avowal and abjuration makes blackness and queerness exclusive identities—though this is, briefly, Baraka's own position.⁶⁴ Marlon B. Ross, in a powerful reading of Baraka's relation to homosexuality, effectively argues that this exclusivity may belong to spatial logics of identity that fail to capture the combined experiences of sexualization and racialization:

[S]ympathetic treatments of African-American homosexuality most frequently assume an identity schism as struggle, competition, misalliance-between gayness and blackness. By proving how an individual can belong to both identities at once, they attempt to overcome the paradigm of competing black and gay identities by demonstrating an intersection, interface, or duality between them...

Although it is impossible to "evacuate" totally the grounding of cultural identity in spatial metaphor, we might be able to disrupt this spatializing tendency, at least temporarily, by thinking of cultural identification as a temporal process that enables and constrains subjectivity by offering up resources for affiliating with, while also disaffiliating against, particular social groupings... Rather than theorizing identity solely as cultural contiguity in relation to others who originate from the same (i.e., identical) social space or as a system of bodily performances determined by the range of roles inhabited in relation to a larger social body, we can consider the ways in which individuals, discourses, and social groupings constantly revise themselves by identifying with and also against traditions based on the material (physical, economic, institutional) and symbolic (linguistic, ideological, cultural) resources extant, absent, or hidden within historically changing practices and forms moving within and across particular environments. (290, 291)

The spatializing metaphor, as Ross argues, can fix identity in an identical, essential, and given social formation. Intersections of different identity categories, on this logic, are even more fixed. Rather than offering agency to minoritized people, the spatial logic describes minoritized identities according to the modes of oppression that determine them. But a temporal logic can understand blackness and queerness differently:⁶⁵ as movements, as Baraka did of blackness; as orientations, as Sara Ahmed has written of queerness (*Queer Phenomenology*); and as commons, as I am arguing here: as forms of communalization that refuse to be fixed by the constrictive social forces of minoritization, invoking new forms of being that minority existence prefigures. As José Esteban Muñoz writes of queer futurity, it is "not an end but an opening of horizon... The queerness of queer futurity, like the

⁶⁴ In the infamous "American Sexual Reference: Black Male" essay, Baraka writes: "Most American white men are trained to be fags. For this reason it is no wonder their faces are weak and blank, left without the hurt that reality makes—anytime" (*Home* 243).

⁶⁵ In the decades since Marlon Ross's 2000 essay, the extensive literature on queerness and temporality has included J. Jack Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005), Carla Freccero's *Queer Early Modern* (2005), and Elizabeth Freeman's *Time Binds* (2010). For a somewhat analogous theoretical archive on blackness and temporality, see Nathaniel Mackey's ongoing novel *From A Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*, Fred Moten's *In the Break* (2003), Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* (2007), and Simone White's *Dear Angel of Death* (2018).

blackness of a black radical tradition, is a relational and collective modality of endurance and support” (*Cruising Utopia* 91).

Blackness and queerness, then, may intersect in ways that are not only amplifications of oppression: we can understand the racialized experiences of queerness and the sexualized experiences of race, instead, as openings to solidarity.⁶⁶ In a discussion of Baraka’s *Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, Ross notes that “what Jones encounters among such predominately white middle-class homosexual enclaves is a process of the self-conscious making of a minority group patterned explicitly on the experience of African Americans” (296). There is an irony here: as Ross points out, at this time in his life Baraka looked to the white middle-class artistic world as an *escape* from minority status. But what he found there was a kind of internal “identity policing” common to black and homosexual groups (300). Ross notes homologies between camp and the dozens, describing both as “verbal contests involving feats of creative insider name-calling always with a sexual edge in which individuals from socially marginalized groups enact their ideological complicity with and resistance to the dominant norm” (304). He continues:

Whether used to stave off actual violence on the street or just for the sheer pleasure of word mastery always on the edge of physical assault, the dozens parry the violent condition of racial subordination into a sense of self-control over, at the least, one’s own enclave. Likewise, camp is the homosexual’s internalization of the constant surveillance, entrapment, and violence directed toward homosexuals by conformist straight society. There is, in other words, a tinge of identity-sadomasochism in both modes of street behavior, whereby the participants both take pleasure in and inflict verbal pain on each other, acknowledging how they *share* maligned identities by pretending to malign those shared identities themselves. Making a playful game of the sexual aggressions directed at them amidst an ugly reality of relentless stereotyping and other forms of conformist verbal violence dictated by U.S. socio-sexual norms, the sexualized verbal battles of camp and the dozens engage their participants in acts of community-formation and identity-sustenance by resourcefully using the scraps most at their disposal: the things others say hatefully about them. Although a form of internally-directed hostility, camp provides a sense of self-control within one’s own grouping, as it, like the dozens, creates a fierce hierarchy of those skilled in intimate knowledge of the subworld. (304)⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Two versions of intersectionality, similarly, follow from spatialized or temporalized understandings of identity. A spatialized understanding of intersectionality would view the intersection of racism and homophobia as a precise point on a map, indicating where forces of oppression combine and increase their force. Such an understanding risks isolating individuals rather than opening up possibilities for solidarity across time between groups with diverse but intersecting—in oppression as well as in elective forms of coalition—experiences of racialization and sexualization.

⁶⁷ While one might think that the presence of homophobic language in the dozens would preclude this homology, Ross helpfully notes that the queerness apparently under attack is a practice continuous with blackness: “The teasing of homo-swishes on the ghetto street and the inventive uses of fag-baiting in the dozens are certainly forms of identity policing. What is being policed, however, is *not* a queer identity alien to blackness but instead a *black* identification of queerness verbally parried *within* black street culture as one of its defining characteristics” (300).

Camp and the dozens emerge out of the violence of racism and homophobia, and yet become forms of control in their own right. While they might be seen as an internalization of the hostility of the outside world, they mean differently here: transformed into a self-directed action that creates the boundaries of a separate community, but also transformed into pleasure. Brad Gooch notes that camp's double-talk served homosexuals "to both reveal themselves to each other and conceal themselves from a potentially dangerous larger society" (*City Poet* 226). In this double motion, the violent hostility of the outside world is moved into another context where it becomes non-violent, a performance of violence without its force.

As we saw in the first chapter through Geoffrey Hartman's reading of William Wordsworth, poetry (and other inventive uses of language) can make the violent passages of experience repeatable without violence—a benevolent, not a traumatic repetition. Can we read the performative violence of Baraka's poems to be working similarly—as a lyrical repetition? Judith Butler has asked, of repetitions of hate speech: "Can there be an enunciation that discontinues that structure [in which the speech is injurious], or one that subverts that structure through its repetition in speech? As an invocation, hate speech is an act that recalls prior acts, requiring a future repetition to endure. Is there a repetition that might disjoin the speech act from its supporting conventions such that its repetition confounds rather than consolidates its injurious efficacy?" (*Excitable Speech* 19-20). Following Ross's reading of camp and the dozens, I suggest we read Baraka's iterations of homophobic violence in this way. The performative repetition of violence, in "Black Art" and elsewhere, seeks alternative structures and contexts for language's violence.⁶⁸ These structures and contexts are certainly, on the one hand, practical: their violence seeks to attack and destroy the white supremacist world however haphazard that attack might seem. But the haphazardness of the attack indicates that another structure and context for this performative violence is poetry's play and pleasure.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Dina Al-Kassim's analysis of the literary rant offers another suggestive possibility for understanding how "disorderly and haphazard speech" (7) can both refusing the law that deems the speech disorderly and elaborate other contexts of understanding: "Not condemned to silence but sidelined in a symbolic economy that determines reception before the speech act is heard, the rant grows and even thrives in the internal fold prepared for it. And it is this liminality to which the rant bears witness in a form of speech that does not shatter the delimitations and exclusions of the norm but rather expands the borderline by widening the path of its own audition... Ranting, a speech under duress, loses the subject in the stream of words that overwhelm his speaking. But the appeal, abject though it is, is directed both at the law that condemns, the self who defends, and the audience who may receive it. No longer a zero-sum speech shorn of artifice and thus authorized as truth telling, the rant is a modern speech destined to that complex and difficult elaboration that establishes the self through the address to the other of speech. This address cannot be entirely direct nor wholly allegorical, for the scene of face-to-face communication has been mediated not only by the alienation of speech in the public space of modernity, but also by the division of the self through the interiorization of that 'complex and difficult elaboration' by which one must 'take oneself as object'" (12, 18).

⁶⁹ Throughout his career, Baraka's writing has pushed against the limits of the ideology of freedom of speech. Baraka was arrested during the Newark uprising in 1967, and during the sentencing hearing of his trial, Judge Leon Kapp read Baraka's poem "Black People" aloud. The poem, which had been published between Baraka's arrest and his sentencing, includes the memorable lines:

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, lets smash the
window drag the shit in from there... (*Black Magic* 225)

Judge Kapp described the poem as a "diabolical prescription to commit murder and to steal and plunder," to which Baraka responded: "I'm being sentenced for the poem, is that what you are saying?" (Hudson 50-53). PEN and the American Civil Liberties Union came to Baraka's defense, criticizing the court for using Baraka's writings as evidence for a totally unrelated crime—a spurious weapons charge, which was later overturned on appeal. Regardless of whether Baraka intended his poem to encourage rioting, its use in his sentencing shows the limits of the ideology of free speech.

Perhaps queer readings of Baraka need not be as reparative as Ross's. Readings of Baraka must, however, contend with the proximity of performative violence to the more transparently positive efforts at world-making that his poetry offers. In a reading of Baraka's play *The Toilet* (1964), Muñoz writes: "By finishing on a note not of reconciliation but of the refusal of total repudiation... *The Toilet* shows us that relationality is not pretty, but the option of simply opting out of it, or describing it as something that has never been available to us, is imaginable only if one can frame queerness as a singular abstraction that can be subtracted and isolated from a larger social matrix" (*Cruising Utopia* 94). Neither queerness nor blackness is such a singular abstraction. And yet their messy relationalities find in poetry the capacity to conjure other possibilities that lie proximate to total repudiation.

Somewhat similarly, the controversy around antisemitic language in his poem "Somebody Blew Up America" led New Jersey to abolish the position of Poet Laureate to which Baraka had recently been appointed. Baraka reflected on the difference: "In the old days, they could lock me up. Now they just take away my title" (Barron, "A Poet Looks Back on a Bloody Week in 1967"). It is not only that the principle of free speech does not apply to Baraka, but that Baraka's words are direct threats to the liberal consensus that underpins the principle.

Chapter 3: This Is How We Dead Men Write to Each Other

This poetry is against you (a non-mystical thought expressed mystically) because it's first of all for you. It's a recognition of the deformations of the world as it is now, a social inability to meet human needs (since they remain alienated).

Does a gay aspect of Spicer's eros fit in then? I think so. It's been part of our gay lives to extend libidinal drives, or try to anyway, to a beyond-the-personal. And—to be frank—that's the meaning of a back room. This has been part and parcel of our construction as gay men. And our narrating structure isn't so different from other communities in specifying this. In a core phase as a Sanctified (not Baptist or A.M.E.) Church, for instance, the black community has a narrative structure with similar aims—in “shouting,” or being possessed by African gods given Christian names. This too gets a person beyond his/her/itself. The gay, like other pockets of community, at least partly, resists, reacts against the slow commodity death known as U.S. society. (Bruce Boone, “For Jack Spicer—and a Truth Element” 123)

For Jack Spicer, too, poetry's capacity to invoke collectivity lies in dynamic relation to investive. Bruce Boone summarizes this motion: “Against the formalism in Jack Spicer, I think, is his meanness, his nastiness. That quality releases the texts from over-universalism. Or if the universalism is there it heads back afterwards to its particular home through spite” (“For Jack Spicer” 120). By formalism, Boone refers to a tendency to consider Spicer's writing as interested in the inside of language, in alignment with post-structuralist criticism that was reaching a high point in the United States in the late 1970s. This tendency is exemplified by Language poet readers of Spicer (especially Ron Silliman) and critics following Robin Blaser's 1975 essay “The Practice of Outside” that linked Spicer to Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, and others.⁷⁰ On the other hand was an emergent queer criticism of Spicer most present in the continuing generations of gay poets in San Francisco and elsewhere who saw Spicer as an ancestor.⁷¹ My contention in this section is that, like Baraka's blackness, Spicer's queerness is its own form of commons. It is not the abstract universalism that all language might seem to provide, but a queer utopia of interrelation that the serial poem in particular instantiates.

⁷⁰ A 1977 special issue of *boundary 2* dedicated to Spicer diversely compares the poet to Saussure, Derrida, Lacan, Blanchot, Heidegger, and others. In the introduction, W.V. Spanos writes: “With the emergence of the 1970's of a phenomenology of absence and a literary thinking that appropriates the anti-metaphysical or anti-logocentric formal and rhetorical imperatives of Heidegger, of Merleau-Ponty, of Jacques Derrida, Jack Spicer's non-sense has begun not only to make sense, but to assume considerable importance in America” (1). In Silliman's talk “Spicer's Language,” he describes Spicer's “anticipation” of the “developments in poetry over the past eighteen years,” grouping him with other Language predecessors including Gertrude Stein, Louis Zukofsky, and Larry Eigner.

⁷¹ It should be noted that, as a translator and devotee of Bataille, Boone is by no means hostile to French theory, and it's a condition of possibility for this dissertation that identity criticism and post-structuralist theory are not incompatible. A 1974 special issue of *Manroot* (a gay San Francisco poetry journal) dedicated to Spicer included, surprisingly, the claim (by Larry Oakner): “The fact remains that Spicer was a homosexual; though his sexual preference has little to do with his writing” (3). In the next issue Stan Persky responded: “to miss the lover/beloved dialectic, which is to miss an understanding of the social character of homosexuality in that historical period (and alas, despite gay liberation, probably in this one also), allows Oakner to say ‘his sexual preference has little to do with his writing’. If Hart Crane had a wife and three kids and taught at Sonoma State, he would've written *Voyages* anyway croaks our learned idealist” (120); and Andrew Bifrost chimed in, “I am sorry that Oakner couldn't see Spicer's intensity and passion as a direct result of his ‘sexual preference’, and the pressures resulting therefrom” (122).

As Boone notes, Spicer's works are also filled with invective: vituperative attacks on fellow poets—especially on those he viewed as careerists, but also (at times) against women, Jewish people, and even homosexuality. This nastiness appears in actions Spicer took among his community, and in several poems that have more ambiguously weighted performative violence. But even at Spicer's moment of achieving seriality, an abjuration underwrites it. Spicer's second book *Admonitions* (1957)⁷² includes a letter to Robin Blaser that would become one of Spicer's most discussed statements of poetics. In this letter Spicer discusses his epochal turn in his first book, *After Lorca*, to "writing a book instead of a series of poems."

Dear Robin,

Enclosed you find the first of the publications of White Rabbit Press. The second will be much handsomer.

You are right that I don't now need your criticisms of individual poems. But I still want them. It's probably from old habit—but it's an awfully old habit. Halfway through *After Lorca* I discovered that I was writing a book instead of a series of poems and individual criticism by anyone suddenly became less important. This is true of my *Admonitions* which I will send you when complete. (I have eight of them already and there will probably be fourteen including, of course, this letter.)

The trick naturally is what Duncan learned years ago and tried to teach us—not to search for the perfect poem but to let your way of writing of the moment go along its own paths, explore and retreat but never be fully realized (confined) within the boundaries of one poem. This is where we were wrong and he was right, but he complicated things for us by saying that there is no such thing as good or bad poetry. There is—but not in relation to the single poem. There is really no single poem.

That is why all my stuff from the past (except the *Elegies* and *Troilus*) looks foul to me. 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 my poetry but the fact that I viewed each anger and each frustration as unique—something to be converted into poetry as one would exchange foreign money. I learned this from the English Department (and from the English Department of the spirit—that great quagmire that lurks at the bottom of all of us) and it ruined ten years of my poetry. Look at those other poems. Admire them if you like. They are beautiful but dumb.

Poems should echo and re-echo against each other. They should create resonances. They cannot live alone any more than we can.

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

⁷² Though not published in Spicer's lifetime, *Admonitions* was widely circulated among his circle.

buried in it—the *Songs Against Apollo*, the *Gallery of Gorgeous Gods*, the *Drinking Songs*—all incomplete, all abortive—all incomplete, all abortive because I thought, like all abortionists, that what is not perfect had no real right to live.

Things fit together. We knew that—it is the principle of magic. Two inconsequential things can combine together to become a consequence. This is true of poems too. A poem is never to be judged by itself alone. A poem is never by itself alone.

This is the most important letter that you have ever received.

Love,
Jack
(*Vocabulary* 163-164)

This text abjures one kind of poem for another, a turn that would be decisive in shaping subsequent decades of Spicer reception. During his lifetime, Spicer restricted the circulation of his works to the San Francisco Bay Area, eschewing national publication (and shaming other poets who sought it out).⁷³ Many readers first encountered Spicer's writing in Blaser's posthumous edition of *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer* (1975), which follows the edict of this letter in beginning with *After Lorca*. (Five years later, Donald Allen edited a small volume of early poems entitled *One Night Stand and Other Poems*.) The effects of this letter come out of its abjuring a certain kind of poem—a certain kind of relation—in the name of building another. Spicer announces his arrival at the poetics of queer relationality, an interrelation of poems that overcomes alienation and loneliness. Their movement is not one that follows familiar reproductive patterns, but instead seeks out strange resonances, echoes and re-echoes.

Turning from the single poem to the book eliminates one mode of exchange, “view[ing] each anger and each frustration as unique—something to be converted into poetry as one would exchange foreign money.” The single poem turns emotions into single emotions, unique, each by each, separate. In their discrete status as individual bodies, these emotions and poems become subject to a conversion or monetary exchange. That exchange is infelicitous: the material of the individual emotion requires converting into poetry; it is not already in poetry's own medium. While the otherness of anger and frustration may be seen as what catalyzes poetry into movement, this orientation positions poetry as something beyond the emotions. By contrast, poems that “echo and re-echo against each other” interrelate in the same mode, resonating felicitously.

Turning from the single poem to the book eliminates one tradition by which to understand poetry, “the English department of the spirit,” and replacing it with another, “the principle of magic.” The English department is a quagmire, but it is an internalized quagmire: a standard of judgment that embeds itself into the spirit. The principle of magic, by contrast, is not only a rejection of the staid standards of the English department, but it is another set of standards. While perhaps less determinate than the university's reified codes of decision, magic is still another form of connection: a ways for things to fit together.⁷⁴

⁷³ Spicer's rhetoric did not always match his actions, and he did indeed pursue some New York publication—most notably in Donald Allen's anthology *New American Poetry* (1960).

⁷⁴ An alternative draft of the letter emphasizes the magic even more fully. The second paragraph includes this interpolation: “Halfway through *After Lorca* I discovered I was actually suspended in mid-air. The same happened to Saint Agnes of Bohemia, wife of Frederic II (or of his son as some maintain) and she was seen by a nun to raise from the floor to a height of four inches. Dominic of ‘Jesus and Mary’ was once in such ecstasy in the presence of Philip II, who was able to move him about merely by blowing on him. But do not confuse levitation with bilocation.”

But perhaps the structuring metaphor of this turn is Spicer's description of single poems as "one night stands filled (the best of them) with their own emotions, but pointing nowhere, as meaningless as sex in a Turkish bath." Why is it that the abjuration of this sexual scene sets up Spicer for the different social-sexual scene of poems that "cannot live alone any more than we can"? That Spicer is using "one night stands" as the figure for the "beautiful but dumb" and solitary single poem implies a construction of the sexuality of the Turkish bath as alienated, overdetermined, directionless, and meaningless—a construction that is by no means mandatory.⁷⁵ Similarly, the sexual metaphor implies that the utopia of textual interrelation provided by the book is in some sense an overcoming of that sexual alienation. What is the social-sexual scene of the book, in contrast to that of the single poem?

