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To Lose Oneself in the Process: Form and Praxis in Contemporary Subject-in-Process Poetry

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Abstract

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This dissertation investigates the dramatization of the subject in works of contemporary North American poetry. For these works, poetic praxis foregrounds the moment of composition, leading to the development of what we might call a poetic *subject-in-process*. Reflexive self-awareness in the subject becomes tied to the poem's discontinuous form, and the poem is allowed to exhibit both traditional lyric and anti-lyric subject positions. What this study describes is a pre-social aspect of contemporary poetics, present whether or not the destabilized subject is later recruited for social or political ends. The first chapter relates the formal attributes of Clark Coolidge's *The Crystal Text* to the praxis that Coolidge developed for his later, sentence-based improvisational work. The poem involves meditative centering on a singular object, with departures to and returns from the "noise" created in the compositional process. We posit that this poetic meditation, with its moments of emergent revelation, allegorizes jazz

performance. The second chapter locates the seeds of Coolidge's praxis in Jack Kerouac's *sketching* mode for object presentation. Although sketching aims at a kind of realism, it also demands a practice of embodiment that can remove narrative structures and imagistic development. Memory, associative thinking, irrational constructions, and pure sound become the byproducts of a procedure that at its inception is merely concerned with an object set before the writer. When Kerouac's subject is evacuated of consciousness, the irrational presentation of a fully altered state seems to mark the introduction of a wholly new subject-position. A kind of Romantic transport takes the discourse of the poem closer to pure sound than what we see in *The Crystal Text.* The third chapter considers what happens to the dramatized subjects of poetic works when digital or other multimedia are incorporated in their production. It first considers Kerouac's recorded poetic performances, which use assembly strategies and collaborative musical accompaniment to add layers of multivocality to the already present "voices" of his poems. It then moves on to illustrate how poet Susan Howe and musician David Grubbs destabilize the subjectivity of Howe's printed poem *Thorow* in the recording studio, with techniques that cannot be easily replicated on the page. In this recording entitled *Thiefth,* superimpositions, cuttings, and electronic treatments of voice and instrument complicate the subject's presentation, which was already made complex in the text by the subject's hesitance to approach (and potentially appropriate) historical materials. Since this work shows the poetic potential of bringing the dramatized subject back into contact with historical objects, my study concludes by looking at more recent works – M. NourbeSe Philip's book-length Middle Passage poem *Zong!* and Caroline Bergvall's multimedia work *Drift* – in which historical documents play a central compositional role in developing the subject-in-process. While these works put pressure on the pre-social poetics of the previously discussed works, they also can be seen to expand the

formal means by which subjects can be dramatized, thus equipping the poetic subject with a more variable response to external, societal issues.

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Dedication

For my mother and father, Betty and Tony DeBlois, with love.

Introduction

"I like too many things and get all confused and hung-up running from one falling star to another till I drop […] I had nothing to offer anybody except my own confusion."

–Jack Kerouac, *On The Road*

When first encountering Jack Kerouac's *Mexico City Blues* before starting graduate school, I found myself challenged by a recurring phenomenon that seemed tied to the alluring musicality found throughout the poem. Many of the poem's single-page "choruses" will begin with the description of an object, scene, or idea that Kerouac ostensibly encountered around the time of composition, while living in Mexico City in the mid-1950s. Just as vivid imagery begins to emerge from the poem's descriptions, however, we see the describing-subject repeatedly abandoned, replaced by an irrational one, or one that seems to have lost his train of thought. Take for example the subject of the "222nd Chorus," which foregrounds its descriptive intent in the titular first line, "Mexico Camera," before beginning to dramatize the scene: "I'm walking down Orizaba Street / looking everywhere. Ahead of me I / see a mansion, with wall, big / lawn, Spanish interiors, fancy / windows very impressive" (*CP* 157) Suddenly, as this simple narrative spills over into the "223rd Chorus," the one-word line "sound" signals a very different presentation mode:

Sound

E Terpt T A pt T E rt W –

Song of I Snug Our Song

Sang of Asia High Gang

Clang of Iron O Hell Pot –

Spert of Ole Watson Ville

Gert –

Smert –

Noise of old sad so

Such Is

Sing a little ditty of the moon inside the loony

boon of snow white blooms in Parkadystan

I S T A M H O W H U C K (158)

Such shifts are common in the book; after encountering them on page after page, within and between choruses, I began to wonder why any poet would want to destabilize a subject in the midst of its communicating what is objectively so vital to the poem. Why is this subject who "sings" about a city repeatedly getting lost in the noise of the composition itself, leaving the reader so disoriented?

Poets coming after Kerouac also seem to have wondered about this feature of his work. Clark Coolidge, in his critical writing, goes as far as to categorize (for future compositional use) the formal features of Kerouac's subjectivity-flux. First he discusses "Everything Work," an example of which he cites from *Old Angel Midnight:* "You got your men women dogs children horses pones tics ports parts pans pool palls pails parturiencies and petty Thieveries that turn into heavenly Buddha" (*NIJ* 57). In this divergent outburst of disassociated 'p' words, Coolidge sees Kerouac rejecting the notion that a poet must deploy *le mot juste,* as he takes apart what was supposed to be conversational in the line. Next he defines Kerouac's "Babble Flow," which is: taking "pressure off words so they pile and collide in and he hears them in mind as if spoken by another" (56). Coolidge finally goes on to introduce Kerouac's "pure forgetting" mode, and provides another example from *Old Angel Midnight*: "Ah Crack Jabberwack, play piano, paint,

pop your pile anum coitus semenized olium o hell what's his biblical name, the pot that split in the room ere Sarad had hers, ad her share, the name, the word, for masturbators, the Neptune O YA you know the name, the Bible Keen Mexican yowl that old tree still hangs in the same moonlight-Ilium, Anum, Ard Bar, Amum, Odium, Odious, *ONAN!"* (59). In this example, it is as if Babble Flow has become too *stable*, and a wilder form of expressive gesture must be brought in to explain what the babbling cannot.

Coolidge's helpful analysis gives definition to the disoriented feeling I was having at the outset; it might also provide a guide for poetic practitioners on how to "shift subjects like Kerouac." It stops short, however, of addressing the praxis question of "why" one would write this way. Here is one of Coolidge's most comprehensive analyses, describing Kerouac's broader compositional strategy of *self-interruption*: "Sketching, he's right in front of the things, leading to the Memory Blowing, writing the words coming off the memory or the notebooks from the experience, perhaps leading then on to the BabbleFlow, which in some cases leads to a feeling of a sort of emptiness and almost, in a Buddhist sense, that he was aware of that emptiness in which the world images began to appear again, and the cycle goes around" (59). Coolidge helps us to see these subtle and ubiquitous shifts in *Mexico City Blues* as a "cycle," but he stops short of explaining for us how the conspicuous development of competing subjects adds anything to our experience of a poem, other than the need to clarify "who is speaking."

Literary challenges to lyrical subjectivity are not new, as antecedents to the works I am interested in clearly exist in literary modernism. We can see discontinuous forms being used to efface the poetic subject as far back as Guillaume Apollinaire's *Calligrammes*, while James Joyce's consciousness writing, the radical parataxis of Ezra Pound, and Hugo Ball's Dadaist sound poetry all disrupt the notion that a poem must have a stable subject. We could approach

the topic of poetic subjectivity by looking at any of these, but what is so striking to me about later examples is how they are influenced by a body of contemporary poetics that reinforces the *compositional* aspect of the subject-in-process. Multivocality and discontinuous form become compositional praxis tools, part of a strategy of reconceiving the stable nature of the subject. Without getting too deep into the analogy, there is a strain of modern poetry that musicalizes the subject-presentation – not in terms of musical representation, but in a manner comparable to the jazz musician breaking apart the line. To examine this strain, I will address issues of subjectivity found in Kerouac's poems (excerpted from *Book of Sketches* and *Book of Blues*) plus his audio recordings, in Clark Coolidge's Kerouac-influenced, meditative long-poem (*The Crystal Text)*, and in a 21st century example of "subject-in-process" poetry in a digital multimedia format (Susan Howe and David Grubbs *Thiefth*).

I am not interested here in joining a critical debate between the schools promoting either traditional lyrical subjectivity or radical anti-lyricism. There are obviously more radically anti-lyrical poems than those we are investigating from the postwar period; Language School poets Bruce Andrews and P. Inman, for example, enact a more complete dismantling of the poetic subject, to the level of even challenging the poetically "human." There is also already established a lively critical discourse about the usefulness of radical anti-lyricism. A good framework for understanding the debate might be located in a text such as Gillian White's *Lyric Shame: The "Lyric" Subject of Contemporary American Poetry.* White extolls contemporary examples of conventional lyric verse for offering "new inroads through the problematic and interesting interpretive limit of the personal"; while at the same time challenging what she sees as the dominance of radical anti-lyrical works within the academy (White 6). She does not take issue with the seminal works of Language poetics, but does with the "later, more diffuse

critiques of 'lyric'" that emerge in their wake (17). White argues that this latter form of radical anti-lyricism might "reinstall [...] the "lyric hegemony" [...] it sought to denature," since such a mode begins to prescribe what counts as "speech" in poetry, systematizes it, and shames all readings of the traditional lyric on political and ethical grounds (18).

My hope is that the central term of my study, *subject-in-process*, implies a critical middle-ground. The term's origin point is Julia Kristeva's book-length essay on Antonin Artaud and poetic language, "The Subject in Process" (1972), where it exists as a tool for psychoanalytical literary criticism, but clearly has applications for compositional theory. Central to her use of the term is the concept of the *chora,* an instinctual state "chronologically anterior" to language, through which the unitary subject is annihilated, and text-production begins. Kristeva's *textual practice* thus follows an "irrational logic" of drives, which pushes heterogeneous materials into or "through" a writer's language (Scheer 120). As might be expected, subjectivity in the resulting work is rendered unstable, although it is never fully precluded. Ideally for Kristeva, this practice results in "anti-Oedipal" and anti-capitalist subversive works, best represented by Artaud's theatrical practice, but also by the poetry of Mallarmé and the fiction of Joyce (117). It is not clear the extent to which Kristeva's subject-in-process applies to the production of (or subjectivity in) other types of experimental works, including poetic works wherein the subject's position is intentionally dramatized. We might also question whether her prescription for a certain quality of literary work encourages the same hegemonic critical function described by White above.

This is not to say that Kristeva's subject-in-process adds nothing to contemporary critical discussions of lyric subjectivity. Even though he sees Kristeva's *textual practice* as being "insufficient" for critiquing contemporary experimental poetry, Canadian poet and critic Steve

McCaffery builds upon her work. Keeping Kristeva's focus on works that oscillate in tension between "symbolic" (normative) and "semiotic" (instinctual/asocial) linguistic gestures, McCaffery proposes a more reader-centric approach for understanding the grammatically and syntactically challenging forms of postmodern poetry like the paragram. McCaffery's will essentially be a "reader-in-process" model, by way of which readers "effect more radical encounters with meaning and its loss than [through] tracking a prior textual practice" (*PM* 7). This allows him to counter elements of "psychic essentialism" in Kristeva's approach that may limit both our understanding of contemporary poetic praxis and the kind of questions we can ask about heterogenous poetic materials (7). McCaffery's post-structuralist revision of Kristeva's subject-in-process allows him to address newer theoretical concerns about poetic language, such as speed within poetic composition or performance, and the expanded use of non-lexical phonetic and subphonetic sound.

A separate contemporary approach to the subject-in-process comes to us from critics who want to link subjective form to social formation and social critique. Juliana Spahr's *Everybody's Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity* contains examples of this, where she examines the multiple-subjectivity writing that follows the political upheaval of the 1960s. She sees this writing as comparable to that era's grassroots movements, because it "valoriz[es…] multiple and individual response" to give acts of reading more political efficacy (Spahr 52). For such writing we need a slightly different reader-centric approach, one with external and communal ends. For Spahr, a primary reason why poets start using fractured words, phrases, and sentences, and begin leaving these unattributed, is because they want to move away from the hierarchical language of the dominant subject: it is a "game plan to critique an unexamined subjectivity that denies power differentials" (77).

Her reader-centric approach to lyrical subjectivity places an emphasis on the poet's responsibility to the collective. For Spahr, Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* exemplifies how a subject-in-process can perform social critique: "[i]nstead of establishing a series of full, coherent identities, Hejinian turns to mapping the networks of power and meaning that link her inner life to a politically suspect outer world of representational authority[;] while *My Life* rejects rigorous self-definition, this work is still about the self" (78). Formal strategies unusual to autobiography, such as the repetition of "I am" statements, a "shard-like" syntax, and shifting reference, allow Hejinian's autobiographical poem to "switch[...] the emphasis from a stable, physical self to the language of the 'self'" (80). Spahr borrows the poem's line "I've been a blind camera all day in preparation for this dream," to reinforce the reader's role in subject formation: "The book, too, is a blind camera, directing readers' attentions to the symbolically constructed nature of reflection [...] and away from any "actual" reflection itself" (80). By allowing readers to resist the cliché that autobiography must be about the subjectivity of the author, Hejinian allows *readers themselves* to create the autobiography, while they concurrently question how the personal is responsible to the collective.

Spahr's example of poetic critique relies upon questioning the dominant conventions of genre. In another discussion linking subject-formation to social construction, Sarah Dowling's *Translingual Poetics: Writing Personhood Under Settler Colonialism,* it is shown how both a poem's dominant language and it dominant subject might reify the dominance of a social class or culture. Early in her study, Dowling critiques the "organizing consciousness," a shared trait of modernist works like Eliot's *The Waste Land* or Pound's *Cantos.* This "figure of the poet, who gathers snippets and shards of literary history, blending and juxtaposing them with the linguistic materials of his surroundings" commands that any disparate subjectivities within the poem

cohere, which subjugates them and reinforces the monolingual paradigm (*TP* 9). Dowling's prescription for a translingual poetics will not merely include works that are multilingual, but will look also to radical works without the authorial filtering function, where "linguistic juxtapositions [...] work against incorporation" and "reveal the narrow drawn tracing of neoliberal multiculturalism's linguistic boundaries and its relegation of those who do not fit within them to nonpersonhood and antimodernity" (10). Dowling's shows how *Zong!,* a long poem from 2008, uses multilinguistic strategies that "complicate the possibility of direct, comprehensible address from an "I" to an other and interfere with their poetic speakers' ability to articulate a stable, recognizable personhood" (this in turn will allow a lyric space for the existence of those who, because their subjectivity has been destabilized or blurred, have been denied personhood) (60). As was the case for Spahr, discontinuous forms become a key site for Dowling, in her examination of how social strategies motivate subject-in-process poetry.

While the above reader-centric poststructuralism and social formation criticism are important to the discussion of the poetic subject-in-process, my work is mostly informed by a different approach. Two threads in Marjorie Perloff's criticism might help to frame how this dissertation will enter the ongoing discussion of subject-in-process poetry. Perloff's mostly Barthesian approach to subject-in-process poetry also wants to circumnavigate the traditional lyric/radical anti-lyric debate, and one way she accomplishes this is by introducing the authorial *signature*. It becomes clear that Perloff is uncomfortable with the idea that the theory-death of the author has fully evacuated the subjectivity of the *poet* from the poem. In her essay *Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject: Ron Silliman's Albany, Susan Howe's Buffalo*, she uses "signature" to replace the terms "voice" and "style," which she argues are now obsolete in lyric subjectivity discourse (412). In her reading of Ron Silliman's *Albany*, she explains how the

"indeterminacy of agent and referent does not preclude an obsessive attention to particular "realistic" detail" (416). Silliman's signature sentences, though highly paratactic, dislocated, and elliptical, are still "normal" and "casual"; they "point to an author who is matter-of-fact, streetwise, [...] self-educated, [...] a working-class man" (417). Simply because a poet adopts the formal strategies of Language poetry does not mean that the poet's subjectivity gets fully supplanted by the "author-function," or the function of a discourse, by default. Perloff also proceeds to show how Susan Howe's *Frame Structures* remains autobiographical, even though the poet rarely "speaks in her own person" (430). While Howe's signature drastically differs from Silliman's, Howe's personal history is still allowed to appear in the "interstices of the text," through her identifiable combination of historical/literary fragments, line placement, typography, and page design.

