

Calling Out the State: Postmodern American Anthropolitics

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Abstract

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This dissertation explores the relationship between the postmodern and the premodern in American poetry. Beginning with Lyotard's definition of the postmodern, I move to incorporate Charles Olson's introduction of the term postmodern in American letters. While Lyotard's definition offers that the postmodern is against the meta narrative of modernity, Olson's introduction of the term postmodern in 1952 emphasizes a temporal blurring that is central to the notion of the postmodern. After illustrating how the work of Olson, Burroughs, and Rothenberg are derived from anthropological and ethnographic exploration of premodern cultures and their poetic forms, I then move to the anthropologist Michael Taussig, whose contribution to the field was to turn anthropological analysis to critique Western culture. Taussig believes that our very means of representation are under siege, and that in order to disrupt this siege of representation,

writing must engage and disrupt the languages and images that reify the power of the modern nation-state. For Taussig, poetry can and does produce this type of disruption.

My goal is to effectively apply anthropology as an alternative method of reading poetry. Though partly informed by anthropology, ethnopoetics, textual studies and literary studies, my method of anthropoetics heavily draws on the methodology of Michael Taussig. In Taussig's methodology, the concept of returning is centralized, and in a sense will be centralized in this dissertation as well. I will show that the concept of returning to *an* origin in order to move forward is a significant defining practice of postmodern American poetics. Anthropoetics, in this project, is interested in exposing the material scene of the origin of texts by means of tracing the circulatory systems of poetry. In other words, the search for origins, as far as anthropoetics is concerned, is about the search for the first mimetic moment, the textual source from which the poem comes into being in order to see more clearly the ways in which poetic forms circulate across time periods as well as cultural and national borders.

My analysis focuses on a select group of late 20th century poets who derive their influence from premodern pasts. I argue that a turn towards the premodern is a distinguishing factor in postmodern American poetry and that the intention was to move forward by way of immersion in the premodern. I further offer that this forward movement results in an increased sensitivity to the sound and materiality of the historical text. The poets I take up as part of this discussion include Allen Ginsberg, Anne Waldman, Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer, Nathaniel Mackey, Steve McCaffery and Lisa

Jarnot. I propose that in an attempt to exit the modern, these poets have immersed themselves in the premodern in order to recover and bring forward that which has fallen outside of Western modernity.

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INTRODUCTION

“I define *postmodern*,” writes Lyotard in his seminal work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, “as incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv). Frederic Jameson, in his book *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, describes postmodernism as having a crisis in historicity. He writes that it “is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place” (ix). Jameson’s analysis points out, that time becomes cultural spaces in late capitalism. Instead of metanarratives, instead of a meta-history what we have in the postmodern is experiences of fracturing and multiplicity, surface play, incompleteness, unfixed meaning, the hybridization of culture all of which culminates as a desire to exit modernity.

To put this in another way, what we call the postmodern is better called circumventing modernity. At stake in all of this are the Eurocentric meta-narratives that helped to define modernity. In his book, *Magic of the State*, the anthropologist Michael Taussig argues that the State, with a capital “S” is the culmination of modernity. In this sense, the postmodern condition is also characterized by the need to circumvent the state. In American poetry one avenue to circumventing modernity was the anthropological imagination that characterized postmodern poetry. Three significant literary figures play a prominent role in the promotion of an anthropological imagination: Charles Olson,

William Burroughs, and Jerome Rothenberg. For these three writers, the combination of the anthropological and the premodern resulted in an anthropological imagination and in American poetry the anthropological imagination plays an important role in shaping the aesthetic forms of the postmodern. In other words, the premodern and the non-Western would come to characterize postmodernism in American poetry.

Liotard provides us with a succinct definition and Jameson with a cultural analysis of the postmodern, but it was the poet Charles Olson that first introduced or applied the term postmodern to American literature. “I am an archaeologist of morning,” writes Olson in his 1952 essay titled “The Present is Prologue.”

And the writing and acts which I find bear on the present job are (I) from Homer back, not forward; and (II) from Melville on, particularly himself, Dostoyevsky, Rimbaud and Lawrence. These were the modern men who projected what we are and what we are in, who broke the spell. They put men forward into the post-modern, the post-humanist, the post-historic, the going live present, the “Beautiful Thing” (Olson 207).

In his short essay, Olson is arguably the first to introduce the term post-modern. His use of the term emphasizes a temporal blurring that is part of the postmodern turn. The blurring of time is evident in the essay “The Present is Prologue.” In his title the present is also the preface, the first event, the introduction, the preface. In a sense “The Present is Prologue” resists linear time and instead test its conceptual boundaries by playing with the denotative concepts of language. The very first sentence of his essay also reflects this temporal play in language. He initiates the essay by writing: “My shift is that I take it the present is the prologue, not the past” (205).

Olson's definition of the postmodern stems from his anthropological imagination and was articulated around the time of his return from the Yucatan Peninsula. Documented in his *Mayan Letters* (1953), Olson explores and compares a Mayan system of the human universe with a westernized, meaning Eurocentric, view of the human universe. In doing so, he further develops his interest in the destruction of "historical time" and turning "time into...space" (Olson 26-27). Olson's introduction of the term "post-modern" makes visible is the connection that postmodernism had to time and what Jameson describes as the crisis in historicity. Olson's notation of the post-historic points to this crisis in historicity, but for Olson the project is looking backwards at the premodern, and the non Eurocentric, in order to break open or rupture the metanarrative of historicity.

Two other important texts derived from an anthropological imagination and written around the same time as Olson's *Mayan Letters* include William Burroughs *Queer* (1985) and *The Yage Letters* (1963). *Queer*, written between 1952 and 1953, reflects Burroughs' time living in exile in Mexico. The book mentions yage throughout and culminates in the beginning of the search for the yage used by curanderas. Burroughs' interest in yage was not just about getting high as many have supposed, but instead he envisions it as something that will help cure him of his heroin addiction. In this sense, Burroughs imagines yage as something that can cure him.

After *Queer*, Burroughs wrote *The Yage Letters*, a series of letters written to Allen Ginsberg between 1952-1953. These letters chronicle Burroughs' yage expedition.

Receiving these letters preceded Ginsberg's own trip to Central America shortly before writing *Howl* and fed Ginsberg's own imagination. In his introduction to *The Yage Letters Redux*, the Burroughs scholar Oliver Harris notes that Burroughs' own background included graduate studies in anthropology at Harvard and Columbia, as well as "anthropology, archaeology, and ethnology classes at Mexico City College during 1950" (xiii-xiv). Harris also notes the chance meeting between Burroughs and the famous anthropologist Robert Evan Schultes (1915-2001) who researched and published on a number of hallucinogenic plants, include yage, used in shamanic rituals. In fact in March of 1953, "Burroughs traveled with Schultes, who had teamed up with the Anglo-Columbian Cacao Expedition (the "Cocoa Commission"), for part of a second, thousand mile round-trip from Bogotá to Puerto Leguizamo," where "[o]utside Mocoa Burroughs first experiences the force of *yagé*, and his description of the set and setting features all the key stages, from *la purga* (the wracking, purgative nausea) through *la chuma* or *mareación* (dizzying intoxication) to *la pinta* (the visions) (xviii).

In a letter to Allen Ginsberg dated July 10, 1953 William Burroughs wrote to Ginsberg that:

Yage is space time travel. The room seems to shake and vibrate with motion. The blood and substance of many races, Negro, Polynesia, Mountain Mongol, Desert Nomad, Polyglot Near East, Indian—new races as yet unconceived and unborn, combinations not yet realized passes through your body. Migrations, incredible journeys through deserts and jungles and mountains (stasis and death in closed mountain valleys where plants spout out of your cock and vast crustaceans hatch inside and break the shell of the body), across the Pacific in an outrigger canoe to Easter Island. The Composite City where all human potentials are spread out in a vast silent market (Burroughs 50).

Burroughs' experience taking yage is suggestive of the spiritual and cosmic. In a sense, for Burroughs, time and culture are ruptured by his experiences in Central America, and because of this rupture the metanarratives of history and culture break open. In a more idealistic sense, what Burroughs' experience can show us is that in looking back at the premodern and outside of the Eurocentric view of culture, the very construction of the modern itself is able to be ruptured, broken open, so that what escapes is something outside of the modern.

Ginsberg was receiving letters from Burroughs, chronicling his search for yage shortly before he would embark on his own trip through Central America in 1954. Ginsberg wasn't there specifically for yage in 1954, it wasn't until 1960 that he would follow Burroughs' path and embark on his own expedition in search of a shamanic ritual experience with yage. Certainly in 1954, Burroughs' letters were feeding Ginsberg's imagination about Central America and were influential in him initiating the trip, but in 1960 his intention about following in Burroughs' footsteps was clear.

In a letter to Burroughs, dated June 10, 1960, Ginsberg writes to that "Last night I attended a regular curing all nite drinking session with about 30 other men and women in a hut in jungly outskirts of Pucallpa behind the gasworks field" (Burroughs and Ginsberg 57). Ginsberg's own experience and account includes seeing "the Great Being, or some sense of It" (57) and highlights Ginsberg's own spiritual quest in taking yage and ayahuasca. In a second experience he writes that "this time the brew was prepared fresh and presented with full ceremony—he crooning (and blowing cigarette, blow a puff of

smoke over a cup, and drank. Saw a shooting star—Aerolito—before going in, and full moon, and he served me up first—then lay down expecting God knows what other pleasant vision and then I began to get high—and then the whole fucking Cosmos broke loose around me” (60)

The critique of the anthropological imagination usually falls to employ the rhetoric of cultural appropriation. Take for instance, Jerome Rothenberg’s own work that directly draws together poetry and anthropology. In the 1960’s Rothenberg coined the term “ethnopoetics.” Initially Rothenberg’s project emerged out of the desire to record Native American oral traditions. Initially ethnopoetics was a form of ethnography and wanted to record and translate Native American oral traditions in a way that did not treat these traditions in opposition to Western poetics styles, but instead ethnopoetics sought to consider Native American oral traditions as complicated systems and forms of poetry. Ethnopoetics would expand its scope to include a number of indigenous and premodern cultures from around the world. Rothenberg drew together experimental western poetics and premodern and indigenous traditions in an effort to disrupt and break open the Eurocentric view of the premodern and indigenous as primitive. Instead he moved to call premodern traditions as complicated systems. In his preface to *Technicians of the Sacred*, he writes “all of this is...a question of technology as well as inspiration; & we may as well take it as an axiomatic for what follows that where poetry is concerned, “primitive” means complex” (Rothenberg xxi).

The primary critique against ethnopoetics is that it started as a misappropriation of the indigenous, yet the questions posed by ethnopoetics continue to resonate in postmodern American poetics. Rothenberg, largely through his anthologies, introduced and promoted ethnopoetics, but failed in many ways to accomplish an effective critique of Western culture and modernity itself. In his anthology, *Shaking the Pumpkin*, he writes that

The yearning to rediscover the Red Man is part of this. It acknowledges not only the cruelty of what's happened in this place (a negative matter of genocide and guilt) but leads as well to the realization that "we" in a larger sense will never be whole without a recovery of the "red power" that's been here from the beginning. The true integration must begin & ends with a recognition of all such powers. That means a process of translation & of mutual completion (xxi).

The critique of such a statement, however well meaning, falls too closely in line with a complicity in colonization, and yet, as Rothenberg notes, "the idea of translation has always been that such boundary crossing is not only possible but desirable. By its very nature, translation asserts or at least implies a concept of psychic & biological unity" (xix). In some sense, anthropology, and certainly ethnography, has been or at least provided a means to colonization and in doing so has become an arm of colonization. And even in the bumbling ways, poets have never stopped calling this into question. We can see this tradition into the 21st century and that it might be telling us something very important, it might be pointing out an alternative path that can us a way to see outside of the cage of modernity.

Perhaps one of the more significant turns in the field anthropology comes from Michael Taussig, who wrote, in his book, *The Nervous System* (1992), that "all social

analysis is revealed as montage” (6). The premise, through the comparison to montage, signifies a break with modernity of Taussig’s own work. He accepts and incorporates the “Nervous System’s scrawling incompleteness, its constant need for a fix” (3). Taussig’s own work, specifically in his writing, is disruptive and critical towards the metanarratives that anthropology has been constructing and relying on as means to recording and theorizing non-Western cultures and at times Western cultures from the perspective of modernity. These types of readings not only fall short, but inappropriate map Western traditions in terms of social analysis onto premodern cultures and forms.

Taussig wanted to write about his own experiences with shamanic curing nights in the Putumayo valley not as a metanarrative appropriate to Western culture, but “instead to preserve their hallucinatory montage flowing and stopping and starting once again.” His interest was in exploring the way that “the power of the mental image” had “to hold a history of nations, of wildness as curative, of the continuous joking and undermining of everything.” In this dynamic Taussig saw “shock and montage [come] center-stage with impressive curing power—tumbling certainties into the imageric politics of reality-and-illusion the curer’s medium as much as the terror’s too” (9). He derives this from Benjamin’s work, but especially from his essays “Theses in the Philosophy of History” and “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” In this perspective, Taussig effectively uses his own ethnographic experiences as a means to effectively critique Western culture in his own writing. In other words, instead of turning his Eurocentric eye towards a critique of the indigenous, Taussig instead turns his critique towards Western culture.

What is at stake, according to Taussig, is that “our very forms and means of representation are under siege.” As opposed to relying on cultural appropriation as an effective criticism, Taussig’s perspective tells us that this not so easily categorized as such and in order to disrupt this perspective he “calls for a mode of writing no less systematically nervous than the [Nervous System] itself” (10). Taussig strongly suggests that it is the siege of our means of representation that needs to be disrupted and that this can only be done by engaging the very languages and images that reify the power of the modern nation-state. In his essay “State Fetishism” Michael Taussig writes that:

We are dealing with an obvious yet neglected topic, clumsily if precisely put as the cultural constitution of the modern State—with a big S—the fetish quality of whose holism can be nicely brought to our self-awareness by pointing not only to the habitual way we so casually entify “the State” as being unto itself, animated with a will and mind of its own, but also by pointing to the not infrequent signs of exasperation provoked by the aura of the big S” (*NS* 112).

The fetish quality of the “State—with a big S” is that which inscribes itself and erases itself, so that part of what alterity can and does do is to make visible the fetish quality of the sign, which constitutes the cultural power of the state. “The world,” Taussig writes, “not only began with Adamic language, but may well end with it as well—perversely essentials life and death names splicing the arbitrariness of the sign to the arbitrariness of the state’s power” (*NS* 29).

What I want to propose is that postmodern poetry is can and does do this: disrupt, shock, mimetically represent, repeat and return. In doing so poetry, most effectively when

at play, can in fact disrupt the siege over our forms of representation, by pointing out the very signs that construct and reify the nation-state. Poetry, at times for just a moment, can in fact disrupt and break open the siege of metanarratives thereby allowing alternatives to emerge and become visible. If we consider that the period of modernity culminates in the nation-state, then the turn to the premodern in order to effect a post-modernity makes sense. Especially in regards to American poetry, it means having transnational reading practices, and it means engaging and consuming poems, narratives, songs, and rituals from other cultures. In short, reading practices, and social analysis, should reflect the cross-cultural experiences inherent to transnational economies that eventually lead to the hybridization of cultures.

Poetry can and does have the ability to make visible this concept of “splicing” through montage and subsequently can make visible the ways in which the state derives power from its own construction of metaphor. In a filmic sense it is the way that montages are made, and in a Dadaist sense it is inherent to the nature of collage. What is different though, is that poetry through imagination can expose that the arbitrariness of the state’s power is derived through the act of splicing by means of a mimetic process. Poetry can and does this through reproducing the arbitrary splicing of the state’s power, poetry can in sense “call out the state” by means of disrupting and producing a kind of cultural shock.

In fact poetry can and will reproduce in excess a mimetic process by which a fetish quality can accumulate power. For Taussig, the important part “is neither to resist

nor admonish the fetish quality of modern culture, but rather to acknowledge, even submit to its fetish-powers, and attempt to channel them in revolutionary directions. Get with it! Get in touch with the fetish!” (NS 122). Consider that poetry may begin from these places, from a revolutionary direction, from the fetish itself, and that that is a good thing precisely because it is capable of being shocking and disruptive to metanarratives.

In some sense, this project continues the work that started with ethnopoetics, but instead of relying on ethnography my work turns towards anthropology. My goal is to effectively apply anthropology as an alternative method of reading poetry. In an effort to describe this method of reading I will rely on a simple hybridization of anthropology and poetics: anthropoetics. Though partly informed by anthropology, ethnopoetics, textual studies and literary studies, my method of anthropoetics heavily draws on the methodology of Michael Taussig whose significant move to turn the eye of anthropology towards a critique of the anthropologists own culture. In Taussig’s methodology, the concept of returning is centralized, and in a sense will be centralized in this dissertation as well. I will show that the concept of returning to *an* origin in order to move forward is a significant defining practice of postmodern American poetics.

Anthropoetics, in this project, is interested in exposing the material scene of the origin of texts by means of tracing the circulatory systems of poetry. By that I mean that anthropoetics is interested in the inaugural mimetic moment that allows poems to come into being. In other words, the search for origins, as far as anthropoetics is concerned, is about the search for the first mimetic moment, the textual source, from which the poem is

formed in order to see more clearly the ways in which poetic forms circulate across time periods as well as cultural and national borders.

My analysis focuses on a select group of late 20th century poets who derive their influence from premodern pasts. I argue that a turn towards the premodern is a distinguishing factor in postmodern American poetry and that the intention was to move forward by way of immersion in the premodern. I further offer that this forward movement results in an increased sensitivity to the sound and materiality of the historical text. The poets I take up as part of this discussion include Allen Ginsberg, Anne Waldman, Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer, Nathaniel Mackey, Steve McCaffery and Lisa Jarnot. I propose that these poets attempt to mimetically replicate in their writing something about their own cultural historical moment and want to move beyond, or outside of modernity. In an attempt to exit the modern, these poets have immersed themselves in the premodern in order to recover and bring forward that which has fallen outside of Western modernity.

In chapter two I take up Ginsberg's "Howl" and Anne Waldman's "Fast Speaking Woman" and trace their formal innovations to indigenous chant practices rooted in shamanism in the Americas. Most of the scholarship on Waldman and Ginsberg has centered on Buddhist influence, but has shied away from seeing the connections such seminal poems as "Howl" and "Fast Speaking Woman" have had to shamanic practices. For Ginsberg, his time spent in the hospital, followed by his travels in South America would provide a necessary platform for him to experience what Michael Taussig

consistently refers to as the “repeated shock of returning” which also meant “coming back to face the demands for academic talk and writing—the demands for an explanation, the demands for coherence, the denial of rhetoric, the denial of performance, when what was crying out for a coherent explanation was the demand for such and the denial of such” (Taussig *NS* 7). What the shock of returning would produce for Ginsberg was a vision of an America that was culturally ill and in need of healing.

By the time she begun practicing chant as a poetic form, Waldman had already been practicing Buddhism but confesses that when she heard the shamaness Maria Sabina’s *Sacred Mushroom Chant* she was drawn to it because Sabina was a woman chanting. Hearing the voice of a woman with spiritual power was particularly influential in facilitating part of the gendered cultural work Waldman’s poem would strive towards. For Waldman, a voice like Sabina’s was a contemporaneous voice that she saw as linked to a kind of healing and redemptive power that women in America needed. If Ginsberg saw a cultural ill in America based as a result of capitalism and modernity, then Waldman’s focus would be on offering a poem that contained a redemptive and healing power for women. Both poets imagined that the rhythmic force of chant in their poems could access a different consciousness, invite a collective consciousness into being and ideally into a kind of unity. In imitating shamanistic practices, their poems access a temporality outside of and counter to modernity and its progress narrative, and imperative to countering this progress narrative was an urgent need to broaden or re-evaluate the concepts of gender and sexuality.

In chapter three I discuss the poetics of Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer. I draw out the premodern in Duncan and Spicer and then I establish a connection to the fact that both of these poets saw themselves as vessels for transmission of the premodern. Their intention was to preserve tradition and in doing so to break open the boundaries of poetics and sexuality that had long been determined by modernity. Duncan defined himself as a derivative poet, and he saw himself as accessing a kind of collective memory by his return to a past. In one undated talk he describes himself as a magician who shows the image without knowing the image in an attempt to engage the sacredness of the thing, or image itself. Spicer imagines his own position as a transmitter of the past as a series of metaphors, which included things such as a radio, a scarecrow, ghosts, dead letters and martians. In a sense each of Spicer's metaphors are figures of a beyond. The point in all of this for Duncan and Spicer is to bring the past in contact with their own present historical moments and in doing so the poets can, through their poems, re-envision the world by my means of their long serial poems. In another sense their poems are world-making poems, which engage alternative meta-narratives that fall outside of the boundaries of modernity.

In chapter four I focus on the search for premodern origins as an inquiry into questions of race, nation and language. I examine Nathaniel Mackey's long poem *Song of the Andoumboulou* and articulate his direct relationship to anthropology as a reader, which he transforms into a retelling of West African mythology. In doing this Mackey creates a poem derived from a non-western origin and effectively produces an alternative world-poem. I then turn to McCaffery's poem "Lastworda" which is a lexical genealogy

of the English language beginning in the late twentieth century and ending in the 5th century. I examine how McCaffery's poem philologically produces a poem that looks at the past by means of language while moving forward. In McCaffery's poem, the search for an origin is anchored in a Eurocentric lexical history. In a sense, what emerges from this inquiry into premodern English is an exposure of modernity through a material temporality embedded in the history of the English language. While emphasizing transnational reading practices this chapter seeks to articulate the material scene of origin for the inception of each of these poems as being motivated by race and nation.

Mackey first encounters the West African Dogon mythology of the Andoumboulou through a 1956 recording titled "Chants des Andoumboulou" which is part of the funeral ceremonies of the Dogon people of Mali in West Africa. This recording sparks Mackey's own line of inquiry into the Dogon mythology which he does through Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen's book *Pale Fox*. If it is the "Chants des Andoumboulou" that provides the sound, the music for Mackey's poetics, then it is Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen's book *Pale Fox* that provides Mackey's sense of the story of the origin, or the history of the Andoumboulou. I describe Mackey as Benjamin describes Paul Klee's painting titled "Angelus Novus" in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, as "the angel of history. His face turned toward the past" while a "storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned." Using this image I propose that Mackey's poem is about the search to move forward by means of immersion in a premodern past. The forward movement results in an increased sensitivity to the sound and materiality of the historical text as well as to the process by

which the material historicizing of texts occurs, making visible and audible a utopian future.

McCaffery, on the other hand, takes a philological approach to achieving a kind of forward movement while gazing on the debris of the past. For McCaffery, turning his face towards the past means looking at the corpus of the English language, in an attempt to construct a lexical history of English. He begins his lexical quest in the 1990's and ends in the Anglo-Saxon period, as early as the fifth century. His approach is a ludic and festive embrace of loss and as readers pointed towards an intimate relationship between sound and the materiality they are also returned to an essence of the English language. I argue that McCaffery, as a Euro-American writer, can approach loss festively because in a profoundly historical and racial sense, English is his.

In chapter five I perform a transhistorical comparative reading of contemporary poet Lisa Jarnot's serial poem title *Sea Lyrics* and the Anglo-Saxon poem "The Dream of the Rood." I draw parallels between the form of Jarnot's poem and the Anglo-Saxon riddle form. In doing so I propose this as a way that the poet is attempting to reify what she sees as a politically fractured world, and that what the poet hopes to elicit is a feeling of intimacy with the world. The attempt to do this through language is central because it is language and the act of naming things that produces a distance from the phenomena of things in the world. In some sense, the naming of things impedes intimate connection, but poetry can point towards this loss of intimacy.

The second formal quality I highlight is the chant form and I propose that the poem is extended in its riddle-like qualities by the employment of a chant-like rhythm. The chant aspect of Jarnot's poem lends the poem qualities that produce a poem that seems as though it has no beginning, middle, or end and that it is a kind of meditation on the objects or things in the world. I maintain that this is achieved through a type of object-personification that is unique to the Anglo-Saxon riddles and that in this way the poet is able to gesture towards a lost intimacy that language through its means and forms of representing things in the world.

What this project explores is the role of an anthropological imagination in postmodern American poetry. The anthropological imagination in poetry came out of a need to exit the modern, which had been defined by a Eurocentric view of culture. In order to effectively exit the modern, poets began to look at the premodern and non-Western forms so that they could imagine a way out of modernity. Some writers, such as William Burroughs, Gary Snyder, and Jerome Rothenberg studied anthropology at universities, while others such as Allen Ginsberg, Anne Waldman or Steve McCaffery employ anthropological methodology in their poetics, or were influenced by predecessors using an anthropological imagination. The role that the anthropological played in the postmodern imagination is crucial and for these poets the anthropological imagination offered a way out of modernity, and by consequence an alternative to being modern.

Chapter 2

The Premodern: Chant in Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" and Anne Waldman's "Fast Speaking Woman"

Come said the Muse,
Sing me a song no poet yet has chanted,
Sing me the universal.”

—Walt Whitman —*from Birds of Passage “Song of the Universal”*

The Premodern: Chant in Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” and Anne Waldman’s “Fast Speaking Woman”

Chant is recognized as one of the earliest forms of poetry, and often one of the most ancient forms of oral transmission of histories, traditions, songs, prayers, and cultural rituals. Editor of *The Teachers & Writers Collaborative Handbook of Poetic Forms*, Ron Padgett, defines chant as a form which “repeats particular words or phrases over and over because there is something powerful about the repetition of a word or a phrase: it adds strength to a poem” (44). Repetition, Padgett notes, that creates rhythm and musicality, which are both essential to the chant form and its ability to be performed, or to be sung.

The noun *chant* comes from the Latin *cantu*, which means “singing, song”; the verb from which chant comes is the Latin *cantare* “to sing” (OED). Additionally Padgett

notes an essential part of the writing and practice of the chant that is relevant to spiritual practices, magical practices, as well as poetic practices. Embedded in the practice of chant is a “plunge into the unknown, remembering that chants have an openness and spontaneity you won’t find in a sonnet or sestina, and lack a predetermined beginning, middle, and end” (45).

Essential to the postmodern lyric is the openness and spontaneity that the chant form fosters. The chant form also creates an opportunity for repetition to operate over longer poems and serial poems. Repetition in chant serves as a binding agent, a mark of the power of magic in language and as a beat or rhythm through which a kind of magic by means of a state of being or feeling possessed can be achieved. The point of repetition in chant is not to point out, but rather to derange and possess the senses. In particular repetition in the chant form obscures the sense of linear time; it obscures the order of logic and instead allows for alterity and the illogic to populate its form. That chant is not obligated to any “predetermined beginning, middle, and end” implies that the structure of time, if there is one at all, is of another order of time.

The reading I hope to offer is one that allows us to see the form of chant as simultaneously premodern and postmodern. The response of postmodernity in the aesthetics of poetry is best expressed as a search for a way out of the kind of temporality that seems to define modernity and the concept of progress born out of that sense of temporality. Postmodern forms that began to appear in American poetics after 1945

wanted to present a kind of anti-modern mode of being that ends up being defined by literary forms that preceded modernity and by forms that fall outside of the literary conventions of modernity. One example of this is the resurgence of chant and the privileging of orality that occurred in counter-culture and avant-garde literary communities.

Chant often pushes the limits of awareness about the concept of time itself, and has the potential to confront time as culturally and geographically constructed. Chant is frequently used as a vehicle for the sacred and it is sacred temporality that defines its order. Chant operates by means of sacred time, magic time, ritual time; it is a type of time that seemingly has no beginning, no middle, and no end; a kind of temporality for which modernity does not account for in its narrative of progress.

Chant as a form has a continuous flow; it often narrates and transmits tales of transformation. In order to do this as a form chant must allow for spontaneity and transformation within its structure. It is the repetition of language in chant that deranges and rearranges the sense of time and enables the sense of narrative, if there is one at all, to follow this temporal pattern. Repetition in chant ensures a high potential for spontaneity to occur so that it remains uncertain how a narrative will develop or if one will develop at all. Extended chants in particular are often unpredictable and open to spontaneous changes; they rely heavily on the repetitions that invoke and construct connections to the literal breathing and moving of human bodies. Repetition in chant is essential to forming

the beat that in especially longer chants, is able to possess bodies and imaginations, it is, in other words a form of lyric possession effected by repetition and mimesis.

In her essay “Fast Speaking Woman & The Dakini Principle” Anne Waldman writes that, “Chant is heartbeat. Chant in all cultures is ancient efficacious poetic practice” (in *Maria Sabina* Ed. Rothenberg 174). Waldman’s notion of the chant form is more spiritually defined than Padgett’s, but that repetition is central to rhythm making is paramount to both definitions. While Padgett sees repetition as something that strengthens a poem, Waldman will see the repetition in chant as that which makes sound, makes rhythm, and that which makes music and as that which is able to possess. Waldman promotes the spiritual connections that are transhistorically embedded in the chant form, and she will exhibit an understanding that chant has the capacity for cultural healing as well as the construction of cultural memory.

Chant as a form is repetitive and rhythmic. It often relies on the device poet might recognize as anaphora which functions as a mechanism for building its rhythm. Its repetition is ritualized and necessitated by the form. The ritual repetition of words can degrade the value of a sign and shift the focus of the reader or listener, and in some sense renders the words repeated invisible. Ritual repetition is reliant on exploiting the arbitrariness between sounds and the things they represent. Another way of thinking about this is that ritualized repetition has a tendency to become a non-verbal or an irrational mode of communication. In other words, the formal mechanics of chant can, and

is meant to push language so far towards the illegible that sound and rhythm begin to operate as the significant and primary means of communication. Ritual repetition renders the invisibility of subjects and re-orientes readers towards objects, thereby constructing the primary relationship as reader to object, or rather as reader to *things* in the world. In another sense, and one that is important to both Ginsberg and Waldman, ritual repetition can re-orient the reader or listener to the phenomena or magic of *things* in the world, a magic or phenomena that in some ways cannot be explained or described by language without degrading or destroying that very sense of magic or phenomena.

In addition to altering the very nature of the relationship of the reader to objects or things in the world, ritual repetition, by means of its ability to possess the senses, affects perceptions of time as linear. The reoccurrence of the same disorients readers, it both marks time and distorts time; it constructs time as seemingly endless for the reader. The consistent reoccurrence of the same constructs an illusion of a pattern that both creates a sense of expectation for the sameness and a sense of uncertainty about the sameness

Ritual repetition is what gives chant its driving beat, its what makes it lyrical, and what gives it means of transmission outside of language. Ritual repetition is primordial in the sense that it speaks to physical bodies through rhythm and in language as sound.

Ritual repetition makes visible the connections that both Ginsberg and Waldman discuss in their poetics, between mind, body and breath, and it would prove to be literary forms that exhibited kinds of ritual repetition that would be most conducive to the postmodern

serial poem. Chant in particular, was a form that enabled the exploration and possible reification of mind, body, and breath, and what young American poets saw as the potential for this “new” form was cultural and social healing.

Both Ginsberg and Waldman utilized chant in both their poetic and spiritual practices, which they saw as innately connected through language, because it emphasized the kind of ritual repetition that was necessary to carry longer narratives, longer lines, and to maintain a space that allowed a sense of spontaneity in composition to happen. In other words ritualized repetition became, for them, a poetic practice that enabled a sense of spontaneity and improvisation was especially effective in performance and especially in performance in public spaces at being able to possess the attention and sense of public audiences. Chant, for Waldman and Ginsberg, exemplified ritualized repetition and lend their poems a way to possess and transform the seeming chaos around them.