Spicer's desire for queer community pervades his writing before *After Lorca*, beginning shortly after his arrival at UC Berkeley in 1946 as a transfer from University of Redlands. At Berkeley, he met the poets Robin Blaser and Robert Duncan; Duncan had recently become the first "out" American poet through a 1944 essay published in the journal *Politics* (which resulted in John Crowe Ransom pulling one of Duncan's previously accepted poems from the *Kenyon Review*). The trio studied with the poet Josephine Miles and the medieval historian Ernest Kantorowicz (the latter an erstwhile member of the Stefan George *Kreis*, another model for queer community). They called themselves "The Berkeley Renaissance," and "only half-mockingly," Spicer's biographers Lew Ellingham and Kevin Killian write. They describe this moment: "Duncan's example led the more timid Spicer to explore his own sexuality in ways he'd never dreamed of at Redlands. In fact, he once spoke of 1946, the year he met Duncan, as his year of birth... They were living in a world that seemed charged with beauty and art, and in the magic circle of his new friends, homosexuality was the glittering fruit of all—not only not forbidden, but positively encouraged" (*Poet Be Like God* 11, 12).

While Spicer would subsequently look back on this period with nostalgia, his earliest writings related to gay identity (dating from this period) show even in this moment a deep desire for a fulfilled sense of community. If the Berkeley Renaissance came to be the name of that fulfillment in Spicer's later life, it is notable that his writings from that time show gay relation as primarily comprised of absence and desire. "Pillar of Salt," a short story Spicer wrote while a student at Berkeley, describes a high school visit to a gay bar.

You both know that you're looking for something more than a show,
more even than getting into Bradley's Bar past that woman who is
posted there specially to keep minors out. You have a better idea

The third paragraph adds, after "There is really no single poem": "When Duncan told us the ectoplasm streamed from his eyes, nose and ears, and he was quite unconscious. We were all allowed to handle the streaming material from his body and then we wound it into ropes which were festooned round the furniture and tied into knots. Several of us were carried high up on a cabinet and there we heard audible conversations in several languages."

These interpolations appear in a typescript version of the letter, and so suggest an alternative draft that Spicer concocted for the letter's appearance in *Admonitions*, as he had no typewriter himself and typed versions are usually fairly advanced drafts. They draw even stronger connections between this early statement of seriality and Spicer's later lectures that connected seriality and "dictation." Thanks to Kevin Killian for his help tracking down the archival version of this letter, which Killian and Lew Ellingham published in the little magazine *lyric&* under the title "'Letter to Robin Blaser,' from *Admonitions* (earlier draft)" (85-89).

⁷⁵ John Emil Vincent comments in relation to this line: "I see no reason to interpret sex in a Turkish bath, or a one-night stand, as meaningless, nor as evidence of aloneness. In fact, for some gay men acts of anonymous sex seem exemplary episodes in resonant series, creating concurrently a sense of community... A Turkish bath seems a strong figure for the resonance of poems (individuals) within a 'serial poem' (communal space/community)" (*Queer Lyrics* 151).

than Lee what that something is, but you couldn't explain it to him in words...

The bus comes sooner than either of you expected and as you settle down into the plush seats you steal a glance at Lee. The glance is literally stolen as you know Lee doesn't like you looking at him.

As you walk down the street, two men walking arm in arm come up from the other direction. One of them detaches himself and comes up to Lee and asks him in a funny high-pitched voice, "Do you have a match?"

Lee gives him a light and the man offers you both a cigarette. Lee takes the bull by the horns and asks, "Do you happen to know of a bar around here that won't bother us about being underage?"

The man smiles and says, "Come with us to Tessie's..."

You begin to look around and you see that on the small wooden dance-floor men are dancing with men and women are dancing with women. On the stage above a woman with bobbed hair wearing a tuxedo is singing a torch song. You begin to realize this night-club is for homosexuals and this knowledge is strangely exhilarating. You had read about them but were never certain that you had seen one before. You almost want to go over to the next table and talk to the youths there (they really don't look any older than you do) in the same twittering voice that they talk in.

Quite suddenly you wonder what Lee thinks of this place. You look at him and he wrinkles his nose and says, "Let's get out of here." You get up and slowly follow him to the door. When you get to it you can't resist turning around for one last look. Unlike Lot's wife you finally turn around and go through the door with Lee.

When you are out on the sidewalk in the cold, clean air again, Lee says, "God, aren't queers disgusting!" And you feel lost and alone. ("Pillar of Salt")

Queer community and queer relation first appear just outside the second-person protagonist's purview. Out of sight—out of explanation in words—made up of forbidden, fugitive glances, partial understandings, and gestures that approach worldmaking. The whole story is made up of that inaccessibility, not the brief period the narrator and Lee spend in the bar. The knowledge of actually existing homosexual community comes late, and the protagonist cannot join it—but he can revel in the look backwards. Yet that look is filled with deathly peril.

In this story, Tessie's bar is almost given to Spicer's protagonist—like the Berkeley Renaissance was to Spicer—without his active searching for it. In other texts from the period Spicer begins to think of queer community as something to be actively sought, and perhaps also built. In another short story that Spicer considered adapting into a novel, "The Wasps," a character named Jack learns of the death of a high school friend (or something more) in Luxembourg, presumably in World War II. "I would have to write his mother. I would write a beautiful comforting phrase and she would reply in a brave and dignified manner. She had been fighting for so long to keep Charles out of my influence, my unwholesome influence; in the very moment of her success she was robbed of its object. Charles was dead" (*The Wasps 2*). The substance of the relation between Jack and Charles is, as in "Pillar of Salt," hardly present. Here it is only articulated in Charles's mother's fear

of it. On the day Jack learns the news, he struggles with how to behave around friends who knew them both; he then goes with another friend, Gene, to look at houses for rent on the coast.

All my thoughts were not about Charles, but they all radiated about him as a center and would inevitably fall back to him as soon as they reached the narrow limits of the circumference...

If only it weren't so lonely—perhaps, if Charles and I could have lived here together, alone—

The smacking of the waves sounded loudly through the broken bay-window, although they were many feet below. I wondered idly if two people such as we had already lived here, had already— (*The Wasps* 4-5)

Jack's mourning for his love object negotiates the homophobic constraints of the outside world that penetrate into constraints on his psyche. This short-circuiting of feeling almost stops queer mourning before it can start. But Jack's feeling breaks through, formally as well as thematically, in imagining another space where his love for Charles would not be so constrained. The real story of the house in is that an eccentric captain lived there alone in a kind of "religious mania"; the house was "too empty" even to be haunted, a man tells Jack and Gene. "The Wasps" suggests that queer love is not destined to be as unremembered as this, in Jack's imaginative ability to transplant himself and Charles there, finding another space where relation would be possible.⁷⁶

Places like Tessie's bar and the house on the northern California coast function as primarily imaginative spaces, barely glimpsed and barely inhabited, in which queer relation can live and flourish. In Spicer's poems from this period, actual queer relation does not seem to offer the same positive possibility. The infamously titled "One Night Stand" recalls a pick-up at a bar:

Listen, you silk-hearted bastard,
I said in the bar last night,
You wear those dream clothes
Like a swan out of water.
Listen, you wool-feathered bastard,
My name, just for the record, is Leda.
I can remember pretending
That your red silk tie is a real heart
That your raw wool suit is real flesh
That you could float beside me with a swan's touch
Of casual satisfaction.
But not the swan's blood.
Waking tomorrow, I remember only
Somebody's feathers and his wrinkled heart
Draped loosely in my bed. (*Vocabulary* 13)

Projecting the story of Zeus's rape of Leda onto this scene adds, to the unsatisfying bar encounter, an aesthetic history of eroticizing violence. That history only adds pathos: it is another "pretending," like the pretense that the object of desire will have a "real heart" behind his red silk tie, and the

⁷⁶ In a poem from the same period, Spicer writes of Hart Crane: "But he is dead / And nothing human there can chafe his flesh; / Only the fertile sea can chafe his flesh; it is the end, / An island end of dreaming" (*Vocabulary* 8).

pretense that this encounter could float into something more than “casual satisfaction.” The poem’s invective touches both the object of the one-night stand—the swan, the silk-hearted bastard—and the object of “One Night Stand”—the reader of the poem; the reader at the same time overhears this invective and is its direct object. Yet neither the swan nor the reader seems equipped to give the speaker his satisfaction. In another poem reflecting a bar scene, Spicer bemoans poetry’s incapacity:

When I praise the sun or any bronze god derived from it
Don’t think I wouldn’t rather praise the very tall blond boy
Who ate all of my potato-chips at the Red Lizard.
It’s just that I won’t see him when I open my eyes
And I will see the sun. (“Imaginary Elegies,” *Vocabulary* 26)

Poetry wants to be a technology to draw out the sexual relation beyond an ephemeral and passing moment, an Orphic praise less ineffectual than Lot’s wife’s turn backwards, that brings the beautiful boy to life beyond the moment of seeing him. But here, it fails.⁷⁷

As Maria Damon notes, Spicer’s poems associate homosexuality with “acute alienation” (144). After the paradise of the Berkeley Renaissance, the same could be said for Spicer’s life in the early 1950s. Spicer began working as a PhD student at Berkeley, but soon resigned his teaching assistant position over the anti-Communist Loyalty Oath controversy in 1950, as did his teacher Kantorowicz and many others. Spicer’s biographers write: “Spicer’s decision was brave—everyone said so—but it meant expulsion from his Berkeley paradise. The rest of his career found him grappling with this loss” (*Poet* 33). He transferred to the University of Minnesota where he began an epistolary romance with Gary Bottone, the first of several such romances that would become Spicer’s ideal mode of engagement: “He preferred his boyfriends long distance, or hard-to-get, and preferably straight. Gary was but the first of a long series of young men or boys whom Spicer used primarily as vehicles for poetic expression” (*Poet* 39). Spicer didn’t stay long in Minnesota—he decided to return to working at UC Berkeley in 1952 when the Oath was modified to a pledge of allegiance to the United States and California constitutions.

Soon after, in early 1953, Spicer became involved with the Mattachine Society, “the organization whose founding heralded the beginning of the gay emancipation movement in the United States” (D’Emilio 9). Here Spicer began to address his alienation politically, again taking up the possibility that gay community could be created and was not only to be given. In meetings of the Oakland chapter of the Mattachine Society, Spicer and several others found a venue for sharing their feelings and experiences—an opportunity to move from viewing “each anger and each frustration as unique” (to use the language from Spicer’s letter in *Admonitions* quoted above) towards a collective understanding of them. In addition to these proto-consciousness-raising discussions held at the meetings, Spicer drafted a detailed questionnaire for those who expressed interest in the society that similarly considered the various affects of gay identification. Questions included:

6. My attitude towards being homosexual is, GENERALLY, one of distaste __, pride __, indifference __, resignation __, (other) __...
7. When disliking my homosexuality, my anger is directed towards Fate __, Society __, myself __, Father __, Mother __, Guardian __, (other) __.

⁷⁷ Spicer also engages a tradition of aubade, perhaps most prominently Donne’s “The Sun Rising” which similarly opposes the sun to the beloved: “Thy beams, so reverend and strong/Why shouldst thou think?/I could eclipse and cloud them with a wink,/But that I would not lose her sight so long.”

8. I do feel __, do not feel __, that I could change if I wanted to badly enough; I've found that I have changed enough to conform __; I thought I could but found I couldn't __; I thought I had but found after a number of years that I hadn't __; I have changed my habits but not my thoughts __; I have changed everything except my sympathies __ ...

[...]

50. If asked to define and describe a homosexual I would __, would not __ have a definite answer...

[...]

61. I was __ years old when I realized I was homosexual; I was __ years old when I began to suspect I was; It took me __ to accept the idea; I still haven't done so __; It took me __ years to face up to the issue squarely; I still haven't done so __; It came as a pleasant surprise __, ghastly shock __, matter of course __, glorious revelation __, as a conflict between pride and shame __, as an unwonted role to be played out as fairly and honestly as possible __. ("Mattachine Questionnaire" 2-3, 12, 13)

These questions show the extent to which the affective substance of homosexual identification was open to determination. It is clear that societal constraints on the free expression of homosexuality are what bring members into the Mattachine: another question considers the homophobic violence and political subjection coming from the police and the law: "Under suspicion of being a homosexual, being associated with homosexuals, or of lewd vagrancy, I have __ have not __ been stopped __ interrogated __ held on suspicion __ arrested __ jailed __ tried __ fined __ served a sentence __ put on probation" ("Mattachine Questionnaire" 9). While beginning here, the survey suggests that the collective work to be accomplished in the Mattachine is to move from externally determined conditions of homophobia and subjection to a self-determined understanding of gay collective identity. The spaces left behind would later, for Spicer, become spaces for poetry, as Kevin Killian has noted:⁷⁸ "The famous questionnaire Spicer worked up four years later for entrants to his 'Poetry as Magic' workshop might have mirrored the circumlocutions and poetic swoops of the Mattachine questionnaire" ("Spicer and the Mattachine" 30).

Along these lines, the Mattachine Society also directly debated the social ontology of homosexuality, and how to understand its minority status, attempting to fill the elliptical spaces that Spicer's own "Homosexuality" leaves. In a debate at the Mattachine convention in Los Angeles in May 1953, speakers considered whether homosexuality was defined solely by sexual activity (the view of Hal Call, a national leader of the Mattachine) or whether one could speak of a gay culture too. Spicer spoke from the floor:

In the beginning I objected to the word 'culture' on these grounds: when asked whether I am a homosexual, I answered by asking "When?" Then it was pointed out to me that I am homosexual not only when I am indulging in a sexual expression, I am homosexual many other times. Perhaps there is something inherent in

⁷⁸ I'm deeply indebted to Kevin Killian's archival research in "Spicer and the Mattachine," and his suggestive comments on how Spicer's time in the Mattachine ramified in his writings around that time. In what follows I suggest other ways to consider this important moment in Spicer's development as a writer.

homosexuality that gives me a different response to the world that I live in. Or perhaps there is something inherent to my adjustment to homosexuality in contemporary society that determines my method of expression. But at any rate, I am homosexual a good deal of the time and I draw from, I exist in, and I hope I may contribute to an area of expression and activity which may be defined by the name “culture.”

We think of many men who are prompted because of their homosexuality to do certain things. I wonder if Leonardo would have done what he did if he hadn’t had a thorn at his side. Or Michelangelo, or perhaps Saul of Tarsus. So I like the word “culture” now because I see it has a meaning, a meaning of activity, thought, or expression. However, we are not an isolated group. We belong to humanity. (Killian, “Spicer and the Mattachine” 27)

Spicer’s speech aligns with Baraka’s later claim that “If I fill a book up with 8,000,000 white people, it is still Negro material,” and with Marlon Ross’s call for theorizations of identification that are temporal rather than spatial, discussed above. The cultural identification of homosexuality does not, for Spicer, rely on an essentialist understanding of identity, as it could equally issue from its social construction. Either way, the experience of being homosexual produces a different sphere of “activity, thought, or expression.”

While Spicer was committed to the idea of a gay culture, he questioned how to understand that culture and in particular its relation to the mainstream. He suggested that the Mattachine research “how minority groups have integrated into society at large in the past,” even asking whether gay people would be happier assimilating or becoming straight, if they could (Killian, “Spicer and the Mattachine” 29). Several of Spicer’s other writings from this period weigh the possibilities for co-identification and solidarity between minority groups. “An Answer to a Jew,” originally dating from the late 1940s but revised in 1956, reads:

When asked if I am of the Jew or Goyim,
When asked if I am an enemy of your people,
I would reply that I am of a somewhat older people:
The Gay, who are neither Jew nor Goyim,
Who were cut down in your Lord God Jehovah’s first pogrom
Out at Sodom.
None of the nations ever protested about it
(We should have nationalized angels) but show us
An angel again
Walking down Sodom St., wings folded,
And try us. (*One Night Stand* 65)

Spicer echoes his Mattachine speech’s “When asked” construction; the avowal of homosexuality, then, belongs already to the context of interrogation and attempted determination, rather than being an *a priori* basis for identity available in advance.⁷⁹ Neither Jew nor Goyim, when these are putatively all-encompassing categories, Gay is an identity that belies the predeterminative and ascriptive

⁷⁹ In fact, Killian uses this “When asked” phrasing (among other clearly Spicerian turns of phrase) to identify the Mattachine convention speech quoted above as Spicer’s (“Spicer and the Mattachine” 27).

function of identification. Yet “The Gay” are nonetheless “a people,” and one whose existence precedes the “first pogrom” against them. Here the poem queries the possibility of solidarity between gay and Jewish people in their mutual subjection to violence. Angels are a more confusing category—in the Sodom story, they are the objects of forbidden desire (Genesis 19:5-7). Elsewhere in Genesis, an angel’s intercourse with Jacob gives him a new identity and a new name, suggesting the culture-making possibility of gay relation (Genesis 32:25-31). Angels perhaps also have something in common with the other minority groups to which Spicer compares gay culture—outside of “the human” and ordinary reproduction, and capable of a different kind of productive intercourse.

In other texts from this period, Spicer considers these questions while also taking up the possibility for an experimental and creative definition of gay identity outside the strictures of homophobic violence. Perhaps the strangest text in Spicer’s corpus, “The Unvert Manifesto and Other Papers Found in the Rare Book Room of the Boston Public Library in the Handwriting of Oliver Charming. By S.” (1955-1956), consists of a brief, somewhat surrealist manifesto followed by a diary of “Oliver Charming.” The diary’s dates begin shortly after the conclusion of Spicer’s engagement with the Mattachine, even though written two years later. Figures appear standing in for Spicer (“S.”), his current epistolary love interest, Graham Mackintosh (“Graham Macarel”), and other contemporary associates.

THE UNVERT MANIFESTO

1) An unvert is neither an invert or an outvert, a pervert or a convert, an introvert or a retrovert. An unvert chooses to have no place to turn.

2) One should always masturbate on street corners.

[...]

6) An unvert must not be homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, or autosexual. He must be metasexual. He must enjoy going to bed with his own tears.

[...]

12) Jews and Negros are not allowed to be unverts. The Jew will never understand unversion and the Negro understands it too well.

(*Vocabulary* 74, 75)

In these definitions of the “unvert,” Spicer experimentally defines gay identity outside the medicalized and violent terms in which identity is imposed from the outside. The diary portion of the text begins by emphasizing the inventive element of “unvert” with another punning coinage: “I must unvert someone named Graham Macarel. He should be about seventeen or eighteen and have a large Dada” (*Vocabulary* 75). To be an unvert, then, is not only to have no place to turn, but to bring certain forms of life and relation into being. The unvert is only loosely defined by who he goes to bed with: “going to bed with his own tears” suggests, however, that it is not action or desire that defines the unvert, but how he orients himself towards that desire and its fulfillment, or lack of fulfillment.

Comparisons between unverts and other minority groups continue throughout the diary entries. S. says to Oliver: “We homosexuals are the only minority group that completely lacks any vestige of a separate cultural heritage. We have no songs, no folklore, even our customs are borrowed from our upper-middle-class mothers” (*Vocabulary* 78). Later, Oliver writes: “The negro’s aim is integration. The Jew’s and the homosexual’s aim is segregation. The unvert’s aim is a grand degradation between men and angels. We are a minority group only in our heros” (*Vocabulary* 83).

We may, of course, question these summary definitions of the aims of Jewish and black people; they seem to mirror the otherwise reductive and alienated delimitations of gay identity. Indeed we might (following Ross's reading of Baraka) read them as a kind of camp appropriation of the violence of determination—though with a notable difference, namely, Spicer's whiteness. Yet among this haphazard invective, Spicer gestures towards a kind of queer identity that, separate from the medicalized "homosexual," could be at once creation ("unvention") and degradation—a queer form of relation or reproductivity that avoids the pitfalls of heterosexuality's "formal procession," as Spicer wrote in an earlier poem.⁸⁰ The tears that come out of homosexual alienation get turned into romantic partners, "unventing" new ways of being in the world together.