Another way that Perloff avoids the traditional lyric/anti-lyric debate is by a reversion to history and literary history. Her work bears a relation to traditional avant-garde theory, in that she prescriptively reads some of the formal experiments of modernism as products of a kind of democratic "genius," or of the techne of those artists "making it new" to counter the oppressive hegemonic and linguistic norms of 20th century mass society. She repeatedly stresses the role that poets' historical circumstances play in the development of the radical praxes that chronologically follow. This dissertation is certainly open to a historicism that links a poet's experiences and reading to her praxis at the moment of poetic composition. Such an approach does not require mapping *all* of the relevant historical and biographical data points in order to show that a poet's use of the subject-in-process might be based on a personal philosophy. The intentional act of diluting or multiplying subjectivity in a poem may derive from some nexus of

physiological and psychological needs felt in the individual poet, as much as from the demands of the standardized poetics of that poet's time (or a reaction to them).

One example of Perloff's historical approach to developments in lyric subjectivity is her reading of T.S. Eliot. In her essay *Avant-Garde Eliot*, she distinguishes between Eliot's early and late works, suggesting that the experiences of the younger poet were responsible for his oft-overlooked experiments involving poetic subjectivity. Perloff suggests that Eliot's playful year in Paris (1910) is partly responsible for the discontinuous poetics of his *Prufrock* era poems, including those of *The Love Song* (composed 1910-1911); she explicates the early Eliot's subject-in-process by compiling descriptive terms from other critics. She references Charles Altieri's view of Eliot's "Symboliste subject" in order to describe the "I" of *Prufrock:* "There is far too much of the author in the character to sustain the distance, yet far too much of the fool in the character for the author to be content with the identification" (*AGM* 24). She borrows from Brian Reed's analysis of Hart Crane to describe the subtleties of the *Prufrock* syntax: it is an "attenuated hypotaxis" of "tenuously interconnected" clauses and phrases, where the blurry connections "inhibit the formation of clear, neat, larger units" (25). And she describes the larger formal structure of *Prufrock* via a term from Hugh Kenner, the "zone of consciousness," which is a structuring of subjectivity that contrasts with the more contemporaneously common "interior monologue" (25). Perloff argues that the death of Eliot's Parisian friend in WWI (coupled with the less personal loss of prewar material conditions) influences his shift away from the disconnected and fragmentary presentation of the subject in *Prufrock*, to the conservative subject presentation of a late poem like "Gerontion" (1920), with its constant deference to the language of traditional and external authority. As the article's title implies, she is interested in

highlighting the more radical aspects of Eliot's earlier poems, examples of which she sees paving the way for the oblique reference and shifting subject in the poetry of John Ashbery (8).

What Perloff provides us with here is a way of looking to literary history for the conditions under which subject-in-process poetries emerge. This suits my discussion, where the compositional basis for the act of dramatizing subjectivity takes precedence over the social and political theory that might inform such an act. To a degree, the modernist antecedents for my study illustrate that the act of dramatizing the poetic subject might be pre-political and pre-social, even if this innovative subject gets recruited for political or social ends *after* the moment of composition. This quality of subject-in-process poetics might help to explain the diverse poetic interests of the modernists who experiment with such a poetics. In addition to those of Eliot (and perhaps as unexpectedly), Robert Frost's poetics centralize a strategy of dramatizing subjectivity. With Frost, we do not see the formal innovation that we do when examining avant-garde modernism, but instead witness his theory of the "sound of sense." Frost's stated goal was to make the sound of his poetry harmonious through a modulation of sentence sounds; these sentence sounds would subsequently, he believed, add nonlexical meanings to the poem. His recurring metaphor for the "sound of sense" includes the image of "voices behind a door that cuts off the words," where one still can "catch the meaning" of the conversation. One might be unwilling to embrace Frostian metaphysics here, since he claims that "the sense of every meaning has a particular sound which each individual is instinctively familiar with and without at all being conscious of the exact words that are being used is able to understand the thought, idea, or emotion that is being conveyed" (*LRF* 122). But what is less difficult to accept is that Frost's theory leads him to diversify the subject in his poems. He frequently departs from the simple declarative statement, putting the grammatical sentence into play with what he called the

agrammatical, "vital sentence" (*RFR* 290). Frost's conversational verse is filled with apostrophes and other "bardic" constructions, and he once described how all his modulations of sentence sound are an attempt to "come at [reality] from a different dramatic slant" (LRF 486). Obviously, Frost's verse forms remain conventional, but when we look at subject-concerned poetries composed later in the century, it is clear that his multiplying of a stable subject's "sound" becomes influential.

On the other end of the modernism spectrum, some elements of contemporary subject-in-process poetry follow out of the work and project of Gertrude Stein. In particular, I am here thinking of her meditative praxis and poetic embodiment, where the poet generates multiple subjectivities out of an intense attentiveness to the thought-processes of the compositional moment. Stein, due to her background in behavioral science and immediate connection to the psychology of William James, did not believe that a pure automatic writing, one that would have allowed her to integrate irrational thought-processes into her work, was physically possible. Instead, as critic Stephen Meyer explains, Stein utilized a process that seems non-automatic by nearly all standards: "she kept the sentence, whatever sentence, in front of her when she was writing and deliberately dulled the echoes, the associations that would naturally come with the sentence and distract one from it" (Meyer 236). Stein thus abstracts the natural associations that are a part of social formation, the natural conventions of expression determined by society and culture, to draw into focus culturally unassimilable subject-positions. We might see what Perloff called the authorial *signature* in Stein's sound of her "continuous present" narrations. Behaviorist B.F. Skinner, for instance, hears a "hypothetical author" who is "intellectually unopinionated," "emotionally cold," who has "no past," and is "unread and unlearned beyond grammar school" (Meyer 224). However we define her signature, it is clear that a great amount

of her work does not produce a stable subjectivity. Stable subject development is undermined by her method for explaining or describing, as in *Tender Buttons,* where each sentence "begins again" in presenting the object and is freed (along with the method for describing subsequent objects) from the logic or rhetoric of previous descriptions. Steinian subject development is also evaded through repetition, which traditionally serves the linguistic purpose of adding emphasis, but in Stein's portraits seems intended to decontextualize or meta-analyze a previous description of the object of contemplation. A stable narrative "style" – which would help us to define the subject's narrative strategies – remains elusive in both her poetic and fictional works, to the degree where only the reader can assemble a subject-position vis-a-vis the object, via participation in a kind of associative game.

The broad spectrum of modernist experiments in dramatized subjectivity, ranging from avant-garde to "traditionally" lyrical, thus sets the stage for our discussion here of equally diverse postwar poetries; like our modernist examples, the works we will consider do not depend upon polarized prescriptions for (or limitations to) what lyrical subjectivity can be. Those new to reading Jack Kerouac's poetry (especially those already familiar with his fictional works) might find his use of subject-in-process strategies to be an unexpected development. The Beat persona was so stereotyped in 1950s and 1960s America (even in literary criticism) that one might approach a work like *Mexico City Blues* searching for the conspicuous voice of *On The Road* or "Howl." The appreciation of subjectivity in Kerouac's blues poems depends upon different reading strategies – the experience will be nothing like the cross-referencing of reading Pound's *Cantos*, but it also will not be like reading realist fiction that has been cut into verse. It will require attention to Kerouac's praxis, which he took pains to elucidate with lists of "rules" and "essentials," since this praxis is what frees the subject from immobility and convention. His

strategic reserve of subject-critiquing forms and modes is not as deep as what Language poetry possesses, but reading his subject-in-process poetry will still demand grappling with the discontinuous forms and constructions in what he calls his "Bop prosody."

The works by Coolidge and Howe/Grubbs will be seen to advance and expand the formal and mechanical technologies available for producing the subject-in-process, and I believe that tracing the arc of formal developments in their work will be central to addressing their dramatizations of subjectivity.[1] This will be a study largely concerned with the poetry's self-reflexive praxis and language use in the compositional moment. We will seek to address how a poem might critique subjectivity internally, and how certain linguistic and poetic devices are appropriate given each individual critique of this sort. As has already been suggested, the exigencies of social critique are often at play when contemporary poets hybridize a poem's subject, but many of the variable-subject positions we see in our works from Kerouac, Coolidge, and Howe/Grubbs do not have an overt or identifiable external critique motivating them. One of the reasons these works seem so vital to me is that they can possess critically apolitical and asocial surfaces, even as they end up "lifting the voices of the oppressed" from history.

Operating in the background, the musical qualities of the works examined are also responsible for their being included in this study, as the shared praxis concerns between musicians, sound artists, and poets has always been a subject near and dear to me. As such, this

[1] I will occasionally use the noun form of "subject-in-process" in this study, to reinforce that these poems are not subject-less by any means. As was alluded to earlier, the subject in process is a subject that is changing, multiplying, being effaced, forming, coming-and-going. I will also repeatedly call the subjectivity of the poems examined "hybrid," a term which allows for the validity of both iterations of its common usage (being an "offspring" or having a character that is "mixed"). This approach to the terminology hopefully frames a discussion where we are expressly *not* theorizing that the death of the subject is the end of these experiments (or that it is even possible).

study will obliquely tack toward parallel discussions of the relevance of avant-garde jazz and popular music to the poems, where musical forms and lyrics seem to want to destabilize subjectivity in the work. To me, discontinuity in the poetic line often feels like breaks in the musical line. At these moments in the study, I almost universally return to poetry, although I hope that the trace of music in the returning might be detected. Regardless of whether it is, I want the music of the following texts to be heard, for it is often in its sound(s) that the subject loses, and finds, its way.

In this spirit, the investigation starts off with a poet who is a practicing jazz musician. Chapter One, "A 'Spread Beatitude': Form and Poetic Meditation in Clark Coolidge's *The Crystal Text"* attempts to relate the formal attributes of one of Coolidge's long subject-in-process poems to the hybrid praxis that Coolidge was developing at that stage in his poetic career. As is the case for Stein's portraits, Coolidge generates poetry through a meditation on an object's presence. Hybridity in his poetic practice stems from the fact that his poetic "making" of a crystal paperweight out of words necessarily involves producing a second meditative focal point – the act of poetic composition itself. Whether informal or advanced, all meditative practice involves both an attentional drift and a "re-centering," or drawing one's attention back to the object meditated upon. Coolidge has created a text that embodies the process of "re-centering," where he shuttles from references to the paperweight to references to his self-reflexive praxis, and back again. The poem's referentiality, as we will see, is largely oblique, which formalizes the difficulty of attaining focus in the compositional moment. It is sometimes unclear whether a line's immediate object of meditation is the paperweight or the act of composing. Meanwhile, neither Coolidge's paperweight nor his praxis ever become stable entities, and this allows him to adopt a method similar to what he calls Kerouac's "Everything

Work." His method presents an associative frame of mind, an instant wherein the selection (of word or phrase) is surrounded by a chaos of thoughts and shards of thought, each of which are appropriate to call upon for providing the poem's material. Fragmentary shards of discursive thought – on both the considered object and the composition of it – become a vast repository of subject matter for poetic discourse, both in this poem and in any poetic act.

If we simply take the poet's cogent discussions of *The Crystal Text* into account, we do not get a complete picture of the development of the poem's innovative praxis; we require other models for a comprehensive analysis. This later work in the Coolidge canon adopts a sentence-basis for its overall structure, while Coolidge's earlier work functioned more at the level of the word and the word-cluster. The critic Michael Golston suggests that the early work of Coolidge allegorizes mental and poetic processes by way of terms and forms of geology, or the process of photography development; an allegorical reading helps to explain the "hard" surfaces in the early poems that decontextualize words vis-a-vis their use in language. As Coolidge now moves towards the sentence, we might extend Golston to expose a new allegory, where the flow states of jazz and meditation represent similar states in the poetic process. In both cases (the word and sentence structural bases), Coolidge seems fascinated by the notion that the material world can be used to model self-reflexive states of mind and habit.

The influence of Language poetics is clearly present in *The Crystal Text*, although the work seems to want to resist participating in a definable theoretical discourse. A poem that is anti-absorptive in both its shifting reference and our inability to pin down a coherent image is at the same time filled with prosaic lines that possess the qualities of both lyrical and conversational speech. *The Crystal Text* seems to desire to participate in communication, yet what gets communicated is the internal "noise" that surrounds the act of communication. The

distractions of a world inundated with mass media and the oppressive functions of late capitalism are not described or presented in images, but are instead *formalized* by the fragmentary nature of the poem's discourse, and the failure of any one consistent discourse to cohere. Still, while the poem formalizes noise, it does so quite musically. The poem's sonorous qualities and occasionally irrational constructions contribute to the feeling that the poem is expressly not participating in theory's rational discourse.

These tensions will certainly contribute to a discussion of subject-in-process poetry, or even make *The Crystal Text* the model for the poetic phenomenon we are examining. Coolidge's poem differs from the more overtly political poems of the Language movement, in that it raises fewer questions about social praxis, and more about the (often hermetic) poetic praxis of the subject writing. While it may be seen to formalize a communicative theory of noise, it simultaneously gives a poetic form to something much more prosaic and earthbound – the acts of meditating, focusing, composing one's thoughts. The subject-position will be shown to be both stable and radically disassembling. In other words, the poem's subjectivity will have many identifiable traits that we might (borrowing a strategy from Perloff) use to identify the poem's signature, and yet the continual fragmentation of its subject narration by its associative praxis renders the subject superficial. The modalities of jazz in the poem's presentation of sound give it the veneer of highly expressive subjectivity, but the meaning of what is expressed is constantly deferred by the interruption of disparate thoughts and actions. The poem is not superadding subjects to an authorial, organizing base; it is abstracting its present subject in favor of the object of contemplation.

Chapter Two, "Making The Vision Speakable: The Hybrid Sketching Mode of Kerouac's Verse" locates the seeds of Coolidge's praxis in an earlier and more conventional poetic context. Originating in the late 1950s, Jack Kerouac's *sketching* mode for object presentation was developed prior to the Language discourse, and its poetics relate better to our subject-in-process concept than most Language works. Sketching, like the other poetic methods of Kerouac, have seldom been discussed, likely due to the predominance of his fiction and the passing over of his poetry by critical discourse. But this method, for which Kerouac gave detailed (if not always "serious") instructions, shows a poet privileging embodiment over the construction of narrative. Sketching is one part of Kerouac's hybrid approach to poetically presenting objects to the reader. Although it aims at a kind of realism, it also demands a practice of embodiment that removes narrative structures and imagistic development.

Because sketching often attempts to unify the object present before the poet with the poem's subject, it is a process through which representation reaches its limits. Through the depth of its centering and attempts to communicate a flow of language outward from the object-center, sketching intends to evacuate the consciousness of its practitioner, leading to a praxis moment where other materials fill the void. Memory, associative thinking, irrational constructions, and pure sound become the byproducts of a procedure that at its inception is merely concerned with an object set before the writer. Kerouac seems to be challenging himself to explore a subjectivity outside of literary convention, but he cannot fully abandon the trappings of the conventional. He must narrate and describe in detail the objects that he sketches in order to reach the physiological state where the act of composition itself brings him to the irrational. The process thus starts out conventional but quickly turns experimental, in that he ends up without a plan or a roadmap for where the associations will lead the composition.