What I am proposing here is that the chant form is one of the premodern literary forms that mark the long postmodern lyric poem. Because of their respective influences in popular culture as well as their significant roles in the construction and solidification of a postmodern poetry community, I have chosen to situate the poem *Howl* by Allen Ginsberg and the poem *Fast Speaking Woman* by Anne Waldman within this significant shift in American poetry. Much of the scholarship on these poets and these particular poems has focused on their connections to Buddhist practices, but what I am offering are the actual textual and geographic influences for each of these poems. I will situate each

poet and their poem within the indigenous Indian curandera traditions to which they were drawn so that they might experience a disconnection, transformation and sense of healing from a New York City modern urbanism to which they were both familiar.

I will argue that Ginsberg's *Howl* performs chant and that its aim was finding and healing the sickness in American culture. Though Ginsberg would not become a practitioner of chant until after *Howl* was written, his interests, experiences and influences concerning hallucinogenic plants from indigenous curandera traditions in central and South American cultures is well documented in his letters and journals. Significantly noteworthy, but often neglected as a considerable influence on the writing of *Howl*, is that Ginsberg had recently finished traveling in Mexico, where he spent time exploring Mayan ruins, metaphysics and cosmologies, before returning to the San Francisco Bay Area, where he would, in 1955, eventually sit down and write and re-write *Howl*.

Ginsberg's time Central America offered to him another way of being in the world, different ways of living, and a kind of unprecedented freedom, especially in regards to sexuality and drug use, for which he had been searching. In a 1953 letter addressed Allen Ginsberg wrote to Neal and Carolyn Cassady:

I had made a *vast* grand plan for travel which I *need* for my art and soul's sake—when you see the extent of my plan and it's simplicity you'll realize why I really should go thru with it before getting to Frisco... This is a rare & marvelous trip I need to feed (& free) my soul from 10 years of N.Y.C. (Gifford 159).

That same year, Ginsberg had been receiving letters from William Burroughs, who was at that time travelling in the Putumayo valley in Columbia in search of the hallucinogenic plant Yage, which he hoped could help him kick his heroine addiction. Also known as Ayahuasca, Yage, is used among indigenous South American shamans not as recreational but rather in sacred healing rituals, which often involve long periods of chanting. The cultural influences to which Ginsberg submitted and opened himself would provide his imagination with another possible order of the world, another way of making sense of the chaos that he felt around him. His return to American culture would give his imagination a shock, which for him produced visions of American culture as sick and in need of healing and transformation.

The significant shift in Ginsberg's own psyche meant that instead of seeing himself as sick and in need of healing he would come to see that American culture by means of its repressiveness, culture of fear, and violence being perpetrated in postwar America was making him and others think of their humanness as a sickness. Paul Portuges writes about *Howl* that, "Ginsberg had fully realized his quest to get right into the terror. The individual, victimized by the repression, fear and violence that so permeates Western culture, had surfaced as one of Ginsberg's major themes" (46). This surfaced as one of Ginsberg's themes as a result of his travels in Mexico, with the intention of freeing himself from N.Y.C. and for the sake of his art, and his return to the U.S. His return to the U.S. would produce in him an acute sense of the culture of fear and repression under which he had been living. Ginsberg, like Benjamin, would realize that these conditions

seemed to be the rule rather than the exception, and that America was most definitely living in a state of siege. Ginsberg came to manifest a critique of American culture through the writing of *Howl*, and was able to sustain his lyric critique by means of a contiguous beat that is transhistorically related to chant.

Anne Waldman, in her poem, *Fastspeaking Woman*, written approximately 20 years after Ginsberg's *Howl*, engages and inhabits the chant form directly and with an intention for reclaiming and healing a feminine identity. She references Maria Sabina's *Sacred Mushroom Chant*, which she first encountered as a recorded performance. While it is both clear and admitted by Waldman herself that this is directly influenced and even at times directly mimetic of the *The Sacred Mushroom Chant*, it is short-sighted to end our considerations at such a generic point. Instead what it is needed is an analysis of the cultural and social relationships that Waldman develops towards the chant form. Rather than relying on concepts of cultural appropriation as a critique, it is my hope that we can re-envision her use of chant as transhistorical and understand its circuits of cultural exchange as an emerging transnational poetic form. To put it another way, what I am most interested in pursuing is the reason chant becomes the necessary form for the transmission of this poem, and the reason behind the particular choice of the Mazatec Indian Shamaness Maria Sabina.

Saint Ginsberg

In his essay “Maleficium: State Fetishism”, Michael Taussig writes

What I want to consider is the everlastingly curious notion, bound to raise hackles, that not only God but evil is part of the notion of sacredness—that bad is not just bad but holy to boot [and that] according to this formulation there is the most radical antagonism between the pure and the impure sacred, there is, nevertheless, close kinship between them as exhibited in the fact that the respect accorded the pure sacred is not without a measure of horror, and the fear accorded the impure sacred is not without reverence. Hence not just Genêt the homosexual in a homophobic society, not just Genêt the thief, in a State built on the right to property, but Saint Genêt. (NS 114)

Perhaps this too is how Ginsberg can be read: not just Ginsberg the homosexual in a homophobic society, not just Ginsberg the thief, in a State built on the right to property, but Saint Ginsberg. The relationship that God/good shares with evil is a relationship to the sacred world, and it is something with which Ginsberg was emphatically familiar and something he admired deeply in William Blake’s poetry. Blake understood social codes and mores as something of an outsider and he could reflect those social codes and mores back to his readers.

Ginsberg very directly writes from an understanding of a mode of thinking that considers the “pure” and the “impure” as both sacred. Ginsberg, also cast as an outsider in American culture, is able to reflect back to his readers, through poems such as *Howl*, the social codes and mores of the late 1940’s and 1950’s by blurring the line between the “pure” and the “impure” and by situating the “impure” as sacred. For instance in the third part his *Howl* titled “Footnote to Howl” he writes:

Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!
Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!
The world his holy! The soul is holy! The skin is holy!
The nose is holy! The tongue and cock and hand
and asshole holy!
Everything is holy! everybody's holy! everywhere is
holy! everyday is in eternity! Everyman's an angel!
The bum as holy as the seraphim! the madman is
holy as you my soul are holy!

Here Ginsberg makes very clear that the mundane and everyday is sacred. He writes not only the body as sacred, but rather he focuses on those parts we might not be thinking of as sacred, the nose, the skin, the tongue, cock, hand and asshole. The poem is also attentive to the importance of equating opposites as sacred. For instance “Everyman’s an angel!” and “The bum as holy as the seraphim!” ensure that the metaphoric language will transform everyman into something sacred, an angel, and every bum is as divine as a Blakean seraphim.

The reading that Taussig gives of Jean Genêt is one that I’d like to bring to bear upon Ginsberg’s poem *Howl*. Taussig reads Genêt’s “triumphs” as having

brought the fetish character of the modern State into a clear and sensual focus, and this could be accomplished only by one deft in the management of the ancient art of the *maleficium*, the fetish-power intrinsic to the impure sacred. By means of his remorselessly holy yet secular blend of crime and homosexuality, he does for the State what Sartre would have him do for us—he holds out the mirror in which we might see the holiness of its monstrous self (NS 133).

Maleficium is defined by Taussig as “The Bad-Making,” and his interest in this concept is how to “*deploy* it as a tactic for drawing out some of the fetish power of the modern State” (NS 129). “[T]he task” he writes, “is neither to resist nor admonish the fetish

quality of modern culture, but rather to acknowledge, even submit to its fetish-powers, and attempt to channel them in revolutionary directions.” In other words “[g]et with it! Get in touch with the fetish!” (NS 122) The role of the “*maleficio*” is to bring—Taussig argues—

out the sacred sheen of the secular, the magical underbelly of nature, and this is especially germane to an inquiry into State fetishisms in that...the pure and the impure sacred are violently at odds and passionately interlocked at one and the same time. It is to this ability to draw out the sacred quality of State power, and to out-fetishize its fetish quality, that the *maleficium*—as I use it—speaks (NS 129).

The role then, of figures like Genêt, like Bataille, and like Ginsberg is to draw out the sacred quality of State power and to out-fetishize its fetish quality. In this *modus operandi* Ginsberg’s *Howl* can be read as drawing out the sacred quality of the State power and out-fetishizing the fetish quality that directly endows the State with its power. It is in this way that Ginsberg’s poem is most politically, socially, and culturally challenging.

Another way of putting Taussig’s reading might be to rely on Walter Benjamin’s famous dictum that the “tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the “state of emergency” in which we live is not the exception but the rule” and that when we can conceive of a history that stems from this insight then we “shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency” (Illuminations 257). So that if we recognize a poet and cultural figure like Ginsberg as writing from a “tradition of the oppressed” a homosexual in a homophobic society, then we can absorb this lesson from

Ginsberg's poem, that the "state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule."

Howl, 1956

The role that Ginsberg's sexuality plays in the writing of *Howl* is immense, and largely unrecognized as an affect that positions Ginsberg in opposition to the modern State. It may be easy for us as contemporary readers to recognize and understand the mode of being that Ginsberg portrays in *Howl* but even easier for us to forget the intensity of oppression in the historical time period in which Ginsberg came of age and in which the poem was written and received. Ginsberg's *Howl* is, in a sense, an all out poetry expedition, incited to explore regions of the mind and the imagination that had yet to be explored and publicly expressed, and for Ginsberg this openness would end up reflecting some of the most contentious issues in 1950's American culture, namely sexuality.

In his poetics statement in Donald Allen's well-known 1960 anthology *The New American Poetry*, Ginsberg writes:

I thought I wouldn't write a *poem*, but just write what I wanted to without fear, let my imagination go, open secrecy, and scribble magic lines from my real mind—sum up my life—something I wouldn't be able to show anybody, write for my own soul's ear and a few other golden ears. So the first line of *Howl*, "I saw the best minds," etc, the whole first section typed out madly in one afternoon, a huge sad abstract poetry of mind running along making awkward combinations like Charlie Chaplin's walk, long saxophone-like chorus lines I knew Kerouac would hear *sound* of—taking off from his own inspired prose line really a new poetry" (Allen 415).

The “fear” to which Ginsberg refers is the fear of being perceived as homosexual and criminal, an infidel to American mainstream culture. The open and public expression of sexuality in *Howl* would prove to be a pivotal poem for Ginsberg socially, culturally, sexually and politically. In an interview with Alan Young for *The Gay Sunshine*, he marks the “crucial moment of breakthrough ...while writing “Howl” and notes specifically the line “let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed with joy” (*Spontaneous Mind*, ed. David Carter 313). I would be lines like this that would attract the attention of the American government and its citizens during the 1957 obscenity trials against Lawrence Ferlinghetti for publishing *Howl* under his imprint City Lights Books.

In his 1968 interview with Paul Carroll for *Playboy* magazine, collected in *Spontaneous Mind: Selected Interviews 1958-1996*, Ginsberg is invited to openly discuss his homosexuality. Ginsberg stated that,

...homosexuality provided me with sufficient affection and gasoline to communicate on a tender level with my fellow citizens...because it alienated or set me apart from the beginning, homosexuality served as a catalyst for self-examination, for a detailed realization of my environment and the reasons why everybody else is different and why I am different. In a tank-military hyper-sadistic overmasculinized society fearful of sensitivity and the unconscious and the full man, my homosexual specialization made me aware of the rigid armoring, defensiveness, overcompensation and high camp put on by police-state police (Ginsberg169).

And following this statement, Ginsberg draws an immediate comparison to “the old shamans who are often androgynous or homosexual” and notes that since “they’re outside

normal routine, they're specialized social critics and have sensitivities that others don't have; they're men who see aspects of male history from a woman's point of view. That spectrum of experience is a useful information bank of supplementary intelligence that can be of real value in community self-understanding and awareness" (Ginsberg 169). Ginsberg implies here, that homosexual men, because they are outside "normal routine," in other words outside the heteronormative routine, they become "specialized social critics" in that they can very clearly see what they are excluded from, moreso than in what they are included. And it is perhaps because Ginsberg can understand being sexually penetrated that he can say that "the old shamans who are often androgynous or homosexual" are "men who see aspects of male history from a woman's point of view." Ginsberg aligns himself with shamanism and healing by means of the perspective of his social position as outsider, which is drawn and constructed from his sexual difference.

In *Howl*, Ginsberg imagines America as culturally ill and is able to do so because of this outsider perspective. It is America's mainstream culture and its push to homogenize social codes as heterosexual that, in Ginsberg's imagination, was making people, and especially himself mentally and emotionally ill. And especially because he was excluded from the hetero-meta narratives of mainstream America, he was able to construct a vision of America that brought to the foreground that hidden fetish power of the state, its rules, its mores, and its punitive measures. What sets Ginsberg apart from other poets of his time period, for which similar claims might be made, is that Ginsberg

was interested in foregrounding that hidden fetish power of the state and publicly stating it, which meant that his audience would need to be America.

For Ginsberg, America's social rules were producing madness, hysteria, addiction and perceptions of sexual variance as illness. In Ginsberg's reading of American culture, what was at stake was, the very value system that America, under the spell of capitalism and mass production, was developing and disseminating. Ginsberg needed then to construct a vision of America that reflected an America whose social and cultural rules produced the infidel culture to which mainstream America sought to set itself apart.

Consider the opening lines of *Howl*,

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by
madness, starving hysterical naked,
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn
looking for an angry fix,
angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly
connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night (9).

as resembling the opening lines of a dream-vision poem. As an example I offer one of the earliest dream-vision poems in English, the Anglo-Saxon poem, *The Dream of the Rood*, which opens with a similar dream-vision formula.

Lo! I will tell of the best of dreams,
What I dreamed in the middle of the night,
After the speech-bearers were in bed.
It seemed to me that I saw a very wondrous tree

By focusing on the "I saw" that instigates the telling of a dream vision, the relationship becomes more clear. The dream-vision aspect of this form depends on an altered state,

often brought about by dreams, hallucinations, induced by drugs or illness. As in Shamanism, the blurring of worlds needs to occur in order for a vision to occur, and as in Shamanism, altered states of consciousness whether they be hallucinatory plant induced, dream induced, or physical illness induced are essential to visions.

Ginsberg claims that his vision was experienced during an altered state of consciousness induced by peyote, and his experience reflects a temporality that is outside of and counter to modernity and its narrative of progress as “good.” Ginsberg, in a sense, pursues an escape from the temporality of modernity and attempts instead an anti-modern mode of being, or rather a postmodern mode of being. He does this by looking to models that preceded modernity and that fell outside of the boundaries of modernity itself, models that existed at the peripheral of modernity. In this way Ginsberg can construct an anti-modern mode of being by calling for a re-evaluation of how we think about “values.”

In his famous letter, to poet and critic Richard Eberhart, dated May 18, 1956, Ginsberg responds to Eberhart's reading of *Howl* as a “negative howl of protest” by attempting to challenge and resituate Eberhart's sense of “positive” and “negative” as a system of values. He writes that the “general “problem” is positive and negative “values.” “You don't tell me how to live,” “you deal with the negative or horrible well but have no positive program.”

The title notwithstanding, the poem itself is an act of sympathy, not rejection. In it I am leaping *out* of preconceived notion of social “values,” following my own heart's instincts—allowing myself to follow my own heart's instincts, overturning

any notion of proprietary, moral “value,” superficial “maturity,” Trilling-esque sense of “civilization,” and exposing my true feelings—of sympathy and identification with the rejected, mystical, individual even “mad.”

I am saying what seems “mad” in America is our expression of natural ecstasy (as in Crane, Whitman) which suppressed, finds no social form organization background frame of reference or rapport or validation from the outside and so the “patient” gets confused thinks he is mad and really goes off rocker. I am paying homage to mystical mysteries in the forms in which they actually occur here in the U.S. environment (Morgan 130).

In this letter to Eberhart, Ginsberg performs a critical reading of American social values as producing the concept of “madness” by suppressing “our expression of natural ecstasy.” Ginsberg envisions, in his letter, that those that seem “mad” in America are actually mystics but that “in the U.S. environment” they may appear to us as mad. So that when Ginsberg writes that he sympathizes with “the rejected, mystical, individual even “mad” he envisions them as “angelheaded hipsters” who are “burning for the ancient heavenly connection.”

In his statement on poetics titled “Notes for Howl and Other Poems” published in Donald Allen’s infamous anthology, *The New American Poetry*, Ginsberg writes that he found himself following the “Hebraic-Melvillian bardic breath” and that he wanted to write a poem without fear of the consequence of going beyond where he had previously allowed his imagination to go. Ginsberg embarked on the writing of *Howl* with the intention of letting go of “propriety” in regards to social codes as well as poetic form and opening up the possibilities that lay in the beyond of his imagination as well as the mainstream culture of the U.S. He writes:

I thought I wouldn't write a *poem*, but just write what I wanted to without fear, let my imagination go open secrecy, and scribble magic lines from my real mind—sum up my life—something I wouldn't be able to show anybody, write for my own soul's ear and a few other golden ears" (Allen 415).

This intention to being "open," encouraged and allowed a sense of spontaneity to enter into the process of writing, and this sense of spontaneity was for Ginsberg closer to writing from his "real mind". This intention to openness, to secrecy, to honesty, and spontaneity became a vehicle for the flow of ideas and images from Ginsberg's mind would enable lines such as these:

who got busted in their pubic beards returning through
 "Laredo with a belt of marijuana for New York,
who ate fire in paint hotels, or drank turpentine in
 Paradise Alley, death or purgatoried their
 torsos night after night
with dreams, with drugs, with waking nightmares,
 alcohol and cock and endless balls (Ginsberg 10)

And the consequences of writing without fear, for Ginsberg, would be first national, then international. Ginsberg's book, *Howls and Other Poems*, published by Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights Books, was stopped at San Francisco customs, and a legal battle for the publication and dissemination of Ginsberg's book quickly became national news and the poet's reputation was mythologized and spread quickly while he travelled overseas.

A Vision of Capitalism

According to the lore surrounding the writing of the poem, Ginsberg had been tripping on peyote in San Francisco's Nob Hill neighborhood, where he had a vision of the Sir Francis Drake Hotel as a giant robot that symbolized all that was evil in capitalism and America. In a letter to Kerouac, dated November 9, 1954, he writes:

Damned Belson read *Yage* and put Bill down refused to read *Queer*, the movie is all off. What madness inspires these semi-ignus? He gave some peyote, I got hi with Sublette and Sheila and we dug S.F. midtown cable cars clanging skyline—looked out my living room vast window down into the bldgs.—especially the Sir Francis Drake hotel—which has a Gogotha-robot—eternal—smoking machine crowned visage made up of the two great glass brick eyes on either side (the toilets men and women of the Starlight Room)upstarting out of the paved mist ground—I wrote on it” (Morgan 110-111).

But before Allen Ginsberg wrote *Howl*, before he had his lyrical breakthrough he had been travelling Mexico for about six months, and prior to that had spent 7 months in a mental hospital. These two preceding events matter greatly in regards to the poem because being away from American culture by being in the hospital and by travelling in Mexico endowed Ginsberg with a perspective of America that was being developed from its socially marginalized peripheries. While more obvious and clear is the direct connection the poem shares with Ginsberg's stay in the mental hospital where he met Carl Solomon, also significant was his travels in Mexico because it introduced him to Shamanism and peyote in a culture that read visions as spiritual instead of as mental illness.

In her essay “Ginsberg in Hospital,” Janet Hadda, argues that Ginsberg’s stay in the hospital was beneficial and necessary to the writing of *Howl* because it allowed him a safe place to experience the chaos in his life and to return from that chaos. She writes, “I have come to the conclusion that this period in hospital, while brief and unheralded, provided Allen Ginsberg an opportunity never before allowed him: to succumb to the chaos that had always shadowed his existence” (Hadda 230). She also notes that Ginsberg’s stay in the hospital allowed him “the respite” that he “desperately needed” and that he “thrived on the regular care and feeding, the other patients—especially Carl Solomon—his regular psychotherapy sessions, and the occupational therapy where he painted his internal landscape” (243). Ginsberg, who had grown up taking care of his schizophrenic mother, was finally being taken care of, but as Hadda notes, “[i]n the way that all children take in elements of their parents, Allen absorbed something of his mother’s illness. Although he was not schizophrenic, he understood disordered thinking (237). “In the end,” writes Hadda,

Ginsberg’s poetry itself is testimony to his freedom. If *Howl*, *Kaddish*, and other works sometimes describe forms of mental illness—paranoia, hallucination, obsession, mania, and the like—the poet himself remained lucid and self-aware. Perhaps he was able to venture further than most people into an uncontrolled realm because he had lost his psychological integrity and suffered what others are terrified to experience. But then, unlike Naomi, he returned to sanity and he knew that he was safe. What he most dreaded had already happened, and he could proceed—in his life and in his art—with enviable guts and brio” (258).

Janet Hadda’s reading of Ginsberg’s stay in the hospital is a significant account of the experience in regards to his writing and the transition that Ginsberg was about to have. Ginsberg had gone beyond the perceived limits of his imagination and discovered that it

did not mean that he was schizophrenic, but instead the experience gave him the confidence to know that he could return from places that would be described as mentally ill.

What this meant to his writing would in turn be culturally monumental for Ginsberg's generation and its future generations. The writing of "Howl" marked a significant shift in Ginsberg's poetic practices. This was the poem that Ginsberg chose to write with the intention of "letting go." Ginsberg decided, as he often says, to write the truth. This was something he admired in Kerouac's own work, particularly a work like *Visions of Cody*. Howl reflected a shift in Ginsberg's writing process that drew on that sense of ecstasy in poets such as Whitman, Crane and Williams.

In Donald Allen's now famous anthology, *The New American Poetry*, Ginsberg writes in his poetic state that,

By 1955 I wrote poetry adapted from prose seeds, journals, scratchings, arranged by phrasing or breath groups into little short-line pattern according to ideas of measure of American speech I'd picked up from the W.C. William's imagist preoccupation (Allen 415).

Ginsberg was beginning to break into a new style of writing. He began to practice poetic composition by means of groups of phrasing and their connection to breath. He was literally measuring American speech by means of breath. The metricist Richard D. Cureton terms this "rhythmic phrasing." In his book, *Rhythmic Phrasing in English Verse*, he defines rhythmic phrasing as "those aspects of rhythmic responses that are not

metrical” (x). Cureton sees meters in verse as regular “controlled pulsations” and

“[p]hrasal structures” as

more irregular, global organizations of rhythmic constituents. Meter presents the basic ‘beat’ of the verse. Phrasing represents how the text is segmented into parts and how those parts move, both in themselves and in relations to other parts (X).

Cureton names Whitman as one of the poets who is influenced by this kind of verse.

Ginsberg himself saw Whitman as central to the development of his own work precisely

because of what Cureton calls rhythmic phrasing. Ginsberg saw this as uniquely

American and admittedly pursued and pushed Whitman’s own poetic project into the 20th century. He wanted to continue to develop and define an American aesthetic of poetry.

Ginsberg was incredibly well read and open to literary forms from a variety of cultures and historical periods. In a sense, he would make it part of his life’s work to search out and poetically investigate religious and poetic traditions from around the world. Coupled with his growing interest in jazz, its rhythms, improvisational quality and potential for spontaneity, Ginsberg began adopting and incorporating similar aesthetic practices—which he often attributed to “spontaneous prose”—into his own sense of American lyric poetry. In other words, Ginsberg began poetically drawing connections between the postwar period in America and pre-modern literary traditions. This, for Ginsberg especially, was a way to see, or to step outside of mainstream American culture so that when he stepped back into mainstream American culture he saw very different things about America. Not only did his writing change, but also his social perspective.

Poetically the result of Ginsberg's own transformation would also be a transformation of the lyric form itself. "Howl" would come to signify a shift not only in Ginsberg's own poetics, but also in the aesthetic of lyrical poetry in America. This significant shift within the lyric is an emphasis on rhythmic phrasing, rather than traditional metrical feel. Also significant to Ginsberg's form of the lyric is the very rhythms on which he was attempting to base his rhythmic units, which for him was the breath of the human body. This basis of rhythm would create a platform to which audiences could connect by means of the somatic, the physical, something that could be tangibly felt as entrancing, ritually and rhythmically mimetic of trance and visionary experience.

Six Gallery Reading

The accounts of Ginsberg's first public reading of "Howl" at the Six Gallery in North Beach resemble the narratives of the opening night of the Cabaret Voltaire where Hugo Bally famously performed his chant poem that became improvisatory on stage. If Ginsberg believed he was writing for Kerouac's ear, as he has stated in several interviews, then his confirmation of holding Kerouac's ear would happen that October night in 1955. One account taken from the 1985 documentary film by John Antonelli, *Kerouac, the movie*, the poet Robert Creeley says that Kerouac, upon hearing "Howl" began to talk at and to Ginsberg as he and Kerouac banged on pots and pans as if it were an

improvisatory jazz performance. When asked what kind of jazz he was into at the time

“Howl” was composed, Ginsberg, in a 1966 interview with Tom Clark, said that,

the myth of Lester Young as described by Kerouac, blowing eighty-nine choruses of “Lady Be Good,” say, in one night, or my own hearing of Illinois Jacquet’s *Jazz at the Philharmonic*, Volume 2 (Ginsberg *Spontaneous Mind* 20).

In a later interview with Michael Aldrich, Ginsberg says that,

“Lester Leaps In,” “Howl” is all “Lester Leaps In.” And I got that from Kerouac, Or paid attention to it on account of Kerouac, surely—he made me listen to it (Ginsberg *Spontaneous Mind* 149).

In several other sources Ginsberg notes Charlie Parker’s saxophone as influential to the composition of “Howl.” Ginsberg’s interest in jazz rhythms, spontaneity, and immediacy would push his work toward a kind of lyric that would signify something uniquely American and pose a challenge and a threat to the tradition of the lyric.

Ginsberg imagined himself as continuing an aesthetic tradition in American poetics that Whitman started: the long line. He saw the long lyrical lines of Whitman’s as central to the kind of line he wanted to construct by means of breath units and thought units and saw himself as “perhaps [carrying] off from where Whitman left off with his long lines” (Morgan and Peters 91). For Ginsberg this long line he sought to develop was different from what had been perpetrated in poetry rooted in English verse tradition.

From William Carlos Williams, Ginsberg had inherited the idea of organizing poetry into breath units, but saw as his own project an extension of his own breathing

and rhythmical practices. In a letter to John Hollander, Ginsberg attempts to explain how he imagines that he has taken up William's sense of organization and what has come of his own adaptation of William's practice. He writes,

The poetry in William has depended a lot on little breath groups for its typographical organization, and in "Howl" an extension into longer breaths (which are more natural to me than Williams' short simple talks)—there is another possible approach to the measure of the line—which is not the way you would say it. A thought but the way you would think it—i.e. we think rapidly, in visual images, as well as words, and if each successive thought were transcribed in its confusion (really its ramification) you get a slightly different prosody than if you were talking slowly (Morgan and Peters 91-92).

Measuring the line for, Ginsberg had to be extended because he wanted his line to reflect visual thinking as a kind of montage, and that was the prosody in which he was most interested in capturing. If he saw in Williams' work the idea of breath units, what he saw metrically in Whitman's work was his long lines. Whitman's longer lines would serve as a model for the long lines of "Howl" and they would offer Ginsberg another sense of possibility for rhythm, syntax and prosody.

The long line gave Ginsberg the space he needed to "transcribe the thought all at once so that its ramifications appear on the page much as the ramifications of a sentence appear on the page." The long line would provide the poetic space to be able to include the "weird syntax and rhythms" that are "just like you think, or nearer to what you think" that Ginsberg saw emerge "if you talk fast and excitedly" (Morgan and Peters 92). As Ginsberg notes, in his letter to Hollander, that it is the "thinking process" that he wants to make visible in writing and that in order to achieve this, he needed a form that could

facilitate the expression of the thinking process. Ginsberg need a form that could extend even further Whitman's long lines and that could capture the kind of fast, excited, talking that seemed to yield strange but truthful syntax.

Bringing these two concepts together, the notion of organization by breath, or rhythmical units rather than metrical units, and the practice and possibility of range in a longer line, Ginsberg would be part of a larger movement to liberate American poetics from European precedents. Ginsberg, wanting to shake preconceived notions of literary style, imagined himself drawing on rhythms of the pre-modern lyric forms because he heard in these forms the kinds of rhythms that related to the kind of rhythms in jazz and blues that he wanted to imitate and that he wanted to use to capture the kind of fast excited talking from which he drew weird and strange syntax. Ginsberg was able to deploy another order of lyric poetry by using a longer line and pushing the breath of the human body to its limits. In his poetic statement he writes that "Howl and Other Poems" are poems that "are a series of experiments with the formal organization of the long line" (Allen 416). The long line: the breath-mind units of thought; the rhythms of blues and pre-modern literary forms all came together in the process of writing "Howl" and lyrically captured and propelled forward the montage like style of "Howl."

The question of how to sustain the long line would occupy his aesthetic values in poetic composition and would eventually lead him to a method of composition that was sound based and utilized poetic techniques such as strophes, blues and jazz prosody,

spontaneity—which he always attributes to Kerouac’s influence— and anaphoric repetition. In a letter explaining the composition of “Howl” to poet and literary critic John Hollander, Ginsberg writes that

The method of keeping the long line still all poetic and not prosy is the concentration and compression of basically imagist notations into surrealist or cubist phrasing, like hydrogen jukeboxes...I tried to keep the language sufficiently dense in one way or another—use of primitive naïve grammar (expelled for crazy), elimination of prosy articles and syntactical sawdust, juxtaposition of cubic style images, or hot rhythm (Morgan and Peters 87).

Ginsberg attempted to articulate his practice over his lifetime, but what seemed most consistent in his explanations were the importance of breath and rhythm to maintaining the long line and that it was this practice that he saw as connected to his “new style” of writing simultaneously from the body and the mind. Ginsberg knew that his writing style had significantly shifted, that it had moved toward what he saw as Kerouac’s rhythmic style in prose. It was exactly as Kerouac suggested he do. Ginsberg saw himself as poetically deploying a rhythm that Kerouac could hear, a rhythm that resembled the prose that Kerouac had been developing in his own writing.

He notes in his poetic statement that “[i]deally each line of *Howl* is a single breath unit” but that there is also a regular beat that drives and contains Ginsberg’s own sense of spontaneity in his composition. He writes that he “depended on the word “who” to keep the beat, a base to keep measure, return to and take off from again onto another streak of invention” (Allen 425-426). Consider this selection from “Howl”

Who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking in the
supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating across the tops of cities
contemplating jazz,
who bared their brains to Heaven under the El and saw Mohammedan angels
staggering on tenement roofs illuminated,
Who passed through universities with radiant cool eyes hallucinating Arkansas
and Blake-light tragedy among the scholars of war,
Who were expelled from the academies for crazy & publishing obscene odes on
the windows of the skull,
Who cowered in unshaven rooms in underwear, burning their money in
wastebaskets and listening to the Terror through the wall,
Who got busted in their pubic beards returning through Laredo with a belt of
marijuana for New York,
Who ate fire in paint hotels or drank turpentine in Paradise Alley, death, or
purgatoried their torsos night after night
With dream, with drugs, with waking nightmares, alcohol and cock and endless
balls

It is this form of repetition and return by means of the beat, and by means of the
anaphoric “who”, is coupled with a sense of spontaneity so that the reader or listener
cannot predict where the poem will take them, that emphasizes the chant structure in this
poem. In these lines the poem moves quickly across images, never dwelling too long,
never fully developing a context for the images, but instead the poem’s composition
favors quick transitions creating a montage of images. The constant return to “who” in the
poem, provides a kind of sound glue that maintains, or rather contains the collage of
images that are not always clearly related and gives them a context or relation by means of
word association. By exploring a strophic form in verse, by utilizing an anaphoric rhythm
that is basic and rudimentary to human histories and human bodies, Ginsberg is able to
move quickly within his long line lines from “Heaven under the El” to seeing
“Mohammedan angels” who are then “staggering on tenement roofs”.