The above quoted discussion of gay custom strongly mirrors Spicer's thinking while a member of the Mattachine. The interest in naming also recalls Spicer's work to rename the society—he prepared a report for the May 1953 convention on possible alternative names to "Mattachine." Spicer was intent on avoiding any kind of "twee" name, citing "psychological and psycho-semantic studies that have confirmed the fact that a belief in a favorable part of a group stereotype (i.e., Negroes are happy by nature) tends to confirm and strengthen already existing negative stereotype beliefs (i.e., Negroes are lazy)" (Killian, "Spicer and the Mattachine" 20). Spicer preferred the name "Tercellan" as an archaic form connected to the idea of a "third sex": "Although the myth of a third sex has long been discredited, the presence of a third "position" or attitude in society is evidenced by the whole Mattachine Movement" ("Spicer and the Mattachine" 20, citing Sears, *Behind the Mask of the Mattachine* 216). Without claiming that gay identity derived from a separate biological sex, "Tercellan" emphasized that gay identity could function in society as a separate position or attitude, a way of being that could operate independently from the coercive heterosexual mainstream. "Tercellan Society" was the most popular of the alternative names at the May 1953 convention, but ultimately the organization stuck with "Mattachine." Other alternatives proposed included the "Olympian Society" and the "Calamus Society," after Walt Whitman's cluster of poems that celebrate love between men ("Spicer and the Mattachine" 28).

Spicer's views towards "Calamus" appear in a remarkable prose piece from 1955, "Some Notes on Whitman for Allen Joyce," that suggests the boundaries and ideals of queer community as he understood it:

"Let shadows be furnished with genitals."

He was reaching for a world I can still remember. Sweet and painful. It is a world without magic and without god. His ocean is different from my ocean, his moon is different from my moon, his love (oh, God the loss) is different from my love.

In his world roads go somewhere and you walk with someone whose hand you can hold. I remember. In my world roads only go up and down and you are lucky if you can hold on to the road or even know that it is there.

He never heard spirits whispering or saw Aphrodite crawl out of the water or was frightened by the ghost of something crucified. His world had clouds in it and he loved Indian names and carried some of his poems in a pouch around his neck. He had no need of death.

⁸⁰ In an earlier poem entitled "Homosexuality," Spicer writes: "Men and women have weddings and funerals/Are conceived and destroyed in a formal/Procession" (*Vocabulary* 6). Homosexuality is more elliptically described—if at all—as "Roses that wear roses."

Rimbaud without wings.

Forgive me Walt Whitman, you whose fine mouth has sucked the cock of the heart of the country for fifty years. You did not ever understand cruelty. It was that that severed your world from me, fouled your moon and your ocean, threw me out of your bearded paradise. The comrade you are walking with suddenly twists your hand off. The ghost-bird that is singing to you suddenly leaves a large seagull dropping in your eye. You are sucking the cock of a heart that has clap.

Calamus cannot exist in the presence of cruelty. Not merely human cruelty, but the cruelty of shadows, the cruelty of spirits. Calamus is like Oz. One needs, after one has left it, to find some magic belt to cross its Deadly Desert, some cat to entice one into its mirror. There Walt is, like some great seabird from the Emerald Palace, crying, “Calamus, Calamus.” And there one is, at the other side of the desert, hearing Walt but seeing that impossible shadow, those shimmering heat waves across the sky. And one needs no Virgil, but an Alice, a Dorothy, a Washington horsecar conductor, to lead one across that cuntlike mirror, that cruelty.

So when I dreamed of Calamus, as I often did when I touched you or put my hand upon your hand, it was not as of a possible world, but as a lost paradise. A land my father Adam drove me out of with the whip of shadow. In the last sense of the word—a fairy story. That is what I think about Calamus. That is what I think about your damned Calamus. (*Vocabulary* 55-56)⁸¹

Spicer marks an unbridgeable distance between his world and a Whitmanian queer utopia—unlike Whitman’s, Spicer’s is without direction, without successful intimacy. Whitman’s queer world pretends to a form of actually existing homosexuality, and Spicer adamantly refuses it as a false tale of a lost paradise. In 1955, Spicer’s own version of this joyful queer past was painfully far away: he was trying out living in Boston after a brief and disastrous period in New York, and wondered in his letters if there was any way to recreate the paradise of the Berkeley Renaissance. From this vantage point, queer community was a “fairy story” in the last sense of the word. Here Spicer suggests that a

⁸¹ An unpublished manuscript poem from Spicer’s notebooks continues thinking along these lines:

What I really have against Walt Whitman
Is why we can't love each other
When I lean against your big body
I feel meaningless
Like the first man that landed on the moon
When you lean against my labyrinthine body
You feel meaningless
Like the first star-jumper
Who has landed among a race of intelligent spiders
Calamus
Is another name for miscegenation [/madness]
Friendship
Is harder to jump across than sexes.

(“Notebook 5, 1956”)

story of community for fairies—for gay people—was not only “a diverting piece of obvious invention,” but the last sense of the word: “a fib” (Webster’s 1950 edition).

But the insistence on pain and cruelty is not a wholly negative posture. As José Esteban Muñoz wrote of Spicer: “The term *antisocial* is a common misnomer insofar as one can often find the impulse for sociality in this being and acting differently of difficult characters like Spicer” (“Annihilation and Innovation” 96). Pain and cruelty are barriers to the enjoyment of someone whose hand you can hold—but in the absence of that comforting relation come the whispers of spirits and a friendly relation to death itself. The soldiers of Whitman’s desire, and the men Spicer desired at a distance, may be far away, but other relations, less accountable and present, are nonetheless possible. For Spicer the queer community—even the queer community in poetry—needs not a poetic Virgil to guide one’s way to it, but a more practically exploratory (if also fictional) figure. This text, even in abjuring a certain vision for queer community, sets an intention for another queer community. As Muñoz continues: “The challenge here is to look to queerness as a mode of ‘being-with’ that defies social conventions and conformism and is innately heretical yet still desirous for the world, actively attempting to enact a commons that is not a pulverizing, hierarchical one bequeathed through logics and practices of exploitation” (“Annihilation and Innovation” 96). What can this mode of being-with be called, other than Calamus? Is it merely a false story about the past, or a possibility for the future? How can that future adequately account for the pain, strangeness, and cruelty that Spicer associates with queer life?⁸²

Unfortunately for Spicer, the Mattachine would not be his vehicle for achieving such a commons. His time with the organization was filled with acrimony, and his avowed anarchism—while finding some common cause with the Communist and “fellow traveler” members of the Mattachine—did not endear him to the liberals who soon came to lead the organization. Early in his activism, as volunteer “Publications Chairman” for the Oakland chapter, Spicer proposed a Bay Area magazine that would supplement the Los Angeles-based magazine *One*—to be called *Two*. Chuck Rowland, one of the Mattachine’s co-founders, wrote in response that the idea “seems utterly mad to me... (with, perhaps, *Three* in Seattle, *Four* in Denver, *Five* in New York, *Sixty-Nine* in Dallas)...” (“Spicer and the Mattachine” 18-19, quoting letter of 5/5/1953). Perhaps prefiguring Spicer’s later interdiction on distribution of his works outside the Bay Area, the desire for a separate magazine is consistent with his interest in smaller, independent circles as arrangements of gay life. The Oakland chapter had previously been censured for attempting to organize a boycott of gay bars that banned black people; the chapter’s very foundation was motivated by an attempt to support Bayard Rustin after his arrest in Pasadena on “morals charges” (“Spicer and the Mattachine” 17, 22). Before long the Oakland chapter was absorbed into a larger Bay Area chapter with San Francisco liberals to mitigate the East Bay radicals. By Labor Day 1953, Spicer was forced out of the Mattachine Society, a maneuver consistent with the liberal coup by Harry Hay against the Communist founders of the Mattachine at the May convention.

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The Berkeley Renaissance was Spicer’s first vision of a utopian queer community, almost given to him as a true second birth. The months in the Mattachine reflect a changed understanding that queer community had to be created. Spicer devoted the rest of his life to making his poetry, and the community he built around his poetry, serve as a possible world that could encompass the cruelty of shadows, the cruelty of spirits. Spicer began drafting *After Lorca* in Boston, while working

⁸² For an alternative discussion of Whitman’s legacy for Spicer and his peers, see Damon.

in the Rare Book Room at the Boston Public Library.⁸³ Though frequently missing Berkeley, he did assemble a set of (mostly) queer writers here, including Robin Blaser (from his Berkeley days), John Wieners, Stephen Jonas, and Joe Dunn.

The poems Spicer wrote here desire a certain kind of power for poetry that still appears wanting; “Song for Bird and Myself,” for example, begins: “I am dissatisfied with my poetry. / I am dissatisfied with my sex life. / I am dissatisfied with the angels I believe in” (*Vocabulary* 69). There is a homology between poetry and sex as regions for desire—and as opportunities for relation. In “Poem to the Reader of the Poem,” Spicer tries to collapse the two:

I dreamed last night—
This is false in any poem
Last night never happened
[...]
...I dreamed I was wrestling
With the reader of this poem.
Dreamed—
Was it a wet dream?
[...]
But the eagle in my throat says, “Jack,
How can you write a poem to the reader of a poem?
Even in a dream you must love somebody.”
This is another lie.
I did not wrestle with anybody
I wrestled with the reader of this poem.
[...]
My darling, if you flew
A naked eagle in my throat
I’d shout, “Exactly!
When I said this was a poem to the reader
I wanted to dig a pitfall
Only you could fall into.
You
Know who you are
Know how terribly far
From last night you are.
If I am old when you read this,
If I am dead when you read this,
Darling, darling, darling,
It was last night
When I wrestled with you.
I am wrestling with you.
It was not a wet dream or you would be wrestling

⁸³ While here, Spicer wrote a review of a new edition of Emily Dickinson’s poems that emphasizes the connections between poetry and letters: “If large portions of her correspondence are considered not as letters...but as experiments in a heightened prose combined with poetry, a new approach to both her letters and her poetry opens up” (*The House that Jack Built* 234). Daniel Katz has persuasively argued for the importance of Dickinson’s legacy in Spicer’s use of letters as poems, in *After Lorca* (as we shall soon see) and elsewhere in his writings (*The Poetry of Jack Spicer* 54-55).

With a naked gravestone.” (*Vocabulary* 65-67)

Spicer attempts to define his dreamed wrestling with the reader in sexual terms: as a wrestling with a lover that echoes Jacob’s wrestling with an angel; as a wet dream imagining a realized form of relation. The poem seems to approach becoming a sexual technology, recalling Frank O’Hara’s desire to place “the poem squarely between the poet and the person, Lucky Pierre style, and the poem is correspondingly gratified” (“Personism: A Manifesto,” *Collected Poems* 499). Spicer wants his poem to be similarly specifically wrought for his beloved: “a pitfall/Only you could fall into.” That effort falls short: the dream of wrestling is not even a wet dream, not even a solitary and unconscious expression of sexual fantasy.

But at the same time the poem’s sexual opening to its readers expands across time, to the iterative reading that would conjure a repeated and changing “last night” of the poem. The single poem gestures beyond the single sexual encounter—the “reader of the poem” has the potential to be more than one person. By means of the lyric technology of repetition, the poetic one-night stand ramifies into a set of encounters. It is even by means of the poem’s *failure* to be a successful one-night stand, its failure to adequately address its main object, that it gestures to another speech that could operate more broadly from operating without guarantee. As Derrida has written of Paul Celan: “To address no one is not exactly not to address any one. To speak to no one, *risking*, each time, singularly, that there might be no one to bless, no one who can bless—is this not the only chance for blessing? for an act of faith? What would blessing be that was sure of itself? . . . You, the word *you*, may be addressed to the other as well as to me, to oneself as other. Each time it exceeds the *economy* of the discourse” (*Sovereignities in Question* 42, 51). Every reader of the poem slips briefly into the pitfall of the poem, wrestling with its apparent failure—with the slippery loss of “last night” that exceeds the economy of the single night, of the single poem. The poem, perhaps, never successfully brings its other into being; but it does bring into being a community of readers who are at once missed and lost, and at the same time searching and yearning.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ In another poem from the Boston period, Spicer similarly considers the loss of the date that comes out of a poem’s repeated reading—and extended writing:

This night (Joe Dunn could give a date
October 1st
That’s Joe Dunn’s date)
But I can’t
[. . .]
It is already
October 2nd.
October 3rd. Will it ever be important again
Whether it is October 2nd or October 3rd?
[. . .]
It is now October 5th (or 6th)
English majors
Can discover the correct date
(The Yankees used seven pitchers
That will tell you the day)
I was lonelier than you are now (or will be)
October something, 1956. (*Vocabulary* 60-61)

The date is simultaneously a closure and an opening, a singularity and a multiplicity. This multiplicity perhaps offers a relief to the poem’s loneliness: if the reader some number of years later compares their loneliness to the poem’s, perhaps that loneliness is mitigated, or at least shared. Derrida’s “Shibboleth” speaks directly to these possibilities of the date, for example: “The date is a future anterior; it gives the time one assigns to anniversaries to come” (25); “It belongs to the always eventful and damaged essence of the date to become readable and commemorative only in effacing what it will have designated, in becoming each time no one’s date” (36).

After Lorca (1957) includes many such risky acts of speech that attempt to create community across time—even across death. Intermittently throughout the book, we read letters from “Jack” to “Lorca” that would require a true act of faith—or a magical conjuring—to felicitously reach their object, on account of Federico García Lorca being dead since 1936. An apocryphal introduction by Lorca directly addresses these texts:

The letters are another problem. When Mr. Spicer began sending them to me a few months ago, I recognized immediately the “programmatically letter”—the letter one poet writes to another not in any effort to communicate with him, but rather as a young man whispers his secrets to a scarecrow, knowing that his young lady is in the distance listening. The young lady in this case may be a Muse, but the scarecrow nevertheless quite naturally resents the confidences. The reader, who is not a party to this singular tryst, may be amused by what he overhears.

The dead are notoriously hard to satisfy. (*Vocabulary* 107-108)

The pleasure-relation with Lorca is not even the relation between two people—there is another being addressed, an uncertain other who “may be a Muse,” and apparently is not likely to be a reader. At any rate the pleasure of this relation is not delimitable even to the two apparent participants. The satisfaction that may issue from this relation belongs to a broader and less accountable collective. As with Spicer’s earlier invective poem “One Night Stand,” in reading the letters we move between being their direct object and overhearing them, an oscillation between positions that lyric reading always conjures. Earlier in the introduction, “Lorca” comments that in Spicer’s translations, he “seems to derive pleasure in inserting or substituting one or two words which completely change the mood and often the meaning of the poem as I had written it. More often he takes one of my poems and adjoins to it half of his own, giving rather the effect of an unwilling centaur. (Modesty forbids me to speculate which end of the animal is mine)” (107). The pleasure is not merely of substituting one object for another, one name for another, one feeling or poem for another—as Spicer critiqued of his early poems in the letter discussed above, “view[ing] each anger and each frustration as unique—something to be converted into poetry as one would exchange foreign money.” The pleasure that this relationship offers can never resolve into an easily comprehensible substitution or exchange; it challenges the integrity of both Spicer and Lorca. The two poets become an “unwilling centaur,” a magical being and a magical form of uniting two people. Translation becomes a form of sexual relation or community that obviates the force of individual identity.

Translation offers the possibility of a queer community that could span across generations—from Lorca to Spicer, but also further than that, in both directions. At the center of *After Lorca* is Spicer’s translation of Lorca’s “Ode for Walt Whitman” (which I will discuss more fully later), suggesting a longer queer genealogy into the past. Each translation in *After Lorca* is dedicated to another writer—typically to a young man—suggesting a queer futurity of further translations and poems to come. In a letter Spicer wrote to his friend Robin Blaser during the composition of *After Lorca*, he said similarly: “When I’m through (although I’m sure no one will ever publish them) I’d like someone as good as I am to translate these translations into French (or Pushtu) adding more” (“Letters to Robin Blaser” 48). This is the utopian tendency, then, in *After Lorca*, and by extension all of Spicer’s later serial poetry: it attempts to conjure a queer community that promises the overcoming of alienation and separation through its unimaginable fecundity, and openness to others-to-come.

One might suspect that this tradition looks very much like the “English department” that Spicer’s critiqued in his later assessment of his early poems—or at best, an alternative English department where the dead men are indicatively queer. Does translation truly escape the grim procession of time that Spicer associated with heterosexuality? In one of the letters to Lorca interspersed throughout the poems in *After Lorca*, Spicer addresses this question in suggesting that the poetic correspondence of tradition is something other than a true historical relation:

Things do not connect; they correspond. That is what makes it possible for a poet to translate real objects, to bring them across language as easily as he can bring them across time. That tree you saw in Spain is a tree I could never have seen in California, that lemon has a different smell and a different taste, BUT the answer is this—every place and every time has a real object to *correspond* with your real object—that lemon may become this lemon, or it may even become this piece of seaweed, or this particular color of gray in this ocean. One does not need to imagine that lemon; one needs to discover it.

Even these letters. They *correspond* with something (I don’t know what) that you have written (perhaps as unapparently as that lemon corresponds to this piece of seaweed) and, in turn, some future poet will write something which *corresponds* to them. That is how we dead men write to each other. (*Vocabulary* 133-134)

The poetic tradition that Spicer conjures here is not one of real connection—of historical or literal connection. Instead it is a form of relation called “correspondence,” a mystical connection between a lemon in California and a lemon in Spain. The relation is not premised on sameness but on an “unapparent” desire for discovery. Recall what Spicer wrote of Whitman: “His ocean is different from my ocean, his moon is different from my moon, his love (oh, God the loss) is different from my love.” While in that poem, Spicer was lamenting and attacking Whitman, here Spicer mobilizes this difference into being the condition of possibility for a different kind of relation. Poetry’s correspondence between dead men—the living, the dead, and the future ones to come—is premised on the *lack* of connection, its unreality.

We can also read the lack of connection synchronically, to consider how, for Spicer, poems find relation in spite of an absence of successful interpersonal relationships. In another letter to Lorca, Spicer addresses this question through considering how “poems find people”:

When you had finished a poem what did it want you to do with it?
Was it happy enough merely to exist or did it demand imperiously
that you share it with somebody like the beautiful person forces him
to search the world for someone that can declare that beauty? And
where did your poems find people?

Some poems are easily laid. They will give themselves to anybody and anybody physically capable can receive them. They may be beautiful (we have both written some that were) but they are meretricious. From the moment of their conception they inform us in a dulcet voice that, thank you, they can take care of themselves...

But I am speaking of the first night, when I leave my apartment almost breathless, searching for someone to show the poem to. Often now there is no one. My fellow poets (those I

showed poetry to ten years ago) are as little interested in my poetry as I am in theirs. We both compare the poems shown (unfavorably, of course) with the poems we were writing ten years ago when we could learn from each other...

All this is to explain why I dedicate each of our poems to someone. (*Vocabulary* 138-139)

Spicer's dedications aim to save poetry from the loneliness in which they share. Poems seek a community, an audience, a sexual relation. When they appear beautiful, that beauty becomes a self-sufficiency that leaves the poet lonely. At other times poems do find forms of relation, whether sexual or otherwise. In another letter, Spicer writes: "When someone intrudes into the poet's life (and any sudden personal contact, whether in the bed or in the heart, is an intrusion) he loses his balance for a moment, slips into being who he is, uses his poetry as one would use money or sympathy... The poet, for that instant, ceases to be a dead man" (*Vocabulary* 150). While certain forms of real life relation place poetry into forms of exchange—money, sympathy, or sex—textual relation offers an alternative. Neither wholly lonely nor successfully social, poetry conjures another kind of sociality, one of dead men writing to each other.