The invention of the blues chorus is the historical moment when sketching moves from a compositional tool for brainstorming fictional plots and characters to a poetic form unto itself. Kerouac couples sketching with the concept of "blowing" his lines like a jazz soloist, thus producing a page-based container that divides parts of a sketch. He also brings in the same self-reflexive gesture that we see in Coolidge's meditations – objectifying the thought-processes that accompany the act of sketching itself. Critics have portrayed this moment as one in which Kerouac's praxis becomes multi-dimensional, in that he is moving horizontally through the narration of thoughts on an object of contemplation, but also vertically through his thoughts on the act of contemplation itself. Kerouac, like Coolidge after him, will destabilize the subject through this meditation upon a meditation.

Perhaps the central difference between the subject of the blues chorus and the subject of *The Crystal Text* is the heightened multivocality of Kerouac's subject. When Kerouac's subject is evacuated of consciousness, the irrational presentation of a fully altered state seems to mark its replacement by a wholly new subject. The distancing from the original language of the sketch in terms of grammar, syntax, and tone can be extreme, and the text of the poem may be arrayed differently on the page. Jerome McGann describes a "beyondness" in *The Crystal Text,* where the poem's formal discontinuity takes the reader past reflection on the object, to a place where only the subject's inquisitiveness remains. The Romantic transport in Kerouac seems to go even further, to the replacement of the rational subject with an irrational one. It takes the discourse of the poem closer to pure sound than The *Crystal Text* ever comes. In this sense, the practices of jazz musicians seem even more relevant to Kerouac's work. The signature gestures of the Beat poet are present at the inception of a sketch, when Kerouac riffs on the material object at hand. But once he begins to shift his contemplation to the inner workings of the actively sketching

mind, these gestures are replaced by more radically discontinuous forms, and a less stable subjective presence.

In Chapter 3, "The Margins of which will not permit": Recording The Context for Subject-State Poetries, I consider what happens to the subjectivity of poetic works when digital or other multimedia are incorporated in their production. Taking the blues choruses and similar works “off the page,” by producing analog audio recordings of spoken performances of them, allowed Kerouac to address a new set of praxis concerns. A dramatic or dialogic quality is introduced by musical accompaniment, and the “whole work,” or sum of textual and performed instances of the poem, is altered. The work’s multivocality, and its mixing of rational and irrational subjectivities, gets heightened, by a process of seaming together adjacent choruses, non-adjacent choruses, excerpts from other poems, interruptive noise, and collaborative musical accompaniment. Kerouac was so taken with the impact of this multivocality that he used his final recording session as a kind of revision tool, altering both the ordering *and the content* of previous materials. What made this final work feel entirely new was that he performed his altered and spliced poems with a reading voice that was tonally unique from that of his previous readings and recordings. His calculated and smooth voice in *Readings by Jack Kerouac on the Beat Generation* suggest an authorial control over previously composed poems, wherein the subjective flux had formalized a lack of oversight. The recording studio for Kerouac allowed him to compose his subject differently, to add yet another voice to the “whole work,” and to effectively produce new poetic material.

The evolution of Kerouac’s recordings will serve this study as a way of introducing the more experimental poems composed (rather than read) in the contemporary era of digital multimedia. The compact disc poem *Thiefth* by Susan Howe and David Grubbs shares with

Kerouac's recordings the trait of being a multimedia performance inspired by page-based poetic composition. Advances in recording technology, however, allow Howe and Grubbs to reimagine the possibilities of poetic subjectivity in multiple ways. The multiplicities present in the subject of the page-based predecessor poem, *Thorow,* are already a powerful tool for allowing the poet to both perform a historical critique and to critique her own historicist language/methods at the same time. In the text version, Howe puts voices from the American colonial era into play with her own voice, using paratactic arrangement and fragmentation down to the level of words; we are not guided through the arrangement by an "organizing consciousness," and therefore the poem does not appear to present an "authorized" history of the subjugation of nature by the settlers. Unlike in the previously examined subject-in-process poems, the subject of Howe's poem depends upon historical documents for its voicing; at the same time, the abrupt shifts between "voices," coupled with other strategies of discontinuity, create a poem that insists upon the reader's role in constructing any subjective discourse.

Howe and Grubbs will further destabilize the printed poem's subjectivity in the recording studio, with techniques that could not be replicated on the page. The introduction of *Thorow* has often been critiqued as being contradictory to the spirit of the poem. In the *Thiefth* recording, the theoretical language of the introduction is cut up into almost imperceptibly small audio fragments which are then dispersed throughout the length of the recording; the digital overlay is done in such a manner that we often cannot identify which words and phrases are being lifted from the introduction. This is one of numerous strategies for breaking down what were the remnants of a stable subject in the page-based poem. Grubbs will play a key role expanding the overall subjectivity of the poem, as his selection and integration of non-representational tones from both electric instruments and pre-recorded, electronically-treated saxophone and cello

performances within Howe's reading seem to serve a signifying and interpretive function vis-a-vis Howe's reading. His patterning of the use of these sounds allows a further critique of the settlers' imposition of positivist order, and a contrast to the ordering logic of both history and its discourse.

In this dissertation's conclusion, I will look at two examples of more recent poetry which expand the available compositional means for dramatizing the subject. In M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!,* the poet faces the daunting task of giving voice to the murdered passengers of a slave ship, for whom the only historical record is their being mentioned in a legal decision that affected their owners. This work shares historiographical features with Howe's *Thorow,* but the (re)construction of the poetic subject is more thoroughly challenged by the incomplete nature of the source materials serving as its basis. Subjectivity must be unstable in the voicing of the slave passengers because the historical record contains no trace of their voices. Sarah Dowling observes several formal features in *Zong!* that multiply the subject: the scattering of words across the page, the use of lyrical conventions like the apostrophe to represent the dominant (white/European) subject, and interruptions of the dominant subject through the use of italicized (and thus juxtaposed) fragments from a language other than English (*PV*). This poem "contrasts the self-possessive voices of legal persons, especially the ship's crew, with the particulate, overlapping voices of legal nonpersons, the enslaved people whose bodies persist beyond, but are shaped by, their diminished legal status"; here, it is only through demonstrating the contrast that a subjective representation of the slave can occur (TP 69).

In concluding, I will also briefly consider the text of Caroline Bergvall's multimedia performance piece *Drift (*2014). In the textual version of this work, the poet's subjectivity enters the poem by way of her personalized translations of pre-modern texts and the biographical logs

that recount her compositional process – both of these will center on the theme of becoming lost. However, in juxtaposing these materials with an unaltered, 21st century historical account of migrants left to die at sea, the poet decontextualizes her own subjectivity, drawing it into stark relief with the reality of a neglected historical tragedy. She thus uses a de-subjectivizing or distancing technique to dramatize her subject, in a fashion that is unique from what we have seen in our previous examples.

All of the above considerations will bring me briefly back to Kerouac, and the question of what his subject-in-process poetics might contribute to poetry moving forward. If we assume that there is a contingent of contemporary poets still experimenting with performative subjectivity, we might consider whether Kerouac's spontaneously-derived forms have been superseded by more advanced forms, or whether they might be reapplied in a new context. At the very least, we might be able to reframe the original question of why poets would want to destabilize the subject in the first place.

A "Spread Beatitude": Form and Poetic Meditation in Clark Coolidge's *The Crystal Text*

Clark Coolidge has been associated both with the New York and Language Schools of poetry, which speaks to the strong presence of an experimental praxis within his work.[2] Born in 1939, Coolidge attended Brown University in the 1950s. His artistic coming-of-age corresponded to a period of emergent spontaneity in the arts in America -- not only that of the early Beat literary movement, but also the action painting and other spontaneous practices of Abstract Expressionism in the visual arts, and the arrival of "bop" in jazz.[3] Coolidge's initial outlet for spontaneous artistic expression happened to be in the field of jazz composition, and he has described in autobiographical statements on poetics and numerous interviews how jazz drumming was part of his formative expressive experience. His years of drumming in a college band with Alvin Curran, who went on to study with Elliot Carter and form the influential acoustic/electronic Musica Elettronica Viva group, introduced him to the "bebop meter," an abstract timing system which he still employs in the poetry that he bases in 4/4 time, or the 2/4 "Circus tempos" of Max Roach (Corbett 136).

While Coolidge's musical experience helped to inform certain praxis strategies in his poetry, it also provided him with the challenge of where to draw the line between jazz and poetic practices. In interviews, Coolidge both acknowledges the subconscious influence of jazz on his

[2] The Canadian poet-critic-theorist Steve McCaffery has recently resisted attempts to associate Coolidge with the New York School: "his work contains no indications of O'Hara's personalism with its "I do this, I do that" agenda; neither does his work display the coterie conversational tonalities nor the surrealistic collage method we find in Ashbery […] Coolidge's early texts are so minimal and subreferential as to appear inassimilable into any poetics of the New York School" (McCaffery 157). While McCaffery bases his observation on Coolidge's early poetry, the discussion of a later work like *The Crystal Text* might draw Coolidge's poetics closer to that of his New York School contemporaries.

[3] For historical background and an argument that spontaneous composition appeared across the arts at this precise historical moment, one might consider Daniel Belgrad's *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* (1998).

poetic composition and admits that "it's not real easy to make a direct parallel" (*Jacket* 22). In fact, he suggests that the practice of the two arts, for him, is something that must be done in a kind of isolation: "I always used to argue with myself about that, I always thought you couldn't devote your full self and energy to two different arts. I don't know, I sometimes think now that that was kind of a bum steer, except that it was always a problem or a fork in the road in my life" (13). Meanwhile, Coolidge has implied that his difficulties with collaborative arrangements were what precluded him from working in the musical field: "Of course you can write without other people" (13).[4]

In spite of these conceptual difficulties, Coolidge did find a way for jazz to play a role in his poetry composition. He will not simply adopt musical metaphors, or craft “jazzy-sounding” lines (whatever that might entail). In his *The Crystal Text* (1986), Coolidge will use a poetic meditation to allegorically represent jazz meditation, and this in turn will produce a uniquely discontinuous poetry that is based in the sentence. The poem’s formal attributes, and the way its sentences are employed, allow the poem to explore and challenge the traditional relationship between poetic subject and object. When the subject of Coolidge’s poem tries to spontaneously “perform” an object, he or she cannot help but capture the context of that object, including the contextualizing consciousness itself. *The Crystal Text* thus models, rather than explains, how such a compositional moment works.

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[4] Coolidge has successfully collaborated with artists *between* different artistic fields. In *The ROVA Improvisations* (1994), Coolidge improvised a series of poems against a series of musical pieces by The Rova Quartet, and for each of these he composed a second set of "reactions to his reactions" (*Jacket* 13). Meanwhile, Coolidge collaborated on multiple books of illustrations, for which he provided the texts, by the Abstract Expressionist painter Philip Guston, who at the time had moved away from purer abstraction methods and toward the line and figural representation.

The relation of jazz to Coolidge's poetry has not been front-and-center in prior critical discussions of it. In the canon of Coolidge criticism, which to date consists of sporadic essays and isolated book chapters, we commonly see works which summarily assume the influence of his musical and avant-garde associations on his poetry and poetics. Prior to the 1990s, most Coolidge criticism is written by figures associated with the Language Poetry movement, and it focuses mostly on the form of his early poems. As such, it is usually invested in reading the poetry as a social and political critique of late capitalism – even after Language poetry gained its footing in the academy in the 1980s and 1990s, Coolidge's poetic works are still viewed as objects resistant to "official verse culture," or literary and cultural media in which "absorbability" is a central feature. It is the diversity and difficulty of Coolidge's syntactical constructions that lead such critics to discuss the politically-resistant aspects of his early poems, while his long, formally-unified, later works contain different elements (discussed below) that encourage readings into his political project.

Charles Bernstein includes one of these typical essays on Coolidge in *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984.* Since Berstein wants to read Coolidge in terms of Language poetics, he will first place him in the tradition of Pound (as Christopher Beach will also do almost a decade later). He uses Pound's own words in the essay's inscription – "It will be as much like granite as it can be" -- and observes the overlay of "ideograms of subject-verb-object, thing and action not formally separated" in the poetry (*CD* 259). While he cites Romantic and post-Romantic terminology from Denise Levertov's organic-form theory and Gerard Manley Hopkins' definition of "inscape," his goal is to show that Coolidge rejects the Romantic union of the subject with the transcendental object. In Coolidge, according to Bernstein, "the experience captured is the one set down, internal to the individual poem, to its compositional integrity, its limits" (260). The

poetry might be referential, but not to any external reality, and even the internal reference is non-specific. We are unable to give the Coolidge poem an associative reading – such a reading as would reveal meaning in a poem like Stein's *Tender Buttons* – because such a tactic "gets bogged down [...] it is possible to point to directions or ways of meaning, as well as certain textual qualities, but the poems themselves seem to show these up as incompetent" (263).

Bernstein's essay focuses primarily on the poetry in Coolidge's early collection *Space.* He sees this book being comprised of "gooey" or "gummy" word clusters punctuated by blank page-space, which in their density allow both the "extravagant and wonderful fantasy" of the reader's ideation but also non-denotational iconography that cannot be assimilated: "a poetry of hieroglyphics" (263). Coolidge's hieroglyphics are, of course, very Poundian (and not very new after modernism), but they are still experimental, in the way that they "mine" for words that are "hard" -- resistant to assimilation -- and arrange or "program" them into untranslatable textures (263). Bernstein comes up with his own unpunctuated list to describe the nature of these words while at the same time simulating the type of syntax that Coolidge uses in *Space:* "time coal mine cog mink facer diurnal hum bop breather clap cup slim putter at a an of part word [etc.]"; as the list continues, we see Bernstein juxtaposing the mostly monosyllabic nouns with connectives or prepositional words that feel, within the texture of the list, like they could serve as nouns (word-objects above all else) (264). Bernstein also lists some of his favorite resultant clusters from *Space*: "hum over glow trout" and "cog world sigh blimp" (265). Such discontinuous and fragmentary constructions allow us to experience words that "mean as sound, as texture, as physical presence" rather than words that "mean in the world (i.e., in a sentence) and beside it" (265).

Bernstein further explores Coolidge's relationship to Language poetics in "Artifice of Absorption," which appears in 1985. The introduction to this book-length essay encourages all Language poets to take a "direction of poetic interest [...] essentializing the mode of difference and incorporating the product (never the process) into its own cultural space" (*AP* 6). This is a political directive of the Language School, that we seek an alternative to the "constant centripetal regrouping and reshoring through official verse culture's enormously elastic and sophisticated mechanism of tokenization that targets, splits off, and decontextualizes" (6). Bernstein sees Coolidge's difference-making role to be an instrumentalizing of musical flows for the purpose of making meaning outside of the sentence. Bernstein will thus here refer to Coolidge's book *Quartz Hearts* (1978) rather than *Space* (1970), because improvisation becomes more influential on Coolidge's work in the later 1970s. Bernstein calls the formal units in *Quartz Hearts* "imploded sentences," and sees them as highly anti-absorptive and antithetical to "official verse culture":

> While in
>
> the complete/closed sentence, attention is deflected
>
> to an abstracted, or accompanying, "meaning"
>
> that is being "conveyed", in the imploded sentence
>
> the reader stays plugged in to the wave-like
>
> pulse of the writing. In other words, you keep
>
> moving through the writing without having to come
>
> up for ideational air: the ideas are all inside
>
> the process. (60)

In this analysis, Bernstein describes a reading experience that diverges from the "hard" or abrupt encounters with the word clusters of *Space*, since in *Quartz Hearts* Coolidge opens up the larger prosody of the poem with lines that refuse to close off the subject/verb/object ordering of sentences. He compares the "musical sweep" or syntax of imploded sentences to John Coltrane's "opening up" of a tune "beyond any background reference to a tune" (this is Bernstein's definition of Coltrane's "ascension") (60). Although this is a different type of Coolidge poetics, it again seems to be geared (as it was in *Space*) toward social ends external to the objects in the poetry. After a quick shift to discussing Peter Seaton's similarly "hard-to-absorb" syntax, Bernstein suggests that Seaton and Coolidge share a feature with other anti-absorptive poets: they both use expressive gestures that "collapse [...] the operant distinction between reader and text," and allow language to operate "'below' its normally understood function as exchange" (61). Bernstein implies that *Quartz Hearts* also has a political project -- in it, poetic economies of "exchange" are resisted by jazz-inflected flows that do not reward the reader with the easy accessibility of an abstracted (because closed) meaning-making device (the sentence) (61). We will return to Coolidge's use of "imploded" sentences later in this study, but for now it suffices to say that Bernstein sees them as part of a jazz praxis that participates in Language politics.