One particular technique, writing in strophes is especially important to constructing that sense of lyrical return to which Ginsberg lay claim. In a Letter to Eugene Brooks dated August 16, 1955 Ginsberg wrote,

Am over the hump on a collection of last 4 years' work and writing in a new style now, long prose poem strophes, sort of surrealist, & reading a lot o Spanish and French modern poetry, Lorca, Apollinaire, & some Latin, still on Catullus... This is more or less Kerouac's rhythmic style of prose, ends "the actual heart of the poem of life butchered out of their own bodies good to eat a thousand years." Elegy for the generation... I have been looking at early blues form and think will apply this form of elliptical semisurrealist imagery to rhymed blues type lyrics (*Letters of Allen Ginsberg* ed. Morgan 120-121).

Ginsberg knew his style had shifted, and it quite articulate about his "new style" of writing. Central to this "new style" was a prosaic style that was rhythmically constructed using what Ginsberg formally called strophes. Ginsberg's claim to adapt strophic verse relied less on the concept of metrical turn that was central to the traditional definition of strophes and instead relied more on the concept of writing in rhythmic units. Strophes are traditionally found in ancient lyrical poetry form Greece and Rome, but in the modern period strophes come to define rhythmic stanzas of two or more lines arranged as a unit. Ginsberg, having been such a prolific and unrestricted reader, knew that strophes had parallels in other poetic traditions. Strophic forms are commonly found in ancient Hebrew poetry, ballads, chants, hymns, and 12 bar blues. Ginsberg clearly felt this rhythmic similarity between blues and strophic verse and it is likely that these emerged from his own interests and investigations into the ways in which mind, body, and breath were connected.

Ginsberg's poetic inquiries were focusing on the immediacy of the sense and sensations, truth, emotion, rhythm and consciousness. In an interview titled "The Art of Poetry", conducted in 1965 for *The Paris Review* and published in the Spring of 1966, Tom Clark Asks Ginsberg, "And in "Howl" and "Kaddish" you were working with a kind of classical unit? Is that an accurate description?" Here is Ginsberg's response:

Yeah, but it doesn't do very much good, because I wasn't really working with a classical unity, I was working with my own neural impulses and writing impulses. See, the difference is between someone sitting down to write a poem in a definite preconceived metrical pattern and filling in that pattern, and with someone working his physiological movements and arriving at a pattern, and perhaps even arriving at a pattern which might even have a name, or might even have classical usage, but arriving at it organically rather than synthetically. Nobody's got any objection to even iambic pentameter if it comes from a source deeper than the mind—that is to say, if it comes from the breathing and belly and the lungs. (*Spontaneous Minds*, Ed. Carter 19)

For Ginsberg the concept of phrase units for composition began in accordance with breath pattern and its relationship to the physical body, but he also was aware of and knew how to draw parallels with other poetic traditions with which he was familiar. What Ginsberg's response most reflects is his openness to spontaneity and improvisation and the poetic forms and traditions that he chooses to include are ones that seem to facilitate spontaneity and improvisation. Ginsberg reimagines and transmits pre-modern poetic forms at a crucial historical moment when capitalism is shifting out of the modern and into postmodern.

ANNE WALDMAN ON ALLEN GINSBERG

Anne writes in her essay “Premises of Consciousness” published in *The Poem that Changed America: “Howl” Fifty Years Later*, that Ginsberg’s “Howl”

...will continue to be a kind of rune for readers of the future. It carries “transmission,” in the Buddhist sense, which moves beyond literal historical time. It exudes a sense of immediacy, of discovery, of generosity. And what makes the poems seem more and more over time, like a sacred text, a sutra, a ritual, is that as it is read silently or aloud, “Howl” is reactivated. The magnanimity of its reach never closes. Its anaphoric “who,” its list of minute particulars, reverberates through time. It is a time machine; it is also a time bomb. “Howls” carries warning prophecy. The desire to eternal spring of feeling—its aspirations—is what drives its persistent relevance” (Shinder 266).

What Waldman sees in Ginsberg’s poem might as well characterize the trajectory of this chapter. For Waldman “Howl” is of another order of time, it is part of a tradition of transmission that works across time exactly because of its “immediacy...discovery...[and] generosity.” The “Howl” that Waldman describes seems imprinted with essential characteristics of chant. By means of its “anaphoric “who”...[“Howl”] reads like a “sacred text, a sutra, a ritual...it reverberates through time” and it “carries warning [and] prophecy.” Recognizing “its anaphoric ‘who’, its list of minute particulars” as a ritualized repetition and as a signifying another order of time, a ritualized time, Waldman reads these as factors that contribute to the sacredness of the poem, and to its ability to move “beyond literal historical time.” She realizes in the immediacy that the poem carries has the potential to transmit warning and prophecy beyond literal historical time. Perhaps Waldman’s reading is generous, or perhaps through another order of time, ritual time, which can be perceived—precisely because of its ritual repetition—as having no beginning, middle or end, and perhaps Waldman is acutely

attuned to the pre-modern ritual chant form that is obscured by literal historical time and yet reverberates within the poem.

Anne Waldman's *Fast Speaking Woman*, 1975

In 1956 two men, V.P. and Gordon R Wasson released a recording of the Mazatec shaman, Maria Sabina, performing the *Mushroom velada*; they named it *The Folkways Chant*. This particular session was noted as a failure. Sabina would later note this recorded session with Wasson as the one that ruined the “sacred children.” Part of the failure in this particular session of Sabina’s came from the fact that it was that the session *was* captured in time; it was recorded, essentially trapped or rather “embalmed” in time. More importantly the failure was linked to the lack of belief in the ritual. In a sense, to arrange a recording of Sabina’s *Mushroom velada* limited the ability of those present to cross the boundaries of the profane world. In a sense the whole point of recording Sabina’s chant was to bring it back from the sacred world and situate it into the profane world. And so from the beginning there was a lack of belief in Sabina’s power as a *curandera*, which mattered in terms of its transmission.

Some time later, the poet Michael Brownstein would pass a copy of this recording to fellow poet Anne Waldman, who would then take it up and open herself to the influence of Sabina’s chant. In a commentary in the book *Maria Sabina: Selections*, she writes that,

“*Fast Speaking Woman* began on a trip to South America in 1972” which according to Waldman was a “voyage that triggered a double interest in Meso-America and South American tantra” (Rothenberg 175). Although Waldman claims that her interest in the chant form as a vehicle for poetry had already begun developing, Maria Sabina’s gender would become a significant factor in Waldman’s particular interest in *The Sacred Mushroom Chant*. It was a female *curandera*, a female voice chanting, and so the voice for *Fast Speaking Woman*, Waldman thought, would significantly benefit from her experience with *The Sacred Mushroom Chant*. Waldman’s attraction to Sabina’s mushroom chant was that it seemed to exemplify what she had already been pursuing, relationships between mind, body, breath, but now instead of through the poetics of Olson, Creeley, Ginsberg, or through the male centered practices of Buddhist chant, this chant came from a woman.

Utilizing the chant form provided Waldman with a type of formal orality that enabled an organic and associative development of the poet’s imagination. Because the chant form has such a long and familiar form to so many of us, it also has the potential to be broad reaching and resonate with forms of the past, and millennia of cultural histories. The potential to reach broader audiences and to resonate with ancient and sacred forms are essential to her poetics. Waldman is also particularly interested in Sabina’s work because of her gender and in a sense is seeking to recover a sacred feminine power through resonating with a gendered history of chant. Waldman in a sense “appropriates” Sabina’s chant in order to draw from it a tradition that is also a woman’s tradition, and what she

hears from it is “her potent voice”. She writes in her essay ““Fast Speaking Woman”
&The Dakini Principle”,

Comrade poet Michael Brownstein, with whom I’d traveled South, brought me the Folkways recording of Maria Sabina, Mazatec shaman, which had been recorded the night of July 21-22, 1956 by V.P. and R. Gordon Wasson. It included Sabina’s text, translated from Mazatec into Spanish by Alvaro Estrada and Eloina Estrada de Gonzalez and into English by Henry Munn. He knew I would be gripped by it, and could “use” it, appropriating shamelessly, as poets do. Fired by her potent voice—both the sound and sense (in translation)—I interwove many of her lines, and picked up on the refrain “water that cleans as I go,” using it as a place to pause and shift rhythm and acknowledge the cleansing impulse of the writing. Neither shaman or psychic healer, I was a product of my generation, ignorant then of “cultural colonialism,” and eager to learn from other/wiser cultures. When I meditate or took peyote or tried to imitate Navaho chant I heard on recordings, I did so not to co-opt but to “taste” as a timeless seeker in my own imagination’s interstices, passionately in love with the magics of the phenomenal world (37).

Waldman’s choices are complicated, politically and culturally speaking. She is both a product of her time and she exceeds it; she is “in love with the magics of the phenomenal world” or rather it is her “imagination’s interstices” that are “passionately in love” (37).

Waldman is interested in the mysterious, the unexplainable, the world of phenomenon; she is interested in the relationship between the profane world and the sacred. For her, the chant form is a vehicle between these two worlds. Yet her choices are complicated. In a 1991 interview titled “Vow to Poetry” she admits being

drawn to the passion that manifest in other cultures’ ritual and oral traditions, to an study of how mind articulates its stated of ecstasy and exploration. How art stretches the boundaries of logic. I’m interested in exploration. How art stretches the boundaries of logic...I am interested in bow and where the synaps occurs that transmits through juxtaposition of semantics and sound...I am also a student of my own time and place, which is circumscribed by writing, and I work to forge a poetics which is close to my mind-grammar and body-mind vibration (128).

What is at issue in her choices, or rather her “appropriation” of Sabina’s form is that of cultural sharing, or cross cultural influence. If Sabina had chosen one of Waldman’s poems it might be called assimilation, or the charge might be that Sabina is borrowing from Waldman, but as Waldman chooses Sabina’s chant to use and be influenced by, it becomes appropriation because of the cultural inequity. Before Sabina’s chant, Waldman was grappling with male centered-poetics and seeking out female poetics that could be connected to the emerging poetic traditions.

Michael Taussig, in his book *Magic of the State*, argues that in analyzing indigenous culture as a commodity fetish the techniques of power of the modern state become apparent. What Taussig also implies within his argument is that the violence within forms of cultural exchange is necessary for cultural sharing. A term he develops in his book *Mimesis in Alterity* — “cultural mimesis”—is useful in terms of thinking about Waldman’s poem in dialogue with Sabina’s chant rather than just a “shameless appropriation.” Consider that to a significant extent the circulation of cultural traditions and forms is necessary to maintaining their existence. In considering Waldman’s treatment or adaptation of Sabina’s *Sacred Mushroom Chant* the dynamics of cultural and formal exchange are such that Waldman’s adaptation has extended and broadened the reach of Sabina’s own work as a cultural healer. The extent to which Waldman treats Sabina’s work as “serious business” and as “serious woman’s work” helps bring Sabina’s work into cultural circulation beyond the borders of Sabina’s own region and disciplinary

practice. By means of a cultural exchange, Waldman's poem accomplishes what Taussig theorizes: a critique of modernity.

As Waldman enters into a form of exchange that is both transhistorical and transnational, borders are crossed both formally and historically. Waldman's poem is insistent on a cultural critique of her own historical time period and how gender is constructed and perceived. Her poem is powerful and emphasizes a mode of perception that considers a kaleidoscopic view of the very ontological category of "woman." She takes up Sabina's cultural practices not as a means to cultural appropriation but rather as a means to discovering a healing or redemptive quality in performance that could carry with it a potential community-making experience for women. In a sense, Waldman's poem is a feminist gesture that is transnational and wants to both recover a history and a poetics of women. "As I began to write "Fast Speaking Woman," writes Waldman in her essay "'Fast Speaking Woman" & The Dakini Principle:"

I had in my head that I would do a list-chant telling all the kinds of women there are to be, interweaving personal details (how I see myself: "I'm the impatient woman," "the woman with the keys") with all the energetic adjectives I could conjure up to make the chant speak of/to/for Everywoman" (35).

Waldman's desire to manifest a multiplicity of traditions of the feminine finds textual influence in the chanting of powerful female healer Maria Sabina, but Waldman's own cultural work with chant as an ancient poetic practice had already been underway by the time she discovered Sabina's work. In choosing chant as her form Waldman invites a connection to a larger cultural consciousness and puts a gendered twist on the chant, but is

still able to summon a broader community making experience. After all, that is what chant is for, to draw together a community, an in Waldman's poem that purpose is to celebrate "Everywoman."

Waldman invokes textual sources from different cultures and time periods, such as the *Song of Amerigin*, citing it as "one of the oldest European chants," and in doing so she creates a transhistorical and transcultural context for chant that establishes chant as an ancient poetic form that belongs to a global commons. This selection of the *Song of Amerigin* provides a sense of resonance across time and across cultures.

I am a stag: of seven tines,
I am a flood: across a plain,
I am a wind: on a deep lake,
I am a tear: the Sun lets fall,
I am a hawk: above the cliff,
I am a thorn: beneath the nail,
I am a wonder: among flowers,
I am a wizard: who but I
Sets the cool head aflame with smoke?

For "its ubiquitous litany," Waldman cites the "Welsh *Cad Goddeu*" (*The Battle of the Trees*).

I have been a drop in the air.
I have been a shining star.
I have been a shining star.
I have been a word in a book.
I have been book originally.
I have been a light in a lantern.

Waldman derives and synthesizes chant traditions from several premodern traditions and writes that she "wanted to use this elemental modal structure to capture Everywoman's

psyche” (Waldman 35-36). And so incorporating shamanic chant traditions from “Latin American tantra” as spurred by her “trip to South America in 1972” is border crossing but it is also within this larger transhistorical context and is meant to draw from multiple traditions. The practices of chant do not belong to one culture or another, but rather it is more from a global commons that Waldman as an artist or “word-worker” draws her influence. “Chant is an ancient efficacious poetic practice,” writes Waldman, in her essay ““Fast Speaking Woman” and the Dakini Principle,” and it can be found in many cultures (35).

Waldman own comparison between practices from the Americas and practices from Tibetan Buddhism want to gesture towards a larger cultural modality. In choosing chant, Waldman notes that she “wanted to use this elemental modal structure to capture Everywoman’s psyche...I was focused on my own femaleness and, by extension, any woman’s” (Waldman 36). “Tantra” she writes “literally means “continuity” in the Tibetan Buddhist sense” and that in the “Native American context, tantra refers to the unequivocal energy, magic and healing properties of human mind and sacred language and the unbroken continuity of enlightenment” (Waldman 37). For Waldman there is a resonance, a correspondence between the traditions of wisdom that are handed down through legends and myths.

The poem begins with a quote from Rimbaud “*I is another*” already motioning towards a displacement of the “*I*” as the visible subject, and instead casts the “*T*” as

voyant, often translated as a visionary or a seer. In the same letter from which this quote is taken, Rimbaud writes to Paul Demeney, that “[o]ne must, I say, be a *visionary*, make oneself a *visionary*.” Rimbaud further writes that:

The poet makes himself a *visionary* through a long, a prodigious and rational disordering of *all* the senses. Every form of love, of suffering, of madness; he searches himself, he consumes all the poisons in him (*Illuminations* xxx).

That “disordering of the *all* senses” so frequently quoted and referenced by poets and academics is central to shamanic practices. In Maria Sabina’s shamanic healing practices the sacred mushrooms were required in order to disorder the senses. In Michael Taussig’s ficto-critical book *Magic of the State* the shaman requires rum and tobacco. Additionally important to shamanic healing practices are chant and song. Waldman’s poem performs a derangement of the making sense in language by means of repetition. The modality of repetition in the poem performs both the erasure of the meaning of the word and the making of rhythm out of the loss of meaning. In other words, repetition in Waldman’s poem transforms language in to sound, into rhythm and most importantly into a beat.

Waldman’s “Fast Speaking Woman” begins not at the beginning, but rather somewhere in the middle of it all. The nature of chant allows the sense of continuity to emerge in a way that enables the poem to both begin and seem like it has already been going on before this poems was written.

because I don’t have spit
because I don’t have rubbish
because I don’t have dust
because I don’t have that which is in air

because I am air
let me try you with my magic power:

Beginning with a conjunction, the grammatical function being to joining parts of sentences implies there are missing parts of a sentence, lost clauses. What we have are the reasons or causes of something, but that certainty has been lost.

As if to say that she is everything and nothing simultaneously, Waldman has already invoked her “magic power” and proceeds into a long chant poem that takes up “woman” as its object, to be reclaimed through a redemptive cultural healing practice. The line between the subject “I” and the object “woman” is blurred by repetition and consciousness can be shifted from the “I” as the poet and “woman” as the everywoman to which Waldman wants to reach. Take for example this early section of the poem:

I'm a shouting woman
I'm a speech woman
I'm an atmosphere woman
I'm a flesh woman
I'm a flexible woman
I'm a high-heeled woman
I'm a high-style woman
I'm an automobile woman
I'm a mobile woman
I'm an elastic woman
I'm a silk scarf woman
I'm a know-nothing woman
I'm a know-it-all woman (3).

The “I” of the poem is separated from its own possibility of identity and instead opens onto a larger gendered identity in an attempt to reach out to or write to every woman. The poet’s own work brings the “I” into a context that expands the imagining of the “I.” This blurring that results from repetition is central to the larger project of the imagination, which is to perform a cultural healing of a collective imaging of “woman.”

The repetition in Waldman’s poem is immediate and driving. Already present is the need to exceed the boundaries of language. In exceeding the boundaries of the words “I” and “woman” these terms are deranged from their ordinary ways of making sense and in doing so the invitation or opening to every woman to engage occurs as a result. So that when she continues to write her chant the performance of language is for everywoman an opening to engage of be engage through a community making cultural practice. In another selection, Waldman writes,

I’m a day woman
I’m a doll woman
I’m a sun woman
I’m a late-afternoon woman
I’m a clock woman
I’m a wind woman
I’m a white woman
I’M A SILVER-LIGHT WOMAN
I’M AN AMBER-LIGHT WOMAN
I’M AN EMERALD-LIGHT WOMAN (3-4).

The continuity in the poem is carried by the sound choices Waldman makes. The repeated sound of “d” in “day woman” and “doll woman,” the sound of “w” in “wind

woman” and “white woman,” and the repetition and parallel construction of “SILVER-LIGHT,” “AMBER-LIGHT,” and “EMERALD-LIGHT” effectively produce a sense of continuity without producing a meta-narrative, but instead the poem produces a plurality of narratives and in doing so it resists the urge to narrate according to linear time.

In his essay “The Uniqueness of María Sabina” Henry Munn writes that “María Sabina incorporates the modern world into her chants: she is a *chjon reloj*—a clock woman” (147). Pointing to the peculiar nature of time, or rather anti-time, a time not ordered by a linear perspective, Munn’s recognition of Sabina as a “clock woman” is also descriptive of Waldman’s own move to incorporate the modern world into her chant. The distortion of linear time is facilitated by the repetition, which produces the beat of the poem.

I’m the gadget woman
I’m the druid woman
I’m the Yoruba woman
I’m the vibrato woman (4).

The anaphora of the poem “I’m” also causes the “I” of the poem to recede to the background. To put it another way, you can only hear “I’m” said in succession so many times before it begins to lose its denotative meaning as well as the logical contextual meaning that it has in English. Instead it becomes part of a beat that keeps the rhythm of poem, the pulse if you will. In other words, the frequent repetition of “I’m” creates a loss meaning within the context of language and turns to accumulate meaning in the context of

sound. The repetition of “I’m” becomes the beat and so the “I’m” begins to speak and act like the primary beat, or as Waldman would call it, the heartbeat of the poem. The “I’m a....woman” in the poem operates in this way until the beat is broken, disrupted by sections such as this one:

water that cleans
flowers that clean
water that cleans as I go (5).

My interest is in this peculiar mode of language in which repetition is able to erase meaning through repetition. Excessive repetition is able to make visible the arbitrariness of the sound-image by erasing the association of the sound-image to its concept. It is, in this poem, one of the ways that Waldman works with words in order to cultivate a larger community of women, and to reach beyond and blur the line between the “I” in the poem and the more general category of “women.” In conjuring a community-making poem that engages a generalized category of women Waldman is able to enable a cultural healing for women. Her esoteric synthesizing of spiritual traditions marks her as a transcultural and transnational word-worker and infuses her poetry with the same circuits of circulation. In *Maria Sabina: Selections*, Waldman writes that she “made no claims beyond those of word/cultural-worker” and that she “was a “product” to some extent of [her own] generation, the culture, the radical...times” (177).

In Waldman's poem what we see is that the poem is both all about metaphor in its syntax and its form through a kind of auto-destruction of metaphor. In his book

Magic of the State, Taussig writes that,

Metaphor is, in other words, essential to the artwork by which the sense of the literal is created and its power captured. As to the nature of this artwork, the great wheel of meaning is here not only state-based on an artistic death in which metaphor auto-destructs giving birth to literality whose realness achieves its emphatic force though being thus haunted. The real is the corpse of figuration for which body-ritual as in spirit-possession is the perfect statement, providing that curious sense of the concrete that the figure and metaphor need—while simultaneously perturbing that sense with one of performance and make-believe in the “theater of literalization” (186).

Metaphor, for Taussig, is essential to the accumulation of power that leads to its reality and imagination, for Taussig is a mechanism of the modern state. In the logic of Taussig “essential to the artwork” is a kind of lyrical “spirit-possession” by means of metaphor and in the performance of metaphor within Waldman's poem there is a blurring between “performance” and “make-believe.” In doing so, the poem both constructs metaphor and erases it so that the modes of power in words become visible and activated as the “I'm” and “woman” are repeated in the chant, their denotative contexts become blurred, fall away from visibility by becoming so consistently visible; they become part of the background as they become sound.

The repetition of the “I'm” and “woman” creates a beat that is central to Waldman's chant as performance. It becomes a sound and in doing so metaphor as a trope implodes, it “auto-destructs.” What is left is “literal” content—words themselves—albeit

“haunted” by the content, the metaphors, which the performance caused to auto-destruct. This is the point at which the beat becomes the heartbeat of the poem, and that the assertions of who “I am” is returning in a new embodied female register.

Chant is repetitive and therefore rhythmic. It is the repetition in chant that is akin to magic. Repetition is often seen as a device used to emphasize something, but in the chant form, or in an accumulation of anaphoric lines, which drives poems like *Fast Speaking Woman*, repetition creates the illusion of disappearance. In Waldman’s poem, the anaphoric phrase is “I am”. The repetition of “I am” extends as long as the poem and its result is the opposite of emphasis. In fact the “I am” of the poem slips in to the background, it becomes the marker of breath in the poem, a rhythm maker and it simultaneously loses content, but not necessarily meaning. Its attachment to its denotative context loosens, and the “I am” becomes sound and by virtue of this it lends the poem its form. In this sense the “I am” of the poem loses meaning, but gains meaning in another sense, that of sound and consequently a rhythm that drives the poem. For Waldman rhythm and breath can have the ability to speak to our other senses; our sense of the mysterious; our sense of the beyond, those very senses that perceive the “magics of the phenomenal world” (38).

The ACT OF READING

In a collection of talks recorded at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, at Naropa University, the poet Anne Waldman encourages young poets to become “scholars of words” and that to do that, poets must become readers: readers of texts as much as they become readers of the world. Here is a transcription from the talk:

“Once we realize that we’re working with words, just as musicians and composers are working with notes and with music, that’s something you have to be scholar of—you learn your terms, you practice your scales—why should writing be any easier? ... Think of what goes into being a musician... think of what goes into being a painter or a sculptor, learning your material, knowing your material. So that’s important. And take it very seriously... consider yourself a scholar of this chosen path, which should make you an active reader. So that’s very important, being a reader, seeking things out, curiosity.”

In this lecture Waldman stresses that poets should know the “stuff”, the material of poetry, which is language, specifically noted here as “words.” Poets should learn words, and they should *know* the words because it is the material from which poetry is composed, and specifically poets should learn poems and know poems in order to write poems. In this way poets can be seen not as a phenomenon of history, but rather they are practitioners of a discourse, of a method of communication, of a means of expression, and of histories. But also let us not forget how these discourses, methods, expressions and histories are collected, how they accumulate, through the practices of reading. Thus Waldman concludes that “being a reader” is “very important,” especially in regards to the practice of writing poetry.

In the practice of the writing poetry, Waldman recognizes that writers are not only producers, but important to the practice of writing poetry is that one must be a consumer of words as well. In a sense words are laden with histories, and if words are the “stuff” of poetry then all the histories of language are transported into the poem as well. In the anthology *Talking Poetics From Naropa Institute* Waldman, in an interview says that the “longer chants in *Fast Speaking Woman*, written more recently but earlier than *Journal & Dreams*, seem more cosmic than earlier work. And they were inspired by Allen Ginsberg and Kenneth Koch. Kenneth heard me read a piece called *100 Memories* and told me to continue to write long poems for awhile” (Eds. Waldman & Webb 306).

Later in the same interview Waldman discusses the prominence of sound in her writing in her poem *Light & Shadow*. Note the connection that the poet sees between repetition and sound. For Waldman, sound is what makes the poem a poem, and repetition is what makes poems musical. But also it is repetition that makes language elusive and signs mobile.

But generally, I get more interested in longer pieces, in sustaining a musical theme, rather than worrying about one voice. I think more about the configurations of the words “light” and “shadow.” Light and shadow are no longer the same after you say them fifty times, right? It moves around. It’s musical. Read *Lifting Belly* by Gertrude Stein. Here, she repeats and varies the phrase “lifting belly” until it becomes like breathing (Waldman & Webb 317).

Consider Waldman’s reading of the repetition in Stein’s poem *Lifting Belly*. The words “lifting belly,” through repetition, become unfixed to their denotative contexts. If we think

about this process in Saussurean terminology, the sound-image *l-i-f-t-i-n-g b-e-l-l-y* becomes loosened and eventually unassociated from its assigned concept; the sound-image is abstracted from its concept by means of repetition. After abstraction the sound image exists in another realm of logic, and that is the logic of sound. The abstraction produces what can be termed a floating signifier. Waldman considers this kind of repetition as language being transformed into music, which specifically means that in Stein's poem, the words "lifting belly" become like the sound of breathing in the poem. At the very least the repetition of "lifting belly" marks the rhythm of breathing.

Both Ginsberg and Waldman are interested in this connection between mind, body, and breath. For both, repetition and rhythm are essential to exploring breath and rhythm in their poems. Their poems are meant for performance and meant to access on a larger communal level. In their search for a way out of modernity, Ginsberg and Waldman, incorporated the premodern chant form because of its ability to conjure and cement a community, because of its connection to spirituality, because of its ability to rhythmically sustain longer poems, and because it was a form that could be found in virtually all cultures. Their hope was to offer ways to think outside of the rules and constraints of modernity and that being able to do this meant returning to a premodern past. By bringing this premodern past into contact with their own present moment through poetry and the performances of their poems, both poets saw poetry as able to point out the ills of modernity and offer an alternative way of thinking about and experiencing the world.

CHAPTER 3:

A Transhistoric Poetics in Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer

A Transhistoric Poetics in Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer

“the Text participates in its own way in a social utopia; before History...the Text achieves, if not the transparency of social relations, that at least of language relations: the Text is that space where no language has hold over any other, where languages circulate”

—from Roland Barthes *Image – Music - Text*

What I want to discuss in this chapter are the ways in which the poetics of Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer draw on a premodern past in order to inform their poems. In their poetic practices both Duncan and Spicer situate the role of the poet as a mediator between worlds or historical time periods. The role of the poet, in the poetics of Duncan and Spicer, is to channel poems from the beyond, to be a vessel for poems. Duncan’s poetics invokes esoteric spiritual traditions and magic to define what he refers to as a poetics of derivation while Spicer relies on draws more from technology, science and practices of magic in order to inform what he calls a poetics of dictation. I take up Roland Barthes’ so that I might contextualize the poetics of Duncan and Spicer within a transhistorical tradition of poetics. By this I mean to accentuate the focus on the concepts of time and histories that were taken up by these poets. For Duncan and Spicer, there is a blurring or obscuring of time in their poems that emerges from the ways that each poet engages with a premodern past.

As part of producing a sense of a continuing tradition, Spicer and Duncan explore seriality in poems as a way to continue returning to the past and bring those pasts into

correspondence with their own present moment. The optimal result in many ways for Duncan and Spicer is to breathe life into the old traditions of poems, or to put it another way, to recirculate traditions of the premodern. The importance of doing this was to participate in a sense of tradition that extended beyond the poet's own imagination, and consequently the poet's world. Looking back at premodern pasts meant for these poets the discovery "new" things that were actually quite "old". This transhistorical mode of experience became a way for poets to look outside of the constraints of modernity and to discover ways of thinking and doing that fell outside of the "metanarratives" and rules associated with modernity.

This chapter focuses on Duncan's poetics of derivation as a transhistorical mode of poetics and explores his concept of *rime* most clearly developed in his poems titled "The Structure of Rime." Then I turn to Spicer and briefly articulate his poetics of dictation as a transhistorical mode before taking up his serial poem "The Holy Grail" for analysis. My agenda is to demonstrate how these poetic methods expand poetic fields by means blurring or collapsing a logical sense of temporality.

Robert Duncan

In his statement on poetics, published in Donald Allen's 1960 anthology *The New American Poetry*, Duncan writes that "[m]y revision are my new works, each poem a revision of what has gone before. In-sight. Re-vision" (401). Duncan's statement

immediately contextualizes his poetics within a transhistorical mode of perception. His statement situates his own poems within a sense of a tradition of poetry. His statement has or reflects no definitive time periods but rather a more mysterious “what has gone on before”. For Duncan, this way of participating in a sense of tradition is also a way of participating in a larger sense of humanity. What Duncan does is to mix, or rather to bring in a multiplicity of sources from outside of himself, which he claims to derive mostly from reading, and to combine them into one poem, or a poetic body of work. His poetics operates as an exchange across time, so that in writing a poem in the tradition of Duncan, one might consider that the job of the poet is to bring the “old excluded orders” to life by bringing them into correspondence with one’s contemporary moment or moments.

In his poem “The Human Communion. Traces.” published in his book *Letters* (1955-1956), Duncan writes,

The dead
are the departed therefrom. Whose
leavings. Reading we partake of
A lamp of letters, a ladder of
divine signs,
a substance of ourselves lost, lost
in a world lost waste lost that we must gather
out. (lines 1-8)

The poem reveals a perception of reading that envisions the very act of reading as a form of communion with the dead. In a sense it is a perception of reading highlights the role of derivation in Duncan’s poetics. For Duncan, reading is something that “we partake of” and in doing so, readers, by means of the act of reading, are able to commune with the

dead. By reading their stories, their mythologies and histories, their “divine signs” the traces of the dead are being consumed and by consuming these traces of the dead their mythologies and histories are kept alive by being kept in circulation through retellings.

