

“I Do Not Intend to be the End Result of Anything”: Notes on a Critically Mindful Poetics

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Abstract

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This essay explores the poetry of Lyn Hejinian and Bernadette Mayer through the framework of critical mindfulness. The essay develops this framework through a critique of dominant notions of mindfulness and mindful poetics and through an application of affectively oriented Buddhist social theory. The essay argues that both Hejinian’s and Mayer’s poetry model modes of consciousness and ways of being that cultivate presence with the fluidity and entanglements of everyday life.

I. A Primer on the Personal and Popular Context of Mindfulness

As a self-care practice in the age of distraction, mindfulness dominates the therapeutic zeitgeist. With its promises to mitigate the impacts of personal and social challenges, “mindfulness” has proliferated within American discourses and industries devoted to mental health and self-care. Derived, yet often severed, from Buddhist teachings, mindfulness seeks to cultivate “the awareness that arises from paying attention...” which “results in apprehending the constantly changing nature of sensations,” according to founder of mindfulness-based stress reduction, Jon Kabat-Zinn (Booth). Sometimes, mindfulness takes the form of formal meditation. Yet it also includes practices for remaining mindful – present and aware – while navigating the pressures and complexities of everyday life.

A disconcerting social backdrop has precipitated the popularity of mindfulness. Dopamine predation by design infects our virtual experiences. Neoliberal capitalism exports market logic to human existence and interaction, exerting pressure on people “...to comport themselves in ways that maximize capital value” (Brown 22). Anomalous and extreme weather patterns portend that the worst of climate change is on the horizon. And a global pandemic has exacerbated these pressures while also raising concerns about one’s, and others’, health.

In the last several years, I, too, have repeatedly turned to mindfulness practices and Western applications of Buddhism, more generally. I have employed mindful strategies to navigate the uncertainties and pressures listed above as well as to deal with personal trauma and grief. To cope, I have strived to practice a loving awareness around difficult thoughts rather than resisting them; to direct attention to sensations in my body, particularly the breath; and to be more fully present in each pleasurable, painful, mundane, and eventful moment. These mindful

acts of acceptance and attention have undoubtedly helped me more skillfully ride ongoing waves of anxiety, despair, and distraction.

Yet, though mindfulness has had personal benefits, I am also aware of its limits. For me, the line between the healing and palliative benefits of mindful practices is blurry, especially as it concerns the current socio-political moment. As Ronald Purser, a Buddhist critic of western mindfulness, writes, mindful strategies for coping may, in fact, perpetuate and induce compliance with the socio-cultural demands that necessitate it (8). To engage with mindfulness earnestly yet critically, what's a person to do? And more immediately for this essay, what's a poet and poetry reader to do?

II. Hegemonic Mindful Poetics

Poetry lends itself to representing modes of attention and being that seem to exemplify paradigmatic understandings of mindfulness. Popular literature in the self-help mindfulness genre often includes poems that model tranquility and offers aphorisms for staying mindful. Typically, these poems position the natural world as a mindful refuge and exemplar. Take, for example, the poem "Hokusai Says" by Roger Keyes as quoted in popular mindfulness author Tara Brach's *Radical Acceptance*:

Hokusai says look carefully.
 He says pay attention, notice.
 He says keep looking, stay curious.
 He says there is no end to seeing...

He says everything is alive –
 Shells, buildings, people fish
 Mountains, trees. Wood is alive.
 Water is alive. (121)

This first half of the poem works in an aphoristic mode as it advocates for the basic tenets of mindfulness – paying attention and staying open to the present moment. The second half of the poem suggests what one might accomplish through this openness: seeing (the mostly) natural world as vital and vibrant.

The connection between poetry and mindfulness goes beyond the prominent inclusion of poetry in popular mindfulness literature. The connection between Buddhism and American poetry, in particular, can be traced through T.S. Elliot, W.B. Yeats, and, of course, the Beats. Recently, the move towards the popularity of secular mindfulness has resulted in several recent anthologies of mindful poetry. The 2017 anthology *Poetry of Presence: An Anthology of Mindfulness Poems* offers a selection of poems from Wendell Berry, Jane Hirschfield, and Rumi, among others. The poet John Brehem has recently published two anthologies that connect mindful practice to poetry – *The Poetry of Impermanence, Mindfulness, and Joy* (2017) and *The Dharma of Poetry: How Poems Can Deepen Your Spiritual Practice and Open You to Joy* (2021). Both anthologies offer a wide range of poems that “embody and implicitly endorse ways of being in the world that anyone engaged in spiritual practice, or anyone wanting to live a more mindful life, might want to emulate” (*Dharma* 23). Brehem positions these poems as “spiritual friends” that can channel the Dharma and help the reader raise their consciousness. As compared to the *Poetry of Presence*, Brehem offers a more varied collection of poems. He includes work by poets who, in their playfulness and use of irony, might not immediately come to mind as models of tranquility, such as Fernando Pessoa and Ron Padget.

Yet throughout his analyses of these poems, Brehem continually positions the work as “reminders” for mindful cultivation. For Brehem’s purposes, the poems offer truths that will help the reader cultivate mindfulness and enrich their spiritual lives. The poems, then, are exalted

artifacts of an ideally mindful way of being in and engaging with the world – whether that’s through mindful listening or deepening compassion, for example. Brehem acknowledges that a more fragmentary, elliptical, and shifting state of consciousness is the norm of our contemporary minds; however, he offers poems to show how “we must shift out of our everyday consciousness – the speedy mind wrapped in its self-centered stories and projects. Poets help us experience this stopping” (*Dharma* 17). For Brehem, poems are antidotes to everyday life, its pace, and the consciousness that develops within it. Paradoxically, these everyday forms of consciousness must be non-judgmentally accepted while intentionally managed and defeated. Mindful poetry, therefore, re-attunes the mind towards a state of consciousness that is more at ease *in* the world, if not *with* it; models meditative states; and cultivates attention in serene and simple ways.