At about the same time, the poet-critic Barrett Watten joins Bernstein in considering the political aspects of Coolidge's experimentation with form, with a chapter in *Total Syntax* (1985). His general approach is to assume that jazz is a background operator within Coolidge's work, and that jazz technique becomes a means to a collective, social end. He begins by positing that Coolidge's career as a jazz drummer is influential on the poet's praxis of word-cluster *arrangement.* Watten diverges from Bernstein in that he detects the "pulse" of jazz in some of Coolidge's earliest work (*Space*). Here, Watten sees "sound [...] leading Coolidge into the

words," while he observes the irreducibility of the words which Coolidge mines for his combinations, and the value being given to "calling up things by their names" (*TS* 91). Watten argues that a cultural critique is inherent in Coolidge's "mined" diction, like in "Bontecou Chandelier," where "the word stock [...] is consistently "American Industrial" (91). In what might be an oversimplifying summary, Watten sees words in Coolidge as "cultural facts," which "stare one in the face with artifice and inertness, as in Las Vegas" (91). This summary allows him to draw a parallel between the "imponderable" words in Coolidge and the mirrors in Robert Smithson's art installations, which make a metaphor of art by their placement in physical space. Watten does not take the easy route toward calling any one of Coolidge's poems a representational critique of late capitalism, as his study is more committed to ontological and psychological questions of linguistics. Yet he does examine linguistic difference in light of the political present, by how he reads Coolidge's formal variance across his works. In the introduction to his book, Watten positions Coolidge's poetry within the category of "asystematic" contributions to poetic method, thus linking it to the poetry of Charles Olson. Coolidge's *method* also becomes critique: his compositional praxis creates new "languages" that will allow, when absorbed on a larger social scale, an understanding of political and social relations. Just as Language School theorists, at a precise historical moment, adjust the fixed conceptual orders in poetry, Coolidge (and his readers) subsequently adjust fixed relations in society (xi).

In the same chapter, Watten makes several other observations of how praxis relates to form in Coolidge's work. In reading *The Maintains* (1974), Watten sees the generative device of using dictionary syntax as producing a poetic line that both "comment[s] on the one above" and serves as "an individual arrangement," which thereby allows for a poetic form (and thus a "language") that argues relationality, or "the edge between self-sufficiency and connection" (96).

In *Polaroid* (1975), he sees Coolidge calling our attention to the "multiple elliptical constructions of American English" by emphasizing non-substantives instead of nouns (97). He observes how *Quartz Hearts* (1978) and "Smithsonian Depositions" (1980) layer references into the poem (whether they be internally-derived arguments or external source material, like newspaper clippings), only to have the poems densely argue and query the referential words as they appear, which in turn generates new materials (98). And in reading "longwork," Watten shows how Coolidge develops cultural references (to the poetry of Robert Creeley or the music of Charles Ives, for example) in concentrated sections of prosoid lines, which are then assimilated into related (though less topical) language in medial sections, a method which Watten refers to as a "highly elaborate cross-referencing of multiple arrangements" (100).

Not only does Watten's review of Coolidge produce a useful compendium of formal attributes across the poet's works, but it also allows him to arrive at a description of Coolidge's overall project that invokes Surrealism and, by extension Hegelianism and Marxism. In Watten’s view, Coolidge directly critiques the rational, post-industrial world's superstructure, through a type of automated process that takes into account the whole of language -- not just the fetched words which point toward "interior and organic scenarios," but also quotidian language and "words as words" (102). Watten’s Objectivist orientation starts to come to the fore: "In Coolidge's work the sign is a multiple and possible exterior reality, and words like ‘thus and so’ have the status of substantives in the work [...] The relation to language is evaluative as opposed to convulsive -- there is a ‘thinking with things as they exist’ as much as any flux of the automatic image" (102). Watten concludes the chapter by thinking about Coolidge's method as a constantly shifting metonymic drive, where the approach to language (even the prior language of the poet) is always deferred and poetic time "never wants to end" (104).

A shift to cultural poetics in the 1990s will alter the critical understanding of Coolidge's relevance; we may observe this by considering Watten's later treatment of Coolidge in *The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Poetics* (2003), and Marjorie Perloff's discussion of Coolidge in her *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (1994). Watten's sustained treatment of Coolidge here shifts the frame from *arrangement* to *assembly*, as he observes some of Coolidge’s more controlled formal experiments. From this analysis, it will be harder to see Coolidge as Watten did in *Total Syntax* – as an inheritor of Kerouac's "spontaneous bop prosody," which “call[s] up things by their names" in the "willful drive of the sound” (TS 91). Watten’s new formulation describes how, "[i]n an almost algebraic sense, Coolidge's text imitates the way Henry Ford made cars" (TCM 134). This book also compares Coolidge’s composition praxis to Watten’s own experience while editing the first issue of *This* (1971), an originary Language school journal: "it would involve a construction of meaning using the freshly cast or broken down units of lyricism that were becoming available with the crisis of the expressive subject after the 1960s, reconfigured in new forms of organization” (134) . Watten now envisions a constructivist Language poetry, which includes Coolidge, that is socially-produced, multi-authored, and accretive. He describes Coolidge's poem "Made Thought" (which appeared in *This*) as “a fabrication of disjunct particles of objectified language, unit structures of the material text, recombined within the percussive metrics of improvisatory form” (130).[5] Watten is saying that Coolidge enters the poetic field with a pre-established, minimalist lexicon that has been abstracted from language. Whether his pre-constituted poetic vocabulary is entirely drawn from the 850-word vocabulary of BASIC English (as in "Made Thought") or

[5] Watten also here wishes to name “Made Thought” the originary moment of Language School poetry: “I see it as a coherent demonstration of a poetics that unfolds from its own self-posited argument” (TCM 134).

simply from the dictionary (as in *The Maintains*), Coolidge sequentially re-organizes materials drawn from what are socially-constructed texts. This understanding applies less, according to Watten, to Coolidge's later poetry, where "time-based improvisation and lingual harmonics [...] cancel out values of constructed meaning" (138). It is the earlier work which is most important to the Language School project, according to Watten, since in it, "Coolidge's construction of poetic language as a form of reconstituted objectification [...] urged a number of writers to break the mold of the author-centered lyric toward a more socially reflexive poetry" (138).

Perloff's *Radical Artifice,* published in the interval between Watten's two books, contextualizes both the transition within Watten's thought on Coolidge and the shift in the critical discussion of Coolidge between the 1980s and the present. Rather than working, as Watten does, from assumptions about late-capitalist culture and the need for a counteractive poetics, Perloff's book provides a series of case studies for how avant-garde poetics have reacted to the material conditions of a language impacted by culture. The book is composed at the advent of the Internet age, and what makes it so timely and useful today is that some of its reflections on language-use in television and print media have been magnified by attempts within contemporary online media to adopt similar language-use strategies. Like Bernstein and Watten, Perloff sees the poets of the 1980s employing poetic artifice in an effort to produce alternate language systems, although in Perloff the role of Language School politics is diminished. This is because poets are increasingly facing a media landscape where the types of natural and/or authentic speech privileged from Romanticism through modernism (and maintained through the "holding operation" of the Confessional poets) has been exploded, by being turned into the instrumental discourse of "junk mail, advertising brochures, beepers, bumper stickers, answering

machine messages," and, most illustratively in Perloff's discussion, television talk shows (RA 49).

Perloff adopts the model of Baudrillard to explain a more indirect relation between poetic formal deviations and the politics of political gesture -- to explain the movement in the 1980s toward artifice and the materiality of the word-as-such:

> [i]f, so Baudrillard argues, "one agrees to define communication as an exchange, as a reciprocal space of a speech and a response, and thus a responsibility," then television (or the media in general) is, by definition, that which always prevents response." Prevents it not because, as traditional Marxism would have it, our mass media are controlled by the consciousness industries of late capitalism, but because the media are themselves the effectors of ideology." (39)

Perloff contrasts "authentic speech" poetry with the newer Language-inspired poetries to show that "authentic speech" cannot help but be ideologically-effected. The poets who follow the prescription of poet Louis Simpson to "reaffirm" the "primacy of feeling" through authentic speech will run into the difficulty that, according to Perloff, "the tension between the 'unique' consciousness and the increasingly indifferent external world could hardly be expressed without falling into the not entirely unrelated inflections of Donahue talk" (42). Perloff, borrowing from Steve McCaffery, sees paragrammatic poetry and the anti-lyric as the signs of attempts by poets to "escape" discourse and thus formulate the only available aesthetic response to the abstraction of mediaspeak.[6] It is the resistance to a media-inflected discourse that leads poets toward, according to Perloff, the syntactic indeterminacy in such a work as *The Crystal Text*, or similarly,

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[6] For a more extensive treatment of the paragram, see McCaffery's *North of Intention* (1986), (cited in Perloff).

the "pan and cut techniques of nonnarrative" that decenter the subject in Leslie Scalapino's poetry. By dissolving and reconstituting both syntax *and imagery*, Coolidge's work serves a dual-purpose in reacting to mediaspeak, since images effect ideology in print media in a manner parallel to how language effects ideology in film, video, and audio media. Coolidge's *At Egypt* (1988) is juxtaposed with Pound's *Cantos* here as part of the argument. Because print images (including, but not limited to, those found in advertisements) from the 1960s onward are "heavily mediated as part of the political and social process in which they participate, their relationship to the consciousness of the poetic observer becomes problematic" (78). The ideogrammatic method of Pound might still be a viable strategy within the poetics of the Language or Objectivist schools, but what must be grappled with is how the "luminous detail" or "clear, visual image," from which poetic movement formerly rushed paratactically (or “vorticistically”), is now itself a ubiquitous tool for the selling of cosmetics or any consumer good. The only way to distinguish poetic writing from other writing, short of interspersing more of the problematic materials of subject-centered, mediated discourse ("witty anecdotes," or "narratives, quotations, and recitations") is through the deconstruction of the image. The latter is what Perloff is observing in the new ideograms of Coolidge's *At Egypt:* "Ordinary words in ordinary constructions -- I came here, I don't know you, I say this, if I see you, be sure of it -- are denaturalized, decontextualized, so that we must puzzle out their relationships within the given language field” (57). In such constructions, a modernist ethos remains in spite of the evacuation of the image, as we still sense, within the rush or movement of verbal clusters, "a concentration, a discrimination among" words-as-such (57).

The Coolidge criticism of the 1990s thus reconsiders both the impetus and the goals guiding his spontaneous praxis. In the 1970s, Coolidge criticism traced the influence of Kerouac

to highlight Coolidge's counter-cultural bent; jazz spontaneity was seen as recreating the language of the "other" from its marginal materials. In the 1980s, criticism showed Coolidge as invested in more calculated constructivist strategies, which called less attention to the poetry's late-capitalist critique and focused more on acts of language production. This shift can be attributed to the normalization of Language poetics within the academy, which made Coolidge's syntactical deviation seem less politically radical. In the 1990s, Coolidge's critics both continue the discussion of the social and political impact of Coolidge's method and also look to historical markers for alternate ways of characterizing his formal method. Charles Borkhuis, for example, suggests that Coolidge's works might be read in the context of late-Surrealism, and provides an alternative reading both of his work and that of other Language writers. Surrealism is generally seen by Borkhuis as a useful frame for freshening our understanding of contemporary poetic praxis -- while similar to Language poetry in its capacity to decenter the unified self, Surrealism "is more easily assimilative because its unconscious associations engage primarily on a sensory level" (Borkhuis 244). For Borkhuis (though not for Watten or Bernstein), the later and tangential surrealist writers are influential because of their self-reflexive automatism – their experiments allow more open-ended, "bodily" texts than what is afforded by the overly cognitive works of the Language school. While that premise is debatable, Borkhuis suggests the usefulness of reading of Coolidge's method through the lens of Surrealist praxis:

> When Clark Coolidge writes in an improvised mode (a subset of automatism), he is predisposed to finding a syntactically disturbed stream of thought impressions that maintains a musical coherence "only in the motion of the act." Coolidge treats the image as a primary color but not, as the surrealists would have it, as *the* primary color. (247)

Borkhuis thus introduces a debate to the established critical lineage, whether it is fair to compare Surrealist automation with the improvisatory methods of Language poets. He also raises the question whether the image, traditionally-defined, remains to be an element of Coolidge's work.

The increasing diversity in the discussions surrounding Coolidge at the start of the new millennium is a logical result of the expansion in the catalogue of the poet's works. The long-awaited publication of the oft-mentioned "longwork" in 2012 not only added an extensive prose document to the frame of the discussion, but also added a work containing extended meditations on definable subjects. In the 2000s, we reach a milestone in Coolidge studies where readings "across" his work, or even monographs on his various subject matters (whether or not there are objective correlatives for these), become more commonplace. Michael Golston's work in *Poetic Machinations* (2015) thus moves between Coolidge's books in order to observe an overarching allegorical project.[7] In Golston, the idea of language-system construction from Watten et al. is still at play, but the scope is now broadened to suggest that each work's formal structure, taken as a whole, might serve a metaphorical purpose. While Golston also sees the relation of Coolidge to Surrealism, it is because he sees allegory emerging contemporaneously with Surrealism on the American poetry scene in the 1930s; he then sees it being rediscovered by Ashbery, in his Surrealism-inspired poems, in the 1950s. The paintings of Yves Tanguy, appreciated in writing by both Ashbery and Coolidge, describe what brand of Surrealism (and, perhaps, what kind of allegory) we are talking about. Golston cites Coolidge's appreciation of arrangement in Tanguy, of the "landscapes where the horizon is maybe not there [...] you can't quite tell," but where (and here he conflates the thinking of Ashbery and Coolidge on Tanguy) " 'obviously *real*' biomorphic

[7] This argument was originally formulated in Golston, "At Clark Coolidge: Allegory and the Early Works," 2001.

figures [are] strung out" on the infinite plane" and *mindscapes* are the what is being allegorized (78). According to Golston, Coolidge diverges from Ashbery in how he puts Tanguy's surrealism into practice: "what is missing in Ashbery's work and what Coolidge's poetry assiduously cultivates is precisely the larger element of *allegorical form*" (80). In order to achieve an allegorical writing of photography, it is not enough for Coolidge to use the surrealist procedures of the cut-up and parataxis at the level of phrase, line, or stanza -- he must have a larger organizational "mandate" to make the work conjunctive at the book level. For instance, in *Polaroid*, Golston sees Coolidge:

> literally translating the mechanical, the technical, and even the *chemical* integers and dynamics of film into poetry [...] The words of this text are literally arranged as the emulsifying crystals that orient themselves, when exposed to light, in the same direction in order to produce photographic images. The dominant metaphor enabling this text, *writing = photography, is projected not into its narrative register -- that is, this is not a poem about photography -- but deeper, into the very syntactic string of the writing itself, while at the same time it generates the logic that organizes the overall shape of the text (28).*

Different stages of the production of a photograph require different books, and thus different formal registers -- *Quartz Hearts* will use more transparent language to translate the actual developing of photographs into poetry. Golston believes that in Coolidge's works of the 1970s, poetic language has been "dissolved and reconstituted" under the sign of photography, at the level of the book.[8]

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[8] It is important for *The Crystal Text* that Golston carries his analysis into a brief discussion of *Own Face* (1978) and *Smithsonian Depositions/Subject to a Film* (1980), both in that these later works contain sentence structures closer to what we see in *The Crystal Text*, and that the latter

The Crystal Text is another Coolidge work from this era where poetic language is "dissolved and reconstituted," though this time under the sign of jazz improvisation. In turning to this text, I would like to pick up from where Golston's introduction of allegory to Coolidge criticism leaves us. As we will see, a consideration of this poem's allegorical form allows us to read into the generative moment of poetry's communicative act, and to see the poem as a model or metaphor for poetic meditation on a material object. This will in turn produce a more phenomenological reading into the conscious processes of poetic meditation, and in particular into the thinking caused by the act of leaving and returning to the poetic objects of contemplation. While my reading will be influenced by the early Language School readings of Coolidge, my approach will not require the a deep reading into the poem's anti-absorptiveness, or how the poem suggests a radical political praxis as a reaction to the decay of the "authentic speech" after modernism. This is because I am more interested in the poem's pre-political compositional praxis, or its self-reflexive awareness of its own form. We will also not venture into musicology, or a discussion of any particular jazz style or work, to explain the formal structure of the poetry. We started off this chapter showing that Coolidge was uncomfortable with the notion of a "jazz poetics," so we will not try to read such a poetics into his work. Instead, this reading of the poem will consider how this or any poem meditates on the moment of poetic composition, and how it might look to another artform to explain the role improvisation plays in such a moment.