By this point in our consideration of *After Lorca* we have seen how poetry functions as a queer commons: as an alternative, utopian sociality and space for relation. Perhaps poetry was always *queer* for Spicer—but whereas the queer poems that preceded *After Lorca* reflected alienation, separation, and a focus on individual experience, the queer serial poem becomes a world of interrelation, resonance, and community. We should recall, however, Spicer's insistence—with respect to Whitman in particular—that the queer community he desired could not be without the cruelty and violence of alienation. Where does alienation fit into the utopian sociality of the serial poem? In an untitled poem from one of the *After Lorca* notebooks in Spicer's archive in the Bancroft Library—that does not appear in any typescripts or versions of the manuscript—we see what looks like this bad feeling:

I feel a black incubus crawling
Into my American bed
It is the color the newspapers describe
Of an atomic bomb explosion
Or the color of the full moon
On the night in which I cannot describe my lover.
He is the color of when I close my eyes
Or the little bowls of spit which tell you not to write poetry
Or the loss of hope – or
The single bullet that is going to kill every fucking person in the
world who is not named Garcia Lorca.
("Notebook 4, 1957")

Description is made impossible by a night which is becoming nuclear, a closing of the eyes which is becoming death. Some familiar Spicerian tropes coincide here: the lover who language fails to reach, the uncertain angel (or devil) who takes his place. Semantically the "black incubus" and lover seem to occupy different positions, but they begin to coincide in their indescribability, their darkness, and their bringing of death. The black incubus might be a lover, a muse, or a demon representing the pain of alienated sexuality; but at any rate, its blackness becomes the blinding white of the atomic

bomb explosion. The lover resists assimilation into poetic description, flitting between binary indescribable positions and making poetry, hope, and even continued living impossible.

The bullet kills everybody *but* Garcia Lorca: suggesting, perhaps, the understanding of Spicer's work where *After Lorca* represents the exception to this world of alienation. The encounter with Lorca replaces this alienated encounter with a lover, and through Spicer's mystical translation the people "named Garcia Lorca" become an infinite set of those participating in this queer utopia of writing. On the other hand, it seems strikingly futile to imagine a bullet that spares Lorca, when he is *already dead*, killed by some combination of homophobia and war that overlaps considerably with the negative forces named in this poem.

After Lorca negotiates the persistence of bad feeling through a direct engagement with Walt Whitman; at the center of the book is "Ode for Walt Whitman," one of Spicer's fairly faithful translations.⁸⁵ The faithfulness is perhaps surprising, as the poem seems to align itself with exactly the kind of Whitmanian, idealized homosexual love that Spicer's "Notes on Whitman" so clearly rejected. The speaker of the poem yearns for this kind of relation, and puts it into direct comparison with forms of relation and objects of desire that are easier to find.

Along East River and the Bronx
The kids were singing, showing off their bodies
At the wheel, at oil, the rawhide, and the hammer.
Ninety thousand miners were drawing silver out of boulders
While children made perspective drawings of stairways.

But no one went to sleep
No one wanted to be a river
No one loved the big leaves, no one
The blue tongue of the coastline. (*Vocabulary* 126)

The actual bodies that are available for observation direct the poem's speaker to a Whitmanian imagination—the bodies of working men that immediately expand to other scenes of work, the one standing in for the many as in so many of Whitman's poems. Yet these objects direct the speaker to what is lacking, a single imagined lover. If not in the speaker's sights, the poem itself still brings into being the one who "wanted to be a river," who seems to be Whitman himself.

In the face of a world of those who do not resemble or satisfy Whitmanian desire, "Ode" delights in its own capacity to conjure Whitman regardless, out of a similar negative construction:

Not for one moment, beautiful old Walt Whitman,
Have I stopped seeing your beard full of butterflies
Or your shoulders of corduroy worn thin by the moon
Or your muscles of a virgin Apollo
Or your voice like a column of ashes
Ancient and beautiful as the fog.

You gave a cry like a bird
With his prick pierced through by a needle

⁸⁵ Clayton Eshleman's careful essay "The Lorca Working" delineates which of the translations are somewhat faithful, which are partially faithful and partially inventive, and which are "non-translations" (34); I will discuss Eshleman's specific reading of Spicer's choices in translating "Ode" in what follows.

Enemy of satyrs
Enemy of the grape
And lover of bodies under rough cloth.
Not for one moment, tight-cocked beauty,
Who in mountains of coal, advertisements, and railroads
Had dreamed of being a river and of sleeping like one
With a particular comrade, one who could put in your bosom
The young pain of an ignorant leopard. (127)

Here we might suspect that the poem's ability to create this kind of desire, between Lorca and Whitman and now Spicer, fulfills Spicer's desire for a queer utopia of interrelation. The poem turns its imagination of Whitman into a beard full of butterflies; it returns Whitman's desire for "a particular comrade" into its own desire for Whitman's "tight-cocked beauty." The poem hears and echoes Whitman's voice and his cry, and makes them available for future readers to hear and echo.

But immediately after this apparently positive augmentation of queer genealogy—and perhaps already within it, with Whitman's purported enmity for "satyrs" and "the grape"—comes a striking abjuration of queer life as it exists outside the poem.

Not for one moment, blood-Adam, male,
Man alone in the sea, beautiful
Old Walt Whitman.
Because on the rooftops
Bunched together in bars
Pouring out in clusters from toilets
Trembling between the legs of taxi-drivers
Or spinning upon platforms of whiskey
The cocksuckers, Walt Whitman, were counting on you.

That one also, also. And they throw themselves down on
Your burning virgin beard... (127-128)

The debased sexuality of the "cocksuckers" (*maricas*) somehow depends on Walt Whitman—they count on him, throw themselves down upon his beard just as the poem itself keeps the "beard full of butterflies" close. As Clayton Eshleman notes, we might read this ironically: that while Whitman appears "somehow 'above' the practice of homosexuality...it is the actual practice that keeps [Lorca's] 'higher' vision of Whitman before his eyes" (38). Whitman, then, would be counting on the "cocksuckers" as a kind of damaged prefiguring of the idealized homosexuality that the "Ode" prefers—and so the speaker's singular love for Whitman depends upon the visible and multiple sexuality of the "cocksuckers."

Spicer's translation perhaps unfixes the poem's singular directedness to Whitman before we even get to these lines, in translating the preposition in "Oda a Walt Whitman" as *for* instead of *to*, as all other translations do. It is "for Walt Whitman" in the same way that the translation is dedicated "for Steve Jonas," and thus Spicer multiplies Lorca's singular object. This contrasts with the poem's persistent attempt to contrast Whitman's singularity with the multiplicities of gay people whom the poem's speaker abjures. If Lorca is writing *to* Walt Whitman as his preferred and only direct object, against the rest of all gay people who are the indirect objects of repudiation, Spicer places Whitman in the indirect object position too. As such Spicer is writing for Walt Whitman, for Steve Jonas, and

for all future translators and poets and gay writers who can find their home in the poem. The multiplicity of this indirect object is the multiplicity of lyric reading.

But Spicer does not turn Lorca into his ally in this move by mitigating between the poem's disgust at certain practices of homosexuality and its admiration of an idealized homosexuality; instead, Spicer's translation heightens the contradiction. Jonathan Mayhew writes: "Spicer makes matters worse, I think, by translating *maricas* ('fairies,' 'queers,' 'pansies,' etc.) with the more intense and graphic term *cocksuckers*, exacerbating rather than extenuating the violence of the poem's attack" (120-121).⁸⁶ The invective reaches a fever pitch towards the end of the poem:

I do not cry out, old Walt Whitman,
Against the little boy who writes
A girl's name on his pillow,
Or the kid who puts on a wedding dress
In the darkness of a closet
Or the lonely men in bars
Who drink with sickness the waters of prostitution
Or the men with green eyelids
Who love men and scald their lips in silence,
But against the rest of you, cocksuckers of cities,
Hard-up and dirty-brained,
Mothers of mud, harpies, dreamless enemies
Of the love that distributes crowns of gladness.

Against the rest of you always, who give the kids
Drippings of sucked-off death with sour poison.
Against the rest of you always
Fairies of North America,
Pajaros of Havana,
Jotos of Mexico,
Sarasas of Cadiz,
Apios of Seville,
Cancos of Madrid,
Adelaidas of Portugal,
Cocksuckers of all the world, assassins of doves,
Slaves of women, lapdogs of their dressing tables,
Opening their flys in parks with a fever of fans
Or ambushed in the rigid landscapes of poison.

Let there be no mercy. Death
Trickles from all of your eyes, groups
Itself like gray flowers on beaches of mud.
Let there be no mercy. Watch out for them.

⁸⁶ Eshleman, similarly, writes: "By toughening the language (and bringing the class structure down a notch), Spicer has drawn out Lorca's implied bile... Rendering 'maricas' as 'cocksuckers' makes for a real dilemma: relatively speaking, 'marica' is inoffensive and rather mild (deriving from maria so that one hears something like 'little Mary' or perhaps 'sister boy' - at most 'fairy'); 'cocksucker,' on the other hand, was dynamite in 1957, and my hunch is that that is why Spicer used it (Lorca could have written *mamapollo*, which means 'cocksucker')" (38-39).

Let the bewildered, the pure,
The classical, the appointed, the praying
Lock the gates of this Bacchanalia. (129-130)

Lorca's fiat seems in direct contrast to Baraka's: rather than bringing gay collectivity into being, it turns against it, looking only to a limited "pure" group that would lock the gates of Bacchanalia, not open it to others. The "cocksuckers of all the world" are "you" when objects of invective, but soon become "they" when the poem breaks into its fiat that assembles only "the appointed" in vigilance. The poem has only sympathy for the queers who "scald their lips in silence," whose emotions are only their own—lonely even in bars with others, dressing up only "in the darkness of a closet," writing only their true names to themselves—poems who try to live by themselves alone. But to the "cocksuckers of cities," public enough in their queer practices to become the plural objects of epithet, the poem has no mercy. Yet can we consider the fiat—and even the epithet—as a performative act of violence that, like the camp and the dozens (in Ross's theorization) suggest a queer reclaiming of the determinative function of language? I do not know whether queer Spanish language practices would have involved reclaiming terms like *cancos* and *adelaidas* and *sarasas* and *jotos* and *pajaros*; but Spicer had certainly been weighing the possibility of remaking a homophobic slur into a positive locus for identification since the renaming debates in the *Mattachine* in 1953, reflected again in the "Oliver Charming" texts.

Eric Keenaghan writes of this passage: "This list of epithets is transnational and transcultural, reducing all visible, sexually active gays to a series of one-dimensional names that condemns their homosexual practices and traps them in a chain of stereotypes" (285).⁸⁷ But while the names may seem to span across difference, Spicer puts away his tool for spanning difference, for reaching from Lorca's lemon to his own—translation. At this highest moment of homophobic invective, there is no attempt to mitigate the divisive and divided slurs into the happy queer community that was previously named under Whitman's "Calamus." Translation stops at *pajaros*, *jotos*, *sarasas*, *apios*, and *cancos*; indeed it is impossible. But while translation is impossible here, it is also unnecessary, as Spicer can simply reproduce these words. This appears to be a limit case for translation, but elsewhere in *After Lorca* Spicer suggests it may be what translation most desires. In one of the letters he writes: "I would like to make a poem out of real objects. The lemon to be a lemon that the reader could cut or squeeze or taste" (*Vocabulary* 133). As Daniel Katz notes in a reading that connects these two passages, the poem made out of real objects is "a poem which both obviated the need for *and* entirely resisted translation" in that the real object can only be reproduced (*American Modernism's Expatriate Scene* 127). Hence the performative terms of homophobic definition constitute the "real objects" that can only be passed on directly from Lorca to Spicer, in a version of seriality apparently devoid of utopian promise.

Translation, then, cannot heal the particular alienations, wounds, and violences of homophobia—whether these pains belong to Lorca himself, or even to Spicer and the poets who make up Spicer's idealized queer community. It is not the work of translation, the work of queer community, to transform alienation into happiness. And yet, at the moment of translation's apparent

⁸⁷ In Keenaghan's reading, Spicer's translation makes Lorca's homosexuality more visible, thus emphasizing the link between them. Katz demurs from Keenaghan's universalizing reading: "The above list may seem at first universalizing, asserting as it does that every city, like New York, has its contingent of 'maricas,' differing only in the name used to excoriate them. Yet at the same time, as *poetry* the list is anything but universalizing, as it is utterly untranslatable—it is precisely the *singularity of each regional name* that occupies each line, and not the group each name points to...Here, the translator has no choice (or has the lucky chance, depending on how you look at it) but to preserve in its literality the very foreign body of the word it is his usual task to efface, as it is those words which this passage represents" (*American Modernism's Expatriate Scene* 136).

failure we should remember that Spicer insists in another letter to Lorca that his translations are always successful: “When I translate one of your poems and I come across words I do not understand, I always guess at their meanings. I am inevitably right” (*Vocabulary* 122). Hence Spicer insists on the utopian possibility of queer translation, even as an impossible possibility. The idea of an inevitably *right* translation coexists with translation’s irreducible impossibility.

Spicer’s utopian queer community, though unimaginably fecund, does not emerge through a narrative of progress and overcoming. The future relations that queer universality makes possible come out of engagement with the past, present, and perhaps continuing non-relation that defines gay experience for Spicer. To return to Muñoz’s words: the negative remains, as a resource for queer utopianism that does not require its erasure. Engaging with the negative, and carrying it over into the future—as determinative force—as continuing alienation—as engagement with the darkness of Lorca’s, Whitman’s spirits—constitutes Spicer’s invocation of a queer commons. The serial poem offers a space both to live with those dark spirits and to imagine other kinds of relation.

Conclusion to chapters 2 and 3

My readings of Baraka and Spicer in these chapters have been similarly structured: both track the arrival of a certain aesthetic-political-social form, and the resistances and ultimate incomplete success of that arrival. But I do not think that the problematic masculinism and homophobia that attends Baraka's invocation of blackness, and the lingering homophobia, masculinism, and other forms of oppression in Spicer's invocation of queerness obviate these achievements. When thinking about these resistances in relation to Baraka's and Spicer's commons, I think it is important that they are not considered recalcitrant particulars that the commons awaits absorbing. The universalizing force of lyric, for Baraka and Spicer, never attempts to be totalizing in this way. Perhaps we can instead read these resistances as complexities that underwrite any claim of black and queer identity, whether universalizing or minoritizing, to adopt Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's terms.

In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick points out that there is no choosing between universalizing and minoritizing views of homosexuality (2). Sedgwick's "universalizing" is not quite the commons I have been discussing here—I have been instead emphasizing how a minoritizing view of identity also creates a commons. In concluding I want to reiterate with a difference another of *Epistemology's* axioms: "The study of sexuality is not coextensive with the study of gender; correspondingly, antihomophobic inquiry is not coextensive with feminist inquiry. But we can't know in advance how they will be different" (27). I am keen to avoid insisting on a homology between queer and black identification, and the resistances to that identification, in this chapter. Instead I want to emphasize that in the works of these two poets, we see poetry put to use in similar ways, asking similar questions whose alignment offers possibilities of solidarity perhaps invisible in their own time.

How we put these to use today is another matter—how we can view these texts resonating in ways that work against Spicer's racism and Baraka's homophobia? "If in the future, somebody is gonna use that song I sang, they're gonna have to strip it or at least shift it," said Bernice Johnson Reagon in a 1983 speech on coalition politics (366). This is itself how blackness and queerness appear, as terms of invocation that mean different things at different times. I am following Fred Moten's claim that "there is an open set of sentences of the kind blackness is x and we should chant them all" (*Black and Blur* vii); and Sedgwick's claim elsewhere that the term *queer* (relative to gay and lesbian) "seems to hinge much more radically and explicitly on a person's undertaking particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation" (*Tendencies* 9).⁸⁸ Sedgwick goes on to hypothesize "that there are important senses in which 'queer' can signify only *when attached to the first person.*" To this I would only add: the first person plural.

⁸⁸ For a recent demurrer, see Heather Love, "Queers _____ This."

Interlude 3: Two Ribbon-Wrapped Hearts

Without positive affect, there can be no shame; only a scene that offers you enjoyment or engages your interest can make you blush. (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, “Shame in the Cybernetic Fold” 116)

But they had—they were too much alike, I think. Not alike, but it was that they were the different sides of the cloth—of the coin, I mean. Because Frank was like very, very, very social; and Jack was not very social, and disapproved of people being very social, and felt that they were wasting their time. But once he was in that social transaction, he behaved exactly the way that Frank would behave, but not so decked out with charm; he was much more earnest. But basically, they were both doing the same thing, which was trying to run their friends’ lives. (Earl McGrath, “Interview” 6)

Frank O’Hara’s poetry testifies to the joy of queer relation, to the queer joy of relation. It is almost wholly coextensive with that joy: no space between the feeling the poem testifies and the feeling it conveys—no space between the lyric speaker and the lyric reader—a delightful intimacy, all of us together in the poem which is to say, in the queer time and place which the poem is, to which the poem conveys us.

Perhaps this seems far from the anxiety and alienation through which Jack Spicer traffics in his attempt to build queer community. Yet Spicer shows up in a strange way in one of O’Hara’s often-cited testaments, “At the Old Place.”

Joe is restless and so am I, so restless.
Button’s buddy lips frame “L G T T H O P?”
across the bar. “Yes!” I cry, for dancing’s
my soul delight. (Feet! feet!) “Come on!”

Through the streets we skip like swallows.
Howard malingers. (Come on, Howard.) Ashes
malingers. (Come on, J.A.) Dick malingers.
(Come on, Dick.) Alvin darts ahead. (Wait up,
Alvin.) Jack, Earl and Someone don’t come.

Down the dark stairs drifts the steaming cha-
cha-cha. Through the urine and smoke we charge
to the floor. Wrapped in Ashes’ arms I glide.

(It’s heaven!) Button lindys with me. (It’s
heaven!) Joe’s two-steps, too, are incredible,
and then a fast rhumba with Alvin, like skipping
on toothpicks. And the interminable intermissions,

we have them. Jack, Earl and Someone drift
guiltily in. “I knew they were gay

the minute I laid eyes on them!” screams John.
How ashamed they are of us! we hope. (*Collected Poems* 223-224)

In the wake of the June 2016 homophobic mass murder at the Pulse bar in Orlando, Florida, one critic wrote that “O’Hara’s joyful, unabashed ode to dancing the night away in a gay bar with friends testifies to what places like Pulse have meant to so many people, for so long” (Epstein). The poem is indeed a flurry of movement and delight—skipping like swallows, skipping on toothpicks—acceleration and deceleration—restless charges and glides. Parenthetical bursts of exhortation call out—“Come on”—to a queer utopia that is hardly then and there, but here and now—“It’s heaven!” The poem’s tripping speed calls us to dance along with Frank and Alvin and J.A. and Dick—calls us not to malingering.

But what do we do with “Jack, Earl, and Someone”? They are affect aliens, to use Sara Ahmed’s phrase (*The Promise of Happiness*) who refuse the poem’s exhortation, they “don’t come” in the second stanza—or perhaps they just move a bit more slowly, for they arrive, after all, by the poem’s conclusion. In another poem years later, O’Hara is more excusing of dilation, or more attentive to its sexual pleasures: “you never come when you say you’ll come but on the other hand you do come” (“St. Paul and All That,” *CP* 407). These three, who don’t come and then do, “drift/guiltily in,” the speaker observes—strangely their movement shares a verb with the music that invites Frank et al. a few lines earlier (“Down the dark stairs drifts the steaming cha-/cha-cha”). From the speaker’s perspective they don’t belong to the poem’s “us” or “we”—and yet they are identified with music just as the happier dancers, already so close to it there is no space between them.

The speaker’s final hope, “How ashamed they are of us,” creates a position from which the “us” can be looked at as if from outside. We might read the double position of “drift” as standing in for the double position of “Jack, Earl, and Someone”—who are gay but not included in the joyful dancing; who are at The Old Place but not of it. Why would the last “hope” be for a feeling of shame? Jack, Earl (McGrath, of the epigraph), and Someone don’t ruin the dance—in fact they seem to be there to join in, however delayed.