When I read poems like these, particularly in Brehem’s framework of mindfully attuned reading, I experience the similar, complex sensation as when I read Western self-help books inflected by Buddhism that advocate mindfulness. “Better” states of mind are available, but I must work, and even discipline myself, to achieve them through specific kinds of mindful practice. These better states transcend human time and place. On the one hand, I understand Brehem’s framework and the poems he offers as refreshingly countercultural as they privilege the act of reading for mindful purposes. To cultivate attention, to revere and learn from the natural world, to listen compassionately, and to seek peace are all qualities that seem diametrically opposed to mainstream, Western culture and the havoc that it has wrought on individual psyches, social fabrics, and the natural world.

On the other hand, an uncritical exaltation of an ideal consciousness, the aestheticization of the natural world, and the positioning of literature as at least gently didactic (though he explicitly dismisses this term) has problematic implications. Principally, it replicates hierarchies

of desirable forms of consciousness and being. Furthermore, it reinscribes ego-driven subjectivity and bourgeois individualism. It privileges psychic states and subjectivities that are: 1) asocial (at one point, Brehm dismisses political action as apart from, and not enough, for dealing with the world); 2) disembodied from the messiness of actual experience; 3) complementary to a neoliberal culture of achievement, where the individual must continually *strive* for betterment; 4) reinforcing binaries involving nature and society. The curation and anthologizing of “mindful poetry” demonstrate patterns that leave out forms of consciousness that do not meet the criteria of hegemonic western mindfulness. The above critiques are a bit reductive, and I believe a poem can be foreground these states and still function in effective, complex, and moving ways. As an example of paradigmatic mindful poetry, consider the following poem from Gary Snyder, a key figure who brought Zen Buddhism into 20th-century American poetry:

Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout

Down valley a smoke haze
 Three days heat, after five days rain
 Pitch glows on the fir-cones
 Across rocks and meadows
 Swarms of new flies.

I cannot remember things I once read
 A few friends, but they are in cities.
 Drinking cold snow-water from a tin cup
 Looking down for miles
 Through high still air (“Mid-August” Snyder).

The poem offers an inviting simplicity as it develops the act of perception that the title indicates – the speaker at a lookout at Sourdough Mountain in North Cascades National Park in Washington State. The first stanza unfurls a slow distillation of natural images, culminating in the swarm of new flies, a sight of rebirth in the dead heat of August. The second stanza moves to

the personal as the speaker enters with a revelation that they can't remember things they once read and that the few friends that they have are removed from the speaker and live in cities. After these observations, the speaker returns to interacting with the natural world as they drink snow-water from that rustic object (a tin cup) and continue the act of perception. The speaker juxtaposes a return to isolation in the natural world against the ephemeral and forgettable made world of books and ideas as well as a distant urban sociality. Implicitly, then, the poem privileges being present in the natural world against these images of what have been forgotten and left behind. Sometimes, Snyder does the reverse of this move. He will sustain an engagement with the social world only to take reprieve into the natural world. For example, the poem "I Went into the Maverick Bar" from his Pulitzer-Prize-winning collection, *Turtle Island*, describes a somewhat raucous bar scene in Madras, Oregon at length. However, the poem ends with the speaker feeling a sense that they have lost themselves in such a scene. Regaining themselves requires an act grounded in natural ecology and produced against the social scene:

We left—onto the freeway shoulders—
 under the tough old stars—
 In the shadow of bluffs
 I came back to myself,
 To the real work, to
 “What is to be done.” (9).

For me, there is much to enjoy and learn from Snyder's methodical, evocative descriptions and use of juxtaposition in both poems. My point, then, isn't to discredit such poems. Put simply, I enjoy them and can identify with the solace found in the natural world. Rather, I am questioning the hierarchy that positions these types of poems as exemplars of mindful poetics and mindful practice more generally.

For if certain kinds of poetry model an ideal ontology of consciousness, the need to fix and discipline one's self exists. Yet, as a social theorist of Buddhism Edwin Ng suggests, such striving, in fact, is the basis of suffering. As he writes, "...dukkha is an unrecognized habit of craving fixity and self-presence (or the refusal to accept the utter contingency of phenomenal reality-selfhood) – conditioned as much by social forces as personal habits" (351). Ng begins to offer language of contingency that leads to the possibility of an alternative form of mindful poetics, one in line with Buddhist social theory and that works to synthesize principles of Buddhism with contemporary modes of critical theory. In Ng's case, he applies the affective turn in critical theory that has taken hold in the past 15-20 years to critical Buddhist theory. The fruitful intersection that Ng theorizes opens up an orientation towards attention and consciousness without recourse to discrete subjectivity striving for improvement and repose in an asocial environment.