The Crystal Text was published originally by the small press The Figures in 1986, thus placing it squarely in the "sentence period" of Coolidge's mature works. The publisher's jacket

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suggests an allegory slightly outside the frame of photography production, by taking up the "grammar" of motion pictures, instead.

description both clarifies and complicates the relation of the poem to the external world, or to an *object's* reality:

> In this, Clark Coolidge's eighteenth published book, a colorless quartz crystal sits upon the writer's desk, still and irreducible as a death's head in St. Jerome's study or Cezanne's studio. But what would the crystal reveal, if it could speak? How might the issue of presence be brought into language? (TCT)

It is clear from the work's first section that the book will be a treatment of the object of a crystal. Or is it? What kind of crystal sits upon the desk of a writer... a paperweight or a trinket?... and what are the particulars of this crystal? The poem's subject will seldom clarify the situation of this crystal. It does not stably or consistently ground us with a subject position vis-a-vis any overtly described object, although "crystal" in its noun form will appear throughout the book's 152 pages with almost comical redundancy. As we are aware, the noun form of "crystal" is a two-syllable word which lends to easy sibilance, and which forms a generic category that encompasses other geologic word-objects, each of which might better serve as a "clunker": quartz, heliotrope, amethyst, and so forth. But "crystal" here will not be one of those "mined" clunker words identified by Bernstein as appearing in Coolidge's early poems. And "crystal" will not be a "hard" and definable substance within the context of the poem.

The object of the crystal first appears in the fourth divided section of the poem, where its description comes closest to what appears on the book jacket, but where it remains more metaphorical than literal: "I would need a stream through / my head like the quartz crystal in the sunshaft / on the desk of a following wood" (9). It is this "stream through / my head" which allows the equally amorphous subject "I" to apprehend the "crystal," and this stream is in fact comparable to a crystal. Odd relations such as these will complicate matters within the poem's

narrative. For instance, this iteration of the crystal (as stream) will not be further reintroduce/developed, though the light it refracts possibly returns later in the stanza with "I have a tiny sun patch hot on my skull" (9). The next instance of the word “crystal” follows in the poem's next section, but it now appears pluralized: "The crystals *are* the wall" (10). The third instance of "crystal" (two sections later) at least allows for the possibility that the poem's speaker is in physical proximity to a manipulable crystal object: "I put the crystal / to my brow and turn" (12). Elsewhere, the repetitions of "crystal" will not consistently be used to invoke a relationship between the subject and a singular and definable object.[9]

What *is* definable and traceable throughout the poem is the juxtaposition or even montaging of appearances of "crystal" with declarative statements about the subject's position vis-a-vis expressive acts, particularly written ones. If we are to see a crystal paperweight that "speaks," as it sits upon the writer's desk, its speech will nearly always be about what a writer (or any subject?) can know. Thus the other conspicuous repetition in this poem, and one which seems intermittently but persistently related to each repetition of "crystal," becomes that of self-reflexive sentences that include meditation on the creative/written act. We must say "include" here, because reference is constantly and dramatically shifting in the book's sentences. The poem’s sentences are multidirectional because of ambiguity with regard to the subject, which is formalized through enjambment. Regardless of the poem’s areferentiality, there is enough accumulated imagery to piece together that we are witnessing a human subject in the act of

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[9] Adjectives are sometimes used to give the crystal a definable shape, and it receives a more traditional description in such lines as “The crystal is blonde and has no discernable edges.” We should note here how a geological crystal, which refracts light and whose shape depends upon its cut, can inherently be difficult to describe from a single perspective. Also, the crystal’s role in the syntax of the poem will shift, as it will often become the subject of a sentence, acting upon the external world as if it were the poet’s mind: “The crystal brings sided air to a water standing” (13).

writing, one who concurrently theorizes on the compositional act. The poem's first line reflects something like the starting posture of the classic Surrealist writer: "He had his things all there waiting for. . . / They had active possibilities. Should they be / enumerated, or left to breed?" (7).[10] The first line of the poem's second stanza develops this automatic writer in the immediate present, via a metaphorical comparison of him or her to a word processor: "Something appears on the screen, speech" (7). Surrealist automation is a relevant analogy because automation (Surrealist or otherwise) is a theme running through the poem's declarative statements. In addition to the subject's "thoughts left to breed," the first few stanzas also present that subject's lamenting "If only he could remove himself sufficiently," before abandoning that wish ("No, nothing but what comes from inside this time. / Blind intervals,") and finally questioning, "You must take your mind off them to allow them. / Is this any more than a change of pronoun?" (7-8).[11] The implication seems to be that if the author could remove himself to another subject position, and thus change his "pronoun," he might be able to surmount the impasse of seeing things (words, ideas) "come apart" that should "fit" (7).

From the work's inception, we see a glut of ideas that need "fitting." Ironically, this text focused on crystalline imagery will be marked by disorder and chaos. While the highly-wrought internal structure of the crystal allows light to pass through, the organization of the subject's

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[10] See Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism" (1924): "After you have settled yourself in a place as favorable as possible to the concentration of your mind upon itself, have writing materials brought to you" (Breton 29).

[11] Here we see a tension that is omnipresent in *The Crystal Text,* between procedures that are "automatic" and those that are "spontaneous." The fact that the materials of writing "left to breed" suggest that they might themselves spontaneously produce the work, while the notion of "blind intervals" is contradicted by what comes from "inside." Coolidge himself commented on this tension in his observations of Breton, in an interview with Edward Foster published in 2000 – "I mean, how unconscious is it in fact? Is it trance, like being in a literal trance? I don't think Breton did that, did he? Those things that he did look a little conscious to me" (Foster 7).

thoughts is far from transparent, and is difficult to describe. In the oft-cited second section of the poem, the subject establishes an initial strategy for dealing with the disordered state of his or her writing:

> To grasp the relation of words to matter,
>
> mind, process, may be the greatest task.
>
> The batter. The worst of the winter.
>
> What I discover in writing comes out of the
>
> mess, the mix. I know no nodes before.
>
> Don't move. Not a millimeter off the knowing it to be.
>
> My imagination is not pure enough to present
>
> the single beatific image. The spread beatitude of image,
>
> the hose to the slaughter. (8)

The subject's effort to relate words to matter is indirectly observed by Jerome McGann, who refers to *The Crystal Text* as "an effort to clarify what in nature, history, and personal experience might otherwise appear only as 'mess' and 'motion'" (McGann 34).[12] In the above lines, the subject worries that his or her writing is "not pure enough" to clarify. The solution becomes the act of centering on "revelatory" objects -- the subject must not stray "a millimeter off" in dealing with the "batter," which is perhaps the mixture of words and ideas that accompany the consideration of objects. Actual things must take precedence over stray ideas about those things;

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[12] McGann cites Coolidge's description in *Notebooks* of a poetic "motion," or meaning that "has an arrow edge nerve to it," and its opposition to "movement," or the "plethora" that sounds like a washing machine. Although he dismisses the terms as fetishistic, he does think that they are windows to Coolidge's anxieties about American consumerism, which he observes elsewhere in the poem (McGann 34).

the mind cannot come to the material world with "nodes" of preconceived thought if the writing is to be coherent. In addition to a strategy for compositional reflection, McGann suggests that these lines introduce a transcendental ethos, along with a heroic or Romantic-lyrical subject position, to the poem.[13] He cross-references the "beyondness" that Coolidge considers elsewhere, and sees a subject who is confident "even when his work insists upon its incomprehension ("Pieces of the poem are all you'll get")" (40). The deep meditation mode of *The Crystal Text* will always yield knowledge, even it "reflects back nothing more than the subject's original inquiring spirit, the answers concealed in the question," (36).

In *Syncopations: The Stress of Innovation in Contemporary American Poetry* (2004), Jed Rasula also draws forth the image of the transcendent poet who wills order out of the muck: "perched at that seam where noise threatens any message, Coolidge's poems stand out with unforgettable singularity as ripples of order, transitorily charged with sudden unsolicited evidence of life itself" (Rasula 97). Rasula wants to trace the relationship of Coolidge's work to noise and information theory, and he sees this transitory "sudden unsolicited evidence of life itself" as actually contributing more noise to the poem:

> There is always the sense that noise and disorder are inherent in the channel [...] Not only do meanings bump and grind, mix and clash; writing makes its own noise. Where most poets try to exorcise that noise, Coolidge abets it. (97)

The subjective "motion" that captures the "spread beatitude of image" brings with it compositional noise, which in turn will interfere with the transmission of any image.

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[13] McGann, Jed Rasula, and Michael Golston all link Coolidge's neo-Romanticism to that of Ashbery in their essays; he seems a fair figure for comparison when we are looking at the self-reflexivity in the declarative sentence mode of later Coolidge.

Compositional noise takes on many different forms in *The Crystal Text.* First there is the noise caused by dissonance between the author-subject and critics who might reject the poem's difficult style. Coolidge has admitted that his poem "comes down pretty hard on critics," and has further described the dilemma of making the critics expectations one's own: "They're comparing it inevitably with what their expectation is, which is often very askew. And the other thing to say about that is that you never write your expectations. To the point where now I wouldn't even be satisfied if I did" (Jacket 13). Thus in *The Crystal Text,* the writer-subject must make a material object "enter the world" in spite of critical expectations – he or she must communicate through the noise of both criticism and the self-doubt it creates.

Noise also emanates from the poem's abundance of non-crystalline objects. *The Crystal Text* is filled with everyday objects, hypotactically introduced, that distract the subject from uninterrupted meditation upon the crystal. Just as thoughts about the practice of writing radiate outward from the crystal, so do other "nodes" of thought, such as the shards of memory that seem to involuntarily intrude upon the writer/writing/crystal dynamic. Two species of this object-fixated thought might be categorized. We encounter observations of larger conceptual objects that are potentially relevant to a discussion of the writer's task: "I hate history because it has never entered the / world as a life" (9). We also see observations of domestic life – both objects around home and the acts or relations within it: "I could watch the stars above a carbarn," (9) or "Why cigarettes, why anything, prepare them, and I / thought the noon siren given but it didn't" (16). It might be helpful to note that the stock of objects here is of a different quality than

the "American Industrial" objects of Coolidge's *Space*. They are mostly familiar and mundane, and can be greatly abstracted: "They were surprised by the blue and red shower at night" (7).[14]

A reader might attempt to piece together a vague image of the subject's workaday life from the poem's objects, but the abstraction produced by decontextualization and repetition of the objects presents an obstacle to image-formation. For instance, the observation, "The collections of solace have yet to see their binding," is followed by "The man with the shoe collection," who "has time for nothing," and is "[t]he victim of clutch and sod" (11). We must participate in an associative language game to reconstruct the image, given the non-referentiality (who is this historical person who collects shoes? and in the next stanza, where exists the Avenue of Rhythms?) and the repetition of terms. Only the hypotaxis of abstracted *ideation* (rather than of objects) allows for a vague image of the house or the poet's daily affairs to emerge. Our experience of struggling to apprehend the poem's objective world thus simulates the non-linear physiological experience of the moment of composition, also contemplated by the poem's subject:

> A prosewriter's mind's mass is thought plots
>
> but a poet's is fielded of words.
>
> What do you see when you look out with your language?
>
> A pile of hooted buckets.
>
> A loose laugh spoon.

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[14] In *Space,* there is greater compression in the hypotaxis, and the imagery of late-industrial detritus is presented in lines like "jars jars oil staples donuts." Similar objects appear and reappear in *The Crystal Text*, but the sentence structure and narrative overlay change the field of images from something like a junkyard to the free-associative grounds of consciousness.

> Miles of adroited pain paper.
>
> Lungs full of glass beads.
>
> A list of nodules knowing of nameless. (15)

This scatological buildup of non-referential constructions, featuring an admixture of grammars, is comparable to what we might see in Stein's *Tender Buttons.* The "mess" of the tangential and areferential objects in the poem reenacts the moment of poetic meditation, instead of explaining what it reveals.

The improvisatory subject will continue to attempt (and fail) to unearth deeper revelatory meaning through meditation. In the above stanza, the meditative mode yielded undesirable results. The subject focused on the crystal, allowing information to flow along any vector. When the subject tried to "look out" with language, he or she saw empty vessels that appeared to laugh, a spoon that more clearly did, and lots of paper marked with pain or ambiguity. In the next few stanzas the subject looks into the crystal, and sees a version of its "self" in it: "A pure writer's name in circuitous crystals" (CT 17). From the subject's self-identification will come memories, and it is the nature of spontaneous acts of memory that many aspects of the self will appear. Sometimes a random thought or memory will not make sense until it is referenced subjectively: "I could remember winter, said Melville, / stamping on his nib, but i won't do precisely enough to delay its remove" (17). The definition of the subject is constantly being challenged by the noise of the subject's thinking: is the above a literal quote from Melville (there are no quotation marks) and was it Melville who wished to "delay" winter's "remove?" We start to realize that in such a subject-presentation method, "Melville" is merely a pointer to remembering, or in this case *forgetting:* in the lines that follow, the writer declares that "Removal is the only sense of finishing / you get" (17). This leads us to the problem of

completion, both the sense of progressing toward and reaching the end: "I've done it and that I've said. / But the chill space sense that I haven't yet / written anything" (17). The meditation thus turns to the exigency of writing, and the anxiety of work production. The ambiguity of "that" which the subject has “said” reinforces that the meditative work has not transmitted any productive information.

In the sections of the poem that follow, we feel the float of imagery away from the pressure of the writing and toward that of time's wastage or unproductive use. Here we do not see references to the crystal, but instead to the manifestation of passing time in diversion ("why cigarettes"), in the weather ("Now the sun is starting to stop, coming out perhaps / turning so tiresome," to diurnal cycling ("how much night could you get"), to the motivations of animals ("Circular cat, replete with wavers, are thought to be / carefully sad?"). As we have seen, there is indeterminacy with regard to any referent in the poem, and there is the possibility that these things are not the things of the room, the sky, or the yard. Whether they are real or imagined, the distracted thoughts push the subject to a physical remove:

> The man walked out, but what locked in the
> description of the room behind him?
> His very passage was leaning in that direction, the indication
> of plain speech and ordinary objects [...]
>
> The man speaks out in the street about light.
> But light from the window is a barricade [...]
>
> He had not noticed himself

even enough to say I am leaving you.