In Duncan’s sense of participation what seems essential is the ability to draw comparisons and correspondences. This, for Duncan, is a kind of human communion, and this, as a ritual form of participation, is central to Duncan’s poetics. As he writes in his essay “Rites of Participation,”

The drama of our time is the coming of all men into one fate, “the dream of everyone, everywhere.” The fate or dream is the fate of more than mankind. Our secret Adam is written now in the script of the primal cell...All things now have come into their comparisons. But these comparisons are the correspondences that haunted Paracelsus, who saw also that the key to man’s nature was hidden in the larger nature (Rothenberg 327).

Duncan implies that man sought a correspondence not to nature but to the very things that composed “nature” itself, the very things behind the words themselves. For Duncan this way of corresponding with “the larger nature” is mediated by language, and language is for him a way of participating in a larger context of the world. In an undated talk and reading of his work Duncan discusses his relationship to language and how he sees the ability of language to relate and connect to a larger world. In a sense we might think of Duncan as positing a relationship between language and a larger social and cultural contexts of the world. He says of his own process of writing:

I create in a poem with language in order to participate what I intuit to be the nature of what’s going on in the world. So in a way I discover the world as I discover my own process of being part of it and creating, but creating language to

me is part of the creativity of man, which is completely in his consciousness.
(Duncan@pennsound)

Duncan thought “our ideal of vital being, rises not in our identification in a hierarchy of higher forms but in our identification with the universe” (SotW 328). He sought to expand not only readers’ sense of the world but also the ways in which readers identified with a universe. In order to have a more holistic view of the universe a more holistic view of the multiplicities of history and of cultures must be permitted to enter the field of the human universe. In Duncan’s world of poetry, all things must be permitted, and those things that have been excluded, must be brought back into the field of poetry. In a published version of his essay “Rites of Participation” he refers to this as “a symposium of the whole.” He writes that

“To compose such a symposium of the whole, such as totality, all the old excluded orders must be included. The female, the proletariat, the foreign; the animal and vegetative; the unconscious and the unknown; the criminal and failure—all that has been outcast and vagabond must return to be admitted in the creation of what we consider we are” (Rothenberg 328).

In this way, Duncan invites into his work, the *Other*, the excluded narratives and traditions, back into the field of poetry and brings tradition into correspondence with the present. In doing so, Duncan’s poetics expands the very fields of both poetry and the social. In a sense, for Duncan, it reflects a search not only for a kind of totality but rather a search for the humanness of humans everywhere, or as Duncan in his more esoteric vocabulary might have labeled it, the cosmos. We might even think of it as the totality, or

wholeness of being human. The result of Duncan's poetic inquiries are that the very sense of being human, much like the sense of tradition, is expanded.

Duncan frequently refers to himself as a derivative poet, which he defines as a poet that derives from other sources. In an undated and unlocated talk, archived online at PennSound, he comments on being a derivative poet and articulates how that, for him, being a derivative poet is connected to another order of tradition and that for him it required a kind of "permission" to actively and consciously write in this way. He says:

I certainly think of myself as a derivative poet. When I gave myself permission to be a derivative poet I found my mind was full. If I have to be original I really don't have anything in my mind at all. I think one of the things I had to battle against and overthrow in my mind that is dominant for the generation for Pound and Williams and Stein is that it was very important to them that they invented, that they were original. Although when we turn back we see them also as derivative. But just as I think of myself as deriving and my being a soul from a world being then I derive also my writing from a language that I did not invent
(Duncan@PennSound)

So that what Duncan understands about his being in the world is that it is from a larger sense of being in the world, a sense of being in which he only participates in by means of his writing and in this way he and his writing become a part of "tradition" in larger world-time, part of a cohesive world-history context. What is true for Duncan about writing, that he "derive[s]" his "writing from a language that" he "did not invent" is also true of his sense of his own existence in an expansive and open sense of social and cultural

histories of the world. Duncan's understanding is that he was born into "it": "it" meaning both the world and the pre-existing system of language.

In his book *The Opening of the Field* (1960) he opens with his poem "Often I Am Permitted To Return To a Meadow." The idea of the poet giving himself permission—a correspondence between the lines in the poem and the transcribed quote above—becomes a place that resonates with the body of the poet's work and with his way of participating in the world by means of the act of writing. After the title of the poem, which also functions as a line of the poem, these are the opening lines:

as if it were a scene made-up by the mind,
that is not mine, but is a made place, (lines 1-2)

Duncan gives himself permission to return to a "meadow" that is not his but rather it is a "scene made-up by the mind." So that for Duncan, returning to the meadow that is a made-up place in the mind is like returning to a memory and because it is made up by "the" mind and not "a" mind it implies that this sentiment of return is related to a kind of collective world-memory. In the eighth stanza of the poem Duncan writes:

Often I am permitted to return to a meadow
as if it were a given property of the mind
that certain bounds hold against chaos,

that is a place of first permission,
everlasting omen of what is (lines 19-23).

He creates a vision of his return as an eternal return, and “the mind” representing a greater collective world-mind of which he is only a part. For Duncan, it is as if this “greater mind” is somehow linked to or is in fact the cosmos itself cast in metaphor, or rather cast in a form of resemblance. The poet giving himself permission to return to the meadow of the mind becomes “a place of first permission.”

The link being made here is to imagination, more specifically the way that imagining things is a really a re-imagining and that the act of imagining is a kind of translation of the things a mind remembers. Duncan’s poetics position an individual imagination within a collective world-imagination, from which he and, at least in Duncan’s mind, all poets draw. Duncan recognizes that the way to the source from which he draws his poems is a process, and that process produces and reproduces re-imaginings, which is essentially a repetition of images. So that for Duncan, this process is about making a way for images to be seen by readers but not necessarily by the poet themselves.

In an earlier collection by Duncan titled *The Letters*, he writes in his prose poem “Source”:

Or: I work at the language as a spring of water works at the rock, to find a course, and so, blindly. In this I am not a maker of things, but, if maker, a maker of a way. For the way in itself. It is well enuf to speak of water’s having its destination in the sea, and so to picture almost a knowing in the course; but the sea is only the end of ways—could the stream find a further course, it would go on. And vast as the language is, it is no end but a resistance thru which a poem might move—as it flows or dances or puddles in time—making it up in its going along and yet going only as it breaks the resistance of language (Duncan, *Selected Poems* 42).

In this instance Duncan is casting himself not as a “maker of things” but as a “maker of a way” so that he is not a maker of things in a poem, he is not an inventor of words or

forms, but rather he is a maker for a way—a process—for the poem to develop. Process is central to Duncan’s poetics because he works by intuition, he “intuit[s] to be the nature of what’s going on in the world,” by means of writing poems and he “create[s] in a poem with language in order to participate” in that sense of what he intuit[s] to be going on in the world. He claims to “discover the world as [he] discovers his own process” of writing and that writing itself is his process of being part of the world (Duncan *undated talk@Pennsound*).

What can also be gleaned from this quote is Duncan’s consciousness of how language relates to things in the world, and how language intertextually relates to itself in a transhistorical manner. For instance, Duncan claims to be a maker of way, not a maker of things, and this points to a clear distinction between things in the world and the words that are related—over time and by means of repetition—to those things in the world which the words are meant to represent and eventually come to resemble. In a sense it is that “place of first permission” to which Duncan wants to return, that first place where in the beginning was the word, so that he can be permitted to intervene within a larger, transhistorical system of language, a system into which he was born.

This kind of historical linguistic intervention is important to Duncan socially, politically, culturally, and sexually. Because Duncan is a writer language is his means, his medium in which to intervene and interrogate the social, political, cultural and sexual histories that are embedded in language. This is part of why Duncan is so invested in

multiplicities and “upstaireses and downstairses” and in several ways of being and perceiving. Michael Davidson, in his book *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Midcentury*, reminds us that,

For Duncan, writing is always a form of reading, the use of poetry as occasion for interpretive acts that lead outward to a larger realm of story...Instead of recovering the text in an act that leaves it essentially unchanged, the poet actively translates its terms into a new text...It is not simply that the poet represents old stories and myths thematically but that the poem itself, by actively interrogating those texts in the present act of writing, reenacts a story that has been lost to cultural memory” (131).

In noting this, Davidson points out that writing as a form of reading means that Duncan “actively translates” the terms of an original text “into a new text.” In other words, Duncan translates texts that he reads, text from the past, into a new text, a contemporaneous text that likely includes references to contemporary events. Duncan does not invent, he does not make, but instead carves out resemblances; he brings the past into correspondence with the present.

Davidson, in his essay on Duncan’s series of poems “The Structure of Rime,” positions Duncan’s aesthetic derivation outside of modernism, and instead repositions Duncan’s aesthetics within a narrative of origins. Davidson sees an alternative path not articulated by the modernists, an alternative sense of tradition and an alternative form of participation within “the largest field of creative life.” He writes that in Duncan’s particular case,

The poet's individual talent is expressed not in originality — the transformation of tradition as Eliot has defined it — but in an ability to respond to the demands of immediacy. Implicit in this idea is the notion of repetition or what Duncan prefers to call “rime,” by which original moments, events, and ideas are interrelated into a dense weave. The structure of rime or repetition refers to the poem's ability to resonate with the world without either representing or destroying it. Where “tradition,” to the New Critical aesthetic, implied artisanal mastery within a specifically literary history, for Duncan and others of his generation it meant cooperation with and response to the largest field of creative life” (Davidson 127-128).

Davidson emphasizes the importance of repetition in Duncan's work as it relates to or gestures towards a collective memory.

In *The Structure of Rime XI* there is a clear example of the type of repetition to which Davidson refers. Duncan's poem immediately places his reader in the context of a mythological original moment: “the first poem.”

There are memories everywhere then. Rememberd, we go out, as in the first poem, upon the sea at night—to the drifting.

Of my first lover there is a boat drifting. The oars have been cast down into the shell. As if this were no water but a wall, there is a repeated knock as of hollow against hollow, wood against wood. Stooping to knock on wood against the traps of the nightfishers, I hear before my knocking the sound of a knock drifting.
(Duncan, *The Opening of the Field*, 73)

The “first poem” drifts on a dark sea and this original moment is brought into correspondence with and is made to resemble in syntax, image and by means of repetition “my first lover” where “there is a boat drifting.” The repetition of “drifting” is not an exact repetition because each instance of “drifting” is situated in a different context: the first poem and the first lover. In this way the repetition of “drifting” within this poem

bring both “firsts” into a similar field, a larger field, a field in which both “first poem” and “first lover” can resonate with and against each other. In the instance of the “knock as of hollow against hollow, wood against wood” is a repetition that invokes correspondence between “hollow against hollow” and “wood against wood;” it performs syntactic parallelism over which the “knock” can be permuted, so that it is clear that all these words that represents objects in the world are brought into a kind of participatory correspondence within this particular field which also wants to resonate and correspond with a larger social field.

Another type of repetition that is prevalent in Duncan’s poems is repetition that happens across poems. This kind of repetition is central to the very concept of the serial poem for Duncan. Repetition across the several poems is what binds the poems together, for Duncan it is a kind of way to rhyme, which he almost always prefer to call “rime.” For Duncan, repetition of words across poems is rime because it is a kind of repetition that operates by correspondence and by recounting or repeating but also translating narratives, language, fables, etc., from the past. This kind of repetition for Duncan also accumulates a kind of symbolic and even cultural capital as it is performed over a number of poem and over a period of time; it, in fact, is the very basis of constructing and instituting, what we might refer to as tropes, or symbols, or images, or even representations.

For example, the repetition of words such as “rime” “wood” and “the world-tree” across several poems accrue meaning by resonating with each other over the whole of a book, or several books, and even throughout Duncan’s entire body of work. It is the very way in which Duncan creates tropes in his own work that both convey and disrupt certain meaning, and it is central to the way that he creates his own idiosyncratic mythology in his poetics. An example of this would be Duncan’s reoccurring figure of the lion, which appears in several poems, and in several varying contexts. For instance in *A Book of Resemblances*, published in 1952, the lion appears in the poem “The Song of the Borderguard” (Robert Duncan *Selected Poems* 22).

The man with his lion under the shed of wars/
sheds his belief as if he shed tears.” (lines 1-2)

In the fifth stanza the lion is reappears in this context:

The man shedding his belief
knows that the lion is not asleep,
does not dream, is never asleep,
is a wide-awake poem
waiting like a lover for the disrobing of the guard;
the beautiful boundaries of the empire
naked, rapt round in the smell of a lion. (lines 15-21)

The figure of the lion reappears again much later in “The Structure of Rime II” published in *The Opening of the Field* in 1960. The context in which the lion is situated is as “The messenger in guise of a Lion” who answers this question: “What of the Structure of Rime?” The messenger disguised as a lion answers the speaker’s question with questions “*Why does man retract his song from the impoverishd air? He bring his own to*

the opening of the field. Does he so fear beautiful compulsion?" As the poem continues the speaker of the poem seems to become the messenger disguised as the lion, until a "lion without disguise" speaks.

I in the guise of a Lion roared out great vowels and hear their amazing patterns.

A lion without disguise said: He that sang to charm the beast was false of tongue.
There is a melody within this surfeit of speech that is most man.
What of the Structure of Rime? I asked.

An absolute scale of resemblance and disresemblance establishes measures that are music in the actual world. (Duncan, The Opening of the Field, 13)

Both resemblance and disresemblance are necessary for the "measures that are music in the actual world," says the lion. So that in a sense, repetition creates both resemblance and disresemblance, and that is the "symposium of the whole" to which Duncan reaches. Not just repetition itself, but more specifically the way that repetition constructs resemblances and disresemblances and in doing so establishes the measure for music in the actual world. This is because, as Deleuze reminds us, exact repetition is unnatural and would be an anomaly, but repetition with difference is common and happens organically in the actual world. Duncan's goal is not to repeat the tropes and narratives of the past, but rather to translate them into another context, another possible order of life, and most significantly, translate those tropes and narratives across time. For Duncan, it might seem rather an intervention into the very processes of construction of the social and political histories of language.

Michael Davidson writes that Duncan's version of repetition is much like Kierkegaard, who saw repetition as that which "generates life out of that which was once partially glimpsed but never fully realized" and that "[f]or Duncan, poetry is also a structure of repetition, a return to "roots of first feeling" and yet a projection based on the terms discovered in that return" (133). But that "return to the roots of first feeling" is only a resemblance of that first feeling, and that first feeling can only be "glimpsed" and "never fully realized." This seeming contradiction for Duncan is often associated with a kind of practicing of magic and it is part of letting in "all the old excluded orders." In this sense, Duncan is a conduit—or rather a mediator—for the "old excluded orders."

In working with language as a pre-established system into which he is born, Duncan sees his process of writing poems as the business of representation and resemblance, and as a "business" that exist in two worlds: the sacred and the profane. For Duncan, making a way for images is the business poetry and it is like a divine kind of magic. Duncan's writing practice oscillates between the profane and sacred, between seeing and not seeing, but it is precisely focused on being a process which allows images—words—poems—to emerge. In a digitally archived reading of *The Opening of the Field* (date and location unknown) Duncan says:

By the time I had written "Structure of Rime II" the title of the book was there and I had begun to think about the field and the opening of the field as that total idea that would be let's say the scene that would be in a tapestry if it could be seen as a tapestry, but I usually think of it not as a tapestry but of one of those vast Mohammedan rugs made up of thousands and thousands of threads where the design is abstract because they are not permitted to show *the* image since *the* image is the most holy thing. And let's say I phrase it this way to myself as an

artist: I am not permitted to look at the image because the image is the most holy thing. I would not seek to show the image for the very same reason, although of course let's say I can neither know it nor can I show it. So I must seek to avoid showing that which I do not know. It's quite a trick if you think about it. That is if I knew the image and had seen it I could refrain from it, but I must practice a kind of magic (Duncan reading *The Opening of the Field* @Penn Sound).

Duncan envisions the business of writing poetry as a kind of sacred and holy thing and because of that he must attempt show the image without knowing the image. The process then for Duncan is that he can only “glimpse but never fully realize” the images that he is constructing in his poems because to see the image would be to also destroy the image with the poet's own vision and interpretation of the image. The job of the poet, in Duncan's practice, is to develop and deliver the image, to bring imaginings of the past into correspondence with the poet's own presence, and in doing so the poet exhibits an understanding of his own historical moment. It is the job of the poet to deal with things that are unknown and to come to discover them through an engagement with language, through the process of writing, while discovering the world around the poet, the world the poet is born into, the world that the poet inhabits. “I will not take the actual world for granted,” writes Duncan in “The Structure of Rime 1.”

What I want to point out here are the language choices Duncan makes. His poem, “The Structure of Rime 1,” begins by addressing the sentence. He writes:

I ask the unyielding Sentence that shows Itself forth in the language as I make it,

Speak! For I name myself your master, who come to serve.
Writing is first a search in obedience.

There is a woman who resembles the sentence. She has a place in memory that moves language. Her voice comes across the waters from a shore I don't know to a shore I know, and is translated into words belonging the poem (*Opening of the Field 12*).

That the "Sentence" "shows Itself forth" reflects Duncan's suggestion that he is a maker of a way, that his practice allows for things to have a sense of emerging. Duncan's word choice also implies that this poem or these poems do not actually belong to him. There is a sense of both being master and of giving over to images or to words, and a sense of the poet giving up agency in the matter of writing while also being its master. The woman that "resembles a sentence" and "has a place in memory that moves language" is one of Duncan's figures of derivation, or a kind of transhistorical translation. She has a voice that "comes across the waters" from a place that is unknown to the poet and is received in a place that is the poet knows, and the very translation of this voice "into words belonging the poem" is actually part of the poems itself.

*Have heart, the text reads,
You that were heartless.
Suffering joy or despair
you will suffer the sentence
a law of words moving
seeking their right period.*

I want to point out the repetition, more specifically repetition with difference, of the word "moving" and its earlier form of "moves" in the lines "place in memory that moves language." The repetition provides connection between the poet and the sources from

which he is deriving poem. In this poem, there is a consciousness of this process in that the “words belonging to the poem” resonate with the overall poem itself. In this way Duncan is able to create a sense of multiple voice communicating across time through writing.

Duncan’s “Structure of Rime” poems are an example of how poems can be linked across books through repetition of themes, words, and forms. These poems contain within them an older excluded form of rime, a medieval form of rime, to which Duncan is returning. Rime, as Duncan conjures it, is a way to tell about events or histories, as much as it is a way to relate events and histories across time. In order to relate events and histories across time what was needed was a form that facilitated this kind of movement across time and for Duncan it became the concept of serial poems. For Duncan’s poetics, what is important is a notion of ongoingness that seemed to permeate his work and that allows him the permission to continue series of poems across books. Duncan’s sense of serial poems personify a practice of telling through retelling, in this way his poems are able to engage with the historical and the mythological. They are able to recount narratives of the past, forms of the past, and language choices of the past, and they are able to do so by means of return and repetition.

To further this analysis I want to engage the spelling of “Rime” which is from the Anglo-Saxon *rim*, and as a noun means: number, counting or reckoning. In its verb form, *riman*, it means to count, to number, to tell, enumerate, or relate. In terms of these

definitions we might consider Duncan's series of poems titled "The Structure of Rime" as an inquiry into the structure of telling, the structure of relating, or as Duncan himself would most likely have it, the structure of retelling. Repetition in this way is essential to Duncan's practice of derivation, since it depends on repeating and retelling poems, structures, forms, and tropes, and then bringing them back into the field of poetry by translating them across time. This kind of work in the language of Duncan's poems brings ideas and concepts from multiple time periods and different cultural belief systems into correspondence, and in some ways this makes the poems into vessels that are then performing a kind of transmission of "the old excluded orders" to Duncan's contemporary and future readers.

In his return to Anglo-Saxon rime, there is a transformation that happens in the transmission of the structure of rime that is elicited by the convergence of the old and the new. Davidson notes that, "[t]he idea that poetry permits one to enter life as a fiction is hardly new, but for Duncan it is the central bequest of the romantic tradition.... "entry" means re-vision and transformation" (140). Permission to return, to re-enter, means permission to revise and to transform "as if it were a given property of the mind / that certain bounds hold against chaos," writes Duncan in *Opening of the Field*, and "that is a place of first permission," and an "everlasting omen of what is" (7). The "Structure of Rime," writes Davidson, "has become the poet's ongoing study of the role of rhyme, measure, and language" (134). He argues that it is a "dramatization of poetics" and that it

is informed by a doctrine of linguistic and mythological correspondences whose implications are ultimately social. His poetics is defined as an interactive process by which individual speech is claimed out of a swirling heteroglossia of other voices. The history of language, from its inception in childhood to its most complex manifestations in poetry, is also the history of fictions by which the human race coheres. To differentiate among phonemes or recognize similar sound as rhyme is to enter the realm of story and the cultural matrix in which story is enmeshed. Duncan attempts, in "The Structure of Rime," to describe the process by which we become "written," inscribed in a text larger than ourselves that we must yet translate into our own terms. But at the same time, it is in the immediacy of the moment, in its specific and time-bound nature, that our sense of commonality is discovered. In such charged moments of attention and apprehension we join "the company of the living." (136)

Davidson highlights Duncan's poetics as an interactive process because it is derivative, because it derives its language, its narratives, its forms from a history of language it can then turn and reproduce a "history of fictions by which the human race coheres." What is particular about "The Structure of Rime" is that it is conscious of itself as a text; it tells a narrative about narrative, about writing and language itself through the very medium of language. In activating this kind of poetic play it retells or reproduces, as Davidson notes, "the process by which we become "written," inscribed in a text larger than ourselves," and by pointing out or calling it out as a process it makes the process visible. In other words a sense of unity of the human race is discovered through the rituals of language and our participation in the whole history of language. In this way can we see the ways in which our participation in the rituals of language can make visible the ways in which we are inscribed in a larger world, or as the poet and scholar Nathaniel Mackey describes in his book *Discrepant Engagement*, a participation in a world-poem. Take for instance this

passage from Duncan's poem "Structure of Rime XXIV," published in *Bending Bow* (1968) where Duncan puts forth the idea of a "life-work" as a way of cohering humans.

And in every repeat majestic sequence of avenues branch into halls where lovers and workers, fathers, mothers and children gather, in a life, a life-work, the grand opus of their humanity, the old alchemists' dream. They must work with the first elements, they must work with the invisible, servants and students of what plants and insects say (BB 36).

Drawing a community of people together and referring to it as a "grand opus of their humanity" emphasizes a cohering of humans. That there is a "life-work" to be done, a work that must be done with the "first elements" stresses the rites of participation in a life-work and being able to do so means listening to what "plants and insects" are saying. In other words, participating in the world, also means to listen to the elements of that world. For Duncan, this is translatable to his poetics; it is a form of derivation for him and engages worlds across histories and traditions.

Reflecting on Barthes essay *Death of the Author* gives us another way to think about Duncan's practice of participation and Michael Davidson's notion that "The Structure of Rime" describes "the process by which we become "written," inscribed in a text larger than ourselves." Dicta such as "The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" and statements such as the author's "only power is to mix writing, to counter the ones with others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them" are reflective of Duncan's own statements about a poetics of derivation (146).

Being a derivative poet, for Duncan, means that he is able and free to draw from those

“innumerable centres of culture” that Barthes describes. “The reader” he writes, “is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.” Being inscribed in a text larger than the self echoes Barthes and is a feature of Duncan’s statement that he “create[s] in a poem with language in order to participate what [he] intuit[s] to be the nature of what’s going on in the world” (Duncan @pennsound). In other words, Duncan uses language as a means of participating in the world as text, or a global text. We might even be able to view Duncan’s poetics via Barthes if we see Duncan first as that “reader...without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted”(Barthes 148). This means that Duncan as reader of texts is inscribed by them and becomes that very “field” on which “the written text is constituted.” In short, this would mean that for Duncan, a field of poetics coheres by means of the texts that the poet reads.

The terms by which Duncan becomes written, by which he claims to be a poet of derivation, happens at that point where the distance between reading and writing is diminished. In this way a poetics of correspondence is brought forth under a concept of “play” that Barthes develops. In his essay “From Work to Text,” Barthes’ writes that:

The text (if only by its frequent ‘unreadability’) decants the work (the work permitting) from its consumption and gathers it up as play, activity, production, practice. This means that the Text requires that one try to abolish (or at the very least diminish) the distance between writing and reading, in no way by intensifying the projection of the reader into the work but by joining them in a single signifying practice. The distance separating the reading from writing is historical...In fact, *reading*, in the sense of consuming, is far from *playing* with the

text. 'Playing' must be understood here in all its polysemy: the text itself *plays* (like a door, like a machine with 'play') and the reader plays twice over, playing the Text as one plays a game, looking for a practice which reproduces it, but, in order that that practice not be reduced to a passive inner *mimesis* (the Text is precisely that which resists such a reduction), also playing the Text in the musical sense of the term (*Image – Music – Text* 162).

When reading and writing are joined into that "single signifying practice" what is made visible is that the "distance separating the reading from the writing is historical."

Duncan's poetics of derivation is a means of bringing to light this unity of reading and writing in order to make apparent the larger histories in which humans participate. In a sense it is a level of global cultural consciousness towards which Duncan's poetics gesture.

Jack Spicer

Dear Lorca,

These letters are to be as temporary as our poetry is to be permanent. They will establish the bulk, the wastage that my sour-stomached contemporaries demand to help the swallow and digest the pure word. We will use up our rhetoric here so that it will not appear in our poems. Let it be consumed paragraph by paragraph, day by day, until nothing of it is left in our poetry and nothing of our poetry is left in it. It is precisely because these letters are unnecessary that they must be written.

—Jack Spicer *from After Lorca*

In *A Textbook of Poetry*, Spicer wrote, “It is as if nothing in the world existed except metaphors—linking between things. Or as if all our words without the things above them were meaningless” (*Collected Books* 169). What Spicer points to here is the system of language itself, which Spicer understood as a system of metaphors. This idea resonates with Duncan’s own notion of resemblances in language. What Spicer seemed to understand is the inability of poetry to capture what he often referred to as “the real.” Because poetry is made out of language it cannot capture the real, but only representations of the real, and because these representations of the real are representations from a human with unique social, cultural, economic, political, sexual and regional experiences, then the very representations themselves are similarly subjected to the same social, cultural, economic, political, sexual and regional conditions that have composed or conditioned the writer.

This matters to the poetics of both Spicer and Duncan because of how they thought about poetry and poetics, specifically the process of writing poems. Both Duncan and Spicer saw themselves as mediators between historical or rather historicized worlds. It is important for us to recognize that for Duncan and Spicer this sense of worlds would have been considered in terms of historical time periods, ie. the ancient world, the medieval world, the world of ancient Rome, or Greece and so forth. But by conveying things from these worlds into their contemporary historical moments, Duncan and Spicer, saw themselves as mediators through which these things, these older excluded forms from different historical time periods, must pass through them. And in passing through them,

these older excluded forms are transformed by the poets themselves. Roland Barthes in his essay “The Death of the Author,” writes that,

in ethnographic societies the responsibility for a narrative is never assumed by a person but by a mediator, shaman or relator whose ‘performance’ — the mastery of the narrative code—may possibly be admired but never his ‘genius.’ The author is a modern figure, a produce of our society insofar as emerging from the Middle Ages (142).

Spicer’s array of metaphors for his own poetics resonates with this ethnographic reading of the author as a mediator. In the introduction to *After Lorca* (1957) Spicer writes under the guise of Garcia Lorca:

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 (11).

The scarecrow in this instance is similar to the mediator. In this tryst, one poet “whispers” to another not in an effort to actually communicate but rather to speak beyond the poet. The figure of the scarecrow is one Spicer’s metaphors that positions poets as mediators between worlds.

Another metaphor Spicer develops is the poet as a radio. In his poem “Sporting Life” published in *Language* (1964) Spicer writes, “The trouble with comparing poet

with a radio is that radios don't develop scar-tissue," and later in the poem he writes that "The poet / Takes too many messages," and by the end sates that "The poet is a radio" (*The Collected Books* 218). This metaphor is likely influenced by Jean Cocteau's 1950 film *Orphée* in which the poet Orpheus takes dictation for poems from a car radio. Spicer discussing poets as mediums, notes that "in his *Orphée*,¹ both the play and the picture, used a car radio" (Gizzi 7). The metaphor of poet as radio is used in order to describe what Spicer refers to as the "Outside" of the poet. The poet takes messages like a radio receives transmissions. In his 1965 Vancouver lecture titled, "Dictation and 'A Textbook of Poetry,'" Spicer revisits and further develops the poet as radio metaphor in tandem with his martian metaphor. "To begins with," says Spicer, "I don't think that messages are for the poet any more than the radio program is for the radio set. And I think that the radio set doesn't really worry about whether anyone's listening to it or not, and neither does the poet" (Gizzi 16).

Yet another well developed metaphor for Spicer are the Martians. The "martians" become for Spicer representative of the Outside. Ellingham and Killian describe the influence as coming from Spicer's friendship with John Allen Ryan with whom Spicer had "invented a private language...and formed their own "secret" society, the

¹ In one version of Cocteau's play, however, the figure of a horse is used as a vehicle for dictation rather than a car radio. The horse stomps his foot and Orpheus counts the number of hoof stomps then using the same number counts through the alphabet and collects the letters in order to compose his poems.

Interplanetary Services of the Martian Anarchy” (Ellingham and Killian 57). “From this point on,” write Ellingham and Killian,

Spicer’s poetry is invaded by Martians...Slowly the notion took root that “invasion” itself might be a better metaphor for poetry than “inspiration,” and “Mars” became a verbal shorthand for a frightening outside force that insinuates itself into human thought and shapes our brains through language. (57-58)

Spicer, in his 1965 Vancouver Lecture, “Dictation and ‘A Textbook of Poetry,’” he further describes this metaphor of Martians as an outside force that transmits messages, which poets can then receive. The Martians as an outside force can only use what the poet already has in their head to transmit their messages. In his lecture, he describes it “as if the Martian comes into a room with children’s blocks with A, B, C, D, E which are in English and he tries to convey a message. This is the way the source of energy goes. But the blocks, on the other hand are always resisting it”. This is because, he notes “you are stuck with language, and you are stuck with words, and you are stuck with the things that you know...The more you know, the more languages you know, the more building blocks the Martians have to play with” (8). In this way a poet can be defined and in some sense inscribed by the vocabulary that they collect by means of reading texts, culture, films, experiences etc.

Again Roland Barthes’ “Death of the Author” is a useful lens to decipher Spicer’s poetic system what it implies in terms of the larger sociolinguistic system under which we, the users of that sociolinguistic system, live, or are inscribed into the sociolinguistic

system. What was at stake for Barthes in his own text, was and is language itself.

Barthes' metaphor, that the death of the author happens at the instance of writing, and that the "birth of the reader must be at the cost of the author" (148) is enabled by the structure of language itself, but it is also necessary to "overthrow this myth". This is because for Barthes, "it is language that speaks, not the author" (143).

For Spicer and Duncan this is an appropriate mode of thinking for their own poetics. For Duncan as a derivative poet and for Spicer as a poet of dictation, the Barthean notion of that a "text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture" (146) and that "a text's unity lies not in its origins but in its destination" (148) permits both of these poets to themselves become inscribed by texts, by language, by words and word histories. For both Duncan and Spicer, writing from this perspective was a way of corresponding with multiple pasts, or culture and with the world itself and the thing-ness of things in the world. In other words, corresponding with the beyond, in a sense, meant corresponding beyond the limits of language and beyond the limits of knowledge. In a sense it meant coming to an understanding of things in the world through language, but in order to do so that system of language has to be corrupted in order to be able to expose itself as system into which readers and writers are inscribed. The levels at which this happens are civic and linguistic, but it is play, disruption and destruction that poetry can offer which can destabilize and make visible the ways that we are inscribed by language and the histories that it contains as well as make visible the connections between the civic and linguistic.