III. A Critically Mindful Poetics

As I noted earlier, cultivating awareness, connecting to the body, and being present are concepts that have personal value to me. And sometimes reading about reflection in nature or being told directly what I should do are exactly what I want. However, when these states of mind, ways of being, and "natural" environments become the paradigmatic version of mindfulness (and poetry) – often contrasted to the everyday – I feel disconnected from, and less accepting of, an engagement with the world and a self that is inherently contingent – messy, impermanent, incomplete, ambiguous, and ambivalent. This has implications both personally and aesthetically. In terms of my reading habits (whether that's literal or in terms of reading the world), striving for ideal states of consciousness makes me feel less receptive and accepting. I

begin to feel unease with open-endedness, ambiguity, and a desire to “get it right.” Taken too paradigmatically, hegemonic mindful poetics enacts a “closure” that marginalizes manifestations of consciousness and attention that explore, even celebrate, contingency. In this rejection, then, of the closure in hegemonic mindful poetics, the connection to innovative/experimental/avant-garde poetics resonates. In one permutation, an orientation towards consciousness in flux within the world rather than centering a self striving for fixity outside of social relations intersects with critiques of the lyric poem. As Marjorie Perloff argues, “..[I]t is true that, even today, mainstream poetry often seems to be trapped in an oppressive circle of self-presence, the ‘cry of the heart’ designed to convey some sort of unique personal essence” (183). While I would not go so far as to dismiss poems that cry from the heart, Perloff’s preference for avant-garde poetics corresponds to my preference for a poetics that is critical, multitudinous, embedded within social life, and resists extolling ideal states for a stable, enlightened self. In the same mode of critiquing the lyric poem, Lyn Hejinian insists on openness over closure in her famous essay “The Rejection of Closure.” She argues, “The coercive, epiphanic mode in some contemporary lyric poetry can serve as a negative model, with its smug pretension to universality and its tendency to cast the poet as guardian to Truth” (“Rejection” Hejinian). Instead, she asks, “Is there something about the world that demands openness?” In responding to her question, she writes, “I can only begin a posteriori, by perceiving the world as vast and overwhelming; each moment stands under an enormous vertical and horizontal pressure of information, potent with ambiguity, meaningful, unfixed, and certainly incomplete” (“Rejection” Hejinian). How, then, does a critically mindful poetics let go of calcifying notions of truth for an openness to contingency and impermanence that is embodied in the experience and stance of the poem itself?

Note that terms like experience, affect, embodiment, and consciousness – as mentioned above and fleshed out in what follows – operate in a different mode of engagement than many orientations towards experimental poetics. My interest in critical mindfulness does not mainly privilege a cerebral interest in the possibilities and limits of language, which innovative poetics, especially L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, often does. In fact, I might suggest that a preoccupation with the artifice of signification risks reinscribing a logocentrism, and fetish for the signifier, that preempts more affectively and embodied ways of engaging with innovative poetry. The privileging of disembodied signification does not capture the complex affective and conscious textures of experimental poetry. And, in fact, I think such an orientation, which puts pressure on the reader to produce endless possibilities of reading, explains why innovative poetry can be so off-putting to some readers. The innovative poetry that I am least drawn to often seems to function principally on a cerebral level, where the arbitrary nature of signification and the polysemy of language become the principal subject matter or material of the poem. In other words, innovative poetry that seems to double back onto its language for the sake of linguistic gymnastics often makes me feel more admiration than connection. Instead, I find the experimental work that I am most drawn to reflects a process for engaging with the material of the world (language included) and everyday experience. In this poetry, the model(s) of deeply embodied, ever-becoming consciousnesses has deep affective resonance with me. In other words, I am both interested in and *feel* a connection to this poetry. Perhaps, then, the modes of experimental poetics that I am most drawn to actually expand lyricism into geographies beyond the stable, singular self.

In my own early encounters with poets that I now consider among my favorites – poets like Emily Dickinson, Harryette Mullen, Rae Armantrout, Lyn Hejinian, and Bernadette Mayer –

I often felt bewildered by their work. I often felt dumb, like I just didn't get it. My difficult feelings derived not so much from the poetic texts themselves as from the habituated reading practices that had been instilled in me from many sources, including secondary education and my expectations from more "mainstream" poetry. Such practices often presume, and direct the reader, towards a poem's true, emic meaning. When oriented in this way, the work of innovative poetry can stymie the reader. My first real appreciation of experimental poetry occurred when I applied some cursory knowledge of post-structuralist theory – particularly, deconstruction – to the texts. Understanding the slipperiness of signification allowed me to appreciate uses of language that intentionally subverted and proliferated meanings. Yet even the pleasures of deconstructive hermeneutics still seemed limited to a highly intellectualized practice. My embodied and affective affinity with these poets has occurred more recently and more resonantly. I identified with the poets' means of cultivating attention and enacting consciousness – what I might call their critically mindful qualities. This critical mindfulness blurs the boundaries between self and world, poet and reader, thereby dissolving the egotism of the edifying lyric subject and producing what Elina Siltanen calls a community of readers in avant-garde poetry. As someone seeking to be present with my own embedded consciousness, I have felt welcomed into this community while I have felt at times alienated, or at least wanted more, from the ways that mainstream poetry often seemed to snap close around truth and meaning.

What does it mean, then, to displace (not replace) the hegemonic models of mindful poetics with a critically mindful poetics that exalts innovative work? Here, "critical" not only points to a critique of hegemonic notions of mindfulness, but more importantly recognizes a space for the mind – and the poem – to engage and be a part of the world – not beside or above

it. This is a disposition that, as Edwin Ng suggests, “balances and weaves together a politics of the outside (social) w/ the awakening, struggle, and transformation of the self” (196).

While I share the discomfort that Purser and others espouse about mindfulness, I also acknowledge its helpfulness, and I don’t see a distinct binary between uncritically mindful and critically mindful poetics. First, such a binary would suggest the ability to locate and identify such a poetics within a text. This takes away agency from the reader and readings that might, for instance, queer, subvert, and/or reclaim more radical understandings of even the most “conventional” poetry. Furthermore, exalting a critically mindful poetics may just be exchanging one master for another, enforcing a new kind of normativity – i.e., it may offer a novel way of exalting certain kinds of poetry. So, in the spirit of non-dualism, I seek instead to explicate a critically mindful poetics as an open horizon for engaging with principles such as the impermanence and contingency of mind and matter.