What if shame, rather than being a contradiction to the progress of good feeling, was just another feeling that good feeling could share in? What if the “us” could include Jack, Earl, and Someone in their slower movement down the dark stairs? Perhaps O’Hara’s poem already records this, and his speaker protesting too much is just another form of differentiated participation in the queer affective space “At the Old Place.”

I would not say that shame subtends the collective feeling of “At the Old Place” but we may notice that not only Jack, Earl, and Someone are doubly positioned. John Ashbery is even called by three different names (John, Ashes, J.A.): and puns and repetitions abound. “Soul delight” already unfixes the possibility of univocal affective attachment with its play on words—is it one delight, or one word that means another? The poem moves from word to word by taking pleasure in how sound can repeat into new and different senses: “Button’s buddy lips,” “Joe’s two-steps, too.” Even the mouthed invitation across the bar—“L G T T H O P”—requires reading one thing for another. Can we stipulate that “At the Old Place” this doubleness is, if shame, also pleasure? If there is a closeted code, there is also a making public in teaching us to read the poem, to turn mouthed letters into moving feet.

My attempt to read reparatively Jack Spicer’s presence in this poem is certainly idiosyncratic with respect to Spicer’s experiences with O’Hara, believed to be a disaster by both poets’ biographers. “I hate this town,” Spicer wrote about New York; and in return, O’Hara wrote to Jasper Johns that Spicer “always disappoints me” (*Poet Be Like God* 63-64; see also *City Poet* 273). The episode recounted in “At the Old Place,” according to Killian and Ellingham, allows us to see

Spicer's "miserable months in New York...brilliantly condensed" (*Poet Be Like God* 64). In the following pages, I want to build on my reading that what is "condensed" here is not the contrast between the shame of bad feeling and the elation of good feeling, but rather the two entwined and entangled within each other. In the poetry of O'Hara and Spicer, good feeling and bad feeling are jointly expressed more as two sides of one coin than as opposites. This counteracts a critical trend that finds no space for negative affect in O'Hara's poetry, while conversely finding Spicer a consistent avatar for the negative. I am not saying that O'Hara traffics with the negative in the manner of Baraka or Spicer, but that affect for O'Hara is always multiple and always can (and often does) include feelings that don't seem so happy.

With Spicer, I previously argued that the alienated bar scenes presented a poetic problem that his later work would attempt to solve. Here I take a different approach: what kind of collective scene is already implied by the poem that marks alienation? In submitting a crisis of individual feeling to lyric repetition, that feeling is already multiplied, already more than one, making a collective out of the individual crisis. Alienation made collective creates a social feeling that is not framed in the affirmative, but as an incondition, as Emmanuel Levinas might put it.⁸⁹ "None of us here feel human."

There is a ruddy boy in the corner that looks like a minstrel show. I wonder if he's ever dreamed of a Ledaean body. His name is Jefferson Davis and his face is on every Confederate three dollar bill. Soft he dances and wistful smiles for the customers. He smiles with his face so he has to put a lot of hatred into his feet. He hates everybody while he's dancing.

Somebody tells me that these people are human. That's silly. They are not human they are homosexual. Jews are not human either, nor Negroes, nor cripples. No one is human that doesn't feel human. None of us here feel human.

Do humans go around kissing each other anyway? Do humans spend every hour looping after sex, collecting a trick a night? Do humans have headaches in the morning?

How can I reach out for one of these people when I know they are damned and evil fairies who disappear after you have stopped touching them. ("Verweile doch, du bist so schon")

In this unpublished prose piece (most likely dating from the 1940s), Spicer casts his eye around a gay bar. The figure on which he alights is not the "very tall blond boy" who elicits desire and praise in "Imaginary Elegies," but one who perhaps is blushing with shame. His red face recalls minstrelsy, and the violence of racism—and in fact we cannot tell whether the "ruddy boy...that looks like a minstrel show" is actually black, and only looks as if he is putting on blackness as a performance. Either way, the resemblance soon suggests to the narrator the possibility of connection between "homosexuals," "Jews," "Negroes," and "cripples." All of whom share a feeling, or share not having a feeling: "No one is human that doesn't feel human. None of us here feel human." The feeling of exclusion is still a feeling that gathers. If dancing isn't a "soul delight" for the ruddy boy of Spicer's story, his steps of hatred still represent a tune to follow, one to which others can dance along. The conditions of this human incondition—going around kissing each other, looping after sex, collecting

⁸⁹ "[T]he condition—or incondition—of strangers and slaves in the land of Egypt brings man closer to his fellow man. Men seek one another in their incondition of strangers" (*Humanism of the Other* 66).

tricks—are collective movements, not disappearing into isolation but moving together and towards each other. Perhaps these do not result in the kind of political gay life that Spicer later aimed for; but nonetheless the feeling of alienation is a collective feeling.

The “us” of “None of us here feel human” and the “us” of “How ashamed they are of us!” similarly create a collective feeling out of the feeling of exclusion, including the feeling of exclusion in the collective feeling. The paradigmatically O’Hara good feeling does not require the total abjuration of bad feeling but can fold shame into it. Conversely, the paradigmatically Spicerian bad feeling is itself—by being *feeling*—an opening to collective experience.

The temptation with O’Hara is to view the poem as the space of good feeling, leaving the bad feeling outside: a utopian image of queer time and place that exceeds the limited and homophobic world that would surround it.⁹⁰ One of the first poems in the *Collected*, “Autobiographia Literaria,” manifests this almost defensive understanding of the poem, contrasting a childhood “play[ing] by myself in a/corner of the schoolyard/all alone” with the present moment:

And here I am, the
center of all beauty!
writing these poems!
Imagine! (CP 11)

The poem is the *locus amoenus* precisely because it is where sociality resides. A few pages later: “Ah! reader! you open the page/my poems stare back at you you/stare back, do you not?” (“A Pleasant Thought From Whitehead,” CP 23-24). The poem is the oasis of good feeling, of pleasure that repeats and shares from one to another, the means for sociality. Later in O’Hara’s parodic manifesto “Personism,” he would describe the poem as another body engaged in this interrelation: “It puts the poem squarely between the poet and the person, Lucky Pierre style, and the poem is correspondingly gratified. The poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages” (CP 499). In these related metaphors, the poem is space of sociality, a stand in for friendship itself.

This poem goes on too long because our friendship has been long, long
for this life and these times, long as art is long and un-
interruptable,
and I would make it as long as I hope our friendship lasts if I could
make poems that long
[...]
let’s advance and change everything, but leave these little oases in
case the heart gets thirsty en route
 (“Poem Read at Joan Mitchell’s,” CP 266)

These little oases are cures to loneliness. In its various routes the heart longs for others: the poem, a place to return to again and again, feeds it with friendship. The poem is friendship, homologous in its length and variety with friendship’s long, long and un-interruptable extension.

One might want to say that whereas many lyrics have been read to build a defensive oasis of singular possession against history—viz. critical readings of William Wordsworth, discussed in

⁹⁰ José Esteban Muñoz opens *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* with a beautiful reading of O’Hara’s “Having a Coke With You” along these lines. Muñoz writes: “This poem tells us of a quotidian act, Having a Coke with somebody, that signifies a vast lifeworld of queer relationality, an encrypted sociality, and a utopian potentiality... The fun of having a Coke is a mode of exhilaration in which one views a restructured sociality” (6-7).

chapter 1—O’Hara’s poems create oases of sociality, spaces not only for one mind and memory to traverse but for others to move through. Yet in their openness to multiplicity these poems deconstruct the very possibility of this boundary. O’Hara does not replace possession with the possession of multiplicity—he directs us towards a different form of possession whose paradigm is friendship, is love. Love’s hold is not a refusal of the movements of politics and history, nor does it fix into place a utopian image of a world to come; love dallies in and out of possession. We hold each other and yet O’Hara asks: “where are you/I have your arm I feel your muscle/But I don’t know where ‘you’ are” (“Poem,” *CP* 451). In love we are “drifting back and forth/between each other like a tree breathing through its spectacles” (“Having a Coke With You,” *CP* 360). Love’s utopia does not have a boundary. Is it at all anywhere?

Is there at all anywhere
in this lavender sky
beside the UN building
where I am so little
and have dallied with love,
a fragment of the paradise
we see when signing treaties
or planning free radio stations? (“October,” *CP* 110)

The O’Haran speaker looks for a fragment of paradise in the queer sky (or is it anywhere, at all anywhere). That paradise, beside one monument to political utopianism, is what we see when we build other monuments to political love: peace treaties, free radio stations. Yet the possibility of this love’s existence is only barely the condition for this viewpoint on paradise, as Donald Allen’s textual note to the poem reveals: “In line 19 of MS 151 ‘without’ has been altered to ‘with’” (*CP* 527). Whether the speaker dallies with or without love so little alters the sense of the poem, because the poem’s paradise is not the political utopia of a free radio station or a peace treaty, that requires a kind of identity of experience: it is open to being without love as much as with love. Or elsewhere, “we fight for what we love not are” (“Ode: Salute to the French Negro Poets,” *CP* 305). In O’Hara’s poems the two are not the same, which is to say that what we love opens us away from what we are, unsettles our position, diffuses us into otherness and away from the security of a sense of self: “all we love and are grows different” (“Snapshot for Boris Pasternak,” *CP* 113).

The encounter with a “you,” then, does not yield a stronger sense of the “I” opposite. Instead the interplay between “I” and “you” deconstructs the solidity of each. The resulting “we,” “two ribbon-wrapped hearts,” is a mobile image of profuse entanglement. O’Hara’s “Ode to Tanaquil Leclercq” (a dancer at the New York City Ballet, one of O’Hara’s favorite haunts) begins:

Smiling through my own memories of painful excitement your wide eyes
stare
and narrow like a lost forest of childhood stolen from gypsies

The dancer’s eyes smile through the speaker’s memories, immediately deconstructing the “my own” of the first line. In this poem, “my own” is a temporary denomination of a space through which another’s eyes can stare and narrow; the speaker’s “painful excitement” feels loosely possessed, not so much shared with another as understood only through the other’s moving gaze. The poem follows those eyes, but they do not narrow into a singular perspective:

two eyes that are the sunset of

two knees
 two wrists
 two minds

and the extended philosophical column, when they conducted the dialogues
 in distant Athens, rests on your two ribbon-wrapped hearts, white
 credibly agile
 flashing
 scimitars of a city-state

where in the innocence of my watching had those ribbons become entangled
 dragging me upward into lilac-colored ozone as I gasped
 and you continued to smile as you dropped the bloody scarf of my
 life
 from way up there, my neck hurt

The two eyes that burst into the speaker's memory become the movement of the dancer's body. In the first few lines we saw that one body ("my own memories") was already two—these lines reveal the dancer to be two as well. Just as quickly, the twoness of the single body becomes another kind of twoness: "two knees/two wrists/two minds." These two minds, if not in the same body, learn the multiplicity of two from the multiplicity already in one. Upon this imputed multiplicity, "on your two ribbon-wrapped hearts," rests an origin story for politics and philosophy. The heart is always-already more than one, always-already wrapped up in ribbons or in plumage, entangled, implicated.

We will return to the heart. The poem ends in address to the dancer, a "you" who might seem to disappear or evade as the "I" reaches out towards it—or is the "I" just moving, just dancing, and possibly hurting their neck from trying to move along with the movement of the dance?

you were always changing into something else
 and always will be
 always plumage, perfection's broken heart, wings

and wide eyes in which everything you do
 repeats yourself simultaneously and simply
 as a window "gives" on something

it seems sometimes as if you were only breathing
 and everything happened around you
 because when you disappeared in the wings nothing was there
 but the motion of some extraordinary happening I hadn't understood
 the superb arc of a question, of a decision about death

because you are beautiful you are hunted
 and with the courage of a vase
 you refuse to become a deer or tree
 and the world holds its breath
 to see if you are there, and safe

are you? (CP 363-364)

The dancer is permanent flux, movement, the repetition of reflection. Her movement and change is indistinguishable from everything happening around her; even her disappearance is an unaccountable motion, “a decision about death”—a refusal of the fixity of an image with the courage of a curved vase that displays without ever becoming. Ekphrasis itself in its extended history—the Greek vases that do not become the deer or trees on them—takes its courage from the dancer. The movement repeats in wide eyes, now not only yours but also ours.

The poem captures this movement, which is to say it holds it in such a way that it is always changing into something else. Always plumage, an apparently unnecessary frame that brings beauty without necessity—what Derrida might call the *parergon*. Always repetition, “simultaneously and simply,” whether in wide eyes or in breath exhaled across the page. When we breathe together in the poem’s repetition, as if not only you were breathing; or when “the world holds its breath,” assembled in suspension—as the next chapter will argue, in the ecstatic universality of aesthetic experience that O’Hara summarizes in his elegy to Billie Holiday: “while she whispered a song along the keyboard/to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing” (“The Day Lady Died,” 325). This almost excessive collective, “everyone and I,” is what “Ode to Tanaquil Leclercq” calls “perfection’s broken heart”: multiplicity’s fugitive, unaccountable, unpossessed possession.

The heart, or often, “my heart”—the organ forbids impersonality—is O’Hara’s permanently impermanent figure for this movement. It is perhaps the predominant metaphor, throughout his writing, for his poetry, as one of his few *ars poetica* texts suggests:

My Heart

I’m not going to cry all the time
nor shall I laugh all the time,
I don’t prefer one “strain” to another.
I’d have the immediacy of a bad movie,
not just a sleeper, but also the big,
overproduced first-run kind. I want to be
at least as alive as the vulgar. And if
some aficionado of my mess says “That’s
not like Frank!”, all to the good! I
don’t wear brown and grey suits all the time,
do I? No. I wear workshirts to the opera,
often. I want my feet to be bare,
I want my face to be shaven, and my heart—
you can’t plan on the heart, but
the better part of it, my poetry, is open. (CP 231)

This manifesto of changeability dates to November 1955, four months after “At the Old Place,” and four years before “Personism.” The speaker marks his “mess” through his oscillation between apparently contradictory affects. In refusing either to laugh or to cry all the time, O’Hara’s speaker insists that his affect is capacious enough to contain both expressions. The analogy at the poem’s conclusion reminds us that the poem need not be only happy, nor only sad, but that O’Hara’s poetics is equally changeable, various, and open to affect’s multiplicity.

But “My Heart” goes beyond embracing the difference between crying and laughing, between workshirts and grey suits. The poem reminds us that neither should be read to imply a necessary relation to any kind of stable “self” beneath them. O’Hara is not writing directly about

feeling here, but about feeling's expression: not happiness or sadness, but laughing and crying. There is a distance between these expressions and the emotion they might be assumed to convey. That distance is a space of movement; the changing plumage and the changing heart underneath are engaged in a dance. Costume does not define character, and equally, the poetry can't correspond to the self. "That's not like Frank," we might cry in disappointment at Frank's poetry if we have some assumption about the self it is meant to express. But while the last lines might seem to be identifying poetry with the core of the poet's self, instead the two become figures for one another, not solid positions. Their indeterminacy is the condition of possibility for our continued engagement in the poem—between Frank and his mess, between the poetry and the heart—

Between the heart and what else? To what is the heart open? The preceding lines make clear that the "better part" of the heart is not somehow the more refined part—the less vulgar, the brown and grey suited "strain." O'Hara is profligate in describing his heart. In the space of six pages in the *Collected Poems*, we have "my heart, like a great beaded purse, feeble and vain" ("Homage to André Gide," CP 154); "my distinguished heart" ("Life on Earth," CP 159); "my heart's black" ("To My Dead Father," CP 160). The heart is here ornate, there dark; here distinguished, there weak. In these various significations the heart stands for what is open to multiple signification: not a stillness around which the world is stormy, but a storminess that opens to instants of musical decision should they reach it:

Secrets of Liszt and Scriabin
whispered to me over the keyboard
on unsunny afternoons! and growing
still in my stormy heart. ("On Rachmaninoff's Birthday," CP 189)

Here it seems that the heart's inquietude is another name for its openness to music's whispers, as different as those whispers may be. Elsewhere, the heart's receptive capacity comes from matching what it receives: "but for now the moon is revealing itself like a pearl/to my equally naked heart" ("Avenue A," CP 356). You can't plan on the heart, on its attraction to difference here and to sameness there; you can't explain its unhabitual and vulgar circulations any more than you can decide on being happy, or to explain it:

yet I do not explain what exactly makes me so happy today
any more than I can explain the unseasonal warmth
of my unhabitual heart pumping vulgarly the blood
of another I loved another and now my love is other
("Pistachio Tree at Château Noir," 403)

The heart's vulgar circulation (blood) and its higher circulation (love—poetry—love poetry) here coincide. The poem—the heart—coordinates them, pumping the material of one love into another, tenor into vehicle and back again—until my love itself turns other. In the material pumping of blood, of words, of lyric repetition, the poem and the heart make the one more than one. The heart is available to another; what belongs most to the self is also what exposes the self to otherness. This is a sharing that can repeat and repeat: "I think of you/and the continents brilliant and arid/and the slender heart you are sharing my share of with the American air" ("Now that I am in Madrid and Can Think," CP 356). The poem produces this repetition, divides the heart (perhaps "unequally," as Dorothy Wordsworth had it—see chapter 1), shares my share of it and makes it yours.

The heart is always becoming something else for O'Hara, always moving into another position, often exchanged for another body part. In one poem the O'Haran speaker is "sobbing,

walking on my heart” (“Ode,” *CP* 196); in another, “my heart is closing/like a fist” (“Mayakovsky,” *CP* 201); in a third, “in my heart the golden tongue of love mutters its worldly little tango” (“Life on Earth,” *CP* 156). Love compels this displacement, the ecstatic movement where I feel so strongly, my feeling moves beside itself, outside of me. But it is poetry that can turn the heart into a foot or a fist, can make a tongue speak in it. This is not only poetry’s capacity to make one word mean another through metaphor, but a more particularly lyrical displacement. In Claire Marie Stancek’s analysis of the “speaking ear” in Emily Dickinson’s poetry, she notes: “The speaking ear thus becomes a way for Dickinson to imagine a poem as an organ or body or figure of simultaneous receptivity and excess...The speaking ear makes an organ of receptivity also an instrument of speech, which demonstrates how the body and its parts work in unexpected, unpredictable ways” (71). The heart’s movement from one part of the body to another testifies to its echoic resonance, as an organ that stands in for the body whose circulation means more than the position it immediately occupies.

The heart’s movement is often *to* poetry; the heart becomes a body for reading: “I observe a heart tangled in the lines of my verse” (“A Camera,” *CP* 35). When we read O’Hara’s poems we do not attempt to undo this entanglement, but we revel in it. Like the ribbon-entangled hearts of “Ode to Tanaquil Leclercq,” the entanglement is an adornment. The entanglement is our choosing to be numerous, choosing to be entangled with others—others in our heart, others in our verse. While this reading might lead us to a single object of desire—“an excavationist has/reached the inner chamber of my heart/and rustled the paper bearing your name” (“Poem,” *CP* 366)—it may also lead us to many others, in lyric’s opening to various and multiple repetition, and to the movement of “the heart” from O’Hara’s verse to the verse of others.

The inner chamber of my heart is always a turn outward, for it is made up of others. O’Hara’s poetry cannibalizes and digests countless others who appear in it as proper names: the poems I have quoted above refer to writers, singers, dancers, and composers including Holiday, Leclercq, Mayakovsky, Mitchell, Pasternak, Rachmaninoff, and Whitehead—in their titles alone. These varied allusions certainly define the O’Haran speaker; and perhaps the capacity to echo the poems of others defines the O’Haran text. In “A Step Away From Them,” one of O’Hara’s more celebrated and anthologized “I do this, I do that” poems, the lunchtime survey of “glistening torsos” and “chorus girl clicks” ends: “My heart is in my/pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy” (“A Step Away From Them,” *CP* 257-258). Reverdy’s poems echo not only in their own entangled pages but in the entanglement that comes from O’Hara’s body being close to them, from O’Hara reading and voicing them. Elsewhere, other poets echo more directly into O’Hara’s own verse. Two hearts in O’Hara’s later poems originate with Thomas Wyatt (or with poems attributed to him).