The very door his party to disaster, or an opening out

of all the roads. Streets lit and not so.

As things are dramatic *and* heedless. (20)

In the meditations of the poem, we are never certain whether what we are seeing suggests an action or an imaginative action. Is the man who "walks out" the man who has been stuck writing at his desk, and is the man "in the street" this same person, continuing his search (now outdoors) for the "light" (or a proper revelatory image)? Is the subject of the poem instead imagining a third-party, such as a generic writer with this conundrum? This latter possibility gets reinforced by the barricade of window light -- the desk-sitter is trying to see the outside world at night, but window reflections caused by artificial light block him. Who is it the writer neglects to inform when he is leaving? A partner or spouse? An embodiment of the room he is describing? Or himself?

The above examples show that the poem flows with highly-charged, metaphorically-active possibilities. At the same time, its narrated events are ambiguous, and they are accompanied by ambiguous constructions of both subject and object imagery. Description occurs without direct treatment of the object and without visual transparency, leading to an attenuated poetic imagery that is very much unlike the products of Imagism. The language is vivid in its presentation of the possibilities for the image, but follow-up description of what is shown in glancing flashes is prevented by the interruptive reflections of "I." The circuit of information flow – to and from the external world and a plan for "how to write" -- is endlessly cut off. This immediately leads us back to the crystal – the subsequent section that begins with "A crystal the cold of collected standpoints" (20).

The poem is formally re-enacting the difficulties of holding the meditative center, subverting notions of the compositional ease of such a method as Jack Kerouac's "sketching." In sketching, according to Kerouac, "[t]he object is set before the mind, either in reality. as in sketching (before a landscape or teacup or old face) or is set in the memory wherein it becomes the sketching from memory of a definite image-object" (ESP). Kerouac allows for there to be indirection in this process, as he states the center of interest is achieved when you "begin not from preconceived idea of what to say about image but from jewel center of interest in subject of image at moment of writing, and write outwards swimming in sea of language to peripheral release and exhaustion" (ESP). In relating Kerouac's prescriptions to *The Crystal Text*, first we have Kerouac's "jewel-center," which, if it does not directly imply a crystalline structure and refraction of light, at least suggests a kind of radiant node. It does not seem accidental that Coolidge has made a literal "jewel-center," his crystal, the central object of a book which reenacts the process of poetic composition. Then we have a writing "outward" from the central jewel, which allows for information to travel along an infinite number of vectors, so long as they are "away." Finally, we have not a rhetoric or concrete formulation of the image, but a "sea of language" which is accompanied by "peripheral release and exhaustion." In Kerouac, the release and exhaustion might describe the physiology of the writer, which clearly we see in the anxiety of Coolidge's speaker. But also in the more literal sense, the image is only sent out into the world when all of its active possibilities have been spent, when its vectors have their terminal point.

The Crystal Text might be read as a poem of subjective crisis, in that the coherent development of the image, or even a "spread" of its imagery, is constantly encountering (as a by-product of sketching) an even more identifiable noise -- the context of the meditative event.

Fragmenting images makes the exigency of the compositional act appear threatening. The poem's subject imagines battle scenes with men who "beat each other. They stomp / and hoot. They are ensnarled in a glass war, as if with ice heavily laden." (24) "Ice" brings water into its crystal form, and "glass war" suggests that the subject is projecting this violent scene into his crystal. Elsewhere, the room, house, products of manufacture, and daily tasks seem to threaten a less epic annihilation:

> This place where morning is permanent
> what do we have for coffee in this doorway breakfast
> a milk-sugar reduction of haulable hulls?
> No spots that are not stuck shadows on collected grounds
> no legs that are larger than their permanent laundries.
> Can this be salvation, bunker with a petaled ceiling
> and no battery lights, no wheat lamps?
> I am arrangeable but the day features no last laps
> no solution firmer than a cap for your pet
> laggard in formation, cat that hired its mice. (34)

A tension is created when adjectives which seem natural and appropriate (as in "haulable hulls") denaturalize their nouns (as in "permanent laundries" and "wheat lamps"). This adds the Surrealist effect of destabilizing the imagistic noise that accompanies the meditation, which furthers the state of subjective crisis. The authorial mind's spontaneous departures from its meditative center might produce a boundless energy; at the same time, it might dissolve the boundaries of all that is encountered. As was the case with the "battle scene," thoughts of this anxious morning – when the subject is threatened with dissolution – again turn back to the

crystal. In the line immediately following this stanza, the subject seems to think aloud: "And if I am afraid, then what? Spin the crystal" (35).

There is an absurdity to this repetitive act of always returning to the crystal. As we have seen above, this reenactment of the frightful "motion" or "plethora" is something which Coolidge detests. What is there that might provide salvation, given the repetitive act of writing and the feeling of no movement or no progress? First off, there are moments where the clarity and referentiality of the sentences bursts forth and seems to provide a break or a pause in the crisis. Ashbery usefully describes a comparable effect in Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation* which "give[ ] one the feeling of time passing, of things happening, of a "plot," though it would be difficult to say precisely what is going on. Sometimes the story has the logic of a dream [...] while at other times it becomes startlingly clear for a moment, as though a change in the wind had suddenly enabled us to hear a conversation that was taking place some distance away" (TI). Ashbery illustrates this effect by referencing the following successive stanzas:

> She asked could I be taught to be allowed
> And I said yes oh yes I had forgotten him
> And she said does any or do any change
> And if not I said whom could they count.
>
> He came early in the morning.
> He thought they needed comfort
> Which they did
> And he gave them an assurance
> That it would be all as well

As indeed were it

Not to have it needed at any time (TI)

The transparency of the second stanza is striking. The comparable, transparent sections of *The Crystal Text* are those which no longer show the thoughts of the subject being refracted, cut, or turned, where the poem's "rippling effect" momentarily clears:

I just lived there and never thought about it.

What was there, who were we? The plants didn't

antagonize the bricks, the cat *ate* the bugs, and we sat

on the porch after his father had died and I thought it

must be a relief [...]

It was Providence, a town, not a city really

with only one tall building with a greenish mentholated

light that should have hissed in the night even when

it wasn't raining. Still I didn't have to imagine

blimps when they all hung over that town like the

vision of a war I knew nothing about.

Brighter days when I was dim. (57)

The presentation of data in the second, more transparent stanza recalls some of the most anthologized examples of Jack Kerouac's "spontaneous bop prosody," such as the "go moan for man" passage of *On the Road*. There is a differential sprawl to the revelatory sentences in both. Similar lines from Kerouac (which we will examine in next chapter) will often take on the characteristic of a long, hallucinatory discursion; in Coolidge they are just perceptibly longer

than what would be spoken in ordinary communication. Coolidge employs a blunt sentence fragment ("Brighter days when I was dim") that must be dropped at the end, where the discourse cannot continue.[15] In each poet‘s work, moments arise where memory is not a shard, but a fluid presentation, as in their nostalgic lines recounting the New England of Providence or Lowell. In *The Crystal Text,* the fact that the machinic grind of the crystal-text-crystal cycle has been broken by a "homey" American digression and child-like wonderment (at the cat *eating* the bugs), suggests a link in the poem between existential comfort and compositional clarity.

In addition to these flashes of syntactical transparency, the poem's sound structures also inform breaks in the meditative praxis. Although noise is constantly interfering with the subject's transmission of the image, the poem counters this noise by driving forward in lines which sound like they are being rushed. The way out of the crisis of the fractured-image dream-state is the "movement" that Coolidge has opposed to motion, a movement formalized in the particularities of sentence and line structure. The reason why the poem seems to encourage its being read quickly – and that in it we might hear the performing voice of Kerouac, hurrying along to catch up to his jazz accompaniment -- is that the patterning of short and long sentences, and the alternation of end-stopped and enjambed lines, seem intended to follow a string of spontaneously overheard thoughts:

> The crystal does not provide. It subsists.
>
> But what I know

---

[15] In his "Kerouac: A Talk,“ Coolidge observed similar end-of-line or end-of-sentence constructions in Kerouac's writing: “Kerouac talked about something he called ‘alluvials’ [...] He said, ‘Add alluvials to the end of your line when all is exhausted but something has to be said for some specified irrational reason.” The “alluvial” as compositional gesture seems important as a feature distinguishing the results of the improvisatory line from attempts at "authentic speech“ (NIJ 53).

> is not its point, certainly not, pendulum weight.
>
> Light as it is not in hand, a tryer though I am.
>
> Perhaps it wanted to be all different ways and
>
> Isotropically came out to this? Loaf enough I'll see?
>
> During, see during, see the end of the line always receding. (46)

This passage highlights recurring patterns in the poem's sound structure. The short sentence "It subsists," with the stress on "It," emphasizes crystal's subject status, but also breaks the meter in such a way as to rush us forward. The simple two-stress line, "But what I know" might have been sounded out more deliberately in the poem, if the three phrases that follow, each with two stresses, had also been delivered by a single line: "But what I know / Is not its point / Certainly not / Pendulum weight." This more terse construction would have slowed us down -- the confusion about the direction of the reference would have stood, but the phrases would have caused more pause than if they simulated speech and were punctuated with commas. The internal off-rhyme of "hand" and "am" in the stanza's fourth line also propels us forward. The rushed sensation of "Perhaps it wanted to be all different ways and / isotropically came out of this?" is caused by spondaic feet, the tension of the line ending "and," and the rhythmic feel of a new line beginning with "isotropically." Repetition of words or concepts can also be seen as a quickening tactic. We see this overtly with "During, see during," but also in the fact that we were already prepared for the clunky word "isotropically" by its definition in the previous line. The imploded sentence structure, here and throughout, adds just the right amount of semantic texture to the reading so as to allow us to drive through the disjunctive references and syntactical deviations -- not only does the poem sound like smoothly flowing thoughts, but it deposits meaning in a fashion similar to more traditional sentences. There is little assembly required, so

that we can experience abstractions and surrealistic conjunctions in imagery in real-time, as if following a discursive speech act.

The propulsive structure of *The Crystal Text* is well-suited to moving through the information of a long, extended meditation, which allows us to see the mind and mood of the subject develop over time. Up to this point, I have been endeavoring to illustrate the formal attributes of the poem's meditative praxis. We have seen how the poem provides the reader with a layered and comprehensive sensation of movement, as the push and pull of the crystal also carries the subject forward from crisis to revelation (and back again). Meanwhile, the sentence forms and sound structure maximize the fluidity and speed of the subject's performance. At this point, I would like to conclude with a brief analysis of how, through this meditative praxis, the poem might allegorize jazz performance.

Coolidge's awareness of jazz performance and history is extensive, and he is especially interested in the dynamics of time-keeping in the music. Inspired by the frenzied and intricate performances of jazz drummers, specifically those playing after the era of Big Band and Duke Ellington swing, Coolidge writes about what happens at the edge of musical time. "In Bop," Coolidge writes, "especially in the drums which almost purely color and are colored by time itself, there is the sense that sheer continuance gets articulated" (*NIJ* 93). Shuttling between "coloring" and "being colored," or between playing ahead and playing behind the metronomic time, marked a historic departure for drummers away from the earlier Swing drumming which Coolidge would have heard on the radio as a child. There is more freedom for the Bop drummer to deviate from landing on the "one" -- he or she can push or drag the tempo. Coolidge here is suggesting that this exchange between determining and following time is what enables the

audience to feel time’s continuance, or to feel time’s insistence at any given moment in the listening experience.

There are two physiological aspects of Bop drumming, related to time-keeping, that Coolidge discusses again and again when relating jazz performance to poetic praxis. The first is a sensation of agency, or the awareness of bodily control over that which manipulates an audience’s experience of clock time. Unlike the metronome’s time-keeping, the drummer’s is creative: "As a drummer, you're holding time's cutting edge in your right hand (ride cymbal), a simultaneity of holding and shaping [...] Once and Ounce, Groove and Chord, Wave and Particle: the Complementarity of Bop" (*NIJ* 94). The granular quality of time-keeping makes maintaining the unified flow of the ensemble performance challenging, but it also allows the expressive drummer to "mark" his contribution, through serial and physical acts (the "stickings" on the ride). It is not accidental that this very imagery of the drummer’s time-keeping is present within *The Crystal Text:*

> The way the time feels on metal, I love its ride.
> Sober sticking on the outside, points, striking points
> that ride on a sheet of air about the plate base.
> Knowing here does not aid but could lapse you
> sheer away. The way time is made, absently
> in perfect focus, riveted eyes, crystal hand,
> thought off yourself to rise in this work. (47)

Knowing Coolidge's personal history as a drummer assists us in making sense of this stanza. As the stanza unfolds, meditation on the ride cymbal becomes parallel to meditation on the crystal. The drummer's conscious awareness shifts from "the way time feels" to "the way time is made."

This shifting from perception to action is familiar to us as readers of the poem, because it is also modeled in the poem's self-reflexive praxis, where the perception of the crystal propels thought. A "focused" and "absent" meditative gaze is equally applicable to both the cymbal and the crystal – we might recall how the poetic subject's focus upon the crystal's objective features is nearly always accompanied by evacuation to other objects and thoughts. The crystal on the desk and the "crystal hand" both form an imperative -- if a "spread" image is to be made through poetic or musical composition, the focus on objective reality (the moment at hand, or the compositional moment) will be necessary.

In returning to Bop drumming, there is also its physiological aspect of subjugation, the drummer being "locked in" or controlled by the dictates of the ensemble. With regard to the boundaries placed on the sticking hand's expression, Coolidge himself describes the limitation of the groove's interval: "[t]he feel is that time has a precise center. Like tight-roping on a moving pulley clothesline, you're always trying to keep up midway between the poles" (*NIJ* 93). The fact that the clothesline is in motion in this metaphor describes the drama of the drummer's subjectivity -- the "precise center" is itself in motion, so there is both limited freedom for the drummer to inhabit the space around this center, and the danger that he or she will fall from it. In a discussion of the solos of Elvin Jones, Coolidge explains how the agency of the bebop drummer can be stripped away by the dictates of collaborative time-keeping. He quotes Jones on the helplessness the drummer sometimes feels during the solo: "...I am looking for the right way to get out. Sometimes the door goes right by and I don't see it, so I have to wait until it comes around again" (*NIJ* 95). As "creative" time-keeping occurs in the mind of the drummer, real time-keeping goes on within the ensemble – syncopations or extended phrases demand an extension of real time, but also a return to it. The solo has to be shaped to "fit" the composition,

but its form and larger shape are being determined by counted, musical time. This subjugation to the composition helps inform the drama of the subject who drums.

The dichotomy of agency and subjugation within the composition, the push-and-pull with regard to both the metronome's and the ensemble's time-keeping, aptly describes the situation of the subject in the poem we have been considering. What I've previously termed Coolidge's "crisis moment" of poetic composition is related to the crisis moment of the drummer's sticking, which is like a "tight-rope" and involves a precise center. The subject of the poem is given agency by the crystal, in that meditation upon such an object allows the generation of the poetic composition. But the subject is *subject to* the crystal, in that contemplation of the latter generates non-compositional thought and imaginative departures that the subject must struggle to return from. The writer's and the drummer's meditative moments involve similar mechanics, and one might be used to model the other.