To narrow the scope of poetry that I’m examining, I’ve chosen to focus on poetry that focus on the everyday as site of recognizing attention. In his book *Attention Equals Life: The Pursuit of the Everyday in Contemporary Poetry and Culture*, Andrew Epstein argues that poetics of the everyday often focus on the subject of attention. And perhaps solipsistically, I also chose poets and poems that speak to my own consciousness and experience of the world.

IV: A Particular Focus on Bernadette Mayer and Lyn Hejinian

While a critically mindful poetics could be applied to many poets, the remainder of this essay will focus on the poets Lyn Hejinian and Bernadette Mayer. First, their work has been central to existing scholarship on perception, the attention, and the everyday. I will be extending

this interest by situating them within a critical mindfulness framework. As I discuss their poems, I will attempt to articulate my observations for what constitutes a critically mindful poetics.

The poems in Lyn Hejinian's 1992 collection *The Cell* take place almost exclusively in the present tense. Each poem is dated from October 1986-January 1989, yet some scholars have read the book as one long poem. Within and across each piece, the poetic mind unfolds in relation to the world around it. That is, consciousness is embodied and emplaced in these poems. While they often use "I," they do not posit a stable lyric subject within and across poems. In this work, as in her more famous work, *My Life*, Hejinian does not reject the "self"; rather, she understands the self as a process, subjectivity as a perpetual, incomplete state of becoming. The self is not stable nor is its stability an objective. Instead, the self, located in the body, is produced within an ongoing entanglement with the world around it, and "the body is as much outside itself as inside itself" (Gregg and Seigworth 3). In Hejinian's work, I will explore this development of self and consciousness in flux as it unfolds and is embodied within time and the everyday experience. Unlike Mayer, Hejinian's language has more moments of philosophical abstraction, which I will illuminate. Yet even these philosophical moments are often contingent and elliptical rather than totalizing and authoritative.

The poems in Bernadette Mayer's 2016 collection *Works and Days* act as more explicit narrations of a given day. Mayer's poems in the collection, many also dated, are like a bouquet of the day's materials and temporalities – arranged without being disciplined or easily synthesized. In my analysis, I will particularly focus on how Bernadette Mayer deploys shifts of attention in her (re)construction of the day as well as how she uses digression as a strategy to capture the dynamic, shifting qualities of the day. As I will explain, these digressions are the point. Through digression, Mayer seeks to show the intersensory and intersubjective nature of

experience – how self and experience collapse into, produce, and entangle one another within personal, political, and cultural sites of the everyday.

V: Axioms in Place and In Body: Lyn Hejinian's *The Cell*:

The wanton consciousness of consciousness
or variable consciousness vibrates
-August 17, 1987 (*The Cell* 96).

A hallmark of Hejinian's work and scholarship is her aforementioned preoccupation with openness in poetry, which "acknowledges the vastness of the world and is formally differentiating" ("Rejection" Hejinian). The term openness is a touchstone in popular mindfulness scholarship as well, such as in author Tara Brach's work when she advises the reader to "rest in openness, paying full attention to the moment's experience" (305). Clearly, Hejinian and Brach employ openness for different ends and in different contexts. For Hejinian, openness describes a poetic stance in relationship to the world and language, one where the poem resists a lyric mode that attempts to erase difference and multiplicity. Brach invokes openness in multiple ways – as an ethical stance towards others, as a space of awareness, as a bodily sensation, and also as a stance towards every passing experience and as a type of presence (120 *Radical Acceptance*; 13 *True Refuge*). Openness, then, requires letting in and being with what's there – in the world, in one's body, and in one's thought. Without pushing the connection too far, one hears a resonance in Brach's values with Hejinian's advocacy for relinquishing total control, foregrounding process, eschewing fixity, and keeping the text "open to the world."

It's this openness to the world that characterizes the experience of perception and consciousness in *The Cell*. It's a type of critical, even radical mindfulness, that does not cultivate attention apart from, about, or alongside the world – but *within* it. Hejinian's syntax and

language in *The Cell* are characteristically elliptical, shifting, and ambiguous. Perhaps surprisingly, however, passages from *The Cell* are eminently quotable and quasi-axiomatic, especially when extricated from context. That's not to say that these passages are necessarily straightforward or simply reflect commonplace ways of thinking. Rather, they often take up the subjects of the poem – both the speaker-subject and aesthetic subjects – to offer glimpses into that “wanton consciousness of consciousness...” They offer flashpoints for understanding the contingency of consciousness. In other words, one can extract a critically mindful disposition from certain passages, however playful and fleeting. Yet they do not stand outside of the poem as totalizing summaries or statements. Instead, Hejinian's insights are embedded within the unfolding experience of the poem. The context in which these glimpses of awareness or quasi-axiomatic statements appear often work to destabilize, depart from, and recontextualize their meaning. Therefore, pulling out excerpts from these poems seems disingenuous, a “fixing” of the poem apart from the porous context that surround it. In fact, deciding where to “cut” seems to require a normative reading that works against the open-endedness of her form (with often lacks punctuation, for example). Hejinian's forms value “...every shift of attention” and deploy “an interruption, a momentary cut in the mode of onward deployment of life” (Connolly 53). While my analysis attempts to isolate some of these moments that provide instructive snapshots into Hejinian's poetics and how they embody consciousness as inextricable from the world in process, I also hope to complicate those readings by expounding on how these statements become complicated by and submerged within the onward deployment of life in the poem. For example, in a poem dated December 10 & 12, 1986, Hejinian writes,

I can say that I
do not intend to be
the end of result anything (*The Cell* 53).