When viewing the structure of language in this way it seems nearly impossible to correspond with “the beyond” of language by means of language itself, but to a certain extent that is exactly what is necessary. For Spicer it might have meant that seeing the arbitrary corresponding structures of language would point us to the arbitrariness of the system itself. For Duncan it might have meant corresponding with a larger social and cultural world, a world “cosmos” as Duncan often called it. But for both poets, the path of poetry was not one of invention and freedom, but rather one that was indebted to a tradition much larger than themselves, a tradition indebted to a larger linguistic system. Being aware of being part of that system as well as being aware of having been born into a system of language was essential to the practice of reading and writing that Duncan and Spicer shared.

A reader of Duncan and Spicer might benefit from considering language as a structure in which we, as human users of language systems, dwell. If language were a house we would live in that house, and if language were a baseball field we would play within the parameters of that field, but since language is an arbitrary and abstract system we inhabit that arbitrary and abstract system, and as poets and readers of poems we play on that arbitrary and abstract field. Because language itself is a system of metaphors, of words representing things in the world, and of words representing other words—think of how dictionary definitions are written—and because Spicer understands language in this way he positions himself as something like a mediator through which language can pass, a

messenger of poetic forms rather than an inventor of them. Spicer, I think, explains it best in the first letter in *After Lorca*, he writes:

In my last letter I spoke of the tradition. The fools that read these letters will think by this we mean what tradition seems to have meant lately—an historical patchwork (whether made up of Elizabethan quotations, guide books of the poet's own home town, or obscure bits of magic published by Pantheon) which is used to cover up the nakedness of the bare word. Tradition means much more than that. It means generations of different poets in different countries patiently telling the same story, writing the same poem, gaining and losing something with each transformation—but, of course, never really losing anything. This has nothing to do with calmness, classicism, temperament, or anything else. Invention is merely the enemy of poetry (The Collected Books 15).

In this often cited quote by Spicer, he makes clear that tradition to him means that poets are telling the same stories in all moments of history and with each new telling there is gaining and there is losing. In a sense, what changes are the “building blocks” and the task of the poet for Spicer then is to translate across time and this is what it means in Spicer's poetics to respond to something called “dictation.” It means the poet listens to and transcribes the stories of the dead and that in the transmission of these stories, words accrue—in their transformation—interference from the present.

This, in a sense, is what it means for language to time travel and as Spicer writes, “It is very difficult” perhaps because it picks up things along the way, it refuses to arrive in what Spicer might call its pure state. In another one of his letters to Lorca, Spicer writes,

It is very difficult. We want to transfer the immediate object, the immediate emotion to the poem—and yet the immediate always has hundreds of its own words clinging to it, short-lived and tenacious as barnacles. And it is wrong to scrape them off and substitute others. A poet is a time mechanic not an embalmer. The words around the immediate shrivel and decay like flesh around a body. No mummy-sheet of tradition can be used to stop the process. Objects, words must be led across time not preserved against it (Spicer, *The Collected Books*, 25).

The role of the poet, as “time mechanic” and as a figure that leads language across time means that the relationship between objects and words must also be lead across time and that this relationship maybe subject to influence or transformation. The transhistorical movement of language embedded in this concept of translating across time, or leading language across time, includes the social and cultural histories that words carry with them, they are in fact those “tenacious barnacles” that Spicer describes. This concept that language should not work for preservation but rather movement across time allows for a kind of interference or intervention from the present. In other words, one can re-write histories and mythologies, writing can influence in transmitting histories and mythologies across boundaries.

One example of this type of blending of sources is in Spicer’s book, *Head of the Town Up the Aether*, where multiple versions of the Orpheus Myth are drawn together. Spicer allows the simultaneous existence of Orpheus myths from Ovid and Jean Cocteau and allows them to be brought across time in conjunction with his own post WWII Americanized version of the Orpheus myth. This is a kind of textual practice that disrupts a sense of linear time and privileges another order of time, one that is based on

another and potentially older order of time. The textual blending of the of the different versions of Orpheus, Ovid's *Metamorphosis* and Jean Cocteau's *Orpheé*,² of which there is a version written as a play as well as a film trilogy, transmitted through the Spicer enables a disruption of a linear time.

For Spicer, the social and cultural histories embedded in the relationships between objects and words are to be translated across time and that these words and the relationships they carry with them are best circulated by being brought into conjunction with a contemporaneous moment. It is not just a comparison, but rather it is correspondence, which is a movement that allows room for multiple times and cultural histories to be in exchange and cohere in a poem. In his essay "Jack Spicer and the Practice of Reading," Peter Gizzi, notes that "Spicer often blends the quaint, the folkloric, the populist, and the esoteric within the space of a single poem," and that in bringing these modes together into the field of a poem the disruption of origins can be effected. Gizzi writes:

He purposefully foils the declared origins of our communities to show their arbitrariness, their "false" origins and etymologies. In this way, the capacity of language to convey a coherent story is thwarted as an artificial system of sign-making which we must undo in order to expose the ultimate randomness of history, perception, or even the intimate ground of love. This is a difficult if not desperate course through language, as it seeks to unseat the transmission of cultural codes through time. (216-217)

² In Jean Cocteau's 1949 film version of *Orpheé* the Ovidian version of Orpheus is made to be a poet who is obsessed with a car radio that he thinks is transmitting messages to him from the beyond. Orpheus spends all of his time in the car and receives these messages, which he interprets and translates as poems.

Gizzi's comment suggests that there is a deeper social and linguistic effect and not just the disrupting or changing of a coherent story; it is a quest, in a sense, to "unseat the transmission of cultural codes" which are the very things that both link and condition social, cultural and linguistic structures. The "cultural codes" are part of the way in which "the immediate always has hundreds of its own words clinging to it" and for Spicer they should not be "scrape[d]...off" because "words are what stick to the real" (*After Lorca* 25). This is what makes visible language and history "as an artificial system of sign making" which Spicer exposes by means of his metaphors, puns, and his sense of linguistic humor.

Another example is Spicer's serial poem titled, *The Holy Grail*, first published by White Rabbit Press in 1964. In the *Holy Grail*, notes the poet George Stanley, "Spicer was trying to turn time sidewise so that consecutive events superimposed" (Ellingham and Killian 220). "All history and mythology," write Ellingham and Lewis, "occur at once" (220). As an example of this consider the opening of the book. The "two Tonies" note Ellingham and Killian,

open two of hits books, those of Gawain and Lancelot. The first "Tony" is tony Sherrod, of Knoxville Tennessee, and the second is Tony Aste, on of the "Jets"—Spicer's nickname for a group of young men who arrived in North Beach in the spring of 1962, when the then-fresh musical, *West Side Story*, was still playing in the theaters" (Ellingham and Killian 221).

The Arthurian legends of the Holy Grail, the two young men named Tony, and the musical, *West Side Story*, all drawn together to compose Spicer's poem *The Holy Grail* reflects an intertextual and intercultural correspondence between things, and in a sense the Arthurian Legends are made contemporary, regionally and personally connected to Spicer's own idiosyncratic historical cultural moment.

Spicer's serial poem *The Holy Grail* bring together references from historical, cultural, folkloric and personal sources across time and in a way that is especially particular to Spicer's own logic and personal mythologizing of his own social network. For instance, he opens the *The Holy Grail*, with the "The Book of Gawain" and from the first Spicer references his personal life and meshes that with the narrative related to the Arthurian legends of the search for the Holy Grail.

1

Tony
To be casual and have the wish to heal
Gawain, I think,
Had that when he saw the sick king squirming around like a
 half-cooked eel on a platter asking a riddle maybe only
 ghostmen could answer
His riddled body. Heal it how? (Collected Books 187)

Again biographers Ellingham and Killian tell us that the first is "Tony Sherrod, of Knoxville, Tennessee, and the second... Tony Aste" who is used to open the "The Book of Lancelot":

1

Tony (another Tony)
All the deer in all the forests of Britain could not pay for the
price of this dish
Lancelot took a chance on this, heard the adulterous sparrows
murmuring in the adulterous woods
Willing to pay the price of this with his son or his own body.
More simply, you heave hands (and all the deer of Britain) a
grail-searcher has need. (Collected Books 195)

In this network of references, Spicer brings together a Broadway musical contemporary to his life while writing *The Holy Grail*, two young men more recent to Spicer's social network, and the dense textual network of the legends of the search for The Holy Grail.

In a sense the mode of perception is “to see it all happening now,” as George Stanley describes in his 1982 interview with Ellingham, “not anything so specific as to tell the story of the Holy Grail for the present, because that’s exactly what he doesn’t do in the poem, but simply to bring to life Perceval and Arthur and Merlin in their humanness in the contemporary landscape” (Ellingham and Killian 220). That “contemporary landscape” Stanley describes is Spicer’s personal landscape, his personal associations, his friends and other literary figures, from whose lives, experiences, and relationships he draws. Another fitting description from the poet Robin Blaser’s essay “The Practice of Outside” observes that the “final aspect of Jack’s work is in this—that the reader participates in the meaning of the poem—that the poet is only one voice alongside another— that the poetic reopens words into an action” and that “[a]s readers we may move back into the work to find the structure of paradise in *Heads of the Town*

up to the Aether, the noise of the god-language in *The Holy Grail* with some sense of a reopened language. And in getting the reader to participate in the poem gives a “sense of a reopened language” because the reader’s imagination is participating in the system of language and the participation of imagination in language is, for Spicer, Duncan, and Blaser, what keeps language open.

In his essay “The Narratives of *The Holy Grail*” Peter Riley argues that “*The Holy Grail* is the summation of Jack Spicer’s explorations into perception-as-love; it is a complete phenomenology of purpose which culminates his attention to the poetic act in all his previous books” (*Boundary 2*, Fall 1977, 163). Riley writes, “*The Holy Grail* thus returns to a more direct engagement with experience, and to a total language generated on the spot, without recourse to prosaic modes of reference and mimicry” (*Boundary 2*, Fall 1977, 164). The reasons for this successful return “to a more direct engagement with experience” Riley believes, are (1) the book’s seven-fold structure and (2) that “I” operates within a field of reference that is familiar, and in a sense, textually unstable—Arthurian romance narratives. He maps Spicer’s books as following the form of the mystical number 7. Riley warns, that readers should “be assiduously careful not to damage the book’s textuality, for what the narrative does *is* is a matter of what the narrative does” (*Boundary 2*, Fall 1977, 166).

And this brings us to Riley’s most useful contribution to the body of scholarship on Spicer’s work, his discussion of Spicer’s form as it relates to what he calls “a concept

of total reading” which he believes “has to come into play” so that “the poem is a transfer of action to the reader’s imaginal field” (167). In other words, “[w]e have to realize that the nature of the serial poem’s structure is that it is as complete in its parts as in the whole. No single item of text is a section of a continuing narrative, but rather a continuing narrative emerges only *because of* the utter completion in itself in each poem and each Book” (166). Riley gestures to the interaction of textual forces in *The Holy Grail* as a “time-concept” and writes that “the book is thus not simply linear, but is of time as a spherical completion by which parts (or moments) add up to more than the whole (extent of time as experienced in the book)” (*Boundary 2*, Fall 1997, 166). This spherical time-concept structure is what gives the serial poem the sense that a “continuing narrative emerges.”

The structure of the serial poem lends itself to a horizontal reading experience that facilitates the participation of the reader which is what allows the overall poem, as well as the individual poems, to be “a transfer of action to the reader’s imaginal field” or as Spicer writes in *After Lorca*, “to transfer the immediate object, the immediate emotion to the poem” (*The Collected Books* 25). In another sense, it is on the reader’s imagination that the textual forces of the poem and poems can play, and by engaging the reader’s imagination in this way participation of the reader is initiated.

The poet and critic Peter Gizzi describes Spicer’s method of composition as a “collaging of narrative fragments” he writes that “Spicer purposefully intrudes

antinarrative bits into existing grand narratives” and Spicer, Gizzi notes, “also delights in taking our memory of the known American theological and folkloric discourses into cul-de-sacs and wrong turns on the road of a shared texts like the Bible” and in this way Spicer “purposefully foils the declared origins of our communities to show their arbitrariness, their “false” origins and etymologies” and the

capacity of language to convey a coherent story is thwarted as an artificial system of sign-making which we must undo in order to expose the ultimate randomness of history, perception, or even the intimate ground of love. This is a difficult if not desperate course through language, as it seeks to unseat the transmissions of cultural codes through time. (216)

Spicer’s method of composition by assemblages, “often blends the quaint, the folkloric, the populist and the esoteric within the space of a single poem” (Gizzi 217).

The search for origins, for Spicer, is a kind of grail quest itself; the quest exists, but the certainty of the grail itself does not. For Spicer, origins are connected to the “artificial system of sign-making” that composes language and so by disrupting “the declared origins” he is also disrupting the declared origins of words themselves, and in so doing, if readers follow Spicer’s poems down this path, they express a link between origins and language. The expression of this link is made visible via its very disruption, which occurs by means of the “collaging of narrative fragments” and showcases Riley’s “time-concept” as a feature of disruption for “the declared origins” which must be made evident so that the transmission of declared cultural codes are disordered by the time-concept.

An excellent example of this process of disruption by means of a time-concept, which is elicited by a method of collaging textual sources, can be seen in “The Book of Galahad.” In the third poem that begins this book, Spicer writes:

“We’re off to see the Wizard, the wonderful Wizard of Oz,”
Damned Austrailians marching into Greece on a fool’s errand.
The cup said “Drink me” so we drank
Shrinking or rising in size depending how the bullits hit us
Galahad had a clearer vision. Was an SS officer in that war or a
nervous officer (Albanian, say), trying to outline the cup
through his glasses.
The Grail lives and hovers
Like bees
Around the camp and their love, their corpses. Honey-makers
Damned Austrailians marching into Greeze on a fool’s errand.

The poem is as an assemblage of textual and cultural sources that Spicer receives from the world or worlds in which he participates as a reader, or consumer and as Spicer makes the poem and there is a reader or hearer for the poem then the poem becomes a transmission of those textual references. The sense of spherical time achieved not only by the seriality of “The Book of Galahad” or by the seriality of *The Holy Grail*, is also achieved in the poem by the repetition of the line “Damned Austrailians marching into Greece on a fool’s errand.” Repetition here functions as a poetic device that contributes to a spherical time-concept in seriality rather than a linear time concept.

Another aspect of the poem that contributes to non-linear time is the interaction, or play, of textual sources in the poem. The Wizard of Oz; Austrailians marching into

Greece; *Alice in Wonderland* signified by the famous “Drink me” and the “shrinking or rising” that Alice experiences when she consumes food in the dream world into which she slips; the image of the SS Officer; the figurative “Like bees/ Around their camp and their love” all assembled in this poem and playing upon a larger field of the corrupted origins of Arthurian legends of the Holy Grail. The appearance of “the cup” from which the “we” in the poem drank and “Galahad” who “had a clearer vision” and “[w]as and SS officer...or a / nervous officer (Albanian, say), trying to outline the cup” culminating in the appearance of “[t]he Grail that lives and hovers” all there reminding readers of the larger field on which the poems that compose “The Book of Galahad” and the books that compose *The Holy Grail* are playing. This is how time is disordered in a poem, and in a sense, or rather a particular logic of the poet that is subject to the poet’s imagination, and this is how it is reassembled in another logic of time and seemingly unified by the reader’s participation in the reading of Spicer’s poems.

In a 1982 interview with the poet George Stanley, published in Jack Spicer’s biography *Poet Be Like God*, biographer Lewis Ellingham records that “George Stanley said that Spicer was “trying to turn time sideways so that consecutive events superimposed.” All history and mythology occur at once, as *Finnegans Wake*: the atom bomb and the death of Marilyn Monroe coexist in the same world as Merlin and Lancelot” (Ellingham and Killian 220). The reference to Marilyn Monroe’s death occurs in the second poem of “The Book of the Death of Arthur.” Spicer’s image in the poem is,

Marilyn Monroe being attacked by a bottle of sleeping pills

Like a bottle of angry hornets
Lance me, she said
Lance her, I did
I don't work here anymore.
The answer-question always the same. I cannot remember when
 I was not king. The sword in the rock is like a children's
 story told by my mother.
He took her life. And when she floated in on the barge or joined
 the nunnery or appeared dead in all the newspapers it was
 his shame not mine
I was king.

So that as Stanley observes, “consecutive events are super imposed” and this is what gives him the sense that Spicer is “trying to turn time side-wise.” In Spicer’s biographers, Lewis Ellingham and Kevin Killian describe the effect of this turning time side-wise by super imposing mythologies from different time periods as offering “a dream world, a dream of history and perception” (220). Super-imposing Marilyn Monroe’s death with Arthurian legends disrupts the transmission of cultural codes of an Arthur’s narrative, so that in some sense Arthur’s death and Marilyn Monroe’s death are both playing on the same field in Spicer’s poem.

The presence of this kind of linguistic time is even more concentrated in Spicer’s *The Holy Grail*, especially because it draws from a myth without certain origins, from a narrative that is already corrupt. The legend and stories surrounding King Arthur, The Holy Grail, and the Knights of the Round Table are re-writings in themselves. It is likely that they are derived from the oral folkloric traditions of the British Isles and circulated orally until they are referenced and recorded by early Anglo-Saxon authors. The legends

and writing surrounding the Holy Grail are drawn from a number of Welsh and Anglo-Saxon texts that are more accurate accounts of a heroic figure oft named Arturius. It is not until the twelfth century that they are written into any kind of narrative form by Chretien de Troyes, and then again later in the fifteenth century by Sir Thomas Malory.

In a sense Spicer's use of the stories of King Arthur and the Holy Grail speaks largely to his own poetics in that he sees the poet as a messenger, a radio, a vessel, a translator, a time mechanic who transmits language with all of its clinging histories across time. The Arthurian legends of the search for the Holy Grail are, like Spicer's work, transmissions that blend folklore, the writer's imagination, and cultural codes and narratives of the writer's own time. In a sense, this is why the field of Arthurian legends remains open for retelling, because literary history has always known the Arthurian legends as retellings kept alive by constant circulation of more retellings.

Spicer's poem, *The Holy Grail*, clearly exemplifies the matter of textuality and origins and transmission as they relate to a poetics of dictation. The tales of King Arthur and his knights are themselves a textual history of lost origins. On one hand we are faced with a multitude of oral and written histories and narratives of King Arthur and the Holy Grail that seem to confuse and disrupt origins. And on the other we have such a multitude of oral and written histories of King Arthur and his knights that the textual history itself is the origins of the myth and history of King Arthur. In a sense the re-tellings of the Holy Grail cement its role as symbol in western culture. This is accomplished by means

of repetition. The repetitive re-telling of the Arthurian legends over time keep the stories in cultural circulation and over time they accumulate a kind of cultural capital which is what constructs and cements the myth as a historical event and a cultural symbol embedded in western cultural history.

If there was a King Arthur, it is supposed that he lived sometime between 400 A.D. and 600 A.D. Early chroniclers of the Arthur legend include Gildas and Nennius, Geoffrey of Monmouth, Chretien de Troyes, and Mallory. The textual history of the legends of Arthur place the narratives surrounding King Arthur in a space blurred by myth and potential historical documentation. The Arthurian legends have been transmitted and translated across time for centuries and because the origin of the Arthurian legends remain ambiguous and have already experiences types of disruption and intervention the legends remain open. Its likely origin is in Anglo-Saxon oral tradition. The versions of Chretien de Troyes, and Mallory are in themselves very different works than the older sources, and they reflect courtly life of the contemporaneous period. Essentially, each subsequent chronicler, or writer of the Grail legends, translated the stories for their own time period and the audiences that peopled their contemporaneous moment.

Spicer begins his second lecture at the 1965 Vancouver Poetry Conference titled, “The Serial Poem and the Holy Grail” by noting variations of the Arthurian legends. In

doing this, Spicer constructs a long historical context for his own poem to correspond with. He states in a kind of cynical jest:

Well, let's start out. I don't know how many of you know anything about the Grail and what the Grail meant. If you've read Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, it will rather hurt you a bit. If you've read Malory, it will help you. If you don't know what happened in search for the Grail and all of that, presumably if the poems' good enough, it won't matter. And if you've read Jessie Weston, you might as well leave the room. (Gizzi 57)

Especially because it is delivered as a joke readers of Spicer's work should take note, since Spicer never seems more serious than when he is joking. The reference is to Jessie Laidely Weston's book on the subject of the Grail legends, *From Ritual to Romance*, published in 1920. Weston's book pursues the origins of the Grail legends, and argues that they can be situated in pre-Christian times in Wales, and can be traced back through folkloric sources. Weston draws a connection between what she terms "nature cults" and the grail legends, and binds them by the practice of ritual related to pre-Celtic traditions.

Spicer's book *The Holy Grail*, is a version of the Grail legends that blends vastly differencing historical sources, that include Monmouth, Mallory as well as textual sources from his own life and popular cultures sources such as *West Side Story*. The lack of clear origins in conjunction with the lack of a single author on which to draw is reflective of Spicer's writing practice. Consider that, in working with such a text, Spicer is positioned as a mediator between the world of the Grail legends and postwar America. In this sense

he is a mediator of narratives across time, a relator of one time to another, or rather a relator of several times simultaneously being called forth into one poem.

Conclusion

When Roland Barthes wrote

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture (146)

he meant for us to focus on the culturally historical system of language as a space in which we as readers and writers inhabit or by which we are inscribed. He describes texts as multi-dimensional spaces that, in a sense, reflect the cultural and historical sources from which they are drawn. Because Barthes positions language as a space in which writers inhabit he can draw the connection that writers have through the medium of language. That language, and that individual words have meanings, which are laden with cultural histories, is of supreme importance to understand why he is able to rightly claim that in the modern sense “the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a ways as never to rest on any one of them” (146).

Neither Duncan nor Spicer thought of themselves as “original,” nor did they seem to be interested in something called the “new” but rather their interest lay in a return to traditions as a way of exploring the system of correspondences that construct language in a way that could produce a sense of gesturing towards origins but never definitively settling on an origin. By blurring or collapsing temporality, by means of drawing things, words, ideas, histories, traditions, etc. into correspondences, their poetics produce a disruption of origins and consequently of a unified sense of “author.” Both Duncan and Spicer become part of larger traditions world poetry traditions, and instead of inventing, they participate, they inscribe themselves into language because they are inscribed by language.

“The author” for Barthes “is a modern figure, a product of our society” (142) and his reign is so tyrannical as to almost blind us as to the fact that the author is both separate from his text and subject to his text. “The *explanation* of a work,” he writes, “is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the *author* ‘confiding’ in us” (143). And this, for Barthes, is a misapprehension because “it is language which speaks, not the author” (143) and “[t]o give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing” (147).

Instead for Barthes, what succeeds “the Author,” is “the scriptor” which “no longer bears within him passions, humour, feelings, impressions, but rather this immense

dictionary from which he draws a writing that can know no halt” (147). He writes that, “the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred” (147) and that because of this it is the “reader” that “is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost” so that in Barth’s “a text’s unity lies not in its origin” from where it begins “but in its destination” which is the reader. It is not so much that the reader makes meaning for the text, but rather that the reader is the space on which meaning is inscribed, and where it can be continued in circulation.

For Duncan and Spicer, this openness to rites of participation in the system of language is an invitation to readers to engage in the circulation of signs. The point is not necessarily to settle on one definitive meaning for a poem, but rather to allow for the poem’s multiplicities to emerge and circulate. The serial form of poetry that Duncan and Spicer take up allow their poems to effectively become intertextual spaces for the modes of culture to engage, and they become effective spaces to reflect variation and correspondences in traditions across historical time periods and cultures. The point of this is to circumvent modernity, in a sense by short circuiting historical time. Duncan and Spicer’s form of seriality is less linear and instead privileges correspondence, collage an assemblage over linear structure. It is through non-linear return and repetition that facilitates Duncan and Spicer’s break with a kind of linear seriality associated with modernity.

Chapter 4

Sound as a Medium for Loss in Nathaniel Mackey “Song of the Andoumboulou” and Steve McCaffery’s “Lastworda”

**Sound as a Medium for Loss in Nathaniel Mackey’s “Song of the Andoumboulou”
and Steve McCaffery’s “Lastworda”**

In a reading of Robert Duncan’s poetics, the poet Nathaniel Mackey highlights the process of a world-poem by pointing out its unfinished quality because it is ongoing.

Mackey’s analysis of Duncan, offers insight into Mackey’s own poetics. In his essay, “The World-Poem in Microcosm,” published in his book *Discrepant Engagement*,

Mackey writes that:

the inclusiveness to which the world-poem aspires, the unity to which it seeks to lend itself exists not as a state but as a process, is dynamic rather than static, an ongoing, not-yet-accomplished fact...It relates to form in the same way that the infinite relates to the finite, the unbounded to the bounded, eternity to time (81).

Mackey’s reading focuses on the process and ongoingness of a world-poem that is important when considering that one can only be a part of the world, or a part of the continuum of the world, or a part of its ongoingness, a sentiment noted by Duncan himself in his essay “Rites of Participation,” published in Rothenberg’s 1983 anthology *Symposium of the Whole*.

Mackey’s interest in open-field poetics is reflected early on in his dissertation on Duncan as well as in his own poetics. His particular interest in “openness” is that it lends itself to “heterogeneity and dispersiveness,” qualities that make “Duncan’s poetry rich in echoes and anticipations” (83). Mackey’s attention to this is to point out how a certain

amount of “repetition...in Duncan’s work...makes use of reverberation.” Mackey suggests that this sort of repetition across poems is capable of dissolving boundaries between poems and that by “dissolving the boundaries between poems, by having his poems echo one another so insistently, Duncan puts aside the self-contained poem in favor of the field concept, a practice meant to give inklings of synchronicity, the “one event” or “one time” the world ultimately is” (84). In other words, Duncan gestures towards synchronicity by “dissolving boundaries” through repetition and return.

The transhistorical imagination for Duncan and subsequently for Mackey gestures towards synchronicity across cultures, across historical time periods, and across national boundaries and across. A transhistorical imagination draws together heterogeneous events, histories, and identities in order to suggest through language, and through imagination a kind of unity, that we are all of “one event” or “one time.” The world-poem, elicited from an open-field of poetics allows, or rather is a vehicle for a heterogeneity of things to enter into the poem. The inclusivity of the form is what suggests a coherence of correspondence between heterogeneous events, histories and identities. Methodologically this means that in order to historicize in the transnational postmodern period one must transhistoricize.

In this chapter I will draw together two unlikely figures from contemporary poetics, Nathaniel Mackey and Steve McCaffery. I hope to illustrate how each poet utilizes a transhistorical approach to language and how this approach is tied to

race and nation and the potential dissolution or at the very least blurring of these boundaries by foregrounding a songlike quality. I will take up Mackey's use of sound and song in his "Song of the Andoumboulou" poems in order to discuss how he celebrates a sense of incompleteness, the indefinite, the unsayable in life and how he incorporates that into his poetics as process, or draft, always unfinished. I will then turn to McCaffery's poem "Lastworda" as an example of a transhistorical approach to language that is able to reach a kind of completion, a point of origin. The poem, as McCaffery describes in his book, *Theory of Sediment* (1991), is meant to be a "sedimentary sweep of the continuum of an English lexicon, and it begins in the poet's "contemporary" English and "retreats a few lines to each decade...as far back as Anglo-Saxon" (214). Because of the poem's lexical complexity I will show its "sedimentary sweep" and mode of continuity by selectively translating and noting the first usage in English. In doing so I hope to illustrate McCaffery's point of origin and to demonstrate his festive and playful use of English to the point that sound and rhythm emerges as the essence of language. I take up a comparison of these two poets so that I might show two different embodiments of a transhistorical American imagination.

The Angel of History: Nathaniel Mackey's "Song of the Andoumboulou"

Effectively invoking the tones affiliated with ritual and the sacred, Mackey begins his "Song of the Andoumboulou: 1," published in his first book *Eroding Witness* (1985), with a call for music. Immediately inciting a connection to the dead through song, he

writes,

The song says the
dead will not
ascend without song (33).

Throughout the remainder of his ongoing serial poem “Song of the Andoumboulou,” the poet Nathaniel Mackey retells a narrative of origins that is at least initially derived from his introduction to the Andoumboulou through music and anthropology. Mackey’s ongoing poem combines aesthetics from black music and mythologies that are reflective of his interest in anthropology. While Mackey almost always begins from music, his own material means is language. In a sense, Mackey, almost always approaches language with the ear of a musician and the interest of an anthropologist.

The 1956 recording of “Chants des Andoumboulou” is part of the funeral ceremonies of the Dogon people of West Africa and is for Mackey his most consistent inspiration for his own “Song of the Andoumboulou.” The 1956 recording to which Mackey frequently listened is the primary stimulant for the quality of sound in his poems. In a sense, it would be this funeral song that would perhaps best express the kind of performance of sound that Mackey wanted for his own poems, that sound for him that would express that which could not be said and that which was not being heard. For the ear of the poet, the performance of sound in this recording and the narrative of origins of the Dogon can be brought together in his poems as reflection of that kind of

“unrepresented or underrepresented or hidden aspect of history, a history that doesn’t make it to mainstream venues for the most part, mainstream historical texts, mainstream historical curricula” to which he is compelled to unveil and unbury for us. He is “drawn” to such moments as a “kind of hidden or secret history” and implicitly believes that “poetry has throughout the ages been a vehicle for imparting and keeping alive secret knowledge, secret information, secret wisdom” (Rowell 707).

For Mackey, these are the kind of secrets, this is the type of secret knowledge that can be imparted in poems because of their emphasis on sound, and this is why they can be vehicles for secret and hidden histories. Sound in language, for Mackey, has a sense of its own, a linguistic performance, which is able to speak to things to which the words themselves cannot speak. “Certain things,” he says, “have to do with the unsayable. And one has to respect the unsayability.” His poems, “aspire to a kind of communication and a kind of collectivity and a kind of we, which would not call for things being spelled out in a kind of explicit way that we conventionally want them to be or expect them to be” (KUSP 1997). What he sees in music and wants draws into his own poems is

that way that music is called a universal language and its suggesting that there is some level of linguistic performance that doesn’t have to do with denotative meanings and semantics and that kind of thing. And to want to bring some of that over into the practice of a linguistic art like poetry or prose...runs certain risks, partly because we use language and language is such and everyday fact of life (KUSP interview 1997).

Even in listening to the 1956 recording of “Chants des Andoumboulou,” he admits, it is the “quality of voice” that grabs him:

The raspy kind of creaking or croaking just grabbed me. I mean I could listen to that and listen to that and listen to that and listen to that. Something wounded about it, something damaged about it, something at the same time abrasive and aggressive about it as though it were wounded but fighting back. The vulnerability of it, which is perfectly appropriate to a funeral, which is about vulnerability, ultimate vulnerability and mortality. But also a part of that song is the trumpet blast, these antelope horns, or some animal horn that they use at the end, which signals the movement of the deceased into the next world being reborn as a baby. That trumpet sound is a baby's cry. So that promise of rebirth and that belief rebirth, keeping that faith of rebirth, really spoke to me very profoundly (KUSP).