“This dedelie stroke, whereby shall seace
 The harborid sighis within my herte”
 (“Biotherm (For Bill Berkson),” *CP* 439)

“Yf ever man might ons your herte constrayne” remember
 (“Trirème,” *CP* 486)

Allen cites a letter he received from O’Hara that reveals “Whereby Shall Seace” as an alternative title for “Biotherm.” O’Hara writes, “The Wyatt passage is very beautiful,” cites the lines, and adds that his own poem is, “I hasten to add, not like that at all though, so don’t get your hopes too high” (*CP* 554, citing letter of September 20 1961). The echoes of the verse of others do not only repeat as the same: their resonances are as often unaccountable, still in my stormy heart.

But perhaps in all cases when I voice the lyric of another, when I wrap its ribbons around my heart, my voice will sound differently. In these citations, O'Hara gestures to his own poetry's capacity to echo and repeat in another's pocket, another's body. Lyric reading spreads these echoes out into strange and other arrangements, into unaccountable and unpredictable commons, unevenly shaped by language and the bodies that voice that language. The form of this commons is an ecstatic movement outside the body. My heart is in my pocket—or my heart is in the highlands—my heart's not here. In the first chapter I referred to Jack Spicer's reading of Robert Burns' lines, themselves iconic in lyric theory from John Stuart Mill's reading of them:

The howling dog in my mind says "Surrender" at eight points
of the compass. North, South, East, West, combinations.
Whether
He means me or you to me I am not certain. A color-blind
person can read signals because red is always at the top and
green at the bottom. Or is it the reverse? I forget, not being
color-blind. The dog
In my heart howls continuously at you, at me. "Surrender."
I do not know where my heart is.
My heart's in the highlands
My heart is not here
My heart's in the highlands
A-chasing the deer. Dog
Of my heart groans, howls
Blind to guesses. The deer
Your heart and guesses, blandly seek water. ("Love Poems" 7, *My
Vocabulary* 385)

Poetry, the heart, is what I have by not having, by not knowing where it is but that it repeats in my repeating it. That repetition sounds in strange forms that are not only human, but also howling and groaning dogs in my mind, hart in my heart; signals made up not even of colors, but of their order from top to bottom; minute transformations of sound and letter. I surrender to the variety of this sounding, because the howl is continuous whether I know where my heart is or not. Without the stability of knowing the domain of poetry's repetition, poetry resonates blindly or blandly in the many changes that language can give it.

"Love Poems" ends: "I give you my imaginary hand and you give me your imaginary hand and we walk together (in imagination) over the earthly ground" (*My Vocabulary* 386). If it is only in a fanciful lyric reading that we can make O'Hara and Spicer walk together, that is because their writings both make space for affect's crossed and contradictory valences. Poetry—the heart—brings these together; is capacious in its capacity to be not itself; to contain by not containing.

Chapter 4: On Ecstatic-Aesthetic Universality — In *Zong!*

It was at this point that Aunt Nancy, getting the drift and eventual point of Penguin's argument, impatiently cut back in. What Penguin was getting at, she explained, was that the absence and/or presence of the drum could never be taken literally, that either was also the other as a genetically dislocated aspect of itself. This, she insisted, was the heterodox beauty of our conception, the hybrid (as against "highbred") pedigree of our percussive concept, the resiliency which made such retrieval as Lambert proposed altogether redundant, not to say absurd. The curious thing, she continued, was that "Prometheus" in its most impressive moments had given evidence of an intuitive understanding of this on Lambert's part but that in the rush to make ideological capital of these "dark advances" he had almost totally lost the subtle, dialectical "touch" which was their animating spark. The work itself, she contended, was in a sense more wise than him, eternally at odds, even in its most authentic aspects, with the life-defeating stiffness of his interpretations and afterthoughts. Lambert, of course, refused to sit still for this, snapping back that if she insisted on confusing absence with essence they might as well kiss the conversation goodbye. She could revel in deprivation all she wanted, he said hotly, but, as for him, he was, as he put it, "fed up with scrounging around for roots." She was equally quick on the uptake, however, arguing that her point had nothing to do with essence but that she knew an *accident* when she saw one, that the quasi-political case Lambert had made for adding a drummer to the group was in the end nothing more than that—"inessential, expendable, eminently beside the point."

They did anything but kiss the quarrel goodbye... (Nathaniel Mackey, *From a Broken Bottle...* 125)

If I had set out to write this poem in the way I often write, that is to tell a story *about* the *Zong!*, I wouldn't have done it in the way the work has constructed itself. (M. NourbeSe Philip, in Patricia Saunders, "Defending the Dead, Confronting the Archive" 75)

I cannot write about M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* (2008) if "about" implies a separation, an aesthetic experience of power vis-à-vis the text as a static object around which I and others might coalesce. *Zong!* forbids it, *Zong!* is a lesson on its impossibility. Which is not to say that *Zong!* does not allow for aesthetic experience or that *Zong!* disempowers its readers, but that *Zong!* recasts aesthetic experience as a decentering ecstasy that yet assembles, that gives non-relation constitutive powers, that enlarges mentality beyond the subject.

Fred Moten has written: "*Zong!* does not represent the ones who become multiple; it just asks you to join them" ("to consent..."). In what follows, I ask what form of commons emerges when we join in the reading of *Zong!*, with *Zong!*, and in *Zong!*. I argue that a certain Kantian experience of aesthetic universality emerges from this reading: one in which "men in the plural," rather than coinciding with "man as essence," opens toward another, unaccounted form of collective subjectivity.

overboard and murdered by drowning.⁹¹ Thus water’s duplicity: causing death both in its absence and in its presence for slaves aboard the *Zong*. As Sonya Posmentier notes in a reading of this passage, water “acts as a *pharmakon*—both deadly and desirable” (217). Slaves died for want of water and slaves died in the water.⁹² Add to these senses the cry of “water” as a divine invocation, beginning the epic with a naming of the force that inspires the poem: a force ambiguous at best. In placing water into all three of these competing yet coexisting senses, *Zong!* refuses an immediate correlation between materiality and ontology. Water does not, in itself, give or take life; the force that the epic invokes as its source is also the site of destruction that the poem mourns.⁹³

What is it, then, for us to begin *in* “water,” if we cannot say whether water is the condition of life or the condition of death? *Zong!* asks a further and perhaps prior question: What does it mean to be *in*?

Zong! #9

	slaves
	to the order in
destroyed	
	the circumstance in
fact	
	the property in
subject	
	the subject in
creature	
	the loss in
underwriter	
	to the fellow in
negro	

⁹¹ These 150 were killed with the aim of shifting the cost of the loss of “cargo” from the ship’s owners to its underwriters. As Philip writes in “Notanda,” her essay at the close of the book: “The massacre of the African slaves would prove to be more financially advantageous to the owners of the ship and its cargo than if the slaves were allowed to die of ‘natural causes’” (189). The subsequent insurance dispute leads to the only public document of this massacre, a court decision from which Philip “excavates” for this book.

⁹² For more on this paradox, see Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake*.

⁹³ The poetry of Ed Roberson relatedly explores water as (at once) the water of the Middle Passage, the space of the passage to freedom (in his poems on the Ohio River, where escaped slaves crossed to the North), and the space of contemporary material subsistence that grapples with all of these senses (in his poems on the generative hauntology of working as an aquarium diver). See especially “Chorus at Ohiopyle” (*Voices Cast Out To Talk Us In* 111-114) and “By The Rivers of...” (*Just In* 136-140).

the sustenance

in want

Rufaro Uwinana Nasiche Nafuna Asura

the arrived

in vessel

the weight

in provisions

the suffered in

die

the me in

become

Kesi Modele Mtundu Ibunkunle Adeyemi

(17-18)

This section at first seems to perform in miniature the poem's general operating procedure: the discovering of words inside other words. Philip used the legal decision in the *Zong* case, *Gregson v. Gilbert*, as her "source text," finding every word in the book among the words in the decision. "I would lock myself in this text in the same way men, women, and children were locked in the holds of the slave ship *Zong*," Philip writes ("Notanda," *Zong!* 191). As readers we are not in the *Zong* but we are in *Zong!*—a minute typographical difference that underscores how the poem's writing attempts to repeat an experience that, as Philip frequently reminds us in her essay, cannot be told. The reading experience of the poem, too, repeats this experience of writing: as readers, we are locked in the text of *Zong!* as Philip locked herself in the words of the legal decision. But neither of these repetitions approach an identity. Philip claims she is locked in the hold of the legal decision but also occupies another position: "I mutilate the text as the fabric of African life and the lives of these men, women and children were mutilated" ("Notanda," *Zong!* 193). As a writer of *Zong!* Philip is neither totally empowered nor totally powerless; she is not writing *as* the slave or *as* the ship's owners or captains. Or perhaps more accurately: if and when she does, "as" signals not identity but a

cut.⁹⁴ The “cut” describes an aesthetic experience of non-identity, both by writer and reader, predominant in the phenomenology of disjunctive poetry, but more broadly (I will argue) in aesthetic judgment. The cut analogizes social difference, and the forms of collectivity that difference generates, to the difference necessary for aesthetic judgment, and the forms of collectivity that judgment generates.

Philip’s first book, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (1988), considers one such important cut: how a writer emerging from a colonized position must approach aesthetic form when writing in a colonial language. The poems in this collection often use structural linguistics to analyze these fault-lines: in one poem, “Discourse on the Logic of Language,” Philip asks whether

the metamorphosis from sound to intelligible word requires

(a) the lip, tongue and jaw all working together.

(b) a mother tongue.

(c) the overseer’s whip.

(d) all of the above or none. (*She Tries Her Tongue* 33)

A reader disciplined in multiple-choice education might be directed to choose among these choices—but Philip emphasizes here that there is no choosing; that for a Caribbean woman writing in English, there are contradictory and perhaps mutually exclusive origins of language and writing. The poems and essay in *She Tries Her Tongue* illuminate this double position of perpetrator and victim: “It is our only language, and while it is our mother tongue, ours is also a father’s tongue” (“The Absence of Writing, or How I Almost Became a Spy,” *She Tries Her Tongue* 85). Philip’s relation to the English language is cut from both English and a precolonial experience, but within both—or within the space that both positions occupy. In “The Absence of Writing, or How I Almost Became a Spy,” the essay that concludes *She Tries Her Tongue*, Philip considers how much the English language must be “dislocated and acted upon—even destroyed—so it begins to serve our purposes” (*She Tries Her Tongue* 84-85).

In the context of *Zong!*, the analogy might break down: Philip would not want to position herself as destroying black life in order to make it useful. But it is important to remember that a deconstructive poetics is always already a reconstructive poetics too, as Philip argues in this essay, and as has recently been emphasized by Anthony Reed in an analysis of *Zong!*’s politics of form: “The work of reconstruction begins with and returns to the work of deconstruction, in this way re-marking the violence entailed in the formation of identity or in a single and simplified timeline wherein no ghost could ever appear” (*Freedom Time* 58).⁹⁵ Yet this work is differently experienced by differently positioned readers: while in *Zong!* all readers find themselves occupying the experiences of deconstruction and reconstruction, of violence and reparation, these experiences reflect differently on our different experiences with the English language and with the history of antiblack violence.

In this multiplicity, *Zong!* suggests that one can be imaginatively *in* the ship *Zong* without a single reparative voice on which to rest that imaginative entry. When voicings do appear, they are among many other voicings and do not appear as a stable place to stand. “Is negroes” (“*Zong!* #24”): How can we nominate the men, women, and children not named in the legal record? There are no names, so Philip invents them and places them at the bottoms of the pages—impossible to

⁹⁴ Later in Kant (via Derrida) we will make a similar point: the *as-if* conceptual not simulating the conceptual; but making a similar move as the cut of the *without*, in the purposiveness without purpose.

⁹⁵ Earlier in the chapter, Reed writes, “Rearranging the elements of poetic language—emphasizing even the spatial arrangements of letters within words—makes visible, as it were, other ways of arranging texts, knowledge, history, bodies, and the social order” (29).

nominate and yet somehow “underwriting” the text. But would a certain kind of nomination be an “*is*” that hovers too close to the commodification of Africans as slaves? “The negroes is” (“*Zong!* #14”): Does the claim of existence set up the possibility of giving humans a monetary equivalence and putting them up for sale?

Philip avoids a lyricized *is* that would occupy the *voice* of those killed, and allow us as readers to occupy it in turn, using her writing as conduit for affect between living and dead. Philip eschews a lyric humanist move that would use her “voice” to mimic or imagine the voice of the slave in such a way that we readers could in turn mimic or imagine. Philip’s remarks on “lock[ing] [her]self in the text” of the legal decision, and in turn locking the reader in the text of *Zong!*, recall Toni Morrison’s remark in her foreword to *Beloved*, that she “wanted the reader to be kidnapped, thrown ruthlessly into an alien environment as the first step into a shared experience with the book’s population—just as the characters were snatched from one place to another, from any place to any other, without preparation or defense” (xviii). Other poets working in recovery projects have effectively used lyric in this way, but for Philip there seem to be particular risks.⁹⁶ The lyric “is” depends on a conception of shared humanity guaranteeing affective response: a property of all humans, whether the one who suffers, who writes that suffering, or who reads of it. *Zong!* offers us an alternative lyric “*in*” with its own affect, perhaps its own ontology: its own form of knowledge and being.⁹⁷ With Philip in *Zong!* let “*in*” become a capacious name for our lostness in others. Let the lostness in others be the condition for reading and writing. What is this ecstatic, this “*inly*” feeling?⁹⁸

⁹⁶ A recent example is Bettina Judd’s 2014 book *Patient*. Through her own experiences as a medical patient and through her archival investigation into the use of black women’s bodies in scientific research, Judd uses a lyric voice to speak with and through those women, whose voices are not present as such in the archival record. Alongside apparently autobiographical lyrics that describe a contemporary black woman speaker’s hospital experience, the poems give voice to Anarcha Wescott, Betsey Harris, Joice Heth, and Lucy Zimmerman, women whose voices are elided in the historical records of the use of their bodies. The perpetrators of violence, whose voices *are* present in the historical record, are not voiced in the poems—so lyrical voice is deployed as a tool of recovery.

⁹⁷ As Posmentier notes, “Two of the most prominent words in the text are the word ‘in’ and forms of ‘to be’; structures of immersion and the ontology of the enslaved Africans necessarily coexist in the poem” (*Cultivation and Catastrophe* 221).

⁹⁸ In a poem on ecstasy’s equivalencies, Adam Ahmed writes:

The only you and I
have is the

One with songs that call
us everyone

Between us we know all
the words to them

We love those songs We love
the songs that love the

words for you They give us
ones we love

we inly know The on
ly songs between us

are the ones that love those
words we know We love

the songs they give us for
the ones we have (“MDA”)

In *Zong!* is not only feeling lost in the large spread of words in its later sections; but *in the is*, the copula of equivalence Philip proffers and yet refuses. The use of the word “is” in *Zong!* do not offer easy equivalences; as Jocelyn Saldenberg writes: “Rather than asserting an identity between two elements as would statements of existence, they question any possibility of joining and recall the non-existent” (3). Philip’s copula puts into relation what risks total non-relation. It is a speculative copula that asks how it might be possible to locate these voices, to inspire them with our own, to mourn those whose existence does not register in the legal record, to tell the story that cannot be told. Philip directly relates the power she assumes in *Zong!* to the power of the law to determine humanity and personhood:

In its potent ability to decree that what is is not, as in a human ceasing to be and becoming an object, a thing or chattel, the law approaches the realm of magic and religion. The conversion of human into chattel becomes an act of transubstantiation the equal of the metamorphosis of the Eucharistic bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. Like a magic wand the law erases all ties—linguistic, societal, cultural, familial, parental, and spiritual; it strips the African down to the basic common denominator of man, woman, or child, albeit sometimes meagre. Without a history, name, or culture. In life but without life. Without life in life—with a story that cannot but must be told...In *Zong!*, the African, transformed into a thing by the law, is re-transformed, miraculously, back into human. (“Notanda,” *Zong!* 196)

Philip names law’s determination of what is and is not human, and indeed more broadly, what is and is not existent, as a conjuration; she posits the poem as a kind of counter-conjuration. The poem’s “miraculous” action arrogates the power of law to make human life equivalent to chattel; equally miraculously, magically, immaterially, the poem will “re-transform” the African slaves—though perhaps not exactly “back into human,” as Philip writes above, but into ghosts who can speak.

Philip’s alignment of poetry’s capacity with the law recalls Barbara Johnson’s argument regarding lyric’s and law’s anthropomorphism: both genres, Johnson writes, operate at the fault-line of “the assumption that the human *has been* or *can be* defined so that it can be presupposed without the question of its definition’s being raised as a question” (316). Lyric, as described by anti-lyric theory (see chapter 1), assumes in advance what counts as human, from the assumed capacity to reiterate around the voice of the poem—in other words, anti-lyric theory treats lyric *as anthropomorphism*. Philip along with Johnson encourages us to read lyric as not treating the human as determined in advance. If lyric (and law) can re-name what it means to be human, then the human becomes the contingent effect of conjuration rather than an overdetermining and limiting essence.

“We inly” describes the feeling of the givenness of experience and its priority to our position in it. “Inwardly (as opposed to *outwardly*); within, internally; in the heart, spirit, or inner nature; in regard to the inner life or feelings” (*OED*). But the “inner life and feelings” here belongs not to the individual but to the collective: what is *our* inly? It’s the songs between us, the ones we know (their words); the ones we love. The ones that love us. The ones we love are the songs and are each other. The one we have is each other. The inly we have is each other and our songs. That the parts in these equations become interchangeable in the poem signals that we are beyond the mathematics of equivalence. We are in ecstasy’s mathematics, where the pleasure a drug brings is so beyond the system of equivalence that its price would indicate. Ecstasy breaks apart the perniciousness of equivalence by universalizing its function, making it excessive.

our

(“Zong! #1,” 3)

In my previous reading of this passage, I emphasized how Philip’s performance offers multiple sense of *water* and suggests the difficulty of even uttering the word. Looking again, the appearance of “our” offers relief for this difficulty, and we perhaps move from deconstruction to reconstruction. Moving towards the not-fully-uttered phrase “water was our...”, the collective pronoun hovers as a momentary appearance of solidarity in speech.¹⁰¹ Yet a collective subject does not seem necessarily present here; rather, its possibility is what is most in question. When ‘our’ can be said and nothing else, the pronoun lacks any contextual sense: it is a pronoun of possession with unspeakable words in the place of what is possessed, who does the possessing, who is possessed of what. And yet we are attentive to the necessary collectivity of possession; not mine or yours but “our.”

The uneasy but ongoing force of the collective in *Zong!* recalls a situation somewhat ubiquitous to the text. Throughout her afterword Philip repeats the same line: “There is no telling this story; it must be told” (189): an apparent contradiction that recalls the ambiguous situation of water, and of law. What is impossible, what threatens life, must still be arrogated or performed. Philip cites Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* throughout her afterword, and there is a Derridean way of understanding this paradoxical conjuncture as a performative invocation, through the law, of a justice to come; or through community, of a community to come. In *Politics of Friendship* (1996) Derrida praises this kind of “mad” language, citing Blanchot’s “unavowable” community, Nancy’s “inoperative” community, and Bataille’s “community of those without community.” For Derrida, a paradoxical statement of community such as this “does not signify haziness and mobility, the confusion preceding knowledge or renouncing all truth. If it is undecidable and without truth in its own moment...this is in order that it might be a condition of decision, interruption, revolution, responsibility and truth” (*Friendship* 43). The structure ‘X without X’ has a particular effect on the meaning of the term invoked: “the same word and the same thing seem robbed of themselves, withdrawn from their reference and their identity, while going on letting themselves be traversed, in their old bodies, toward a completely other dissimulated in them” (*Parages* 76). When speaking of a community without community, the community can only be traversed, thus far, in speech: and though we speak of a community, it is not a community that we yet know. “This operation,” Derrida remarks, “does not consist in simply depriving or denying—far from it—and forms the trace...of the completely other that acts (on) itself there” (*Parages* 77). Thus when community seems impossible, the performative invocation of a community without community attempts to welcome, from the trace of community as we know it, the “completely other” of community, the unknown. Perhaps so with the story that cannot, yet must, be told: when its telling seems impossible, when those that would tell it seem outside the realm of existence, it is that performative, ritualistic attempt to tell, nonetheless, that brings into being the impossible telling, the impossible community, the unknown *we* that would tell the story that cannot be told.