Here, Hejinian affirms becoming and process over the self-imposed teleology of a whole or stable self – a selfhood where the speaker has arrived to an ideal state. A statement about not becoming “an end result” seems performatively contradicted by its self-assuredness; it has the echo of a statement or maxim arrived at as the end result of a process of thinking. However, an ostensible qualification of the statement that follows complicates the three lines above:

Still the city is enticing
 and angles for the psyche
 So which is the more
 personal, expectation or repose (*The Cell* 53).

Here, Hejinian attributes agency to the city, and we might imagine that the statement that she just made about not intending to be the end result of anything occurred in the cityscape, either physically or psychically. The word “Still” suggests that the city might be a threat to the speaker’s intention, angling for the speaker’s psyche to compel the speaker to be an end result. Yet that “still” can also be read as temporal, merely the next statement, and not necessarily qualifying the previous one. Its angling for the psyche could be in opposition to the speaker’s intention not to be an end result, but it might also be the next movement of the speaker in the space of the poem. In other words, the transition is purposefully ambiguous, with a possible complication of the statement through the interjection of the city. One can read this statement about the city not only as consistent with axiomatic discourse, but also as a narrative move away from such a discourse.

The Cell continually engages in this kind of ambiguity, buoyed by syntax and multiple discourses and registers. To me, the ambiguity of syntax exists horizontally, in the context of expectations about the sentence. The ambiguity of discourse/register (who’s speaking and in what way?) exists vertically as one can imagine diving into any utterance and generating a list of possible discourses (axiomatic/koanic, narrative, lyric, scientific, philosophical/theoretical, among others). Both kinds of ambiguity create the non-linear time or flow of the poem and speaks to the

effect of temporality in each poem. The subject is activated by, speaks to, is embodied within a web of temporal movements. I would argue that Hejinian is both expressing awareness (a kind of mindful commentary) but that awareness is not outside of movement or the embodied experience – not in a state of repose or as the sum of result of anything but constructed within the constraints of the day(s), the longer and larger flow of the poem.

So we might say that Hejinian’s statements or axioms of critical mindfulness are embodied in place, where “...the emergence of a fecund thought is closer to a viscous fluid flowing through a membrane than to the clean contours of a recollected image” (Connolly 73). The statements are not arrived at and recollected in tranquility, to quote Wordsworth (though the first part of his quotation regarding “a spontaneous overflow” might still apply). Rather, these fecund thoughts project out and recede in the poem. For Hejinian, machinations of the mind that give rise to the subject do not exist a priori to the world they are a part of. The natural world, for instance, isn’t arrived at by a subject who is relieved by it. Instead, a reciprocal relationship exists between consciousness and the material world. For instance, Hejinian writes,

Outdoors the clouds pour shape
and stability into myopic interstices
These
Those—between seeing and believing (*The Cell* 107).

In typical fashion, the pronouns themselves are not stable. What seem like opposites – “these / those” collapse here, as Hejinian works to point out, but can’t quite pin down, the interstices that exist between the act of seeing and believing (and at the same time, she invokes and disrupts the cliché of “seeing is believing”). Such interstices reflect a non-dualism between thought and world, between the body and experience, that pervade *The Cell*. Hejinian further reflects on this refusal to cleanly divide between subject and object when she writes:

Existence is endemic to the
 desired object
 I go between stones in
 order not to be trampled
 And so I remain as
 private as my arm – that
 outstanding fact (*The Cell* 88).

The first two lines seem to make an assured statement about existence – that it exists in the object desired. Is this the existence of a subject and a comment on the arbitrary binary between subject and object? This reading brings to mind the phenomenologists, like Maurice Merleau-Ponty. As G. Mathew Jenkins notes, Hejinian was reading Merleau-Ponty as she wrote these poems. Jenkins writes, “every form of consciousness presupposes its complicated form: the dialectic of the epistemological subject and the scientific object” (19).

Yet perhaps existence isn’t referring to a subject at all in this passage. Perhaps it is simply affirming existence within an object, although desire complicates the picture. As we attempt to make sense of this statement, we get the invocation of an “I” who moves between stones (objects) not to be trampled. Is there a relationship between this “I” and the existence and desire of the previous two lines? Finally, we get a statement that suggests a certain lyric revelation, yet the self is removed from the body (I remain as private as my arm) yet also belongs to the body. The dash, and the fragment that follows it, could refer to the arm as “that outstanding fact.” The objective here isn’t to resolve these tensions and ambiguities. Rather, it is *within* these ambiguities and possible yet not fixed connections that represent a critically mindful conception of consciousness and experience. William Connolly writes, “Perception requires a disciplining of the senses” (52). We might say, then, that Hejinian is attempting to “undiscipline perception.” In another poem, Hejinian writes,

The tree is pierced by
 a neck—for the most
 part taking place
 within the head
 On close scrutiny it is
 at a distant place (the
 head) (*The Cell* 92).

Consciousness, the body, and the world are always “inter-involved” with the material around it. This reflects both the nature of being and thinking. As Ng writes, “[T]he body-mind’s capacity to flip over unexpectedly from one coherent state to another can be observed in formal meditation practice” (367). Again, Hejinian is constantly engaged in this flipping over:

The poem is not natural,
 unnaturally desired and saturated
 The relentless obligation of seductive,
 descriptive, and corrupting perceptions
 Of some eternal, never-ending, everyday
 task (*The Cell* 53).