The overall structure of "Song of the Andoumboulou" is a series of poems that span several of Mackey's books, similar to the way that Duncan's serial poems "The Structure of Rime" and "Passages" appear in several of Duncan's books and remained ongoing. "The tradition," Mackey notes in his interview with Charles Rowell, "that I hooked up with was questioning that and instigating" the idea of a "well-made poem," and instead it was "instigating another kind of practice which sees the individual poem as always incomplete, always partial, always part of a larger work that is ongoing and continues to feed upon previous work." In this way he describes his own poems, as "poems [that] echo and anticipate one another," as poems that "read back on the one another."

Mackey notes that that in the seriality of his own poems "[t]here's a kind of intertextuality going on among the various poems that I write within a book and even from book to book." And because this seriality extends from book to book as well, "[t]here's also a conversation going on between the different books" (Rowell 708). The

ongoing nature of Mackey's serial poems lend an "unfinishedness" to his poems, seriality, in a sense, allows Mackey to explore the nature of incompleteness as he conceptually refigures this from the Dogon mythology. The "[s]erial form lends itself" writes Mackey in his introduction to *Splay Anthem*,

to andoumboulouous liminality, the draft unassured extension knows itself to be. Provisional, ongoing, the serial poem moves forward and backward both, repeatedly "back / at / some beginning," repeatedly circling or cycling back, doing so with such adamance as to call forward and back into question and suggest an eccentric step to the side — as though, driven to distraction by shortcircuiting options, it can only be itself. So it is that "Mu" is also *Song of the Andoumboulou*, *Song of the Andamboulou* also "Mu." H.D.'s crazed geese, circling above the spot that was once Atlantis or Hesperides or the Islands of the Blest, come to mind, as do John Coltrane's wheeling, spiraling runs as if around or in pursuit of some lost or last note, lost or last amenity: a tangential, verging movement out (outlandish). The ring shout comes to mind, as do the rings of Saturn, the planet adopted by Sun Ra, once whose albums, *Atlantis*, opens with a piece called "Mu" (xi-xii).

Mackey models distraction by means of shortcircuiting options by drawing together Atlantis, Hesperides, the Island of the Blest, H.D., John Coltrane and Sun Ra. He points to the going back and forth of mythologies that are lost, cyclical, spiral-like in its mode of perception, driven yet inter-connected. The intertextual nature of serial poems allow Mackey to incorporate many modes of perception that allow for a pursuit of something lost, an exploration of the unassured draft, the provisional. Mackey's serial poems offer a transcultural and transhistorical mode of perception that is also "an eccentric step to the side" (xi).

Serial poems for Mackey are open; they lend possibility; they allow for a world poem-making to come into being. The provisional, ongoing, draft-like nature of serial poems, enable Mackey to create or recreate a cosmology as he does in his “Song of Andoumboulou” poems and continues in his “Mu” poems. Poetry has possibility and possibility is facilitated by the intertextuality that is inherent in ongoing serial poems. In Mackey’s poetic cosmology, the possibility is not so much that he is conjuring an alternate history but that this potential alternate cosmology of the Dogon is a point of departure for his own imagination. We might consider that Mackey’s imagination is steeped in the possibility of the Dogon cosmology in order to be able to look back at his own historical moment of production, or rather to be able to see “repeatedly” the “circling or cycling back.”

I am focusing on Mackey’s serial poem “The Song of the Andoumboulou” especially because it is in Mackey’s body of work the link to his material scene of origin, because it is in a sense the poem that started it all but especially because of how he views the Andoumboulou as a “rough draft” or as a metaphor for the incompleteness of humans. In his first book of poems, *School of Udhra*, published in 1993, he begins with a quote from *The Pale Fox*, written by the anthropologists Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen and first published in English in 1986.

First to be born were the Yeben, small creatures with big heads, discolored bodies, and frail limbs who, for shame of their condition, hide in the holes of the earth. They coupled and gave birth to the Andoumboulou, who are even smaller than they are. All these beings were born single. All were incestuous because, like Ogo his progenitor, a Yeban male coupled with his daughter, an Andoumboulou

woman. Thus, the earth's interior became slowly populated with these beings who are the very first to attest to Ogo's failure and his lost twinness (Mackey 1).

The quote Mackey uses is a description of a beginning of humans, a kind of creation story, which begins in West Africa and which he receives as a retelling by European anthropologists. The West African Dogon is a mythology that Mackey continues to mine throughout his poems. It is one of the reoccurring themes that functions as a kind of intertextual glue between Mackey's books of poems.

In this way the Andoumboulou, for Mackey, become a symbol, a metaphor, of this textual transmission between West Africa and Europe and America, which is simultaneously intertextual and transnational in scope. The Andoumboulou as a kind of metaphor for transnational textual transmission makes visible a social and cultural engagement with imagination and in doing so it also nurtures an engagement with a larger social imagination

The narrative of the Andoumboulou for Mackey is as a story of beginnings that can open a door to a possible alternative future by looking at an alternative past and can answer questions about a cultural present by looking at a cultural past. In an interview with Paul Naylor, conducted via email between March 1999 and February 2000, Mackey writes that his,

adoption of the Andoumboulou as a figure for our present as well as past condition, the suggestion that the Andoumboulou are a rough draft of human being and that we're (still) that rough draft, is a gnostic one (656).

Mackey takes up the Andoumboulou in order to construct a metaphor for the human condition past and present as being a rough draft. His use of the Andoumboulou reflects that going back and forth between the past and the present that Mackey sees as possible in serial poems.

The work that is being done here is an intervention into history and it is being executed in a way that points to a mode of violence without taking up violence. Norman Finkelstein describes violence in Mackey's poems as "rarely depicted in an explicit fashion in Mackey's poetry, but the signs of violence are pervasive" (*On Mount Vision* 187). For the purposes of examining sound and sense as they relate to these "signs of violence" that "are pervasive" in Mackey's poems I offer this longer excerpt from "Song of the Andoumboulou:16" published in his book *Whatsaid Serif* (1998).

—cante moro—

They were dredging
the sea, counting
the sand. Pounded
rocks into gravel,
paid a dollar a
day,
sang of the oldest
fish like family,
tight
flamenco strings

distraught...

Some
ecstatic elsewhere's
advocacy strummed,
unsung, lost inside
the oud's complaint...
The same cry taken
up in Cairo, Cordoba,
north
Red Sea near Nagfa,

Muharraq, necks cut
with the edge
of a
broken cup...
Lebrijano's
burr-throat, raspy
as night, adamant
night, long night
longer
than a lifetime of
nights...

Turning away what light
was outside, night
without end...

Muttering,
"Time," less than a
sigh, resigned
to it, would-be

Book
of Coming Forth by Day,
would-be

kef-pesh, pinkish
sun...

Between lips, resuscitant,
reached

where they were, no boat not
one they drowned in, dredged
it, letterless the
book we thumbed... (3-4)

The implied violence of the rhythm is pervasive as it resists melody, harmony, the known and the ordinary, instead privileging a beat that is inclined to speak like drums in four to six syllable lines. Even this is resisted by the command of consonants as in the opening lines “They were dredging / the sea, counting / the sand. Pounded / rocks into gravel” and the drops into a raspy assonance as in the lines “where they were, no boat not / one they downed in, dredged/ it, letterless the” expressing in sound things that cannot be explained with language, expressing by means of sound something we might identify as feeling and what Mackey might call “wounded” feeling.

Sound in poetry and in terms of our senses removes the kind of distance that language as a means of representing things in the world enables, and instead sound turns our senses of perception towards experience and feeling. That is what is most difficult about reading poetry, but also why it has a transhistorically intimate connection to other genres like song, dance but also genres like painting or sculpture. And it is at point like this that we can then turn and say that this is what Capitalism also does: it abstracts, it alienates, and it commodifies like language itself. And realizing that language can perform in ways that it cannot say, and that in doing this it can then say things which are unsayable opens readers up to another sense and possibly another order of history, one that is based in the histories of both our individual and collective senses and one that finds its narratives oscillating between the everyday and the exceptional. This act of “opening” is an example of the more general “redemptive” dynamic at work in the poem and it is permitted by the poem’s serial form.

The suggestion in Mackey's poems is almost redemptive and forgiving, in that Mackey's use of the Andoumboulou permits us failure as human beings, and that our very being in the world is a rough draft, a work in progress. "Mackey" writes Finkelstein, "is haunted" by a "song of loss and redemption that resonates" in his poems duende would require digression (Finkelstein 189).

He does not dwell on the damage and the woundedness but incorporates a vision that includes death and life. So that, as we have already seen, Mackey, in his KUSP interview, insists on exposing a more holistic view and includes the sound of the trumpet blast as meaning to resemble a baby's cry, thereby signifying in sound a rebirth. What then is most important to Mackey is that "keeping of the faith of rebirth" which in a sense is a responsibility he takes up in the sounds that his own work makes. We might consider that Mackey sees poems as vehicles for transmission.

What Mackey creates in his poems then is an "alternate book" another order of time and history. In *Song of the Andoumboulou 44*, Mackey describes a quasi-mystical scene in which "the book" was blown into by horns, but that "*Parallactic Hinge* / was an alternate book..." The irony here: in 2005 Mackey published a book titled *Paracritical Hinge: Essays, Talks, Notes, Interviews*. In his book of poems *Splay Anthem*, Mackey writes:

A region of hills it was we came
to next. Horns blew the book we
rode skyward. *Parallactic Hinge*

But there is a book that exists, and it was blown by horns. Mackey's poem tells us that the words in books come from the sounds of horns being blown, and by doing so his poem initiates a connection between sound and language that reflects in a deeply transhistorical sense, the connection of orality and the written word. And by this logic, considering the genre and content in which this idea appears, a poem that is called *The Song of the Andoumboulou: 44*, Mackey also initiates a connection between song and poem, which brings about a very core definition of poem that in premodern poetics is virtually inseparable, that is that poem and song are one in the same.

The image that the book is blown by horns resonates with the poetics of Duncan and Spicer in that the sounds come from elsewhere, from outside of the poet, and that the poet becomes something of a medium or mediator, or as Roland Barthes notes, and relator, through which sounds travel. He writes that

in ethnographic societies the responsibility for narrative is never assumed by a person but by a mediator, shaman, or relator whose 'performance' – the mastery of the narrative code – may be admired but never his 'genius' (Barthes 142).

In other words, sounds come from outside of the poet then through the poet as mediator for the poet's own age, these sounds are transformed into words and finally into something called language. In his collection of poems, *Whatsaid Serif*, Mackey begins his book with an epigraph from *A Musical View of the Universe* by Ellen B. Basso. He quotes:

...in order for the story to be told at all, it must be received by a responder or "what-sayer," who is a crucial actor in the situation. The what-sayer may be

someone who asked to be given the narrative or the recipient of a story that exemplifies explanatory principles needing clarification during the course of some other discussion; the person serving as what-sayer can change during the course of a telling (1).

The “what-sayer” becomes a “crucial actor” in the situation of Mackey’s book of poems. The title of Mackey’s *Whatsaid Serif* already playing upon this principle, activating the musical imagination of his readers and situating the what-sayer of his book as both central to the past and present sense of poem-saying. In “Song of the Andoumboulou: 20,” he writes:

I was the what-sayer.
Whatever he said I would
say so what.

The reluctant what-sayer, who mockingly refuses the messages from the speaker, but goes on to become the what-sayer and who is perhaps already being seduced by the sounds of unordinary speech, by the music of poetic speech, functions as a mediator. More specifically, the what-sayer in Mackey’s poems represents unreliability, or lends its narrative authority to questioning. He listens and it is as if the what-sayer is not quite ready to become a what-sayer and needs to hear the “Spooked flutes” and be hallowed out. “Horns blew to woo the unready,” Mackey writes in the *Song of the Andoumboulou: 20 (Whatsaid Serif 23)*.

For Mackey, the importance of the connection between sound and sense are always central to his poetics and reflected in his employment of the Andoumboulou “as a

figure for our present as well as past condition” (*Naylor* 656), which is echoed a decade later in his book *Splay Anthem*. He writes again, yet more specifically,

I couldn’t help thinking of the Andoumboulou as not simply failed, or flawed, earlier form of human being but a rough draft of human being, the work-in-progress we continue to be. The commonplace expression “man’s inhumanity to man” has long acknowledged our andoumboulouousness. The song of the Andoumboulou is one of striving, strain, abrasion, an all but asthmatic song of aspiration. Lost ground, lost twinness, lost union and other losses variably inflect that aspiration, a wish, among others, to be we, that of the recurring two, the archetypal lovers who visit and revisit the poems, that of some larger collectivity an anthem would celebrate (xi).

In this quote, from Mackey’s preface, the poet again draws together, with a sense of immediacy embedded in the language, the connections between sound and sense that are essential to the structures of language. That he characterizes the song of the Andoumboulou as “one of striving, strain, abrasion, an all but asthmatic song of aspiration” is reflective of the linguistically and metrically transhistorical connection between the terms poem and song, but there is something else to consider: Mackey is also performing this in his own writing and thinking. The musicality of the soft consonance and the assonance of this string of words “striving, strain, abrasion, an all butasthmatic song of aspiration” is characteristic of Mackey’s ability to always make sound active with sense.

As another example one might consider the word aspiration, from the Latin *aspirare*, which means to breathe, or to blow, and which can change meaning when its syntax changes. When it is in the dative or as an infinitive paired with the accusative it

becomes to aspire to, desire to reach or obtain, to come near to obtaining— which echoes the image of the Andoumboulou and us, our “andoumboulouousness,” as a rough draft, a work-in-progress. Mackey creates an image of sound, of horns “blowing” a book—in the sense of Coltrane “blowing” his horn and making music—that constructs a mode of perception which suggests that language through sound both carries and activates what Mackey calls “sense.” To put it more succinctly: sound carries sense.

In his essay “Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol,” published in *The Politics of Poetic Form* in 1990, Mackey writes that “[m]usic encourages us to see that the symbolic is the orphic, that the symbolic realm is the realm of the orphan.” He then reads “[p]oetic language” as “language owning up to being an orphan, to its tenuous kinship with the things it ostensibly refers to.” It is in this essay that Mackey emphasizes the importance of his reading of retelling of the Kaluli myth, which he reads as a narrative in which “the origin of music is also the origin of poetic language” (89-90)³. “The myth,” Mackey tells us, is:

of a boy who goes to catch crayfish with his older sister. He catches none and repeatedly begs for those caught by his sister, who again and again refuses his request. Finally he catches a shrimp and puts it over his nose, causing it to turn a bright purple red, the color of a *muni* bird’s beak. His hands turn into wings and when he opens his mouth to speak the falsetto cry of a *muni* bird comes out. As he flies away his sister begs him to come back and have some of the crayfish but his

³ Mackey encounters the Kaluli myth through Steven Feld’s book, *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics and Song in Kaluli Expression*, first published in 1982, which he notes, is dedicated to “the memory of Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, and Charles Mingus.”

cries continue and become a song. Semi-wept, semisung: “Your crayfish you didn’t give me. I have no sister. I’m hungry...” For the Kaluli, then the quintessential source of music is the orphan’s ordeal — and orphan being anyone denied kinship, social sustenance, anyone who suffers, to use Orlando Patterson’s phrase, “social death,” the prototype for which is the boy who becomes a *muni* bird. Song is both complaint and a consolation dialectically tied to that ordeal, where in back of “orphan” one hears echoes of “orphic,” a music which turns on abandonment, absence, loss. Think of the black spiritual “Motherless Child.” Music is wounded kinship’s last resort. (*The Politics of Poetic Form* 87-88).

Mackey sees the boy who becomes a *muni* bird as a signifier of wounded kinship, and that the boy who continuously repeats his “falsetto cry,” makes a song of his sounds, and in this way his sounds are given sense, and that sense is to express what cannot be told in the experience of wounded kinship. Mackey further explains that “[t]he words of the song the boy who becomes a *muni* bird resorts to are different from those of ordinary speech” (90) and so he brings us back around to the point that when “kinship etiquette” is violated and no one is listening, the last resort is music as communication, and it relies on sound to transmit meaning, or sense, or narrative, that can only be transmitted and articulated beyond the realm, or orders of ordinary speech.

This is something that Mackey derives from Victor Zuckerkandl’s book *Sound and Symbol*, published in 1956, and that provides the second half of the title to Mackey’s own essay “Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol.” In his essay Mackey writes that Zuckerkandl “goes to great lengths to assert that music bears witness to what’s left out of that concept of reality, or, if not exactly what, to the fact that something *is* left out. The world, music reminds us, inhabits while extending beyond what meets the eye, resides in

but rises above what's apprehensible to the senses" (88). What the boy who becomes a *muni* can and does resort to is something Mackey calls "song language" which he notes is a "break with conventional language" and "is brought about by a breach of expected behavior" (90). So that in Mackey's poetic vision, the function of sound is to measure and relate that which cannot be talked about, or that which is not being heard; the function of sound then is to measure the unsayable.

In an interview with Robert Pollie for the radio station KUSP, Mackey, in discussing the relationship between sound and sense, highlights the importance of this relationship to musicality in poetry as it relates to what cannot be said but can be expressed. He says that

Certain things have to do with the unsayable. And one has to respect the unsayability. The poems aspire to a kind of communication and a kind of collectivity and a kind of we, which would not call for things being spelled out in a kind of explicit way that we conventionally want them to be or expect them to be.

Poems, for Mackey, become a vehicle for the unsayable precisely because of the ways in which poetry can accommodate "song language." The importance of musicality in language for Mackey is socially significant because he sees it as the last resort of wounded kinship and his choosing of the story of the boy who becomes a *muni* bird matters to this connection because it is a narrative that points out the power that a linguistic performance can have in a body and in a sense in a collective body. With similar social and artistic importance, Mackey uses this narrative as point on which to relocate the birth of poetry,

to resituate reception of sound in language in way that considers writing as a medium in which to execute this.

When Mackey uses this West African narrative as an explanation of the birth of poetry it has the effect of decentralizing the Eurocentric view of how poetry is read and received. His example reconceptualizes the way we read the sounds that language makes and calls readers to consider that sometimes we have to listen to the sounds of language in order to read it. One explanation that can give insight into the way Mackey perceives the possibility of this connection, he gives in his KUSP interview. One possibility he sees is in the way that music is read as language and how readily listeners perceive this to be true: that music can make meaning. In a tone that relays a knowing confidence, Mackey says,

that way that music is called a universal language and its suggesting that there is some level of linguistic performance that doesn't have to do with denotative meanings and semantics and that kind of thing. And to want to bring some of that over into the practice of a linguistic art like poetry or prose...runs certain risks, partly because we use language and language is such and everyday fact of life.

Because for Mackey “there is some level of linguistic performance that doesn't have to do with denotative meanings and semantics,” sound in poetry can be a vehicle for the unsayable. And because linguistic performance in poems in a sense can communicate outside of the system of language by means of sound, sound for Mackey is a way of producing a social critique. This is how sound in poems can be politically resonant by means of its aesthetics.

Sound in poetry, in language, then, for Mackey, becomes a vehicle for “notoriously” producing “a critique of social reality, a critique of social arrangements in which, because of racism, one finds oneself deprived of community and kinship, cut off.” So that I may be more specific and attentive, I want to point out that Mackey’s concept of this kind of social critique is wrapped up in his discussion of “black music” that “critique[s]...our concept of reality” and this his primary excavation in his essays, poems, and prose is “the social meaning of sound” (90). For him it is the place where “[i]mmanence and transcendence meet” and it is this meeting that makes “the music social as well as cosmic, political and metaphysical” (91). Mackey, in “Song of the Andoumboulou: 50” writes,

Fray was the name where we came
to next. Might’ve been a place
might not’ve been a place but
we were there, came to it
sooner
than we could see...Come to
so soon, it was a name we stuck
pins in hoping we’d stay. Stray
was all we ended up with. Spar
was another name we heard
it
went by...Rasp we also heard it
was
called... Came to it sooner
than we could see but soon enough
saw we were there. Some who’d
come before us called it Bray...

Sound’s own principality it was, a

pocket of air flexed mouthlike,
meaning's mime and regret, a squib of
something said, so intent it
seemed. At our backs a blown
conch,
bamboo flute, tropic remnant, (*Splay Anthem* 66).

The horns in the poem are continually blowing a book, an alternative book. Breath, aspiration, spirit, imperfection in the “asthmatic song of aspiration” that raspy creaky music on which he draws to both invoke death and new life. The “Sound’s own principality” is “meaning’s mime and regret.” It’s that “pocket of air flexed mouthlike” that sounds out words like “Spar” and “Rasp” pointing to, by means of sound, their anagrammatic qualities, cloaked like secrets while also pointing to secret histories embedded in language. The play of sound producing a kind of slippage as it does between “Fray” and “Bray” in the poem foregrounds a secret arbitrariness of sound that is shared and exhibited in pronouncing the similarity in sound between the “F” and the “B.”

For Mackey, the orphic journey through language is about a return to origins, or at the very least a desire to do so through sound as social critique. Intervention into and disruption of a Eurocentric historicity through sound and the symbolic is imperative to Mackey’s poetics. His work, his return to the premodern, is about recovering a black history that is not dominated by a Eurocentric perspective. In his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Walter Benjamin writes,

This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps

piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed (*Illuminations* 257).

Perhaps this is what poetry does, or rather it is the task of poetry to “bring about a real state of emergency” as Benjamin urges us to do. And perhaps this is what Nathaniel Mackey’s poetry does: brings about this kind of state of emergency in language. While the poet’s face is “turned towards the past”... “he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.” So that Mackey, the poet, “would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed.” But in Benjamin’s example there “is a storm blowing from Paradise,” and it is this storm that gets “caught in [Mackey’s] wings with such violence that [he] can no longer close them.” And perhaps it is “[t]his storm [that] irresistibly propels [Mackey] into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.” And perhaps “[t]his is the storm” of blinding whiteness that “we call progress” (*Illuminations* 257-258). So that the state of emergency in language that Mackey’s poems bring about is the mode of unsayability.

The image of “Angel of History” in which a narrative of progress is defined by turning back to look at the ruins of the past while being blown into the future is a useful image in considering Mackey’s poetics. In his essay “Theses on the Philosophy of History” Benjamin writes that the “past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again” (255). Mackey seeks to

redeem, by means of sound, the “loss” of history and this redemptive quality to Mackey’s poems operates transhistorically across time and the Middle Passage. “History,” Benjamin reminds us, “is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now” (261). For Benjamin as for Mackey this means that the past exists by being brought into the now, the present, by being brought across time.

The next section of this chapter will show that the poet Steve McCaffery makes an excellent point of comparison, as his poem “Lastorda,” also uses sound as a vehicle for transhistorical movement and racial identification. But there will be a curious difference as regards “loss” here. “Writing based on a general economy,” writes Steve McCaffery, “would strive towards a...dissolution of categories and boundaries and utterly refuse a line of mastery.” This kind of writing, states McCaffery,

...becomes highly problematic whether or not a conscious strategy of sovereignty can ever be possible. Renouncing mastery, it can never find a place within a project of knowledge and there are doubts as to whether a general economic writing could actually be sustained beyond a fleeting instant, registering its effects as anything more than a momentary rupture. What a writing of this kind would require is a whole number of losses and the absolute degree of risk taking...Proposed would be a writing that transgresses the prohibition of the semantic operation and risks the loss of meaning. This would not constitute an utter rejection of meaning, for rejection would only resituate meaning...Rather the loss of meaning would occur within meaning itself in a deployment without use, without aim and without a will to referential or propositional lordship. A return to the material base of language would be necessary as a method of losing meaning; holding on to graphicism and sonorities at the very point where ideation struggles to effect their withdrawal. (213-214)

McCaffery here neither laments loss nor seeks redemption—he discusses “risking loss” and seems to value “loss of meaning” as a text comes to prioritize its materiality of sound. Where Mackey locates critique—in the severity and violence of language—McCaffery discovers affirmation—in the song of English, and of his (white) Eurocentric race.

Textual Festivity in Steve McCaffery’s “*Lastworda*”

In his poem “Lastworda,” published in 1991 at the end of his book *Theory of Sediment*, McCaffery experiments with the loss of semantic meaning by means of a lexical journey back through time, back through a history of language. In doing so McCaffery’s poem generates a dependency on the “sonorities” of language as the material base. He describes “Lastworda” as a

planned as a journey back through and English lexicon along the sweep of a single continuum. Commencing with selected words current in contemporary usage the continuum retreats a few lines to each decade, in this way as far back as Anglo-Saxon...Wherever possible I’ve tracked down a word’s first appearance in print and a chronological precedence was arrived at for each century’s vocabulary (214).

The poem sheds semantic meaning by tracing the English language back to a material scene of origin found in medieval Europe. The loss of semantic meaning in the poem is dependent on the temporal distance between the contemporary English of his own historical time period and the premodern Old English of the Anglo-Saxon period. In his book *Strange Likeness: The Use of Old English in Twentieth-Century Poetry*, published in 2006, Chris Jones notes that for “modern poets there is in Old English something of the

shock of the old. In returning to origins motivated by a desire for innovation these poets express a form of conservative radicalism” (6).

Jones clarifies an important connection, which I hope to take up in McCaffery’s own work, he writes that,

Unlike the previous examples of ‘primitive’ traditions appropriated by modernism, Old English poetry does not come from beyond the boundaries of Western culture and aesthetics. Instead it represents a point of origin for the English branch of the Western literary canon. That is to say, it seems to represent the primitive within, the other that is also the same (7).

The connection being made here that I hope to cull concerns race and nation. What is at stake in the search for origins—in a sense—is the search for culture itself as it is bound to race and nation through the medium of language. What Jones’s statement reminds us is that it is significant that the use of Old English in twentieth century poems “represents a point of origin” for the English language, and that that language has its geographic scene of origin as the British Isles. McCaffery’s own use of Old English has a different trajectory as it aims to produce a lexical history of the English language. McCaffery, wanting his poem to perform somewhat like an “avalanche” (Linebreak 1997) draws his poem to a close by lexically positioning Old English as the origin for the “English branch of the Western literary canon.”

In considering McCaffery’s poem “Lastworda” I am going to trace the poem’s lexical journey back through time, beginning with the late twentieth century and ending in

5th century Anglo-Saxon. In order to do so I will start from the beginning and construct a transhistorical reading of the poem. I will perform this transhistorical reading by marking the first year of usage of a selection of words from the poem in order to illustrate the poem's lexical progression back through time. I hope to point out how a transhistorical reading can expose an evolution of social, cultural and political constructions of power by showing how the poem highlights and awareness of its own production of a search for an origin. "Lastworda" begins like this:

An intervention buffer friendly to diskette that transit via chunnel sovereignty of fission going moody visitation under spandex augurs dialophonic Gallup pooled velour now Dow Jones bullish lost that Porsche the self in a slump attachment to a sputnik motorcade the naugahyde on file with chainsaw frequency to frisbee throws collateral damage known as corpses fez on fax means lycra's safe for tickertape parade Ornithopter volunteers a lube job on the Popemobile picometers to mince words not control as agent orange soaks through women's lib the laundered cash pogram Disneyland in hacksaw syndromes Oxfam into tweeter wharf when cryongenics says Alaskan summer built for tylenols in scope the Plax attacks the radars musk bikini couplet doodlebug (McCaffery 201)

The language in this selection is reflective of a post WWII in that many of the words in this passage did not appear until after 1950. The most contemporary instance is likely the word "Buffer" which, first appeared in reference to digital technologies in a 1989 article for *PC Mag*. "Diskette" first appeared in the October 1973 issue of *Digital Design*. Just four lines into the poem the word "sputnik" signifies the 1950's since, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, "sputnik" first appears in an article for the *Times* in October of 1957. The idea, as McCaffery describes it in his interview with Bernstein, is that every few lines a reader would find themselves regressing back a decade or so within the history of the English language.

The vocabulary that marks this first page temporally signifies the twentieth century by means of its reference to twentieth century technologies and other products. Examples include the word “frisbee,” a product not commercially circulated until the 1950’s, and the word “bikini,” which was first used in English in 1948. Or as in a few lines later the word “walkytalky,” appears:

and blimp as rhesus positive what’s blood to soccer flange a U-boat niacin
examples of shift the gift of sulfa drugs for middlebrow bacteriophages Scrabble
into doughboy’s camouflage a walkytalky set and test with razzle dazzle centered
rhythm on a proton ridge of polka dots the cause thyroxin back through robot
trepidations (201).

signifying the 1940’s since its first use was in 1939. Even before the appearance of “walkytalky” there are words such as “blimp” first used between 1916-1918, and U-boat, first appearing in English in the *Times* in July of 1916. Next to “U-boat” appears the word “niacin,” which first occurred in the *Times Herald*, on February 5, 1942. Indicated in the poem’s structure is a kind of oscillation between historical time periods that is present in the poem as it reaches back towards its material scene of origin. Even without looking up every single word in the poem, history is evident in the diction choice, which is directed by the logic of genealogy.

As the poem regresses through time it highlights our socio-linguistic and temporal distance from a history of the English language. The logic that underwrites this poem is genealogical and operates by means of time. This means that genealogy, to a certain extent, dictates the logic of choice in diction, syntax and rhythm within the poem.

Obscuring the material history of language by means of time, and by means of historical distancing, the poem is able to shed semantic meaning. But in doing so the poem also points to the obscuring effect that time and history have on language.

In order to make visible the lexical genealogy at work and see how it demonstrates an obscuring of language I will continue to follow the poem's language back through a history of the English language by marking the first historical uses of words. I will do this to show how the poem quickly sheds semantic meaning and begins emphasizing sound as a binding element. I am invested in demonstrating how a poem like this is effective in calling forward the past.

By the beginning of page 202 the poem is pulling words from the 19th century:

pithecanthropus erectus not a frog through symbiosis enzyme celluloids that nuclein package the telegrams indium and with dynamite a picayunish grumply glycogen (202).

The word "telegrams" first appeared on April 6th 1852 in the *Albany Evening Journal*. The word "enzyme" is of Greek origin ν in + ζύμη and means leavened. And according to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word was used by W. Kühne in 1877 in Heidelberg in a Medical-Biological dictionary. But its first use in English, which is more significant to the logic of the poem, is recorded in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society*, a scientific journal, and is attributed to W.H. Roberts. I mention this because the first use in English is what matters most to the logic of the poem, since the poet's material scene is

an English lexicon. And so this English lexical history that brings forward another history, one that reflects a broader English history that reflects histories of discourses in technology, science, politics, religion, cultural life of certain time periods.

One clear instance of the discourse of politics occurs deep into page 202 with the appearance of the word “Capitalism,” curiously capitalized in the middle of the poem. The word’s first recorded appearance noted by the Oxford English Dictionary is in the May 25th 1816 *National Register*. Its second recorded use, and the one more commonly noted in English, is William Makepeace Thackeray in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, February 1855 issue. I note this particular instance of this word “Capitalism” because of the way that the concept of capitalism informs McCaffery’s poetics. McCaffery describes the movement of his poem as “a complete accumulation of the English language which almost moves like an avalanche” (Linebreak 1995). Especially interesting is his choice of the word “accumulation” as part of the poetic process of the poem because it reflects a facet of political discourse in regards to political economy. For McCaffery politics is always linked to language by means of their historical definitions.

So that I might effectively trace the movement back through time more effectively I will offer selections from several pages while also tracking the initial time usage of certain key words in the text. In doing this I want to illustrate how McCaffery’s text moves into what he calls “graphic alienation” by producing a lexical history of language. For instance, page 204 contains words such as “cholik” first circulated on the cusp of the 17th and 18th

century, a few lines later the word “Whig” indicating by its first usage the century and decade as the 1680’s. Further down the page the words “Marriners” and “Spoyls” spellings common in the 1600’s appear. And as we follow this trajectory through page 205, we transition into the 1500’s. Some linguistic time indicators are words such as “picke-tooth,” which was a spelling circulating during the 1500’s for what we today would consider a toothpick, and other medieval spellings such as:

...brazed galliard no warne adustion countenance demised a picke-tooth to his voider ostende squints compleat that strike as bogs dooe in goode skene or better cloakbag collours plundge gaue ayme poste legged in motely tannikin besotted lookt in warme licour markes dolemma for a chaoise bigge (McCaffery 205).