But what is the process of telling the story that cannot be told? What is the feeling of operating with faith in the impossible? Derrida describes the necessity of this impossible work in his insistence that “justice” cannot leave “law” behind, whatever its imperfections.

That justice exceeds law and calculation...cannot and should not
serve as an alibi for staying out of juridico-political battles...Left to

¹⁰¹ Thanks to Hannah Manshel for sharing her writing on *Zong!* which I draw on in this reading (and elsewhere).

itself, the incalculable and giving idea of justice is always very close to the bad, even to the worst because it can always be reappropriated by the most perverse calculation...And so incalculable justice *requires* us to calculate...law...but also in all the fields from which we cannot separate it...we *must* take it as far as possible, beyond the place where we find ourselves and beyond the already identifiable zones of morality or politics or law, beyond the distinction between national and international, public and private, and so on. (“Force of Law” 28)

To submit the ideal of justice to the calculation of law would be to put faith in the calculation rather than faith in the incalculable. And yet, to abandon law’s calculation altogether would allow for it to appropriate the name of justice. Derrida exhorts (in this address given to a conference at Cardozo Law School) for law’s calculation to proceed with faith in the incalculable that requires it without being used by it.

So it is, perhaps, with Philip’s approach to *Zong!*. Any assumed capacity in advance of how to tell the story would put faith in the capacity of its telling, and submit to the logics of calculation that are so deadly—the copula of commodification. But Philip’s use of violence (in mutilating the text), of the copula (commodifying or speculative), of various tellings that do not tell, come out of a faith—in the telling of the story, in the community that somehow survives or lives on after the history of anti-black violence that the story recounts, in the possibility of reading even where it is most unlikely. Here we can follow Derrida’s closing exhortation of *Specters of Marx*:

Could one *address oneself in general* if already some ghost did not come back? If he loves justice at least, the ‘scholar’ of the future, the ‘intellectual’ of tomorrow should learn it and from the ghost. He should learn to live by learning not how to make conversation with the ghost but how to talk with him, with her, how to let them speak or how to give them back speech, even if it is in oneself, in the other, in the other in oneself. (176)

Speaking to ghosts is learning how to live, how to tell the story, how to speak with and to each other, the other, ourselves. Avery Gordon’s reading of Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* comes to a similar conclusion: “*Beloved* also problematizes the retrieval of lost or missing subjects by transforming those who do not speak into what is unspeakable, so that in that marvelous power of negative dialectics it can be conjured, imagined, worked out” (*Ghostly Matters* 150). Philip emphasizes the ghostly origins of *Zong!* in her references to Yoruba theology and in her often neglected ascription of the text to dictation, as the front cover, copyright, and title pages indicate: “As told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng.” The mode of this dictation, for Philip, is poetry and aesthesis: these are the sites in which the negative dialectics of the unspeakable and untellable are negotiated. We speak to ghosts and with them through the writing of the poem, through the reading of the poem, through the reading (of the poem’s source case) that writing is, through the active writing (of meaning into *Zong!*’s difficult passages) that reading is.

And in finding, in aesthetic experience, the direction to community, we might also read Philip as following a well-trodden Kantian path. Kantian theories of politics (as diversely followed by Adorno, Habermas and Arendt), find Kant’s critique of aesthetic judgment to be the basis for an understanding of political judgment and community. But neither constructivist theories (that find in

the aesthetic “a boot-up disk for conceptual thought as such”¹⁰²) nor proceduralist theories (that “presuppose the priority of such a rationality, and also presuppose the suspect character of ostensibly non-rational features of human conduct in the domain of politics”¹⁰³) can do justice to *Zong!’s mise-en-abyme*, its attempt to find an “our” amid total destruction. In a constructivist Kantian theory, aesthetic experiment “constructs and/or makes available . . . among other things, the intellectual and emotional apparatus for accessing, and to that extent the social material of, ‘the new’” (Kaufman 711). According to Robert Kaufman, the lack of law in aesthetic experience “weirdly projects the possibility of uncoerced social construction from the very absence of an object, general rule, norm, or standard of taste that would determine the process called the judgment of beauty” (713). The projected capacity to make judgments regarding the art object presages the revolutionary capacity for social construction free of coercion, in the necessarily uncoerced (though also necessarily impossible) social construction of the aesthetic.¹⁰⁴ As Ariana Reines writes in her poem “We Can Do It”: “It takes art / And you have it” (*Mercury* 14). For Philip the difficulty of such a theory is that it proceeds with too strong a guarantee: an assumed identity between the collective construction undertaken in aesthetic judgment and the production of concepts. Indeed, poetry’s ritualistic functions seem to have little to do with the creation of concepts. A constructivist reader might retort that Philip’s refusal of the conceptual is thematic and does not exclude the critical relation of judgment to the conceptual (see Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 161).¹⁰⁵ But I want to stress that the possibility of judgment is much more abyssal than aporetic in the reading of *Zong!*, the reading that *Zong!* shares: disinterested quasi-conceptual judgment does not even register as a foreclosed possibility.

A proceduralist Kantian theory would assume less about the relation between aesthetic judgment and political/conceptual judgment, while (perhaps) assuming more about what underlies the procedure of aesthetic judgment itself. Arendt’s version (which we will be following more thoroughly shortly) attempts to do only the former. Judgments of taste, according to Arendt, are only limited by a “general communicability”: “What Kant demanded in the *Critique of Judgment* of judgments of taste, is ‘general communicability’ . . . Now communicability obviously implies a community of men who can be addressed and who are listening and can be listened to” (Arendt 40). What does “communicability” imply about communication itself, about what capacity it depends upon and the “rationality” or otherwise of those who communicate? For Arendt, it seems, not very much. The fact of community is prior to any fact about the communication or communicative capacity that then proceeds under its aegis. Compare, as Arendt does in her notes:

Human species = Mankind = part of nature . . .
 Man = reasonable being, subject to the laws of practical reason which he gives himself . . .
 Men = earthbound creatures, living in communities, endowed with common sense, *sensus communis*, a community sense; not autonomous, needing each other’s company even for thinking (‘freedom of the pen’) . . . (26-27)

¹⁰² See Robert Kaufman, “Red Kant, or the Persistence of the Third *Critique* in Adorno and Jameson” (711).

¹⁰³ See Judith Butler’s critique of Habermas and Benhabib, in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (15).

¹⁰⁴ Here I might invoke Derrida’s distinction in a discussion of Nancy’s *The Experience of Freedom*: “The democratic is possibly impossible, and the political possibly possible” (*Rogues* 46). For Kaufman, the constructivism of the aesthetic appears possibly possible.

¹⁰⁵ See Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 161.

These three versions of “man/men” are not interchangeable and not, Arendt suggests, necessarily coextensive. To align them would assume that “communicability” is directly allied with a “communicative capacity” related either to man as a particular species, or man as a reasonable being—either way, man as essence.

If the shared end of communicability is reduced to a communicative capacity, then, a substantive claim about human nature is implied. As Butler writes in a critique of Habermas and Seyla Benhabib:

Although the procedural method purports to make no substantive claims about what human beings are, it does implicitly call upon a certain rational capacity, and attributes to that rational capacity an inherent relation to universalizability. The Kantian presumption that when ‘I’ reason I participate in a rationality that is transpersonal culminates in the claim that my reasoning presupposes the universalizability of my claims. Thus the procedural approach presupposes the priority of such a rationality, and also presupposes the suspect character of ostensibly non-rational features of human conduct in the domain of politics. (*Contingency* 15)

Using aesthetic judgment as the model procedure for understanding political judgment, then, might require too strong a presumption regarding what kind of capacity enters into judgment. It seems clear that such a model cannot be painlessly applied to our reading of *Zong!*: indeed if any reading of *Zong!* is possible, it is not a reading that is *a priori* universalizable. Rather the reading of *Zong!* calls into question what is shared and what cannot be shared, and finds no procedure immediately possible for its reading; the procedure will have to be discovered, and it seems unlikely that its discovering will lead to a rule that would be then applicable *a priori*.

It is another question whether Arendt’s separation of man as essence from “men in the plural” is a sustainable reading of Kant; we might have reason to doubt that it is (in agreement with Derrida’s critique of Kant’s tethering of judgment to essence). But we might also have other reasons to doubt Kant’s applicability to a reading of *Zong!*, following critiques of Kant that emphasize how his theories are embedded in a racialized worldview. Simon Gikandi writes that for Kant, as well as for David Hume and other interlocutors, “The black was excluded from the domain of modern reason, aesthetic judgment, and the culture of taste” (*Slavery and the Culture of Taste* 5). Gikandi argues that this exclusion is reflected in “the transcendental project of aesthetic practice and judgment, [in which] materials that were considered anterior to the process of European self-fashioning, such as slaves, Indians, and the poor, were confined to notational margins and footnotes” (7). Proceduralist readings that, as critiqued by Butler above, “presuppose the suspect character of ostensibly non-rational features” might be seen as especially guilty of participating in these racialized hierarchies. Denise Ferreira da Silva complicates this mode of critique by noting that viewing blackness (and non-Europeans in general) as excluded from universal reason might lead to the “privileging of historicity” at the expense of “scientific universality” (*Toward a Global Idea of Race* 14).¹⁰⁶ In fact, she argues, the historicity/universality dyad is itself produced by what she terms the “transparency thesis”: “The ontoepistemological account that institutes ‘being and meaning’ as effects of interiority and temporality” (4).

Silva’s critique emphasizes that our task in reading *Zong!* alongside Kant is not to locate *Zong!* as an avatar of historicity relative to Kantian (racist) universality; instead, our task is one of

¹⁰⁶ For Silva’s critique of Butler’s Hegelian version of universality, see 5–7.

deconstruction and reconstruction: in moving beyond the description of aesthetic universality as essence, finding a version of aesthetic universality that can be useful in thinking about minoritized contexts to understand how aesthetic experience can assemble a *we*. My orientation to Kant, here, follows from Philip's own orientation to the legal archive that she describes in an interview with Patricia Saunders:

When I take the legal text and say, alright let's play with this now, let's really play with this that process makes room for something—anything—else to happen. It seems to me that what that approach suggests is that I don't trust the archive, that the archive is much more unstable than we originally thought. It's complex because we need language, we need grammar, we need all of those things, but we also need to use them in a different way—to make them ours in a different way. (“Defending the Dead” 70-71)

My wager in reading Kant in this way is that following some of the Kantian aporia and abandoning others may offer other possibilities for thinking the relation between aesthetic experience and universality in a different way, not delimited by a racist conception of the aesthetic and the universal.

The first question is whether we can use aesthetic experience as a point of assembly, as creating a focal point for objectification, for a judgment that would purportedly be universal; for political readers of Kant this is the entire game. Whether by the exemplary free judgment of the “as-if” universal, or by the procedurally guaranteed operation of a “sensus communis,” aesthetic experience is read to bring together disparate subjects in a putative or provisional unity. Kant, however, offers possibilities that fray this unity, or that make it seem not so simple. To start this unity is not a unity of shared essence but some kind of shared experience. But is it even a shared experience?

One wants to submit the object to his own eyes, just as if his satisfaction depended on sensation; and yet, if one then calls the object beautiful, one believes oneself to have a universal voice, and lays claim to the consent of everyone...

...The judgment of taste does not itself **postulate** the accord of everyone (only a logically universal judgment can do that, since it can adduce grounds); it only **ascribes** this agreement to everyone, as a case of the rule with regard to which it expects confirmation not from concepts but only from the consent of others. The universal voice is thus only an idea. (§8, 101, boldface in original)

In Kant's description of the experience of judgment, the universal voice is what one “believes oneself to have” when one is judging. Is it strange that the feeling of judging is in essence an incorrect feeling, an “idea” that “ascribes” a fictive agreement? When we speak this fictive idea together, it is not to compel its truthfulness. The universal voice is an ascription whose value comes from the ascription itself, not its truth. It is like a prayer in which God's voice only seems to emerge in the sound of all of us (fictively) speaking in it, all of us who, individually, can no more speak for God than compel the accord of others in the way that a logically universal judgment could.

The universal voice is only an idea—an ascription—an appeal. And ultimately Kant appears agnostic about ever knowing it:

This indeterminate norm of a common sense is really presupposed by us: our presumption in making judgments of taste proves that. Whether there is in fact such a common sense, as a constitutive higher principle of the possibility of experience, or whether a yet higher principle of reason only makes it into a regulative principle for us first to produce a common sense in ourselves for higher ends, thus whether taste is an original or natural faculty, or only the idea of one that is yet to be acquired and is artificial, so that a judgment of taste, with its expectation of a universal assent, is in fact only a demand of reason to produce such a unanimity in the manner of sensing, and whether the “should,” i.e., the objective necessity of the confluence of the feeling of everyone with that of each, signifies only the possibility of coming to agreement about this, and the judgment of taste only provides an example of the application of this principle—this we would not and cannot investigate here; for now we have only to resolve the faculty of taste into its elements and to unite them ultimately in the idea of a common sense. (§22, 124)

Kant leaves off at the moment he might turn taste into an objective necessity. This recalls the moment at the conclusion of the preface to the *Critique of Judgment* where Kant writes, of his impending turn towards “the doctrinal part” of his critical philosophy: “It is self-evident that there will be no special part for the power of judgment in that, since in regard to that critique serves instead of theory” (58). As Kevin McLaughlin has recently noted, Kant distinguishes between “empirical community,” the only example for which is “commercial interaction,” and “community as *communio*,” or “communicability,” which only exists ““where perceptions do not reach”” (6).¹⁰⁷ In a reading that connects McLaughlin’s work with Silva’s, Rei Terada has suggested that Kantian relation “becomes a natural armature that can be called upon to set a political limit, and to set race outside the political limit” (“The Racial Grammar of Kantian Time” 275). While this is the case if, as Terada notes, we conceive of relation as both “transcendental and real,” other possibilities might emerge if the universal voice becomes so untethered from the real that it is only an idea, not even approachable in doctrine but through a different kind of thinking that aesthetic experience make possible.

If the universal voice is just an idea, what is the experience of together voicing it? First note this paradox: for Kant, the collectively voiced *sensus communis* is just as ideal as the individually voiced universal; it is not some kind of Habermasian actually-existing consensus. While there might be cause to critique the *sensus communis* as, therefore, irreducibly solipsistic, what if we turned it the other way around: What is the collective that the individually voiced universal imagines? It is a collective of other individuals imagining their voices as universal—a kind of exposure to others even in my most private and subjective judgment—an ecstatic feeling that yet moves towards others.

And this is consistent with all Kant says about the actual experience of judging, which is paradoxically internal and external, free and constrained, solipsistic and other-seeking. The very idea of a disinterested judgment of beauty requires the subject to be both wholly subjective and also to imagine her judgment as objective.

¹⁰⁷ The last quotation is from the Third Analogy in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which (McLaughlin emphasizes) was composed around the same time as Kant’s analysis of *sensus communis* in the Third *Critique*.

[Kantian pleasure] no longer depends on any phenomenal empiricity, of any determined existence, whether that of the object or that of the subject, my empiricity relating me precisely to the beautiful object, or to the existence of my sensory motivation. As such, and considered intrinsically...the pleasure presupposes not the disappearance pure and simple, but the neutralization, not simply the putting to death but the *mise on crypte* of all that exists in as much as it exists. This pleasure is purely subjective...But its subjectivity is not an existence, nor even a relation to existence. It is an inexistent or anexistent subjectivity arising on the crypt of the empirical subject and its whole world. (Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* 46)

Anexistent subjectivity is subjectivity cutting away from its existence in the subject and cutting toward others, toward an imagination of the judgment of others. Kant writes, of the subject judging an object beautiful: “He must believe himself to have grounds for expecting a similar pleasure of everyone. Hence he will speak of the beautiful as if beauty were a property of the object and the judgment logical... , although it is only aesthetic and contains merely a relation of the representation of the object to the subject” (§6, 96-97). Deep in myself—which is to say, deep beyond myself—I find a feeling that invokes the expectation of others. And it turns out that this communicability is not only a feature of my aesthetic judgment—it is its *ground*. Kant:

For since it is not grounded in any inclination of the subject... , but rather the person making the judgment feels himself completely **free** with regard to the satisfaction that he devotes to the object, he cannot discover as grounds of the satisfaction any private conditions, pertaining to his subject alone, and must therefore regard it as grounded in those that he can also presuppose in everyone else...

Thus it is the universal capacity for the communication of the state of mind in the given representation which, as the subjective condition of the judgment of taste, must serve as its ground and have the pleasure of the object as a consequence. (97, 102).

It is *communicability* that is the “ground” of *subjective* aesthetic judgment. The subject finds the grounds for its subjective judgment in that judgment’s communicability with others.

“Communicability,” Arendt writes, “obviously depends on the enlarged mentality; one can communicate only if one is able to think from the other person’s standpoint; otherwise one will never meet him, never speak in such a way that he understands” (*Lectures* 74). There is something not self-sufficient about the individual subjectivity’s capacity for judgment. The individual subject must not only cut away all her commitments and interests, but this is not a kind of ultra-reduction of the subjective. Instead it is an addition, a kind of enlargement towards others. In reducing myself I find myself not boiled down to some kind of rational essence, but increasingly dependent upon my interrelation and interconstitution with others. In short, judgment is a collective ecstasy, a movement between within myself and outside myself, which is to say, with others.

This ecstatic communicability, then, is less a Habermasian unity than an alignment of cuts, my anexistent subjectivity enlarging itself to meet yours. The collective this alignment creates is an ecstatic movement away from my essence—not towards the essence of others, as I know them—but towards an anexistent enlargement. The feeling of judging as a *sensus communis* is a feeling of being beside oneself, a feeling of being myself and also someone else. What brings us together in judgment

is not something proper to me, but the cut of my *imagining myself* (if not, in terms of *essence*, really being) in common with others. Except what Kant seems to suggest here is that “being in common with others” is entirely made up of this imagining. Being in common, then, is not an essence equally shared among many; instead what is shared is an experience of outsideness—a universal errancy—laying together in the cut.

The Kantian communicability I am following here might be better described as a “dis- assemblage,” as a failure of coherence. Not a taking hold, not an exchange, not an objectification, but an ecstatic decentering even as I am brought together with others. This aligns with Monique Allewaert’s idiosyncratic theory of the subject in the eighteenth-century Caribbean that she calls “Ariel’s ecology,” after the Shakespearean sprite:

In Ariel’s ecology, there is no medium of exchange like the money form that remains conceptually outside of the process of relation. Instead, everything including that which is conventionally understood as a medium—for instance, the sea—is bound up in processes of touching and proximity. Here, one entity touches upon and intensifies or exhausts or even decomposes another: this first entity’s relation to the second is that of touching, of constituting, of perhaps in turn being constituted by it, all of which precludes exchanging one for the other. What this suggests is that relation, far from being a synonym for exchange, names a process through which bodies and parts punctuate themselves against larger fields that they also decompose. Relation, then, describes an enmeshment that is not a merging and that forecloses the possibility of exchange. (*Ariel’s Ecology* 8)

Kantian insofar as aesthetic experience is understood as relation; Allewaertian insofar as relation is not understood as exchange. The voices that read the poem, the voices that are in the poem, the real body behind or alongside the voice as well as the idealized body or voice: as they punctuate themselves, they decompose the fields that they create.