As the book winds down, references to jazz practitioners and a final, open ended prescription for the poet practitioner will raise a question for any meditative compositional practice. "Brubeck," the poem's subject asks, "Just how long were your mistakes?" (119). The commonplace from jazz lingo, that mistakes aren't mistakes if you repeat them or "run" with them, might be part of what this reference invokes. But what if Coolidge's poem is, in fact, one extended failure to present an image of either the crystal or the subject's consciousness of that crystal? The conclusion of the poem contemplates the possibility that meditative acts will not be productive for the writer, and will not transmit the message over to the reader (through the noise). The moment of the subject's compositional crisis might be seen as interminable, and Coolidge suggests as much with the wording of a late stanza: "I have made up a procedure here

to which / there can never be an end" (138). In light of this conundrum, what final image of the writer-subject does the poem leave us with?

Even though Coolidge's speaker must endlessly and self-reflexively write at the moment of a praxis-crisis, he eventually is able to affirm that something concrete has been conveyed over to the reader:

> I wouldn't think of holding you down
> to a reading of all this, a dreaming of the ground as a bulk
> the figures don't light well. The crystal stands
> for this mismatch in gap.
> Live silent
> from this and these, there
> and here on out. (145)

This stanza points to the overall difficulty of reading this poem, where its syntax does not allow easy rational activity, and the thing which should be solid as "ground" becomes an imperceptible “bulk.” In this context, the form of the crystal meditation itself “stands” in for our expectation of a clearer image or revelation. The poem thus instructs us that there is groundedness in the crystal, or the close attention to where the real material takes you. The notes toward a physical praxis that looks outward only through focus on objective reality are the real reward of *The Crystal Text*. A meditative formal praxis, made metaphorical by the poem, is in fact what is meant by the poem’s reference to a "spread beatitude of image," and an understanding of the nature of this praxis appears in place of preconceived notions that the poem should produce any singular, developed, or radiant node.

In this chapter we have explored the development of this meditative formal praxis in Coolidge's *The Crystal Text* and its relation to prior literary and musical compositional praxes. The poem dramatizes its subject's relation to a singular object less to critique the object than to call attention to the difficulty inherent in any compositional encounter with the objects of the material world. The poem's discontinuous, sentence-based form partially results from the fact that the poem is allegorizing spontaneous jazz practice, where the noise surrounding the moment of composition draws in a multitude of subjective associations, creating both departures in imagery and sound and a repeated returning to the central image. The challenge of maintaining the stability of a poetic subject thus becomes the most enduring representation the poem enacts.

The Crystal Text provides a good departure point for considering the dramatized subject in contemporary poetry, as it sets the stage for illustrating the role poetic objectivity plays in destabilizing the subject. In many ways, the destabilized subject that appears in late 20th and early 21st century poems derives from a heightened poetic awareness of the issues surrounding our perception of both physically present and historical objects, and how that perception itself might be conditioned by history. While certain Objectivist and Language School poems are more invested in critiquing our conditioned perspectivism, my interest here is in poetry that treat perspectivism more purely as a compositional issue. Experimental forms of subjectivity in the poetries considered here might be more hybridized, in that they do not settle upon one anti-lyrical strategy, but instead prefer to put both traditional and avant-garde subject-formation strategies into play, depending upon where in the poem we are located with regard to its narrative or object-consideration. As a species of this poetry, *The Crystal Text* presents an identifiable writer-subject throughout, but one who is constantly being altered by that subject's relation to a meditative object. The poem foregrounds both the hesitance and transcendence

involved with subject-formation. Its centering praxis allows its subject to formulate new positions where revelatory insight might be gained.

In the next chapter we will more closely examine a historically antecedent compositional technique which informed Coolidge's meditative poetics, Jack Kerouac's poetic "sketching." We will trace in sketching's development an increasing openness to sound play and irrational expression, elements which the blues chorus form is specifically designed to contain. Here, jazz technique will inform poetic technique in a different manner from what we have seen above, in that song structure and soloing technique will be used to structure isolated and variable performances of the subject. The object set before the mind of the poet will serve a different practical purpose – not the consideration of compositional dynamics, but the embodiment of the subjectivized sounds of the Beat Generation.

Making The Vision Speakable: The Hybrid Sketching Mode of Kerouac's Verse

As the previous chapter illustrates, Clark Coolidge employs some of Jack Kerouac's spontaneous composition techniques while crafting his meditative poetics. Particularly, Coolidge's use of Kerouac's sketching technique in *The Crystal Text* allows him to examine the relationship between the historical moment of a meditation (thinking) and that of poetic composition (writing). A meditative praxis allows Coolidge to shift away from traditional imagery, lyric narrative, and the development of a subject-position, and toward the "noise" of a new, self-reflective praxis. Describing that praxis becomes the larger project of Coolidge's book, and sketching serves as a tool for uncovering the mental processes involved with poetry composition. If the poet strives to foreground the material/physiological aspects of the compositional moment -- to produce a work that embodies the compositional act within the word -- then sketching might prove useful.

While Coolidge's critical prose states the value of sketching to his and to post-Language poetics, it does not go into detail about how sketching helps to define Kerouac's own poetry production. A small number of critics have related Kerouac's *fictional* sketching to his theories about spontaneous prose and have thereby shed new light on what makes Kerouac's novels experimental, but how sketching works in Kerouac's spontaneously produced *poetry* has almost never been considered. At the most, we have seen critics draw tenuous lines between his fictional and poetic experiments (which merely expand a view of "spontaneous prose" to cover the poetry), but no sustained reading of the poetics of his poetry sketches has been attempted. Such a reading could potentially tell us more about not only Kerouac's poetry, but about the relationship between poetry and the subject-in-process in general, and how experimental American poetries of the era before Coolidge dealt with the body-writing.

Jack Kerouac was a transgeneric, multimedia artist who produced poetry throughout his writing career, a fact that is at odds with the contemporaneous media image that portrayed him exclusively as the iconoclastic, counter-cultural novelist responsible for *On the Road*. His poetry has either been made a historical footnote, placed within the marginalia of his oeuvre, or viewed as so many sidenotes accompanying his fiction. While the subservient role of poetry in Kerouac studies is partially due to external forces and popular opinion, it is also fair to say that his poetry's formal attributes have also played a role. Much of Kerouac's verse contains an informality that the New Critical school, still dominant within the 1950s American poetry scene, would have found disqualifying. Meanwhile, simply delineating what comprises his "poetic works" is made difficult by the fact that the line between Kerouac's poetry and prose is often fluid. That this difficulty remains in the 21st century is evidenced by the "Notes of the Texts" in the Library of America edition of his *Collected Poems* (2012). Here, editor Marlene Phipps-Kettlewell must rationalize including the automatically written, mostly prose poem *Old Angel Midnight* in the collection, even though this work formally "differ[s] only slightly" from many passages from Kerouac's novels. (*CP* 707). She also strives to justify excluding excerpts from *Book of Sketches* (2006) -- which she calls a "prose journal" despite its compressed, imagistic, and lineated content -- and material from *Some of Dharma* (1997), an assemblage of notes on Buddhism that she argues should be read "as an organic whole" (even though it contains what she believes are self-contained poems) (707).

The fact that Kerouac's poetry lives in the shadow of his fiction continues to impact both how we receive it and the discussions surrounding it. Ironically, though, the poetry's marginal status within the Kerouac oeuvre may have been partly the poet's own design. Two of Kerouac's most cited contributions to mid-20th century poetics -- the nexus of stylistic elements called

"spontaneous bop prosody," and the technique of literary *sketching* -- were never exclusively categorized, by the author, as either poetry or prose techniques. The lack of technical specificity in his two manifestos on poetics, "Belief and Technique in Modern Prose: List of Essentials" (1958) and "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" (1959), seems completely intentional, and it further blurs the poetry-prose line in Kerouac's work. While these documents use the word "prose," they contain lists of rules that eschew reference to traditional fictional elements; they provide instead loosely formulated instructions that include using "measured pauses" and "the vigorous space dash," elements that inhabit both Kerouac's fiction and poetry (Charters 57). When he tells writers how to "sketch" while adhering to a "jewel-center," he describes mental and physiological activities with which either poetry or fiction writers could engage (57). Meanwhile, he seeks an "imagistic" work of "free-association," a product nebulous enough to be poetry or fiction (57). These ambiguous definitions for his craft are composed with an off-the-cuff camp, where non-sequitur rules like, "[n]o time for poetry but exactly what is," shift the reader's attention away from an exclusively prose focus (58). What Kerouac's commentary in "Essentials" and "Belief and Technique" suggests (especially when considering the topic of "sketching"), is that he is not opposed to opening the dialogue and methodological exchange between poetry and fiction.

There were historical reasons why Kerouac wanted his technique for producing "spontaneous bop prosody" to be equally applicable to his poetry as to his prose. Daniel Belgrad describes spontaneity in the arts in postwar America as "a direct reaction against the narrowing scope of artistic and political possibilities within the corporate-liberal nexus" (Belgrad 247). It may be difficult generally to tie aesthetic practices to the economic and political systems contemporaneous to them, but Belgrad's broad survey makes the compelling case that the 1950's

American avant-garde was seeking another way of doing business, or an "oppositional version of humanism, rooted in an alternative metaphysics" whose attributes were "intersubjectivity and body-mind holism" (5). Between 1940 and 1960, we see bebop, bop prosody, and the "plastic palimpsests" of Abstract Expressionism appear all at once, each with elements that challenge the "liberal definition of the rational individual" privileged by the Cold War-era "bureaucratic control" of society (247). Belgrad particularly views "body-mind holism," which comes to define the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s, as being rooted in a "plasticity" of forms across the arts, which the spontaneous, "irrational" aesthetics in the 1950s brought into being. Bop poetics, like jazz improvisation, can be seen as part of this "plastic dialogue" (248).

Within the literary-critical realm, Kerouac's method emerges during an era marked by oppressive orthodoxy. In *The American Poetry Wax Museum*, Jed Rasula describes the position of the critical establishment regarding the appearance of the Beat movement. The method of the Beats, for whom "poetry is *all* method," was portrayed as barbaric by the academic poets of the fifties; at the time, *The Nation* satirized the situation as one of all-out confrontation, complete with militaristic terms (Rasula 216). Defenders of the Beats did emerge from the "Academe" -- the poet Karl Shapiro, for example, wrote of the Beats as revolutionaries who would rightfully return Whitman to relevance, overturn the classicism of Eliot and his circle, and thereby overthrow the artificial, esthetic distancing of poetry from the world (216). Still, this orthodoxy stayed entrenched throughout the 50s, and journalistic stereotypes, such as that of the superficial "Beatnik," filtered into the critical venues. For Rasula, one piece of commentary in *Poetry* magazine becomes emblematic of the stereotyping of the era:

> [T]here is a more essential meaning for "beat," keying in with the beat poet's frequent affiliation with jazz. Beat means pulse. The beat poet feels he responds

> to the pulse of the times, or to an essential reality which beats beneath the forms, the sham, the imperialistic show. This I take it is what everyone properly feels during adolescence, when for a little while he is part of a communal personality made up of his contemporaries. [...] [B]eat poetry is based on a direct use, or misuse, of the poet's own excitement on discovering this identity, this charge. (217)

Such a view, by positing that the Beat's affiliation with jazz was naive or immature, contributes to the "cordoning off" of Beat poetics. In the cultural realm, the Beatnik becomes an appropriative consumer of what's "hip," instead of a serious poet. This rejection will have a lingering effect, as many lesser Beat poets eventually lauded by Donald Allen's landmark *The New American Poetry* will still be left behind by the reviewers of the 1960s (220).

While Belgrad and Rasula provide us with some of the context, the conditions that formed a backdrop to Kerouac's poetry have become a bit of a critical cliché: A stifling, "square" social environment, scaffolding for a repressively bureaucratic and hegemonic political system, drives an era's artists to resist its social ordering, through spontaneous and irrational acts. Meanwhile, the establishment of academic poets and conservative journals prevents even the least radical of the era's poetic experiments from being critically discussed, in a gesture of self-preservation. All the while, the media (whether literary or otherwise) covers Beat literature only as the immature gesticulations of the Beatnik, or of the "writer who cannot write."

A revision of this history has only recently begun, and for this, Rasula points us to the instructive work of Michael Davidson. Davidson, too, frames his analysis with an early negative critique of the Beats, Norman Podhoretz's *Partisan Review* article, "The Know-Nothing Bohemians" (1958): "The only art the new Bohemians have any use for is jazz [...] "[t]heir

predilection for bop language is a way of demonstrating solidarity with the primitive vitality and spontaneity discourse which, being a product of the mind, is in their view a form of death" (Davidson 62). In addition to the problematic racial overtones here, which makes bop "primitive," we should take issue with the simplification that equates Beat spontaneity with anti-rational drives. Davidson calls the notion that Beats exalted action over reflection "one of the most pervasive fictions" about them, and he sets forth to illustrate the "disparity between participation and reflection" in their work (66). In Kerouac, Davidson observes the distancing techniques that the author increasingly uses in his fiction - the shifting perspectives and parataxis of *On the Road* that create "one multiple consciousness" out of the active Dean and the introspective Sal (72); the fusion of "objective and subjective poles in a single narrative" in *Visions of Cody*, where transcripts of recordings of Cody's/Cassady's stories produce an inaccurate representation until Duluoz/Kerouac intrudes and mediates the text of the transcript (76). Davidson does not deny that Kerouac's novels celebrate a "primitive vitality" in Cassady, but he shifts the focus to the author's first and third person narrators/foils who fail to fully disengage from society, and thus fracture both "the dream of the road" and the perspective of the narration. For Davidson, the technique of sketching becomes less a tool for projecting the heroic vitality and horizontal movement of the characters, and more one that stops horizontal movement, allowing for a vertical probing of the significance of spontaneously generated content.

Reappraisals like Davidson's of Kerouac's experimental method have surprisingly not led to more discussion of his poetry. The only sustained discussion has been James T. Jones' *A Map of Mexico City Blues: Kerouac as Poet* (1992), which appeared at the same time as Davidson's study. Jones calls himself a critical "cartographer" of a poetic territory that is *terra incognita*

(Jones 5). He structures his work by reading, in succession, general issues into Kerouac's book -- these include "autobiography in his writing, his attraction to Mexico, the importance of the blues in his writing, the influence of Buddhism on his life and work, his theory of spontaneous composition" (4). Jones dismisses the earlier *San Francisco Blues* poems, in which he believes Kerouac "had [...] intended to employ [an improvisational chorus] structure from the very beginning," but failed to grasp the significance of what he was doing (16). Jones seems to *require* that Kerouac's poetry operate like his fiction: "*San Francisco Blues* shows Kerouac tuning his powers of observation; however, without the strong narrative thrust of his fiction, the individual poems [...] flounder in an arbitrary progression" (11). Otherwise, he usefully illustrates how the poetics of bop spontaneity work inside the blues chorus form, by focusing on two jazz-influenced prescriptions of Kerouac's poetics: "blowing (as per jazz musician)" and "rhetorical breathing (as jazz musician drawing breath between outblown phrases)" (84). He believes that Kerouac uses the metaphor of the jazz horn player because he wants poetry to "sing" and not "sign", and argues that the poet wants to "negate [...] a negation," which is the stripping of emotion from poetry. He describes Kerouac's chorus form as an "intuition", with its analog being the "form of the blues" (86).

Separately, Jones posits that Kerouac's sketching technique is not for "music-making," but instead shares a Surrealist goal with Breton's "Silence Is Golden" (1944) -- to "unify and reunify sound and sight" (85). In Jones' formulation, sketching is a method for enacting spontaneity, whereas "blowing" becomes the musical re-structuring of a sketch (what restricts the spontaneous image-production to the structure of song). The fact that the first person to suggest "sketching" to Kerouac was a visual artist (Ed White), leads Jones to the conclusion that sketching served the same function for Kerouac that action painting did for the Abstract

Expressionists: “[it] kept him fully aware that he was describing the method itself as it produced [its] scenes" (149). For Jones, the only difference between the “literary sketcher” and the visual artist is that the poet produces “images,” rather than "scenes" (20).