Already possible is the sense of graphic alienation one feels by the different spellings. The continual experience of graphic alienation accumulates just a few lines later on page 206 when the language temporally changes like this:

...needs the terrible apron of first woordes thrice trimm’d a discipline of peakes extoll’d suck’d figges thereat match third-bare fvmblings interpvuncted crinkle clear doo cvt one galimafrie termagent hammers scabd hyd weerish a broad face vnder dvst as peradventure pimple coyled a crupper down by a trauell coming hangers stayd halfe cowehyde heauen to horse-back apple-squire an vrinall be seete a neckercher cause chattel into bason trimme cald boot-halers demeanes rhewme blew with dedred pit dappert to swaggart buskind spittle-post as matleth a retinue in verament beard (206).

The word “figges” is a spelling for figs that reflects their 15th century introduction to England by Cardinal Pole. Medieval spellings such as “thrid-bare” in sound still resemble its contemporary spelling of “thread bare” but visually are different enough in orthography to be distracting or distancing. By page 208 we are seeing words such as “rifraffe” first circulating in the 1400’s and a medieval spelling of the word “iournayes”

which is beginning to show more graphic alienation from its contemporary spelling of “journeys.” By page 211 we are introduced to spellings such as “grene,” which is a spelling of “green” that was circulating in the 1300’s. The cusp of the Middle English and Old-English periods can be graphically seen in this example that transitions readers from Middle English to Anglo Saxon English:

Ge took and treowd in pacientes yat yai it raysed to wapen pees and saufand
tapers payne vused nocht as mair of a fforfaiture betwixt yat is to sai menn craftes
thare yame at myd howre mesour hong askry abegge myn imbasse methynkes y-
heried celsitude bout almenaks alymykanteras in astrelabie yeven knarre to fote
(211-212).

By page 213 we are seeing a very different kind of English that is not only orthographically alienating but also operates according to unfamiliar principles. Appearing are words such as “gifta” and “goldgifan” which is a compound of the noun “gold” and the Anglo-Saxon verb “to give.” Represented in poetic language in contemporary English a translation might be “gold-giving.” Notable is the shift from a capitalist economy to a gift that the poem is reflecting in language, and more specifically pointing out in the historical distancing.

Just a few lines later we encounter the Anglo-Saxon word “slaepe” first used in 825. The poem in its inevitable and promised trajectory ends in Anglo-Saxon English, completely graphically alienating even an educated reader like this:

thaera woc fleom faederenmaege onmedlan gyn aefter gomene slaepe awoc se de eafod uncudes scaed scondeswa hwilc man thu cyrliscne faran gehirde on-haefde fultum gemaegnde gelaehthe ne lungan snelnesse lath snotor in maelceare to cased in ondraet ac geban fram gegearcode urum ic faewum ceastre hwon wolde heo naman thu sorgodes andwlita hal be wife al areodode fram dam ongeat cnihtum scufan mid motan in scynscada aenigne hetelic weard fela hahfaestne fleon lastworda. (213-214).

What this means is that the language choices in the poem are determined by principles of time rather than denotative meaning. That the words “buffer,” “diskette,” “transit,” and “chunnel” occur in the order that they do is important to the genealogical order of time rather than these words make contextual or denotative meaning for readers in a conventional sense. Rather than seeing the syntax as illogical or disordered, it can be viewed as genealogically ordered so that the kind of meaning that can form is being exhibited through a temporal logic of language, so that even from the beginning the sense of meaning as it is composed by ordinary logic seems immediately disrupted.

By ordering its syntax temporally rather than grammatically, a beginning such as “An intervention buffer friendly to diskette that transit via chunnel sovereignty” doesn’t make sense as conventionally understood. Nevertheless, rhythmically, orally and graphically the order of words suggests something like “meaning,” that is, a message readers can take in. The word choice and by consequence the logic in the syntax of the poem is based on another order of logic: time, but the poem doesn’t just disrupt meaning in this way, it also creates meaning in this way, particularly in the form of affirmation. By the time the poem regresses through hundreds of years of history of the English language

and the reader is already experiencing graphic alienation by means of historical distancing, a stage for loss has already begun from the inception of the poem's design.

In a 1995 interview for the radio program called LINEbreak, host Charles Bernstein notes that McCaffery's poems seem interested in the act of loss and quickly draws the attention of listeners to his poem "Lastworda." Bernstein situates the poem within an economy of loss and centralizes this notion in their conversation because he is interested in the way that the poem exhibits a loss of meaning, but also turns to accrue meaning in terms of sound. While McCaffery acknowledges that "with a semantic loss there is a gain of musicality" he also points out, in their conversation, that the "poem sets the risk of loss."

McCaffery's response refocuses the thinking in a sense not on loss itself or the act of losing but rather the "risk" of it. This "risk of loss" is a significantly different cultural perception that is philosophically linked to a dominant power within social, cultural and political hierarchies. To put it more mundanely, the risk of loss is only experienced if there is something to lose. So that McCaffery, being a poet of European descent, conceptualizes the risk of loss rather than an unsayability of loss is able to do so because of the social, cultural, historical, and racial links that he has to the English language. To put it more bluntly, being a white poet of European descent enables a sense of a risk of loss because it is English that we are dealing with, which is primarily

descended from the British Isles and roots its origins in Anglo-Saxon English. A British-born Canadian poet resident in the United States, McCaffery lives—and models through *Lastworda*—a very different kind of transnational imagination than Mackey.

McCaffery sets the stage for a concept of loss of meaning in the poem “*Lastworda*” rather than lamenting loss because that, in a sense, is what is at stake for him in language, the stage of loss, the possibility of loss, and the anxiety that anticipating a loss of meaning can create. His poem “*Lastworda*” is an attempt to shed denotative context in language by alienating the reader from the words in the poem. The poem does this by considering language as a whole historical system by which it can travel back across time inhabiting language of different socio-linguistic time periods until the reader is alienated by a temporal distance of the English language. In other words, the poem alienates by means of historical representations of language that are all at once social, politically, economically linked to the cultural histories of their specific time periods. To a large extent this is what transhistorical readings can do: expose, an evolution of social, cultural and political constructions of power.

Steve McCaffery’s poem “*Lastworda*” as a transhistorical text attempts to record a lexical genealogy of the English language. The poem as a lexical journey begins in the post WWII period and systematically regresses through hundreds of years of the English lexicon until it finds its simultaneous end and beginning in Anglo-Saxon. It is by no means exhaustive, but that is the premise that underwrites this poem. In another sense the design

of the poem is engineered by its dedication to treating language as a “single continuum” that can perform cumulatively. In a sense, the poem expresses language as a living, breathing economy of writing that expresses that “absolute degree of risk taking” that McCaffery describes in his essay “Writing as a General Economy.”

For McCaffery, writing as an economy is “an alternative to structure” it is an “economy” that is “concerned with the distribution and circulation of the numerous forces and intensities that saturate a text” (NI 201). In “Lastworda” the distribution and circulation of numerous forces and intensities of the text can be described in the historical, social, political and cultural contexts of the words themselves. In other words the poem keeps in circulation hundreds of years of English as a lexical history characterized by McCaffery as “a complete accumulation of the English language which almost moves like an avalanche” (Linebreak 1995) and yet it is also this very thing that effects the loss of semantic meaning. “A textual economy” writes McCaffery, “would concern itself with the order-disorder of circulations and distributions” (NI 201). Highlighted here is the emphasis on the relationship between order-disorder, and as will become more apparent an economy of excess as it relates to a restrictive economy. The shedding of semantic meaning in the poem is a form of expenditure and the gaining of a sense of musicality in the poem becomes the very thing that is “propelling textual experience into a festive economy” (NI 215).

According to McCaffery, the poem “is a complete accumulation of the English language which almost moves like an avalanche” a movement that he then contextualizes as “a purely Hegelian idea...Hegel’s idea of *aufhebung*...the accumulation and retention without waste.” “Lastworda,” for McCaffery serves as an example of “a philosophical concept that gets realized as a poetic project” in which the “vocabulary regresses back to Anglo-Saxon” (Linbreak 1995). Because McCaffery envisions this poem as a “complete accumulation of the English language” readers would do well in considering this poem to exhibit the sediment of the English language. So that readers should not consider this a totalizing complete accumulation, but rather a sample of this accumulation of the English language.

Even for a highly educated reader “Lastworda” is a poem that is difficult to read because it deals with a large corpus of the English language and in order to follow what is going on in the poem a reader needs to be able to at least notice that the English language is being presented to them almost as a tapestry, or woven rug, representing a history of the English language, and that in that woven mesh of historical time periods is a social, cultural and political critique of the language as alienating. McCaffery in his interview with Bernstein says that the poem “Lastworda” is

a piece that really works on the assumption that everybody is not a trained linguist, or trained in the pronunciation of Anglo-Saxon. And one thing that is built into the piece is a sense of becoming graphically alienated from the language. Anglo-Saxon looks different. In many ways as well as the musicality that comes out there’s that loss of meaning. We’re alienated from the language semantically and it becomes a kind of music (Linebreak 1995).

The effect of it seeming to be a single continuum is due to the poem's dependency on sound and the illusion that the end of this lexical journey is signified by first a return to the title "lastworda" and by a single and final mark of punctuation: the period. The poem then sacrifices its sense of meaning by journeying back through a history of the English language until it is indiscernible as what contemporary readers know as English. In his essay "The Notion of Expenditure" George Bataille writes that, the "term poetry, applied to the least degraded and least intellectualized forms of the expression of a state of loss, can be considered synonymous with expenditure; it in fact signifies, in the most precise way, creation by means of loss. Its meaning is therefore close to that of sacrifice" (120). McCaffery's poem "Lastworda" can best be understood as a poem that operates by loss. Its whole point is to lose meaning, to regress so far back into an English lexical history that the English language itself is not longer associated with its own historical formation, or its historical self. McCaffery in his 1995 interview with Charles Bernstein notes that to be alienated semantically and graphically is part of how the poem works, it wants to alienate its reader. By means of this alienation of the reader the loss of meaning is materialized in language.

As we have already seen, McCaffery writes in his essay "Writing as a General Economy" in his book *North of Intention* that in order to achieve this kind of alienation and loss then the writing would have to be a kind of writing that

"transgresses the prohibition of the semantic operation and risks the loss of meaning...A return to the material base of language would be necessary as a

method of losing meaning; holding on to the graphicism and sonorities at the very point where ideation struggles to effect their withdrawal (214).

Significantly, in the same essay McCaffery cites sound poetry as an example of how “loss of meaning” might occur, and he emphasizes the Dada poet Hugo Ball. McCaffery views “sound poetry” as a “poetry of complete expenditure in which nothing is recoverable and usable as “meaning” (214). “As a poetry of purely phonic outlay, the sound poem”, McCaffery writes, “puts the subject into process, exploding the unitary contours of conscious and propelling textual experience into a festive economy.” Meaning will re-attach itself “through homophonic agents and associational effects” (215).

So in McCaffery’s poem “Lastworda” the point at which it becomes a sound poem is the point at which the subject of poem is put into a process which explodes the unitary contours of consciousness and propels a reader’s textual experience into a festive economy. In other words when it becomes a sound poem the whole structure of the sign in language becomes unhinged, unfixd, a chain of floating signifiers. It is this linguistic world of floating signifiers that McCaffery sees as essential to producing a reattachment to homophony and association with materiality of language. In McCaffery’s “Lastworda” the audience is forced beyond the limits of representation the instant the poem graphically and semantically alienates the reader to the extent that the only thing left for the reader to associate with is sound. In order to gain sound the poem must progress in such a ways as to expend its unity of signification and linguistic associations, and at the very moment that unity of signification is lost sound as dominated the poem emerges.

What McCaffery's poem can teach us is there are alternative ways to make meaning. What McCaffery describes as semantic and graphic alienation, Bernstein notes as having the effect of re-focusing the audience on other things, so that there is, as he puts it in his interview with McCaffery, "another kind of semantic gain: the sounds, the rhythms, the patterns, the intonations" (LINEbreak). Other forms that exist in the text begin to emerge almost but not wholly apart from language. Because the lexical project of "Lastworda" disrupts the system of the sign and audience cannot successfully approach the poem using that same system. If an audience can learn to unhinge itself from "meaning" then other non-lexical forms and pre-literate traditions of poetry can be rediscovered. "For myself," says McCaffery in his interview with Charles Bernstein:

poetry has always been research and always will be, an investigation into endless possibilities within language that has always attracted me. And this research then often gets applied and often gets applied in poetry hopefully is making some kind of political critique on a level that is not descriptive but is really looking at the way language and linguistic utterance ties into notions of power within society (LINEbreak).

This concept of research when applied to the poem "Lastworda" supports a suggestion that McCaffery is performing a kind of research within the English language in hopes of making a political critique at the material level of language. In doing so, McCaffery hopes to show the connection that language has to power at the level of the material. The "poet's research" says McCaffery, "is motivated much more as a ludic enterprise. It's a basic playfulness and a fundamental risk-taking that critical scholarship works against

(LINEbreak). In other words, the poet's research involves playing with language, experimenting with language, testing and discovering its limits in a festive economy.

In a 1995 interview on the radio program LINEbreak, host Charles Bernstein notes that the poet Steve McCaffery is interested in a kind of loss in the act of reading. Bernstein notes this after a sample reading of McCaffery's poem "Lastworda" because he sees this as a poem that depends on an economy of loss but insists that alternatively, sound is gained. McCaffery describes his poem as

a piece that really works on the assumption that everybody is not a trained linguist, or trained in the pronunciation of Anglo-Saxon. And one thing that is built into the piece is a sense of becoming graphically alienated from the language. Anglo-Saxon looks different. In many ways as well as the musicality that comes out there's that loss of meaning. We're alienated from the language semantically and it becomes a kind of music.

Because McCaffery's poem travels across the English lexicon, which in his description he posits as a single continuum, it becomes temporally obscure at a certain point, and this point may vary depending on the knowledge of the reader. While the poem "retreats" decade by decade across the historical corpus of English, it can become unrecognizable and strange to the reader. Because Old English is vastly different than contemporary English, it will seem a foreign language to most readers. By means of the syntax and rhythm of these lines, the poem seems to make sense, but immediately fails to make sense within the logic of a contemporary English context. The poem does not use punctuation,

but still manages to signify its pauses, and the seeming beginnings and endings of sentences, or rather thoughts.

In a sense the poem's structure and overall project as a journey back through an English lexicon, calls attention to the rhythms and sounds that are not only related to but also drive the very linguistic system of English. The poem accomplishes this emphasis on sound in a deeply transhistorical way so that in hearing the poem read, or for those few who can actually read the poem for themselves, what remains a constant in the poem are the rhythms of syntax. By moving transhistorically across the history of an English lexicon, McCaffery's poem provides an historical linguistic contrast to contemporary English. In a sense he moves so far back into the English language that he produces a confrontation with our linguistic past, and in doing so his poems makes visible the past as seemingly new and different while foregrounding its rhythmic familiarity. The transhistorical and transcultural journey of this poem also suggests that the origin of English is synonymous with the colonial past of the Anglo-Saxon period in England.

Both Mackey and McCaffery use sound to foreground an audible materiality in language. Both poets utilize language as a vehicle in which to go back in time and across space until language becomes more and more songlike. For McCaffery this is a ludic and festive embrace of loss. Through his poems we are returned to the essence of language, which is identified with Anglo-Saxon, and provides a racial grounding to language. For Mackey the emergence of sound is a redemptive effort with a critical edge that when

crossed points to ways in which the language of the colonizer can be dissolved to find the “cante moro,” the black song, in and beyond it. McCaffery, the Euro-American writer can approach loss festively because English is in a profound sense his; Mackey has no point of origin to celebrate except a story and song about incompleteness and indefiniteness. Both Mackey and McCaffery, like the Angel of History, face the ruins of the past, but unlike the Angel they find paths to optimism, they find ways to say the unsayable.

For many “postmodern” writers, one becomes “post” by connecting with the premodern and its ways of knowing the world. In Mackey and McCaffery, sound and song become the tools for disrupting the system of language. For these poets, sound becomes a form of social critique of the modern, but beyond this Mackey and McCaffery return to, or at least privilege an oral tradition, in order to exit the modern. Whereas in chapter 2, the premodern oral tradition that enabled Ginsberg and Waldman to exit the modern was chant, here it is the rupture of meaning through song.

Chapter 5

The Postmodern Lyric: A Comparative Analysis of Lisa Jarnot's "Sea Lyrics" and the "Dream of the Rood"

The Postmodern Lyric: A Comparative Analysis of Lisa Jarnot's "Sea Lyrics" and the "Dream of the Rood"

"If it were not revolutionary and did not have the speed of lightening it would show us nothing outside the opacity of the present, but at the same time it would be unable to adapt itself to the requirement of a revolution to which changes the world"

— from *Literature and Evil* by Georges Bataille

Lisa Jarnot is a contemporary poet dedicated to the lyric. Her attention to rhythm and sound and cadence through repetition are innovative and energetic. The link between song and word in her poems are obvious in some titles of her books such as *Ring of Fire*, an unabashed reference to the American country song popularized by Johnny Cash, and "Black Dog Songs" which resonates with rock band Led Zeppelin's song titled "Black Dog Song." Other poems such as the long serial poem titled "Sea Lyrics" establishes such connections both rhythmically and historically. What is unique about Jarnot's mode of the contemporary lyric and reflective of the poet's historical time period is the speed at which the rhythm operates. Jarnot constructs in her poem "Sea Lyrics" what I will call a hypertrophic riddle. The repetition in the poem creates both a riddling technique that obscures the subjective imagination of the poet, or the "I" and also produces a chant-like rhythm.

In order to facilitate a transhistorical comparison between this long lyric poem published at the end of the twentieth century and the riddle as a premodern literary form I take up the Anglo-Saxon poem "Dream of the Rood." I focus on a comparison of her repetitive use of the "I am" and "I was" so that I might illustrate the ways in which she

echoes a premodern riddles in the form of her poem. The effect of the riddle is to obscure the name of an object or thing and instead refocus a reader's imagination on the attributes that describe the thing. In Jarnot's poem the name of the state that is California is obscured by a lyrical description of attributes, or specifics that compose the poet's experience of California. I also argue that in order to maintain this riddling over several poems and in prose form the poem also relies on an anaphoric repetition in order to construct a driving rhythm that has the effect of propelling the poem forward. This driving rhythm that I describe in Jarnot's poem is representative of a postmodern form of the lyric. In this poem the postmodern lyric embraces a premodern poetics. The poet envisions her lyric quality as a response to the disintegration of the political left in the United States. She situates poetry as being capable of responding to the social, the cultural and the political in ways that evoke intimacy and hope and in doing so the poet draws an intimate connection between the body politic and the body poetic.

Poetry and Politics

In 1997 *An Anthology of New (American) Poets*, the contemporary poet Lisa Jarnot writes that

Coming of age in the 1970's and 1980's meant witnessing the fragmentation and disintegration of the Left in the United States. It meant seeing the country's loss of economic hegemony and subsequent xenophobic internal and international policies. It meant, in general, wading through the alienation of commodity culture, the grief of an AIDS epidemic, and the beginning of the end of a livable global ecosystem. What is surprising is to come out of such circumstances of childhood into life as a poet and to again embrace the world with some determination to communicate candidly, with hope, and with urgency. The communication that rings through these pages is of a keen desire for social interaction, an openness to diversity of experiment, and an earnestness in the

intellectual and philosophical pursuits that one might associate those who call their craft poetry. This work is not without cynicism, it's not without confusion, and it's not without a great mistrust for the structures of the body politic or the body poetic. However, it is filled with a new charge a renewed interest in the continuity of traditions of writing, a critique of the dire economic and social conditions which surround us, and a sincere approach to the fact that we have much to learn from each other and from our individual poetical practices (2).

This lengthy quote is a reading of not just Jarnot's generation, but more acutely it is the poet's reading of the social, political and cultural climate of the coming from the 1970s and 1980s. In general, Jarnot's commentary is about loss and her generation's response to this loss. She implies that in some way the poems in the anthology respond to loss by means of revisiting and continuing traditions of writing. For Jarnot, and the poets included in this 1997 anthology, the stakes are about an urgent search for intimacy and honesty. The poems that come from the 1990s in response to the 1970s and 1980s desire "social interaction, an openness to diversity of experiment, and an earnestness." She categorizes the work that emerges from the period as "cynical," at times confusing, and filled with "mistrust for the body politic or the body poetic."

The connection she elicits between the "body politic" and the "body poetic" is explicit and best understood through form and aesthetics in her own poems. In revisiting "traditions of writing" Jarnot's poems reflect a continuing of that tradition, but the agenda to "critique...the dire economic and social conditions" that surround her means that "traditions of writing" are being brought across time and into the historical moment of the poet. It is a transhistorical maneuvering of form across time, which echoes the transhistorical modes of writing of Ginsberg, Waldman, Duncan and Spicer. Jarnot's own poems often exhibit an urgency of rhythm and beat more than in the words themselves.

Her poems are candid in their mistrust for the “body politic” and the “body poetic” and yearn for social interaction within and around the political and the poetical.

In the preface to *The Politics of Poetic Form*, Charles Bernstein writes that “[p]oetry remains an unrivaled arena for social research into the (re)constitution of the public and the (re)constitution of discourse” (viii). He claims that poetry can do this by means of how “the formal dynamics of a poem shape its ideology; more specifically, how radically innovative poetic styles can have political meanings” (vii). By configuring poetics as an arena for social research, Bernstein brings to the forefront of the conversation form and by extension aesthetics, as central to shaping ideology, and in a sense as a way to into question the State’s power through the state of language and form. In his writings concerning a general economy, Bataille writes that, “[o]nce the world of things was posited, man himself became one of the things of this world, at least for the time in which he labored. It is this degradation that man has always tried to escape” (Bataille *Accursed Share* v.1, 57).

Bataille’s statement reminds us that people, and consequently human culture, through labor have become a commodity fetish. Negating the commodity fetish is best achieved through sacrifice and destruction, and for Bataille “poetry...signifies...creation by means of loss” (“The Notion of Expenditure” 120). Because it is language that names things, and because language is central to political discourse then language just might be the site of struggle in which to begin calling out the State and its fetish power. If “[i]n his strange myths, in his cruel rites, man is *in search of a lost intimacy* from the first”

(Bataille *Accursed Share* v.1, 57) then poetics, in its ability to unhinge words from their meanings, is a path to recovering a kind of an intimacy with the world itself, and as Jarnot reminds us in her statement and her poetics, the search for this lost intimacy, and honesty, is urgent.

Sea Lyrics

The body of the poem itself consists of 30 prose-like poems set on their own page. Each individual prose poem is also a sentence, often built from an accumulation of clauses that both extend the sentence and help produce the rhythm of the poem. Rhythmically, the poems are serially linked by means of repetition in words, phrases, and the consistent rhythm that the repetition facilitates, but within each individual poem anaphora is employed in each clause and is sustained serially across the entirety of the poem. The excessiveness and consistency of the repetition in such close proximity creates a fast rhythm that drives the poem forward.

The contemporary poet Lisa Jarnot begins her long serial poem “Sea Lyrics” with a definition of California taken from a first edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. This definition functions as an epigraph meant to introduce her poem but also to link to the poem to another context.

California, a large country of the West Indies, lying between 116° and 138° W. long and between 23° and 46° N. lat. It is uncertain whether it be a peninsula or an island.

Encyclopedia Britannica, 1768.

Marked by mistake and misdirection from the beginning, the poem offers misguidance and misrecognition, it produces a misunderstanding of both the word and the place, in a sense it enacts a parody of definition, and consequently a parodic obscuring of “California” as a definition based on its longitude and latitude. The poet’s selection from the 1768 Encyclopedia Britannica defines “California” by its geography, uncertain of its landscape. The very naming of it, the defining of it as “California” is itself an act of obscuring the place itself. In a more specific sense, the very substance that these letters, C-a-l-i-f-o-r-n-i-a, are meant to represent is obscured by the letters themselves.

Jarnot’s misdirecting definition continues to engage and further obscure and re-define California. She writes,

I am a partially submerged boat on the waterfront of Jack London Square on a Sunday morning buying jam, I am flesh-colored and pale, in an Indian head dress cracking chestnuts and eating roots, in the fissure between the bus lines, with the smell of burnt toast in the can-crushing lot, in the inside-out tomato yards, where I am riding all the bicycles through the tunnels to the lawn, where I am on a downtown bus, partially submerged, I am krill and various large birds, the color of glass in isolation in the sun, I am waiting for the swamps and smoke of eucalyptus in the breeze, I am stuck in traffic near the mudflats on the bay, I am aimless and have several new tattoos. (ROF 21)

The “I” in the poem immediately takes on an identity that relates to the mis-definition that precedes it. In a sense, California is all these things and this particular vision of California is delivered through the Jarnot’s perceptions. What I am particularly interested in is the repetition in regards to producing both the lyric and obscurity. What I want to propose is that this poem engages the poetic forms of chant and the riddle. Because of the repetition, the rhythm and the seriality and length of the poem it reads like a chant not

unlike Anne Waldman's poem *Fast Speaking Woman*. Yet note the repetition of "I am" and how it is functioning in a way that takes on the identity of geographic and social details of California. It is almost as if it is producing "California" as the answer to which it might end with the question "what am I?"

Because of how the "I am" operates in the poem it produces a riddle-like form, more specifically an extended riddle. Through its repetition in the poem, the "I am" is loosened from its denotative context and is able to take on the identity of the objective clauses which signify geographic details through personal experiences in California at a certain time. The first clause "I am a partially submerged boat on the waterfront of Jack London Square on a Sunday morning buying jam" is a reference to Jack London Square in Oakland, California. The syntax necessitates that the "I am" is a "partially submerged boat on the waterfront of Jack London Square..." and in doing so the "I" become associated with the objective clause "partially submerged boat on the waterfront of Jack London Square on a Sunday morning buying jam" in away that allows it to assume the objective clause as its identity. Because the "I" is a pronoun and is usually assumed to represent a human it works to personify the "partially submerged boat on the waterfront of Jack London Square" but also the reverse is applicable in that the "partially submerged waterfront of Jack London Square" affects and obscures the "I" of the poem so that it can no longer solely represent the narrator just as a person but also as a thing or object to be discovered.

In this way Jarnot's poem acts like a riddle, but also by means of the ongoingness of the poem best shown through conjugations of the verb "to be," the poem counts on the "I am" construction to develop its rhythmic chant-like quality. Even in the instances when the poem veers from its repetition of "I am" it is still working to produce the chant-like rhythm. For example in the following section of the poem the repetition is centered on "where":

Today I am rivets of sails in a log cabin where Jack London lived in Alaska until they moved his cabin here where we collect the change to buy our drinks and eat the free hors d'oeuvres, where the neighbors are somewhat pleased beside the railroad trains, where the vague sense of the Union Pacific is with opossums of freeways and you, where we've assembled plastic birds all morning, where the airplanes fill the plastic sky, where the fish are brightly colored on the lawn, where an underwater bird is pummeled on the sidestreet, where we take hallucinogens and wander through museums, where the people construct the artificial ponds, where theosophists arrive on all the hillsides, where I have been bowling all morning, where we have been airplanes and also the plastic small birds, where this is the type of leisure that I am, where these are the largest of fires, where the highway trembles on the edge of the waterfront square.

The repetition of "where" in the poem maintains the chant-like rhythm of the poem but now there is a "we" that makes an appearance in the poem. The shifting between the "I" and the "we" indicates that the speaker of the poem is both doing things both alone and communally. But the "where" in this section of the poem functions as a pronoun that signifies geographical details much like the "I am" in the previous section of the poem, only "where" is operating by means of its grammatical rules in that it is a pronoun that designates places. Instead of finding the more commonly constructed odd logic in the assignment of geographic details to the first person pronoun "I" in Jarnot's poem we find pronouns operating under the duress of repetition. In the poem "where" becomes steady, consistent, and facilitates an accumulation of images, but by means of its own repetition

loses its own significance and becomes loosened from its own denotative and syntactical context. Under the duress of repetition “where” becomes the chant-like beat that allows the circulation and accumulation of images while also pointing to and parodying its own arbitrary grammatical function by reassigning its association with a constant changing of images.

In this example consider how the “I” functions not as a narrator but rather it becomes a tool by which experiences are expressed.

I am collecting ceramic dogs and cats, I am awake early today to go to the lawn from the shower to the vacantest lot with all the pit bulls and the cars, I am waiting for the man to come in through the window, I am sitting on the roof devoured by the smog, I am directing you to a sushi bar, I am cooking only foods with milk and eggs, I am a tiny frozen squid.

The “I” within this short section acquires the a montage of details that informs the subjectivity of the “I” and is situated more as background to the details.

The rapid and rhythmic listing of images constructs a montage-like effect that contributes to the mode of obscuring the “I” in the poem. Instead the “I” becomes the rhythm and sound of the lyric, becoming less visible and loosening the boundaries of the poem and the syntax of sentences an opening for imagination occurs. The lyric obscuring of the “I” allows a kind of erasure of its usual association and allows an openness to occur into which the readers can insert their own identity as readers by means of their own imagination. The effect is of distance between reader and text, but more importantly the distance between reader and what is being said or rather signified by the words of the text is shortened, thereby lending the text what the Anglo-Saxon scholar Frederick Tupper calls “a closeness to life” (Tupper lxxxvi). A mode of interaction emerges that allows for

an “intimate participation with the subject” of the object, or thing in the world (Bataille ACC, 55). In other words by erasing the “I” as subject that is distant, or rather by obscuring its very subjectivity, the repetition and erasure allows for the reader to engage the poem with his or her own subjectivity by entering the mode of the poem it enables the reader as the “I” of the poem to develop a more intimate relationship with the life of the object.

Jarnot’s poem misguides; it produces by accumulating metaphors; and the “I” of the poem inhabits the identity of things that are never named; and it operates by means of a projective imagination. “Sea Lyrics” performs like an extended riddle, and it performs at a different speed, a kind of hyper speed, reflective of the speed of life in late 20th century, which contributes to a feeling of alienation. Because of the poem’s simultaneous simplicity and complexity and because we are dealing with a poet writing lyrically in English I propose that we consider the Old English Riddles for comparison. It is widely argued that the Old English Riddles were not writ or performed for the sake of exercising one’s wit in public, but rather that the Old English Riddles are more complex and ambiguous than their correspondent Latin riddlers. Because Jarnot’s poem acts like a riddle in the late 20th century early 21st century it also acts at the speed of this particular time period and so I conclude this dissertation project and continue this chapter with the statement that Jarnot’s poem *Sea Lyrics* acts like a hypertopic riddle, meaning that it performs like a riddle at a quickened—or hyper—pace.