What if we idiosyncratically read the Kantian analogy that Derrida critiques as all cut, never exchange?¹⁰⁸ What if we speculatively read Philip’s copula as referring not to relation as exchange but relation as dis-constitution?

Zong! punctuates against relation as exchange and posits relation as ecstasy. Relation, paradigmatically the relation created through aesthesis, is the decentering exposure to violence, to the voices of others, to our own voices. In *Zong!* we are together as we are put outside of ourselves; we are together as being put together is a dis-constitution. We are a community made up of cuts

¹⁰⁸ “Now in explaining why this universality must be without concept, Kant exhibits in a sense the forcing—imposing an analytic of concepts on a process without concept—but he justifies his operation by an argument that one can consider to be the *constitution*, that which makes the whole edifice of the third *Critique* hold-together-and-stand-upright in the middle of its two great wings (the critique of aesthetic judgment and the critique of teleological judgment). This argument is *analogy*. It operates everywhere in the book, and one can systematically verify its effect. At the place where we are in the exposition—its crossroads—it *gathers together* without-concept and concept, universality without concept and universality *with* concept, the *without* and the *with*; it thus legitimates the violence, the occupation of a nonconceptual field by the grid of a conceptual force. Without and with at the same time (*ama*). By reason of its qualitative universality, the judgment of taste *resembles* the logical judgment which, nonetheless, it never is, in all rigor. The nonconceptual resembles the conceptual. A very strange resemblance, a singular proximity or affinity (*Ähnlichkeit*) which, somewhere (to be specified later) draws out of *mimesis* an interpretation of the beautiful which firmly rejects imitation. There is no contradiction here which is not appropriated by the economy of *physis* as *mimesis*.” (*Truth in Painting* 76-77)

away from knowledge or the concept or our own desires. And we are in the cut together, finding in each other something other than a demand for agreement, not an object or a subject of exchange, not a coercive ascription of unity: an ecstatic relation, from and with each other, from and with our aesthetic experience of *Zong!*.

3. *Zong!*'s endless commons

I've used the expression "technical-ecstatic" many times, but not until recently, it seems, did I know how apt and applicable it could be. Yes, "ecstatic" in the root sense of standing outside oneself, an exacting leverage applied and approach via "technical" means—means fed by exactly such standing. Which comes first is a pointless question, to which the devil is a likewise pointless though tempting answer. What gets me is the sense of quintessential repose out of which this issues, a paradisiacal aplomb which borders on boredom. The rub is that the self which might have enjoyed it isn't there, which can be said to be where hell comes in. Cold hell. (Mackey, *From a Broken Bottle...* 279)

Let's lay in the cut once more with *Zong!*'s unruly universality, its paradisiacal aplomb, its cold hell.

A challenge of teaching *Zong!* is its overwhelming technics of disjunction, seemingly divorced from a modernist deployment of disjunction as a voluntaristic function of form. By voluntarism, I mean the belief that the operating poet can escape the structures of determination enough to challenge them, with a confidence emerging from ontological security that the poet's operations are freed from the logics that the poet would attempt to disrupt.¹⁰⁹ *Zong!* does not only attempt to "disrupt" the smooth text of the court case that is its source text. It also attempts to take on that case's power. The position of *Zong!* vis-à-vis the text it would "disrupt" is ultimately undecidable, as is the question of what is "content," what is "form," and what disrupts what. In teaching *Zong!* I speak about how the text unsettles a hylomorphic view of form and content, a naturalistic reading of the two together, whether it is form implying content or form following from content. Neither seems accurate to *Zong!*; indeed *Zong!* asks us to read without that kind of confirmed relationship. Content and form are in dynamic relation, but that relation must be ecstatic. If one holds power over the other, that power is temporary and contingent.

A scene from teaching *Zong!*: I ask for a reading out loud of the start of "Ratio." This section begins with an epigraph from Paul Celan, "No one bears witness for the witness." Here are the first two pages (101-102):

¹⁰⁹ I develop this critique of modernistic voluntarism in a discussion of Hannah Weiner's relation to Language poetry ("What Good is Poetry" 373-383).

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 the port
 pass
 hear
 him
 the peas
 pleas
 all round
 her slap slap
 slap
 of
 sail there
 was only
 if & ashes
 when not
 seal this act
 of
 skin of sin
 of what a
 deal my elation
 ran
 riot
 on
 my
 a
 seal
 deal
 well
 done
 i
 see you
 kate
 clad
 in
 fur
 the
 ring
 how
 many
 carats
 you ask
 i
 say ben
 the lad
 lay
 dead
 mi
 omg
 mi
 omg dear
 ruth this
 is a
 cold
 an
 tale
 told
 old
 tale
 one
 note a
 song an
 for
 for
 kate
 for
 clara
 clair

How do / we / parse: a question that seems singularly addressed to the reader, yet full of gaps. I asked for another student to give a reading somehow different than the first, and this reader tried to pause for as long as each space would have taken were it filled with words, reading the spaces as rests in the text's score.

In the latter sections of *Zong!* the words are scored across the page in varying densities. How do we understand the difficulty of *Zong!*'s gaps? Earlier I described the first page of *Zong!* as a stuttering, a coming to speech. There, the gaps seemed to indicate an unaccomplished effort whose fulfillment we could imagine: "water" regulates "wwwawawawater." But is there a similar logic that regulates the gaps at the start of "Ratio"? Is there an imagined "complete" speech or utterance or writing that regulates the fragmented utterances? There seems to be a stronger imperative to read the gaps as "content" themselves, as my student did: the gaps and spaces are part of what is found in Philip's journey through the *Gregson v. Gilbert* text. The gaps and spaces are not a condition of future utterance or utterance in progress but an articulation of what is, precisely, unutterable. This was a persistent struggle for our class, as it was easy to adopt the paradigm from the first section of *Zong!* as a heuristic for its formal difficulty. The formal difficulty of *Zong!* there appears to be the difficulty in voicing the slaves' experience, a difficulty to which formal effects like disruption and disjunction appear as a solutions, means to an end.

To be sure, much of *Zong!* works in this difficulty, but there are other difficulties as well. As we discussed above, *Zong!* deviates from a certain itinerary that we might expect in a "recovery" project that attempts to voice unspoken voices, refusing a certain lyrical move that would use voice as a substitute for life. Philip uses "voice" in a less obviously directed way. Indeed the voices that we hear (and then, in reading, voice ourselves) include both slave and slaveowner, victim and perpetrator. The glossary of "words and phrases overheard on board the *Zong!*" (183) includes words made from the text of the (English) legal decision in Dutch, French, Portuguese, Spanish—as well as Yoruba, Twi, Shona, Fon. The "Manifest" (185) includes the names of the Crew, and the names of the "Women Who Wait" for them. In voicing all of these voices and positions, *Zong!* cannot be arrogated to a politics of recovery.¹¹⁰ And the "we" of *Zong!* is not only, then, a fractured African diasporic collectivity: it includes the perpetrators of slavery. It includes we readers of *Zong!* as perpetrators, as beneficiaries of slavery to this day. Following the arguments of Gikandi, Silva, and others, even as aestheticians we participate in slavery's culture of taste. In *Zong!* that is not necessarily an indictment against aesthetics, but merely aesthetics' starting place: in relation to power that is not necessarily devoid of it, not necessarily in full exercise of it; we start in the gaps between.

Saidiya Hartman asks: "Were gaps and silences and empty rooms the substance of my history? If ruin was my sole inheritance and the only certainty the impossibility of recovering the stories of the enslaved, did this make my history tantamount to mourning? Or worse, was it a melancholia I would never be able to overcome?" (*Lose Your Mother* 16). What is the substance of these silences?¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ On scholarly recovery projects, see the *Social Text* special issue: "The Question of Recovery: Slavery, Freedom, and the Archive," ed. Laura Helton, Justin Leroy, Max A. Mishler, Samantha Seeley, and Shauna Sweeney.

¹¹¹ Consider, alternatively, M. Jacqui Alexander's grappling with gaps in the historical record: "What once seemed a legitimate set of questions to understand the plantation figure Thisbe were entirely inadequate to the task of knowing Kitsimba, who was waiting to be discovered. I first had to confront the limits of the methodology I had devised to know her. While legal and missionary documents gave me proximate access to daily life, they were unable to convey the interior of lived experience, the very category I needed to inhabit in order to understand how cosmological systems are grounded and expressed. Reading against the grain to fill in the spaces of an absent biography was simply not sufficient. I couldn't rely on the knowledge derived from books, not even on the analytic compass that I myself had drawn. Moreover, I had to scrutinize my own motivations for embarking on the project, as well as to figure out why I had been delegated to go in search of Thisbe's life. In short, I had to begin to inhabit that unstable place of not knowing, of admitting that I did not even know how to begin to know. Divested of the usual way of posing questions, I became

Philip is explicit in her essay that it's not gaps and silences that she wants. She wants the bones:

I attend a talk...by a young forensic anthropologist, Clea Koff, who has written a book about working in Rwanda and Bosnia identifying the bones of the murdered. It is important, she says, for bodies to be exhumed—in doing so you return dignity to the dead. What is the word for bringing bodies back from water? From a “liquid grave”? Months later I do an Internet search for a word or phrase for bringing someone back from underwater that has as precise a meaning as the unearthing contained within the word exhume. I find words like resurrect and subaquatic but not “exaqua.” Does this mean that unlike being interred, once you're underwater there is no retrieval—that you can never be “exhumed” from water? The gravestone or tombstone marks the spot interment, whether of ashes or the body. What marks the spot of subaquatic death? Families need proof, Koff says—they come looking for recognizable clothing and say, “I want the bones.”

I, too, want the bones. (“Notanda,” *Zong!* 201)

The self isn't there, the bones aren't there.¹¹² But *Zong!*'s response to gaps and absences is not to insist on a politics of presence, or to ontologize absence. Its response, which is to say, its call to those of us who read it, is an injunction to lay in the fissures, to find the community that's made up of cuts and separations, to find patterns of relation rather than equivalence. “I, too, want the bones” subscribes to a *desiring* relation to fragmentation. “I, too, want the bones”: I will make an itinerary (join an already-ongoing itinerary) through gaps and absences and fragments, an itinerary that will approach song.¹¹³

vulnerable and experienced the kind of crisis that is named ‘writer’s block.’ It was this that led me to examine the recalcitrance that masked an unacknowledged yearning for Spirit” (*Pedagogies of Crossing* 294).

¹¹² If the spectro-poetic logic of the Christian resurrection is something like, “The body is not there, therefore he is risen,” the logic of *Zong!*'s speaking with the dead is more like: “The body is not there, we are.”

¹¹³ “I, too”: this Hughesian lyrical gesture of affiliation finds a different expression in Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* (2007). “I, too, am the afterlife of slavery” (6); “I, too, was a failed witness” (129); “I, too, live in the time of slavery, by which I mean I am living in the future created by it” (133). Hartman's “I, too,” affiliates herself with slavery's catastrophe and irreparability. Her own book is not an attempt at reparation, but an attempt to plumb the depths of loss. She describes a photograph of a reenactment in a slave dungeon in Elmina Castle, that attempts to recreate the presence of the slaves who were there, as follows: “The photo could only express the loss, not repair it...The picture was a fiction of love. It permitted us to believe that we could coexist with the captives, witness their suffering, and remedy their defacement...Love longed for an object, but the slaves were gone” (135). Elsewhere Hartman writes: “My pessimism was stronger than my longing. In my heart I knew my losses were irreparable” (54). It is not for me to dispute Hartman's experience of slavery's aftermath; and her book is a stunning exploration of a black left melancholy that resists the seductions of black nationalism or internationalism. But *Zong!*'s “I, too,” offers us other possibilities: a love operating with the absence of the object; a longing stronger than pessimism.

Hannah Manshel writes: “Hartman's recuperative project will always fail because it is trapped in a dialectic of sympathy that assumes likeness between herself and the dead. She wants to successfully recuperate loss by ascribing personhood and self-possession to the enslaved and she wants to relate to the dead through an individuated mode of feeling. Because *Zong!* has different aims and methods than Hartman's project, Philip evades some of the narrative impasses Hartman encounters. First, the aim of *Zong!* is not recuperative or redemptive. What Hartman casts a failure to redress the wounds of history does not read as failure in *Zong!*; redressing the wounds is not the point. Second, by not ascribing personhood to the voices of the murdered and instead conjuring them as ghosts, Philip short-circuits the melancholy identification that would place her into a limited dialogical relationship with dead persons turned mute.

Back to the first pages of “Ratio”: What connections can there be? What longings can we trace, what desires can we identify with on the page? When I voice the poem I put my voice—“I, too”—among and between the Europeans on the *Zong!*, the women who wait for them, the parents on the *Zong!* lamenting their lost children, the cries of misery, the desire to tell a story, the legalistic study of the case text. Let’s try to track these movements on the next page of “Ratio” (103):

Philip tells this untellable story through haunting, which undoes the logic of sympathy. If sympathy is about duality and agency, haunting is about multiplicity and being given over.” For other differences between Hartman and Philip, see the recording of their 2014 joint reading (and debate): “A Question of Africa” (CUNY Center for the Humanities).

the deed is it one
 or
 many how
 do we
 praise the
 dead a job
 well done the
 captain says the
 pain the
 pain le pain le pain el pain
 pant & paint
 it do i
 have your
 ear i rave i
 rave i rêve je
 rêve mes
 rêves
 les rêves in the e
 den
 of our gar
 den you and i ruth will
 have stag s boar s &
 deer carp in
 the river doves
 there
 will be dogs fish &
 grouse owls &
 tit s pea hen s too no
 negroes & she pigs he
 negroes je rêve je
 a lease on mer rêve pain has
 erase this erase
 meaaaaaa
 slave save the
 œt s save the sa'œt s the va'œt s
 too but not the
 slaves bilge
 water

“How do/we/ parse/ the deed”: the question spans across pages and several lines of space, and yet we receive it. While “how do we parse” seemed to be a self-reflective question directed at the reading of *Zong!*, the delayed object shifts us to the reading of text that made life into property, “the deed.” Suddenly in reading *Zong!* we are also reading the deeds, particular acts of violence by language. The deed turns life into property, and then the word “deed” morphs into “the dead,” many dead. “How do we praise the dead” emerges out of the previous question, another impossible

question. The “how” comes out of an inverted “how many”: praise for the dead is immediately proximate to the deadly nomination of life into lives, capable of being property.¹¹⁴

The inversion of “how many” into “many how” is what makes the question of praise possible. Does praise indicate an orientation towards the divine, or just the notation of a “job well done”—does it relate to earthly power or heavenly power? The “ai” in “praise” soon is heard again in “captain,” a crashing echo towards a specific nomination of power. And that nomination soon dissolves into “pain,” which itself is equal to “*pain*” (bread)—what kind of relation is held by a pair of “false friends” across two languages?¹¹⁵

Either way the sound becomes “pant & paint,” the expression of suffering and the creation of an image. (And perhaps brings to mind J.M.W. Turner’s “The Slave Ship,” another work that attempts to find black life as an unruly commons in the wreckage of the *Zong!*: we’ll return to Turner’s painting shortly.) But lest we feel too strongly that there is a subjective transformation of misery and desire into art, the subjective function dislocates: “it do i”, takes away action from the first-person subject, placing the ‘i’ (perhaps this brief form of possession is still less than that of the ‘I’) as the object of action.

The ‘i’ which has your ear: is this the teller of a tale that stops the reader, or is it the more pernicious possession of property? Or are both somehow near each other: recall the Ancient Mariner’s listener in Coleridge’s poem, who “cannot choose but hear.” A certain telling is a violent form of possession, the overriding of one language with another. What is the difference between a *rêve* (dream) and a mad rave? There is probably an etymological link, according to the *OED*, but perhaps the more pertinent question is whose dreams, whose raving.

The ‘i’ appears to nominate itself as ‘ruth,’ one of the names supplied in the Glossary as “women who wait,” and also the Biblical figure for a chosen, uncoerced following. “Where thou diest, will I die, there will I be buried” (Ruth 1:17) echoes darkly here against the coerced removal of Africans and their unchosen location of death. So does the apparently dreamed-of Eden: a prelapsarian Western fantasy of Africa, or the millenarian dream of the New World? The listed animals seem to include “he/ negroes & she/negroes,” or just dissolve into them: and while this looks very much like a racist animalization, could we also hear the whispered dream of solidarity against a coercive delimitation of the human that would exclude “negroes”? Where viewing humans as animals is not a slur but a collapsing of difference, an expansion of what “men in the plural” could denote? (We will return to this possibility soon, again with the help of Turner.)

I do not know what to say about the collapse and movement between *ave, vale, save, slave, salve*. Another bilingual pun, a false friend or a misspelling, the difference between a greeting and a naming and a healing.¹¹⁶ Sina Queyras writes: “Here the play—the save/salve— is a necessary if only

¹¹⁴ On the deadly nomination of “life” into “lives,” Fred Moten and Stefano Harney write: “Black lives don’t matter, which is an empirical statement not only about black lives in this state of war but also about lives. This is to say that lives don’t matter; nor should they. It’s the metaphysics of the individual life in all its immateriality that’s got us in this situation in the first place... Meanwhile, Michael Brown is like another fall and rise through man—come and gone, as irruption and rupture, to remind us not that black lives matter but that black life matters; that the absolute and undeniable blackness of life matters. The innovation of our survival is given in embrace of this daimonic, richly internally differentiated choreography, its lumpen improvisation of contact, which is obscured when class struggle in black studies threatens to suppress black study as class struggle” (“Michael Brown” 84-85). *Zong!* participates in this polemic for “black life.”

¹¹⁵ An analogous moment appears in Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley’s reading of Ana-Maurine Lara’s *Erzulie’s Skirt*: “La Mar as she appears here is not only a mirror for black Atlantic queerness; she is a black Atlantic that mirrors queerly. Her song creates figures of comparison where terms are not equated but rather diffracted and recomposed, reflected in a broken mirror whose fractures are part of their meaning-creation” (“Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic” 202).

¹¹⁶ Cf. Fred Moten’s poem “the salve trade” (*hughson’s tavern* 65-66)

a temporary oasis, the words jamming, clinging to each other, cutting themselves, mutating too” (“On Encountering Zong!”). If there is an oasis, it is in the jamming, the cutting, the clinging.

What do we learn from reading *Zong!* this way, from following its various threads? Here is Philip’s word on “Ratio” from her afterword:

The basic tool in the study of law is case analysis. This process requires a careful sifting of the reported case to find the kernel of the legal principle at the heart of the decision—the *ratio decidendi* or simply the *ratio*. Having isolated that, all other opinion becomes *obiter dicta*, informally referred to as *dicta*. Which is what the Africans on board the *Zong* become—*dicta*, footnoes, related to, but not, the *ratio*...

On the “surface” the *ratio* of *Gregson v. Gilbert* was that “the evidence [did] not support the statement of the loss made in the declaration;” in other words, given the evidence presented to the court, the ship’s owners had not satisfactorily proved that they needed to “jettison their cargo,” that is, murder 150 African slaves. The “underwater” *ratio* appears to be that the law supercedes being, that being is not a constant in time, but can be changed by the law. The *ratio* at the heart of *Zong!*, however, is simply the story of be-ing which cannot, but must, be told. Through not-telling. And where the law attempts to extinguish be-ing, as happened for 400 years as part of the European project, be-ing trumps the law every time. (“Notanda,” *Zong!* 199-200)

The *ratio* of the law is that law supersedes being. The *ratio* of *Zong!* is that being supersedes law: every time.

How does “be-ing” trump the law, in *Zong!*? Philip’s “be-ing” is black life as a continuing and expansive plural; it refuses to accept the logic of individual nomination and individual voice. Being emerges in our reading of *Zong!*, in our continuing to make new itineraries from and with the archive of suffering, itineraries whose extension is endless. The endlessness of the reading of *Zong!* is its gesture to new commons of readers that the text inspirits and is inspirited by in turn.

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