Here, Hejinian reflects on the nature of the poem and characterizes it as not natural, calling to mind how the poem is constructed and mediated through emotion and obligated and belonging to various modes of perception within the consistently flowing everyday. Hejinian’s interest in the “everyday” does not privilege certain activities or ways of being in the world apart from everyday life. And, in fact, the everyday stages an engagement with gender throughout *The Cell*. In many poems, Hejinian includes remarks on gender in her typically elliptical style, such as “We’ve lived our lives at various rates / Some are inappropriate and therefore / we have gender” (161). Here, gender is asserted as a function of lives lived over time, with ambiguity around “some” referring to the various rates or the lives themselves. A line like this typifies the way Hejinian posits gender as a product of existence over time, a result (and therefore a construction) of a way of living inappropriate or gone awry. For Hejinian, gender is social and produced through the experience of time. For both Hejinian and Bernadette Mayer, the everyday can be seen as a site of feminist poetic

practice. As Bronwen Tate writes, “Women are often associated with the everyday due to the *embodied* and *conscripted* roles, routines, chores, elements of everyday life (whereas men are associated with the abstract)” (43). This doesn’t mean that everyday life is inherently feminine; rather, it suggests the dismissal of the quotidian has an anti-feminine quality. Reflecting on gender within the everyday contrasts sharply from the exaltation of the natural world, where social categories are not recognized. In *The Cell*, the natural, the social, the gendered, and the everyday – among other concepts and sites – impinge on one another in complex environment scapes and environments that do not lend themselves to easy demarcations. Hejinian, as well as Bernadette Mayer, are present with and mindful of material experience, because and not despite of its entanglements, reflecting the values of new materialism, which values the multidimensionality of any the environment. As Sara Nolan writes, “As new materialist ideas ask us to question where we draw the line between nature and culture, the concept of a purely natural environment is becoming increasingly fictional. Rather, environments are revealed as all around us — ranging from our own bodies to the digital and textual places that we construct” (20-21). The everyday, then, acts a container, context, and substance thick with the embodied nature of living.

IV. Bernadette Mayer: Bouquets of Digression

I Am Proactive Ephemeral Epiphytic

I don’t mean to get all
 Parallel universe on you
 But I am at once the spider
 The spider web, and
 Me observing them (Mayer 57).

Bernadette Mayer’s work has long been associated with the everyday and the capacity of the everyday to hold and weave together material involving domestic life and motherhood, in

particular. Her long poem from 1982, *Midwinter's Day*, was written within the constraint of a single day. Her 1975 collection, *Memory*, which Mayer called “an emotional science project,” combines a year’s worth of journaling and photographs (Noor). Apart from the content of her writing, Mayer intentionally situated her processes *within* the world, creating forms and prompts out of the experience of everyday life.

Mayer’s later work has gone relatively unnoticed by scholars, even as it expands on her concern with the everyday. *Works and Days*, Mayer’s 2016 collection, continues her impish and experimental engagement with everyday life as form and prompt. Through grounding her work in the everyday, Mayer positions her work against perfection. As she once put it in her characteristically blunt way: “The idea of a perfect poem is pretty stupid...if nothing else is perfect, why should a poem be?” (Burt). A poetics against perfection and rooted in the processes of the everyday challenges the dominant, neoliberal paradigm that mindfulness can easily fall into. As a *New York Times* review of this collection suggests, “Mayer’s goals are radically democratic, opposed to hierarchies of all sorts...” (Burt). This opposition to hierarchies results in Mayer refusing to shape her poems into linear, efficient, meaning-making machines. I believe that calling any kind of poetry “political” in the sense of effecting large-scale change is unrealistic. However, what happens in Mayer’s poetry is an affective stance – a way of interacting with the world – that is proto-political, constructing the spaces in which a counterhegemonic consciousness can take shape. The dominant mindfulness paradigm understands “distraction” (or the “monkey mind” as it’s often called) as a state that mindful practice can mitigate. Yet Mayer pursues digression, and even celebrates it. Shifts in attention do not represent a problematic state of mind. Instead, these shifts demonstrate a mind, and life, that does not resist or attempt to tidy up the unfolding (and writing) of perception along the axis of the day. Mayer’s attentional “cuts” are generative, allowing

for multiplicity and association and displacing fixity and linearity. As political theorist William Connolly argues about modern life, embracing interruption is a way of reattaching and reconnecting to *belief* in the world as it adjusts to the accelerating temporality of the world as a way of becoming active within it (63). Mayer's poems are active within accelerated and juxtaposed temporalities. Again, Mayer's work is proto-political in its resistance to convention and expectation and also micropolitical in how it is located in the everyday. Many of the poems in *Works & Days* contain dated prose poems. The whole collection itself functions as a kind of daybook of shifting attention. In one poem dated "April 15," Mayer writes:

Today's the day of the wintry mix, preceded by thunder and wind. Whether this will happen I don't know; it's what I've been told. Poor Phil is stuck on the thruway, returning from Passover. Perhaps some accident creating a delay. I don't like the way they say, "that accident has been cleaned up, cleared away." As if the cars should not be stopped. They're dinner dishes. (14).

Unlike Hejinian, each sentence has a more conventional stability and clarity. Instead, it's the shift between sentences that moves towards disequilibrium and shifts attention. One might expect the poem's second sentence to continue in the present tense, expounding on the consequences of the wintry mix. Instead, Mayer switches into the future simple tense. That first sentence, then, can be recast as a weather report that the speaker is assessing the veracity of in the second sentence. In the following sentence, we are introduced to "Poor Phil" who's stuck in traffic, perhaps due to the weather, yet if we're in the temporality of the previous sentence, that weather hasn't come to fruition yet. Perhaps, then, we are in a different part of the day when Poor Phil is stuck in traffic. Mayer's cuts in attention, then, aren't always in subject matter; they're cuts between temporalities. The next three sentences become a meditation on the language around car accidents and the statement "As if the cars should not be stopped" seems both critical of such language while also, possibly, a larger political statement about the