The Anglo-Saxon Riddle

In his book *Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, Craig Williamson defines riddles as “a form of literary game” and notes that “they are also metaphoric disguise(s)” and that the “Old English *Riddles* are anthropomorphic—they describe something not human in human disguise...but there is nothing in the classical tradition to explain the particular lyric quality—almost a celebration of the nonhuman Other—in the Old English Poems” (26). This “particularly lyric quality” that Williamson describes here emerges specifically from an Old English tradition, which he argues is significantly different from the Latin and Greek riddlers. He argues that the Anglo-Saxon riddles are more complex and lyrical, less exercises of public wit than riddles from the classic tradition. He observes, as does Frederick Tupper, that the Anglo-Saxon tradition of riddles invoke everyday objects and subjects. Tupper writes that,

The English poems smack far less of abstractions and of classical and biblical lore than the problems of Aldhelm; nor are the eked out with liberal borrowing from Isadore’s *Etymologies*, like those of Eusebius. Nothing human is deemed too high or low for treatment, and all phases of Old English existence are revealed in these poems; so that they stand forth as the most important contemporary contributions to our knowledge of the everyday life of their time” (lxxxvi).

Tupper furthers his analysis by asserting that “[n]owhere does a poet or school of poets proclaim closeness to life more plainly than in choice of theme” (lxxxvi). Riddles can give a sense of “closeness to life” because of how a reader can, or rather is forced to interact with the riddle. In reading a riddle the reader is formally positioned in such a way as to develop an intimate relationship with things in the world by means of their own complex descriptions rather than the name that represents the thing in the world. The

form of the riddle asks its readers to play a language game, and readers that accept the terms of the game become riddlers and are effectively pulled into solving the riddle. By going through the mechanics of solving a riddle the riddler is interacting at a different linguistic level with things in the world.

The literary game of a riddle asks the riddler to not only consider what is beyond a name, but to come to that name by thinking about the thing itself without yet knowing that thing. In a sense, the game asks the riddler to know the thing without knowing its name, and in this way it is possible to see that not only do riddles effect a “closeness to life” but in their game they also expose to the riddler that names, which are nouns, create distance between things in the world. To put it in other words language abstracts us from knowing things in the world and riddles expressly play with this relationship.

So that we might understand what is meant by “closeness to life” I want to turn toward an inquiry into the Anglo-Saxon riddle form as an exhibition of a complex exploration of the thing-ness of things in the world. In Anglo-Saxon riddles the idea that things of the world have a life-force is not only metaphorical but it speaks to the kind of relationships that were perceived in pre-modern forms of the world. By foregrounding the details that describe objects, or things in the world, erases the subjectivity of the objects and in doing this the relationship between reader and text is different in that the role that imagination plays.

The Old English Riddles evoke an exchange between reader and text that constructs a situation in which the reader takes on the role of the riddler and depends on a projective imagination so that the riddle can be solved. The role of the reader of riddles is to imagine the everyday object by means of its attributes. To a certain extent the riddle draws the reader to discover the subject by identifying intimately with the object's attributes. These attributes are description, which are presented by means of analogy because while a riddle wants to be solved it also serves to misdirect readers on the way to the solution.

In her essay "Linguistic Ambiguities in Some Exeter Book *Riddles*" Elena Afros describes the Anglo-Saxon riddlers as being able to "consciously deploy carefully crafted linguistic means to direct as well as misdirect the reader on his/her way to the solution(s)" (436). Anita Riedinger also recognizes that necessary to a riddle is its ability to mislead its audience and that riddles "intend to reveal and conceal simultaneously" (38). Somewhat like a literary scavenger hunt, readers must identify the object by projecting themselves by means of imagination into the riddle; and riddles invoke this by beginning with phrases such as *Ic eom* or *Ic waes* (I am or I was).

Williamson classifies the Anglo-Saxon riddles into two primary types: the first is imaginatively projective and begins with "I am" or "I was" and the second is narrative and begins with "I saw" or "I ..." or "What is." He writes:

There are two kinds of Old English riddles that are the two poles of the perceptual game. The first kind of riddle is one that begins typically with *Ic eom* or *waes*. This kind of riddle, like *The Dream of the Rood*, is an imaginative projection, a kind of Anglo-Saxon negative capability. In terms of the game, the riddler

pretends to be the creature in question. The voice of the riddle is the voice of the unknown creature cloaked in the disguise of man. The disguise is double. The riddler (man) pretends to be the creature (not man), but the creature describes himself in typically human terms. Thus the wind speaks as a warring servant, the shield as a wounded warrior, the nightingale as an evening poet, mead as a terrible wrestler, gold as an exile, and the book as a mysterious traveler. These projective riddles we may call first-person riddles of personification. The second kind of riddle begins typically with *Ic seah* or *Ic gefaegn* or *Wiht is*. This kind of riddle is a narrative riddle in which man retains his human identity in order to describe the miraculous identity of the riddlic creature. Still the creature that is not human is often described in human terms... These narrative riddles we may call third-person riddles of description (25).

In accordance with this classification, Jarrot's poem *Sea Lyrics* is a first-person riddle of personification because it employs "I am" in the image building in the poem. *Sea Lyrics* is a poem of imaginative projection and it situates the reader as riddler who pretends to be, or rather to embody the life-force of the object or image of the poem. Jarrot's poem positions its readers to imagine an image of California by means of its details, which in a way resembles the kind of Mohammedan rugs to which Duncan refers in order to articulate his conceptual practice of magic in poetics as showing the image without knowing the image. This process of imaginative projection, the continued use of "I am" to describe places in California, and the effect that it has on personifying California all come together in Jarrot's poem to suggest the ghostly mark of the Old English Riddles. Jarrot's poem exhibits characteristics that follow the complex Anglo-Saxon riddle and her poem effects a kind of personification similar to the way that the "Dream of the Rood" poem exacts personification of the tree that becomes wood and is eventually transformed into not just any cross, but the crucifix.

Because they are complex, and because readers are situated so that they become the animal or object by projectively imaging themselves as the object, and because the search for intimacy with the world through the linguistic system that represents the world, Old English Riddles are significant to a genealogy of lyric poems written in English. The very operations of the riddle form in the Old English Riddles are reminiscent of the kind of intimacy for which poetry is always searching because it recognizes our loss of intimacy from the first. Let us be reminded that Bataille's salient definition in his essay "The Notion of Expenditure" states that the "term poetry...signifies...creation by means of loss" (120).

For Bataille "creation by means of loss" is the very fortune of poetry, it is endemic to the way in which it operates. Poetry, as a genre of expression, recognizes its paradox within language as a system of representation: that language, words, and naming things in the world signifies a loss of intimacy with the things in the world to which it wants to refer. So that we might clearly understand this idea as it is related to poetry and its premodern cousin the riddle, I want to turn to Saussure's well-known linguistic model of the sign.

In Saussure's model, the combination of the visual letters T-R-E-E and the sounds that those letters make signify the thing in the world that we imagine a tree to be. Letters and sounds then refer to things in the world and in doing so they create a sense of loss of intimacy with thing things in the world that letters and the sounds they make are attempting to represent. Language itself signifies loss. We use the word because the thing

is gone. The kind of intimacy lost is physical, so that in a sense we can no longer know things in the world as they are, as they exist, but we can only know things through how they are represented, through words.

In this way, Baudrillard's dictum that the "map precedes the territory" is quite true in that language is the map and it can only refer to the territory but never be or fully represent the territory. And this is something that Saussure himself understood about language, that the letters T-R-E-E and the sounds they make when combined could never fully represent the life-force of the actual thing in the world. As Spicer might say, or as Barthes might say, words can only ever gesture to the thing. What we lose in knowing things through the medium of language is an intimate experience with things in the world—and this is the inception of poetry. In fact it defines its paradox in that poetry creates out of loss, gains intimacy through the destruction of language. Perhaps it is this in our own contemporary period that is difficult about poetry, the intimacy that it wants to generate, the closeness to life that it reveals as our loss, and perhaps this is all too much for most readers to be reminded of such loss. At this point I would like to turn to the concept of loss, first as it relates to the Anglo-Saxon poem the "Dream of the Rood" and the technique of *propopoeia*, and secondly as it relates to Jarnot's long poem "Sea Lyrics." In order to effectively do this I will take up the concept of sacrifice as it relates to both poetry and loss through *Bataille*.

An Economy of Sacrifice in *The Dream of the Rood*

“Poetry alone, which denies and destroys the limitations of things, can return us to this absence of limitations – in short, the world is given to us when the image which we have within us is sacred, because all that is sacred is poetic and all that is poetic is sacred” (*Literature and Evil* 84).

Because Bataille holds poetry among the most destructive and pure states of loss in the arts, and because Bataille sees destruction as a means to negating utility, and because Bataille sees poetry the most destructive of the arts his theory of sacrifice seems best suited when considering the structure of language. For as Bataille writes in *Literature and Evil* “Even if it wanted to, poetry could not construct: it destroys; it is only true when in revolt” (86). For Bataille poetry “signifies, in the most precise way, creation by means of loss” and “...poetic expenditure ceases to be symbolic in its consequences; thus, to a certain extent, the function of representation engages the very life of the one who assumes it” (*The Notion of Expenditure* 120). Because Bataille believes that it is sacrifice, which is inherently a loss, restores the sacred to the world of things, and hence poetry that can restore the sacred to the world of things in language I will use his work on sacrifice in order to read acts of sacrifice in the poem *The Dream of the Rood*.

The poem has two main sacrifices, the first being that of the tree which become wood, which then becomes a cross, which then becomes a *the* crucifix; and the second is that of Christ. In order to address a pagan community with Christian messages, the poet employs the rhetorical device of prosopopoeia. Sacrifice is what allows the tree to be

transformed and to be put into intimate contact with the sacred, and literally fused to Christ as a symbol.

For Bataille, sacrifice is integral to the notion of excess because it is sacrifice alone that has the capacity to re-organize social structures. In fact, as noted by Joseph Libertson, sacrifice is the “second basic elaboration of the concept of transgression” (Libertson 1015) and for Bataille this means that sacrifice remains closely linked with notions of excess by means of destruction, which “... is the best means of negating a utilitarian relation between man and the animal or plant” (*The Accursed Share Vol. 1* 56).

It is not arbitrary that I choose Bataille in order to consider a particular form of sacrifice in the poem *The Dream of the Rood*. What is important to notice about this quote from Bataille is that at issue here is the relationship between “man” on one side and “animal” / “plant” on the other. A relationship based in utility is what for Bataille abstracts man from the sacred, and thus also from the “animal” or “plant”. A relationship based in utility implies that a plant or animal has become a *thing* in the world to which man can then subject to “servile use,” which for Bataille, degrades the sacred world. In turn it is this relationship that also carries with it the ability to put man into “servile use”:

From the start, the introduction of *labor* into the world replaced intimacy, the depth of desire and its free outbreaks, with rational progression, where what matters is no longer the truth of the present moment, but, rather, the subsequent results of *operations*. The first labor established the world of *things*, to which the profane world of the Ancients generally corresponds. Once the world of things was posited, man himself became one of the things of this world, at least for the time in which he labored. It is this degradation that man has always tried to

escape. In his strange myths, in his cruel rites, man is *in search of a lost intimacy* from the first (57).

Things are nouns. This matters because it is nouns that have utility; it is nouns that are able to be transformed into objects, into products. People by means of their labor also fall into this rational economy: human labor becomes a thing and thus is abstracted from the sacred and exists in a degraded form. In Bataille's world people cannot escape this degradation except by means of sacrifice. Sacrifice

restores to the sacred world that which servile use has degraded, rendered profane. Servile use has made a *thing* (an *object*) of that which, in a deep sense, is of the same nature as the *subject*, is in a relation of intimate participation with the subject (*The Accursed Share* 55).

The "*search of a lost intimacy*" then is a search for an intimate participation between man and "plant" / "animal."

In *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Heidegger discusses this sense of degradation as it plays out in what he will depict via concealment. His terms "thing-in-itself" (21) and the "thing-concept" are what must be unconcealed, meaning that truth be revealed, that there be an openness. For Heidegger, the "nature of truth" is "unconcealment" (53) and one way "in which truth grounds itself is the essential sacrifice" (60). Heidegger too is concerned with origins and in his search detects violence as a means to "unconcealment".

But for Bataille sacrifice is the means to truth, more specifically self-sacrifice. Sacrifice is a pure form of loss; it is loss without gain. Sacrifice is destruction, the victim

is destroyed, becomes a necessary expenditure, a necessary loss. Expenditure and loss are integral to the sacred for Bataille:

From the very first, it appears that sacred things are constituted by an operation of loss: in particular, the success of Christianity must be explained by the value of the theme of the Son of God's ignominious crucifixion, which carries human dread to a representation of loss and limitless degradation (*The Notion of Expenditure* 119).

In fact he argues that the sacred is constituted by loss and that "sacrifice is nothing other than the production of *sacred* things". This will become materially evident when looking at the theme of sacrifice in the poem *The Dream of the Rood*. Sacrifice consecrates that which it destroys, and for Bataille this is integral to the Christian faith. It is rightly so that poetry, which is for Bataille "the least degraded and least intellectualized forms of the expression of the state of loss". This is so much the case for Bataille that he considers poetry as "synonymous with expenditure; it in fact signifies, in the most precise way, creation by means of loss. Its meaning is therefore close to that of *sacrifice*" (*Notion* 120).

That is why poetry is favored so highly by Bataille, because it carries within it the destructive qualities of the purest form of sacrifice, which in turn means an absolute expenditure, or loss. In an essay on the poet William Blake, Bataille notes that "[p]oetry alone" is that "which denies and destroys the limitations of things" and it is poetry that "can return us to this absence of limitations" (*Literature and Evil* 84). Poetry alone then can return us to a state of being where limitations are absent so that we can in fact have intimate participation with the sacred.

In the realm of language this means that signs and symbols as the social order must be destabilized. In *The Dream of the Rood* the order of pagan tradition is what is destabilized. What destabilizes it is the fusion of the cross to the Christ:

Purhdrifan hī mē mid deorcan næglum. On mē syndon þā dolg ges ene,
opene inwidhlemmas. Ne dorste ic hira ænigum sceððan.
Bysmeredon hīe unc bütū ætgædere. Eall ic wæs mid blōde bestēmed,
begoten of þæs guman sīdan, siððan hē hæfde his gāst onsended.

They pierced me with dark nails. On me, the scars are visible,
open malicious wounds. I did not dare injure any of them.
They mocked both of us, together. I was all drenched with blood,
covered from the man's side, after he had sent forth his spirit. (lines 46-49)

The cross becomes fused to the fate of Christ, evident in line 41 of the cross' narrative.

Bifode ic þā mē se beorn ymbclypte.

I trembled when he embraced me.

The fusion is complete after the nails have pierced the wood, and left open malicious wounds, then the cross notes that "Bysmeredon hīe unc bütū ætgædere" "They mocked us both of us, together" (Line 48). The cross and Christ are now consecrated together, but it is Christ who has ascended to Heaven and the cross that has stayed behind to become a monument, a messenger, a symbol for cultural memory. The cross can only be witness to Christ's sacrifice, not a victim.

Prosopopoeia

Ongan þā word sprecan wudu sēlesta:
‘Þæt wæs gēara_iū, (ic þæt gyta geman),
þæt ic wæs āhēawen holtes on ende,
styred of stefne mīnum. Genāman mē ðær strange fēondas,
geworhton him þær tō wæfersyne, hēton mē heora wergas hebban.
Bæron mē þær beornas on eaxlum, oððæt hīe mē on beorg āsetton,
gefæstnodon mē þær fēondas genōge. (lines 27-31)

“The most excellent tree began to speak the words:
‘That was a long time ago, (that, I still remember),
that I was hewed down from the edge of the forest,
removed from my root. Strong enemies seized me there,
they made me into a spectacle for themselves,
commanded me to lift up their criminals” (lines 27-31)

That things in the world have life is not a new concept, even for the Old English poem, *The Dream of the Rood*. That Orpheus could make the rocks sing with his lyre and that the Old Testament has speaking trees are both evidence of the idea that *things* in the world have life within them. Here in *The Dream of the Rood* it is the tree or *The Rood* that exhibits the characteristics of being alive. The poetic device that accounts for this rhetorical move is commonly known as personification, but it seems an unfair thing to consider the complex and extended personification that is developed in *The Dream of the Rood* poem similarly to the kind of personification we might find in a line of poetry.

For this reason, I turn to an essay published in 1980, “The Technique of Object-Personification in *The Dream of the Rood* and a Comparison with the Old English *Riddles*” by Peter Orton. In this essay he names the use of this poetic device in *The*

Dream of the Rood “object-personification” a technique he also connects to the tradition of prosopopeia. *The Dream of the Rood* poem is an early example of an extended use of prosopopeia in English literary history.

In a 1978 essay Bruce Braswell attempts to make a textual connection between Aldhelm’s writing on prosopopeia, which Aldhelm locates in sacred scripture, and *The Dream of the Rood*. Though he bases this connection on the possibility of the poet having been at the same court where Aldhelm’s works may have been known Braswell does offer us evidence that the device was known. Aldhelm, in his *De metris et enigmatibus ac pedum regulis*, writes that,

For sometimes a rational creature adopts the pose and character of irrational objects and, on the other hand, a creature that is irrational and lacking the power of sense perception is endowed with the pose and voice of creatures with the capacity of understanding (Braswell citing Aldhelm 462).

What is important to Braswell is that this connection suggests how the poet of *The Dream of the Rood* might accomplish its use of the rhetorical device prosopopeia “with scriptural authority” (Braswell 463). This is important because as Orton notes, the “*Dream* poet...was dealing, not simply with a particular object with a certain function, but also with a known narrative in which the object is variously involved with particular human characters and groups” (Orton 8). What is useful from these arguments connecting a poem like *The Dream of the Rood* and *The Old English Riddles* are that Orton notes focuses on the relationship between the objects and human communities. In the case of *The Dream of the Rood* poem the use of prosopopeia in order to explore the relationship between the wood in the forest and the human Christian world of medieval

England. *The Dream of the Rood* narrates the story of the crucifixion of Christ from the perspective of a tree that has been cut down and transformed by the labor of human hands into the shape of a cross.

What seems true then is that the use of prosopopoeia in poems seems to exploit the connections and relationships between human communities and objects in the world.

While Old English Riddles are exceptionally clear in establishing this relationship by means of both first-person projective imagination riddles and third-person riddles of description. A more accurate way of thinking about this is through the way in which object-personification, or prosopopoeia, by shifting the relationship between subject and object, the line ordinarily regulating their difference is blurred. In doing so, if not just for a moment, the subject-reader is brought into close proximity, intimate proximity with the object personified with life-force.

It is this point from which I would like to leap back to Jarnot's poem, in order to discuss the concepts of sacrifice and loss and their relationship to prosopopoeia, or an extended object-personification. We have already seen that Jarnot's poem leads with the "I am" but also that it employs the indefinite pronoun "where". In accordance with Williamsons notation of the difference of "first -person riddles of personification" and "third-person riddles of description" Jarnot's poem works like both a first-person riddle of personification and a third-person riddle of description. For Jarnot's poem this means that it can both personify the object, California places, and give it a kind of narrative structure in the way that a riddle might. By oscillating between these two perspectives

Jarnot also oscillates between seeing California details as both objects and objects that are personified. In doing this, Jarnot's poem is able to make visible the stakes of language, or more specifically, of naming.

Certainly at risk here is that language can signify a loss of intimacy with things in the world, and in Jarnot's poem that thing being the places and the life-forces that can be contained, hidden in fact, in the name California. Jarnot's poem continues with its urgent beat,

I am not quite yet the harmony of spheres, I have been hunting prey and building bridges for several years now on and off, I am the foam of obstruction in the foam of obstruction I am, I am the open bridge, I am the falling away from a baseball game across the earth on the edge of the islands and jail (ROF 26).

So what we return to after looking at "Dream of the Rood" is a contemporary poem whose rhythm is fast, driving, urgent, and to which repetition of the "I am" lends something beyond and Anglo-Saxon riddle and that is the destruction "I".

Repetition's effectiveness at erasing, or rather eradicating the "I" is dependent on its ability to transform it into something else beyond its denotative meaning, or association with the subject-reader as distant from the object. Jarnot's poem effectively does this by using the "I am" so repetitively that, similar to Waldman's *Fast Speaking Woman*, it become musical. The poem's ability to incorporate the "I am" and an indefinite pronoun "where" marks the beat of this poem with variation but similarity.

Take for instance this example:

I have come from here to there on multi-colored subways through the multi-cored lawns with wet feet being webbed and nearly sober where the baseball teams are

frenzied and Peralta herds his cows where abutting all the artificialist lagoons are moonlight and the sound of wheels, where the palm trees are imagined, where the knotted branches ring the edge of all the hillsides by the park, where in the lunar tides I fall outside the porch into tequila, I am at the library with the health food stores, I am upon the roof to glare across the city where I am, I am trembling like the traffic, I am on the backs of motorcycles in the pull of the tides in astrology and far from Detroit (ROF 27).

Where the poem is able to both continue its propulsion by means of syntactical parallelism and chiasmus, but also it is able to maintain that flux between first-person object personification and third-person description. For instance the repetition of the “I have” resonates with the consistency of the “I am.” The “where,” already established as a form of repetition that reflects the riddle, also resonates through syntactic parallelism with the “I am” and the “I have.”

The urgency of the beat increases in such moments of inverted syntactic parallelism such as it occurs in the breath of these two clauses: “I am upon the roof to glare across the city where I am, I am trembling like the traffic.” The chiasmic structure occurs sporadically throughout the poem. In this particular moment it has the effect of bringing the “I am” to the “I am” and pushing through the boundaries of the the letters “I – a- m” into a reverberant sound. In bringing this about it pushes the language away from its own ability to represent by showing it a reflection of itself. In a sense the “I am” by being confronted with a replica, a copy, a simulation of itself becomes abstracted, or unhinged from its ordinary, everyday associations. In doing this what is made visible is the a kind of Baudrillardian hyperreal as the the reality. In his essay “The Precession of Simulacra” he writes that,

Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generations by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal (1).

Baudrillard's concept, when applied to language and poetry, impose the notion that the real is only ever a copy, and that there is no origin or reality, but instead our reality is simulation. When considering a comparison the poems, "Sea Lyrics" and "Dream of the Rood" through the form of the riddle, Baudrillard lends this same negation of an origin as does Barthes' in his essay "Death of the Author." Instead what is foregrounded is the concepts of simulation and circulation. In other words, most relevant is the simulation and circulation of signs.

The point then is to make this visible to readers, to participants in the world, the ways in which we live and understand the world through signs. The way to point this out is to unhinge or destroy the sign, and show its materiality, show its primal sounds and beats. "Whatever society looks for in continuing to produce, and to overproduce," writes Baudrillard,

is to restore the real that escapes it. That is why *today this "material" production is that of the hyperreal itself*. It retains all the features, the whole discourse of traditional production, but it is no longer anything but its scaled-down refraction (thus hyper-realists fix a real from which all meaning and charm, all depth and energy of representation have vanished in a hallucinatory resemblance). Thus everywhere the hyperrealism of simulation is translated by the hallucinatory resemblance of the real to itself (23).

Overproduction, as a kind of excess, is the very thing that creates the conditions for the concept of sacrifice, the need for expenditure. In sacrifice, something must be destroyed, and in our present reality, or rather hyperreality, notions of expenditure are an attempt to

not only “restore the real that escapes it,” but moreso it is to restore the lost intimacy that which in turn restores a sense of the real.

If it is true, as Michael Taussig writes in his essay “Why the Nervous System?” that “our very forms and means of representation are under siege” then

this puts writing on a completely different plane than hitherto conceived. It calls for an understanding of the representation as contiguous with that being represented and not as suspended above and distant from the represented...and it calls for a mode of writing no less systematically nervous than the [Nervous System] itself. (10)

What is made apparent in Jarnot’s poem is that the repetition of form and syntax are part of an urgent propulsion of the poem, but also part of its unhinging, its destructive quality to which as Bataille believes is inherent to poetry.

In other words the poem, like its subjects and objects, moves. And in moving it exposes the naming of California, and the naming of things in the world as a form of obscuring. And in its montage like movement it performs a kind of nervousness in its writing, in its modes of representation. The poem resists conventional meta-narratives and instead privileges the circular, the circulation of signs, and in doing so performs a kind of unhinging of signs which in turn effects the exposure that the means and forms of modernity are under siege.

Opening A Field

By the time I had written *Structure of Rime II* the title of the book was there. And I had begun to think of the field, and the opening of the field, as the total idea, that would be ...let's say the scene that would be in the tapestry if there were a tapestry. But I usually think not of a tapestry but one of those vast Mohammaden rugs made up of thousands and thousands of threads where the design is abstract because they are not permitted to show *the* image since *the* image is the most holy thing. And let's say that I praise it this way to myself as an artist: I am not permitted to look at *the* image because *the* image is the most holy thing. I would not seek to show *the* image for the same reason. Although of course let's say that I can neither know it nor can I show it. So I must seek to avoid showing that which I do not know. It's quite a trick if you think of it, that is if I knew the image and had seen it I could refrain from it, but I must practice a kind of magic.

—Robert Duncan reading *The Opening of the Field*

In some sense all poetry of the modern and post-modern era does this: attempts to show the thing without showing the thing. In some sense all poetry is invested in forms of representation. After all, what is the point of poetry if it just shows you the thing that it is? Gertrude Stein came to understand this very thing in *Tender Buttons*, which is according to her came after working on the *Making of Americans*. She describes it in her lecture "Poetry and Grammar."

And then, something happened and I began to discover the names of things, that is not discover the names but discover the things the things to see the things to look at and in so doing I had of course to name them not to give them new names but to see that I could find out how to know that they were there by their names or by replacing their names, And how was I to do so, They had their names and naturally I called them by the names they had and in doing so having begun looking at them I called them by their names with passion and that made poetry. I did not mean it to make poetry but it did, it make the *Tender Buttons* , and the

Tender Buttons was very good poetry it made a lot more poetry, and I will now more and more tell about that and how it happened.

So then in *Tender Buttons* I was making poetry but and it seriously troubled me, dimly I knew that nouns make poetry but in prose I no longer needed the help of nouns and in poetry did I need the help of nouns. Was there not a way of naming things that would not invent names, but mean names without naming them. (141)

When Stein had finished her obsessive experiment with verbs of the continuous present in her book *The Making of Americans* she turned away from that project and began to explore the noun. Such meditations on the usefulness of nouns to poetry became the thing of interest. Stein writes that a “noun is a name of anything, why after a thing is named write about it (*Poetry and Grammar* 125) and then turns around and writes that

a noun is a name of a thing, and therefore slowly if you feel what is inside that thing you do not call it by the name by which it is known. Everybody knows that by the way they do when they are in love and a writer should always have that intensity of emotion about whatever is the object about which he writes. (*Poetry and Grammar* 126)

Stein’s lecture denotes a shared practice among poets. That one should not call a thing by its name is quite similar to what Duncan suggests about the image. Both poets share the sentiment that what is essential to poetry is an intimacy with things in the world and that a poet must see beyond, or through forms of representation in order to render an other view, or rather in order to begin anew. A poet, must, in a sense, be able to see outside of the present moment so that there can be a calling out of the order of the world and calling for a reordering of the forms that constitute the world.

In another sense we might consider this in terms of Heidegger’s concept of “disclosure”. In Heidegger’s world we might imagine that all language hides the very

thing in the world that it professes to define. “Language,” writes Heidegger in “The Origin of the Work of Art,”

by naming being for the first time, first brings being to word and to appearing. Only this naming nominates being *to* their being *from out of* their being. Such saying is a projecting of the clearing, in which announcements is made of what it is that beings come into the Open *as*. Projecting is the release of a throw by which unconcealment submits and infuses itself into what is as such. This projective announcement forthwith becomes a renunciation of all the dim confusion in which what is veils and withdraws itself.

Projective saying is poetry: the saying of the world and earth, the saying of the arena of their conflict and thus of the place of all nearness and remoteness of the gods. Poetry is the saying of the unconcealment of what is” (71).

For Heidegger, the act of naming creates a relationship between word and appearing and in doing so creates a distance, or an obscuring through the representation of the word.

What is necessary then is a projective saying, which for him is poetry. It is poetry that unconceals and discloses the thingness of the thing. Poetry in some sense has the capacity to disclose the obscuring of the phenomena of the world. “Genuinely poetic projection,” Heidegger writes, “is the opening up or disclosure of that into which human being as historical is already cast” (73).

Jarrot’s poem “Sea Lyrics” is a serial poem that acts like Duncan’s practicing a kind of magic, or in accord with Stein’s advice that one must “feel what is inside that thing you do not call it by the name by which it is known.” The subject of Jarrot’s poem is California, but it is not named in the poem. Instead it is introduced at the start of the poem as an inaccurate definition; it acts as a force of misguidance in order to crack open the very terms by which we define a place and to point out that experiencing things

through their forms of representation first impedes us from intimacy with things in the world and consequently with each other.

In one sense for the poet, we have all been in this meta-narrative of modernity for a long time, and our yearning to get out of it drives us to both transgress and expand the formal fields of action in the poetic and the political. She writes,

I have been a long time in this story on the bridge inside tattoos and wearing avocados, and I can think only of myself, and I can steal the books in bookstores, and I can collect cans at all the can crushing lots, and I am here to wait in line with others near the lawns, and I am being shot at on the sidestreet, and I am hoarding all the plastic pigs, and I am practicing with others for the dawn, from rooftops where the hills are all on fires with the most usual of circumstances (ROF 41).

It is likely the poet's hope that the community making, or world making that poetry has to offer can make visible our present lack of and search for intimacy. The search in poetry turns towards the past, the old, the premodern, it turns to a time when in our cultural narratives animals could talk, and rocks and trees could sing and had a life-force through a phenomenal intimacy with humans; the search for intimacy looks toward and experience with what Anne Waldman in her essay "Fast Speaking Woman and the Dakini Principle" calls "magics of the phenomenal world" (*Fast Speaking Woman* 38).

As testament to this yearning for the "magics of the phenomenal world" I leave off with this poem by Lisa Jarnot title "Old."

As in the old days
for the wolves who speak
because themselves are
old, in trees, silent,
in the trees above the
heads of silent wolves,
the old and silent wolves
in trees who there are
quiet in the trees that
are so old themselves,
the wolves who eating
soup from cans are old,
the cans of soup that
are as old as wolves,
and I am old this year,
older than the trees or
all the wolves, in their
houses with the heaters
and the stoves and t.v.s
and the cans of soup,
and this is my old song,
that the wolves sing
from the trees, that
the wolves have sung
in dreams (ROF 69).

In this poem, the poem blends notions of age and ancientness through the repetition of old as it applies to trees and wolves and then the poet herself. The use of the words “As in the old days” in the opening line of the poem evokes a form of pre-modern story telling. This line resembles oral story telling forms of premodern or oral literary cultures.

In the poem, that notion that the wolves are so old they speak, points back to premodern literary narratives and traditions that invoke pagan cultures. The concept that animals and plants could speak is most richly detailed in premodern narratives. When animals and plants could speak there was magic in the world and there was magic in the literary imagination. When animals and plants could speak there was a kind of intimacy

between humans and things in the world that made visible the perception of an auditory mimetic imagination. Jarnot's return to the premodern is about recovering an intimate connection with things in the world, with the magic and phenomena of the world. Language and repetition, through a kind of auto destruction, disrupt metanarrative at the level of the word. In Jarnot's work repetition is a means to recovering an intimate connection with things in the world because it calls into question the order of the sign through its performativity and in doing so it makes more visible the arbitrary associations of the sign. Taussig would describe this as a method of recovering the object from its forms of representation—which according to him are under siege by the metanarratives associated with modernity—through a kind of rupture and breaking open. For Jarnot, a reverting to the premodern becomes a way out of the modern modes of knowing.

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