hegemony of car culture. In this move, there's a resonance with a suspicion of received language and belief (like that of the weather). The final sentence is perhaps the most ambiguous (while also being the shortest). Temporally, we have moved, it seems, to dinner time. "They're" is a homophone with "There," and so the straightforward statement "There are dinner dishes" is evoked. But the "they" seems to refer back to the cars. Here, then, is a characteristic Mayerian move. The preceding sentences proceed with slight shifts between topics, a paratactic movement characteristic of innovative poetry. Parataxis also occurs in the move to dinner dishes. But there's also an *intersubjective* move. We are with the object of dinner dishes (perhaps plates, before, during or after being served; yet perhaps "dishes" in terms of meals themselves), but the cars have the possibility of being the dishes, too. We've both leapt from one subject to another yet also synthesized or overlapped subjects. I imagine a mind, then, thinking about cars as it regards dinner dishes. Mayer's intersubjective moves works to represent the unboundedness of experience in everyday life. Its playful both in terms of its tonal lightheartedness as well as in its conceptual play that refuses to submit to stable tenses or stable subjects. It is not so much that subjects and experience are fixed, and Mayer playfully loosens that fixity; rather, it's language itself that attempts to fix the free flow – of memory, of experience, of perception – that animates the moments and objects of everyday life that always impinge on one another.

Mayer's shifts of attention and cuts are not only about quick jumps between stable, bounded topics. We might associate this with stream-of-consciousness writing. In fact, though Mayer does make shifts in topics, many of her poems are focused on a small set of discernible topics. Instead, her shifts, in their play with temporality and blurring of subjects, often show the inter-involvement of many elements (Ng 194). Connolly makes the distinction between disciplined perception, governed by norms, and the kind of preconscious perception that is

always “intersensory” and “never divisible into separate sense experiences.” (46-47). In other words, perceptions are not discrete, linear moments but dynamic, interwoven interactions.

The intersensory nature of perception appears throughout Mayer’s poetry. Take, for instance, Mayer’s poem “May 30”:

Something ate the basil plants; sun on the typewriter. Yesterday the tree guy who works for the power co. came to clear branches away from the lines. They readily cut down two of our trees and chainsawed them up for firewood. Bill had told them I had a stroke. Now we have more sun on the shady plants. Today’s the day the Greens put their garbage out.

walfed dewfal flawed

U S E T O T T H L F L E (98).

What holds the poem together is a consciousness willing to pay attention to the mundane. That attention itself – Mayer’s mindfulness – begins with two observations conjoined by that most hybrid of punctuation marks – the semi-colon – which signifies both separation and connection. From there, what seems pedestrian is marked by violence towards the natural world as well as disclosure of illness. The sun from the beginning is later recast within the space made by cutting down the trees – but is it *now* more sunny? Or is the sun’s appearance at the very beginning the result of that clearing? Characteristically, Mayer muddies the temporal progression. Finally, before the jumble, the poem switches into the present tense with the most pedestrian of observations about the Greens putting out the garbage. Yet the surname leads us back to environmental concerns without any explanation or perhaps intention of that. The surname slyly suggests that the world of intersensory association that occurs through writing is (not) so random – or is it? The poem refuses to end in revelation, clear thematic connection, or synthesis. Rather, it moves to the inclusion of the jumble, characteristic of newspapers, at the end of the poem. The

only word we can make out in the jumble is “flawed.” We can read this word as meta-poetic, especially in light of Mayer’s argument against perfection. Or we can read this word as mere coincidence, one of the jumbles of the day that acts only as signifier of the game itself. I would argue that it is both/and as well as neither/nor. If fixed meaning does not exist within a text, then one can bring meaning to the word as much or as little as one wants. In other words, one’s experience of the text is another layer of experience from the one(s) that Mayer recounts. This polysemous move feels like quite a relief from puzzling into poetry – or life – to capture truth; instead, Mayer’s moves value the experience of experience itself – one where the facts of the day can be (and lead to) a jumble and where any “reading into” the poem is possible but not totalizing, i.e., not reliant on a mode of interpretation set on discovering the emic “meaning.”

The ways of reading that Mayer both allows and resists map onto a mindfulness where flow and instability always outpace truth and fixity. This, to me, is a paradigmatic move of a critically mindful poetics insofar as it displaces the desire for a homogenizing mode of attention.

Heterogeneity, therefore, exists in the textures of the quotidian and the mundane so that it exists in a *bouquet* of experience. As Michel Serres explains, “A bouquet forms a fragment of memory because of the impossibility of analysing mingled bodies: either it has integrity, or does not. A singularity reappears around the intricate intersection. Recurs. Resuscitates” (88). Mayer’s bouquets, then, are units of fragments that gain integrity because of the difficulty in parsing out separate strands. The poem, then, exists as a whole when fragmentation isn’t resolved into wholeness. Perhaps paradoxically, the mingling of fragmentation is what has integrity. To extrapolate this into a hermeneutics of poetry, or life, requires abandoning coherence in order for things to cohere.

Mayer's bouquets, her curation of fragmentation, exist across days as well as across spheres of the personal, social, and political. Much like the events of a day cross-modulate one another, so do the spheres that Mayer engages. Purser and others often critique the contemporary mindfulness movement as privileging states apart from society, coupling a sort of desired apolitical existence with being mindful. Instead, in Buddhist social theory everyday life is an ongoing political and "self"-constructing site. As Ng writes, a micropolitics of becoming is one that "constantly attunes itself across multiple registers of intensities" and where these intensities impinge on one another (197). Mayer often stitches together these intensities throughout her poems where the personal and the political share time, page, and head space. The poem "May 29" reflects this:

Guns bad, bear good, or vice versa. In a camp after WWII, Nazi POWs sat in front of black GIs. The daughter of the American ambassador to Germany when Hitler was beginning, was "shown" to him as a potential girlfriend.

bufial ibafu fsiul

LCHLLIPI

Sorry for the delay, I got stuck in a wormhole (98).

Right away, we get a political statement and an elusive reference followed by a suggestion to flip it. The vice versa can be read as the sentiments should be flipped – e.g., "Guns good, bear bad" – or that the syntax should be flipped – "Bad guns, good bear." Without any resolution of this, we move into a critique of American history in the World War II era, with facts about race and America engagement with Adolph Hitler. This moves right into the jumble, with the first word unscrambled as "fibula"; the second as two words "fab fib"; the third as "fusil" (a type of musket); and the fourth, though all in caps, not coming out to any one or two words, though many words are contained in it – "Phil" (the name of Mayer's partner), "pill," "chill," "chip,"

and many others. Figuring out this last jumble certainly feels like being in a wormhole, which the statement at the end gets to. Yet the last statement feels like a complete jump, as well, to a different place in time, where the speaker has been delayed – as well, perhaps, as a comment on history. Mayer’s poem traverses the personal and political in many temporalities in a compact and elliptical way that feels like an authentic (a word perhaps verboten in discourse about postmodern poetry) presentation of her mind at work. These leaps between and among the political, personal, and cultural occur throughout Mayer’s collection. Almost every poem, in its references and tone, has at least hints all of these dimensions. Mayer refuses to limit herself to a particular setting or subject matter. Moreover, she intertwines these spheres in ways that reflect their constellations in everyday life.

VII: Concluding Thoughts: No Time Like the Present

Much discourse about mindfulness concerns the idea of presence – of cultivating a practice of being present with what is. Poets such as Hejinian and Mayer do not mediate presence in the representation of an ideal state of mind or in idyllic natural settings. While states of mind and natural (among many other) settings are centered in their poetry, the act of presence is about being faithful to – and reproducing – the unboundedness of perception, time, and event. And that presence exists both in terms of subject matter and modes inquiry, as detailed above, as well as in language choices. In a blog post on John Ashbery, Ron Silliman posits a “focus on focus, on presence, immanence. *Be here now* is very much a poetic program” (Silliman). (Interestingly, that phrase, “Be here now,” is the same one that Ram Dass, a paragon in the western mindfulness tradition, also advocates). For Silliman, being here now describes a state of consciousness that grounds itself in exactly where it is at.

This is not suggest to that “being here now” exists before, or above, the act of writing and the use of language. Of course, language is not a window into pre-existing events but an event itself. For Hejinian and Mayer, the vibrant language events of their poems are an attempt at gesturing towards, playing with, and perhaps even advocating for presence with modes of consciousness imbricated in experience. For the language itself to be present, it must be embodied in the world and experience. These poets’ registers and modes of signification are not apart from their modes of inquiry and subject matter. My analysis has elided signification proper since, as I referenced earlier, dominant modes of engaging with experimental poems often happen at the level of the signifier. However, I believe it is important to note how the discourses that Hejinian and Mayer employ also undermine the conventional well of lyric discourse that paradigmatic mindful poetry represents. Hejinian is not afraid to reference sex, the body, and engage in a continental philosophical mode. Mayer is not afraid to be funny, playful, brash, and colloquial in her mode of address. Complementing the ways that it refuses hierarchies of experience, a poetics of critical mindfulness also does not create hierarchies of language, with lyrical lushness or syntactical simplicity corresponding to a mindful state. In Mayer’s poems, there’s *Downton Abbey*, “the ocean’s CEO,” and full names of friends. For Hejinian, “...we’ll speak of sex, sex is everywhere” (*The Cell* 51). Mayer’s and Hejinian’s capacious dispositions extend to the kind of language that they let into their experiences. To be present with the complex flow of everyday life requires openness on the level of diction and its tonal qualities as well. So again, I am brought back to that term “openness.” On the levels of discourse, register, and interest, the openness of Hejinian and Mayer are what inspire me most. Often, openness is associated with a kind of direct emotional disclosure. And certainly, hints of this do occur in these poems. As mentioned previously, I find myself less drawn to experimental poetry where

language play overrides any sense of subjects feeling their way through experiences, although those subjects and experiences are multiple, shifting, and at least partially opaque. For me, I am drawn to vulnerability in the sense of a capacity to take in, to address, to explore, and to explicate – a catholic sensibility not driven by an agenda to instruct or exemplify. It's this experiential and discursive capacity that informs my own poetry. Some may feel unmoored by such a capacity in the same way that the world and mind in flux may seem like a source of instability. I, however, find poetry that is enacting displacement and flow and that is embodied in the impinging spheres of modern life to be a poetry that is not only okay with, but in fact values, instability. That embrace allows me to relax into a poem and into the world. From that state, I find myself more receptive to write *with* the world, not against it in some struggle to achieve calm and peace. I appreciate how analyzing these poems and explicating my affective connection to them leads me to want to write and read – the generative quality of Hejinian's and Mayer's poetry draws me to merging the openness of texts with an openness of being. My only fear is that articulating a theoretical framework of critical mindfulness circumscribes the poems in ways that turns them into new exemplars of mindfulness rather than alternatives to it. Perhaps, then, these poems are both critically mindful and anti-mindful, affirming as they negate, and vice versa. I'm not so sure. So rather than going any further, I am going to go for a walk around the North Beacon Hill neighborhood of Seattle while listening to a podcast on artificial intelligence or one about '90's TV, paying attention to whatever and whenever, or nothing at all, but everything, too.

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