Jones’s study added nuance to the discussion of poetic form in Kerouac, where previous criticism on the “blues chorus” had overly generalized how it relates to jazz. Amongst recent scholars, Tim Hunt also attempts to revise previous oversimplifications. A key concern of Hunt’s, in *The Textuality of Soulwork: Jack Kerouac's Quest for Spontaneous Prose*, is that spontaneity has been equated with improvisation; Hunt cites the examples of George Dardess' "The Logic of Spontaneity: A Reconsideration of Kerouac's 'Spontaneous Prose Method" (1975) and Regina Weinrich's "The Spontaneous Poetics of Jack Kerouac: A Study of the Fiction" (1984) (Hunt 2). He argues that "improvisation might be better understood as a necessary condition of Spontaneous Prose rather than a sufficient condition,” and sees Kerouac reconceiving the medium of writing and the ways it enacts language (2). In *Kerouac's Crooked Road: The Development of a Fiction*, Hunt applies this understanding to a reading of sketching in *On the Road*, where he views sketching and jazz-influenced improvisation as separate elements of a more complex spontaneous nexus.

Sketching is now no longer discussed merely as a tool for jazz-inflected improvisation, and sketches are no longer just containers for irrational, automatic writing. Clark Coolidge updates our understanding of the formal praxis of sketching, in a talk at the Naropa Institute in 1991:

> So finally I was thinking about Kerouac’s work as being in motion in a cycle between these aspects of the work: Sketching, he’s right in front of the things, leading to the Memory Blowing, writing the words coming off the memory or the

> notebooks from the experience, perhaps leading then on to the BabbleFlow, which in some cases leads to a feeling of a sort of emptiness and almost, in the Buddhist senses, that he was aware of that emptiness in which the world images begin to appear again, and the cycle goes around. (*NIJ* 59)

What Coolidge describes is an associative method that begins by pushing literary realism to a kind of limit. It is not the practice of *objective* realism – Kerouac does not test the kind of object-centered descriptive limits that the authors of the *nouveau roman* did. Kerouac's practice involves the unification of the present object with the character and narration of a subject-in-process. What reaches a limit through sketching is the capacity for words or language to represent the writer's experience of an image or theme. Language dissolves into fragments of voice and sound as the sketch attempts to expand the means for representation. Coolidge observes Kerouac emptying his own consciousness, achieving an unstable physiological state from which more images must appear. He compares this associative word/sound generation to the conceptual "Everything Work" that Coolidge himself has experimented with (alongside Bernadette Mayer) -- the exact notation of everything which the mind touches upon during an interval of composition (56). It is important here to note that both Kerouac's and Coolidge's "Everything Work" involve complex procedures that adhere to rational rules, and they are not base expressions of irrational drives.

Coolidge's formalistic reading of Kerouac's broader poetics is one of the few that exist. Instead of tracing historical or biographical narratives within in a single work (as Jones and others have previously done) he focuses on Kerouac's sound-forms, which he reads across multiple works. Although a lengthier discussion of sketching specifically might have been expected, given his meditational method in The Crystal Text, Coolidge has not yet conducted

one. What he has provided is a launching-off point for understanding how sketching is connected to all the other spontaneous procedures in Kerouac's work.

To better understand what Kerouac contributes to the field of subject-in-process poetry requires an extended reading of the parallel development of his sketching technique and the blues chorus form. Kerouac produces a unique strain of poetry, and his commitment to sketching's development leads to a praxis and project that is identifiably different from what we have observed in Coolidge. By sustained examination of Kerouac's sketching across a few poetic works, we might discover how their similar praxis concerns produced strikingly different poetic results.

To achieve this end, it is instructive to start at sketching's beginning. Kerouac attributes the invention of the technique directly to a suggestion from a friend in correspondence, so we can approximate the date at which the technique was born. Thus, we can prioritize the prose and poetry written immediately after this date if we want to better understand the development of sketching. The later *Mexico City Blues* has been hailed as the apotheosis for blues chorus form, but if isolating sketching is the goal, we might look first at the aptly titled *Book of Sketches,* where the sketches are not meant as a type of "blues" and are not topically limited to a single locale or moment. Since the hybrid, prosaic nature of *Book of Sketches* means it does not constitute a purely poetic example, the sketches in *San Francisco Blues* might next be considered. Though this book might be seen to "narrate" a single city, its poems are of a fragmentary nature, making the identification of a unifying narrative problematic. In addition to charting the development of sketching, we will also want to discuss why sketching evolved at all. As we have seen, Jed Rasula has juxtaposed Beat "anxiety" with that of the conservative era in which the Beat appears. To this end, more might be done on the micro-level, by tracing

Kerouac's anxiety about sketching as a compositional tool; this anxiety appears *within the sketches themselves.*

To begin again, sketching has a precise birth date: Edward D. White, Jr., architect and lifelong friend, asked Kerouac, "[w]hy don't you sketch in the streets like a painter but with words?", in a letter dated October 25, 1951 (Dardess). Positioning this letter in a timeline of his poetics, we see that it postdates Kerouac's initial experiments with spontaneity. Kerouac had already received, in December of 1950, the long and "fast, mad, confessional" letter from Neal Cassady that he credits with inspiring the spontaneous style of *On the Road.* He had also completed, during three weeks in April of 1951, the famed 120-foot-long scroll-version of *On the Road* (*CP* 701). After White's suggestion, Kerouac writes to Ginsberg to explain the practical effects of taking his friend's advice:

> [E]verything activates in front of you in myriad profusion, you just have to purify your mind and let pour the words (which effortless angels of the vision fly when you stand in front of reality) and write with 100% personal honesty both psychic and social etc. and slap it all down shameless willy-nilly, rapidly until sometimes I got so inspired I lost consciousness I was writing. (Melehy 95)

While the enthusiasm of this correspondence renders it imprecise, this letter is useful for quantifying the nature of the activity. At this point his approach is to be physically present before a scene, and to attempt to quickly reproduce or represent that scene through description. The poet does not seem to be a fully-in-control agent of the sketching act, given the need to "purify" the mind and "let pour" the words.

Kerouac's first documented sketch (which he creates on the day of receiving White's letter) will end up becoming the first passage of *Visions of Cody*. It provides an example of prose against which we can compare the later poetry:

> This is an old diner like the ones Cody and his father ate in, long ago, with that oldfashioned railroad car ceiling and sliding doors--the board where bread is cut is worn down fine as if with bread dust and a plane; the icebox ("Say I got some nice homefries tonight Cody!") is a huge brownwood thing without oldfashioned pull-out handles, windows, tile walls, full of lovely pans of eggs, butter pats, piles of old bacon -- old lunchcars always have a dish of sliced raw onions ready to go on hamburgs [...] (*VC* [Kerouac] 3)

Several features that will come to define sketching are already in place in this first example. First, the passage utilizes recollection: Kerouac writes this first sketch at a diner on Sutphin Boulevard in Queens, but his memory allows him to fuse two historical diners into one -- the present New York diner and the Midwestern or Western diner of Neal Cassady's youth (Melehy 98). Sketching will often freely associate the objects of the present with the objects of the past, before returning to the present. Hassan Melehy argues that Kerouac employs memory to overcome the spatial confines of any sketched scene, because the poet believes that "the object and the act of apprehension can't be separated" (99). Sketching also will generate a particular breed of transparent diction. Instead of compressing his imagery with *le mot juste* and fetched adjectives, the sketcher builds up description through the pile-up of nouns. Thus, one feature of sketching will be poetic cataloguing, wherein objectivity is furthered by the fact that none of the scene's objects (the wear on the cutting board, "bread dust," "butter pats") will be too small or insignificant to be included. Through the cataloguing, objects pile up rhythmically, and the

rhythm is propelled by run-on constructions containing alliteration and monosyllabic words, as in "the board where bread is cut is worn down fine as if with bread dust and a plane." Sketching will also sporadically introduce overheard voices and internal monologue. These interjections frame sketching as a duration of perceptions, those of the sketcher, during which action might occur. Their inclusion suggests that they are integral components of the object sketched, and they fuse the subjective and objective, since whether they are internal or external voices, these interjections call attention to the character and history of the narrator.

Kerouac expands this list of features when he takes sketching "on the road" between 1952 and 1954, and this interval when he composes *Book of Sketches* is crucial to understanding the technique's subsequent development. What we first note is an inscription to the work which introduces us to one limitation that Kerouac imposes upon himself:

> Printed Exactly As They Were Written
>
> On the Little Pages in the Notebooks
>
> I Carried in My Breast Pocket 1952
>
> Summer to 1954 December…………
>
> (Not Necessarily Chronological) (*BS* XIII)

From the reference to "little pages," we can assume that the book's lineation and the positioning of line breaks are affected by the dimensions of the notebook page. A handwritten haiku is also included in the book's preface:

> (Proving that sketches
>
> aint Verse)
>
> But Only What Is (IX)

While the author gives advance indication that he is not producing "traditional" verse, the subsequent text preserves the handwritten lineation that was enforced by the small notebook. Hasan Melehy is perhaps the only critic to draw assertions from this feature, describing the handwritten text as "a presentation of reality that is effectively part of it," while suggesting that the "typewriter" or publication will effectively "turn[...] the sketches into poems that preserve the visible signs of their contact with reality" (Melehy 101). Melehy is careful not to engage in debate about whether the book violates a poetry/prose distinction, likely because he is observing ambiguity in the poet's own description (what genre would constitute "Only What Is?"). He is instead arguing that the limiting generative device (the notebook) actually expands the literary potential of the sketches; they prevent the sketches from becoming "hermetic" (101).

Book of Sketches is clearly not a hermetic (nor a conventional) text, despite the simplicity of its themes and subject matter. It starts out looking like a travel journal, with titles associated with the places and/or dates described; the first three in order are, "Rocky Mt Aug. 7 '52," "PANORAMIC CATALOG SKETCH OF BIG EASONBURG (backyard), and "Aug. 5, '52." Its genre association quickly shifts and morphs, though, due to variations in narrative perspective. Much of the presentation derives from an omniscient third-person position possessing a consistent tone:

> Changed now to
> dungaree shorts, gaudy
> green sandals, blue vest
> with white borders &
> little festive lovergirl ribbon
> in her hair Carolyn prepares

the supper -- (*BS* 1)

Other than the question “who is speaking?”, the formal attributes of the initial sketches are not particularly noteworthy. The line-breaks do not convey much information, as the enjambment seems mostly arbitrary -- although the short lines (which visually produce a mostly uniform column throughout) do seem appropriate to their compressed and superficial descriptiveness. The above-listed articles of clothing, like most of the objects in the book, are paratactically presented. The imagery is stark, to match the simplicity or even mundanity of many of the objects sketched. A reader would be left in a world of lightly narrated “things,” if quick shifts in perspective did not introduce some complexity to the sketch:

-- She
prepares the aluminum
silex for coffee -- never
puts an extra scoop for
the pot -- makes weak
American housewife coffee
-- but who’s to
Notice, the Prez. of the
Waldorf Astoria? (2)

The personality of the sketching entity gets abruptly injected into the presented scene, as the character of the narrator develops into a sort of Beat humorist. Our awareness of the narrator’s subjectivity will continue to grow during this first sketch – a portrait of suppertime with the Blake family of Rocky Mount – until the subject of the lyrical voice seems to supersede the subject sketched:

-- Little

Paul grew -- & cried

-- & learned to suffer --

& cried -- & learned

to laugh -- & cried --

& learned to be still --

& suffered -- Groo, groo,

the heavens dont care --

It had not always

Been so easy & calm

As now at suppertime [...] (15)

It is not the rhythm or musicality of such lyrical tangents that defines this sketch, although a heightened metrical awareness is at play in these lines. A musical "shape" will be foregrounded more in the later blues chorus poems. What this lyrical subject instead provides is a model for a specific type of narrative self-reflexivity that Kerouac uses, one which may burst into any sketch. The writing in this book frequently moves toward summary moments of introspection, which superimpose a veneer of universal truth over a litany of everyday particulars. Upon reaching these moments, the voice shifts to more prophetic seriousness, and paratactic structures take on an almost Biblical quality and purpose. We see this repeated throughout the work, and it is perhaps the most obvious sign for this version of sketching:

Alley: telephone poles,

Wires, Firestone tire sign

(flamepink & blue), old

Graywood garage door,

Redbrick chimney lashed

To a house with bar,

Aluminum warehouse, old

Streetlamp overhanging --

Norton, Kans. --

Old shacks! -- O

America! -- What was

It like in Lincoln's time

-- Where are all the

Railroad men of the

19th Century! They've

All slanted into the ground --

The heavy-headed wheat -- (136)

The use of Romantic lyrical asides and apostrophe here produces some of the more traditionally "poetic" material in the book, but also illustrates the complexity of this presentational mode. While he occasionally gets distracted from it, like in the pedantically observational sketch, "NOTES ON THE MILLENIUM OF THE HIP FELLAHEEN" (172), this mode is responsible for most of book's shifting subjectivity.

The shuttling between lean presentation of objective data and the bursting forth of narrator subjectivity is an approach that Michael Davidson and Tim Hunt have also observed in Kerouac's experimental novel, *Visions of Cody*. In section three of that novel, "Frisco: The Tape," Kerouac gives us transcripts of tapes he and Neal Cassady made in the early 1950s.

Davidson observes that while we might expect the transcription to provide an accurate record of Cody's (Cassady's) speech, it instead results in a "metadiscourse on the problem of representation," as we witness in this sample:

> [CODY.] … I'm going through the process of telling you, and you're the one who *wrote* it down, see, so I'm saying, you know, you know more about it than I do --
>
> JACK. I didn't punctuate it
>
> CODY. No, you know more about it than I do. . . no -- well it *was* unpunctuated talk anyhow. (*VC* Kerouac 76)

Here, the character Jack humbly refuses to take credit, as Cody, fumbling to "get down" the details, argues that his friend is the one who gives his own exceptional life its shape. Davidson posits that the episode shows the limitation of objective tools for the representation of "fact," since "[t]he novel presents visions (sketches) of Cody, but their accuracy depends upon the narrator's ability to see through his subject's eyes" (Davidson 76). Cody (Cassady) credits Duluoz (Kerouac) with "knowing" his stories better than he does, since "knowing" an incident is equal to giving it narrative shape. In transcribing Cody/Cassady, the mediation of Duluoz/Kerouac itself becomes the part of the sketch, a superaddition to the sketched scene, and an objectification of the subjective voice. Historically in the sketching technique's development, *Visions of Cody* is the moment when Kerouac's fiction moves from the horizontal and linear chronicling of *On the Road* toward a new, vertical movement, that which Ginsberg calls "the sacramentalization of everyday reality" (76).

Alternately, Tim Hunt sees the transcription section as a failure to achieve such vertical movement, what he calls Kerouac's "alto-lyric knowing." The full performative potential of sketching is instead achieved in *Visions of Cody's* subsequent chapter, "Imitation of the Tape," in

which Kerouac "riffs" on the previous chapter's transcriptions. In this chapter, the narrating subject becomes more performative; Hunt argues that Kerouac is here "performing in writing" rather than "performing in speech," since he is abandoning the faithful representation of the spoken acts (Hunt 148). The primary effect of this upon the form of the prose is an explosion of both musicality and abstraction, which is enacted by the writer (rather than the characters being transcribed). The prose starts to look nothing like a transcription, losing both the structure of a dramatic dialogue and the conventionality of spoken discussion:

> But of course I don't have to go through all that, well t-when we're bloody well finished or shall I wait for the early morning fog when equestriennes clad only in skin fighting tideropes...I have seen the rp, the proud ladies of the Hore Show, Horse Show, I have seen, but I have seen, typing is a goof. (qtd. in Hunt 149)

The author no longer sketches the historical object or event (as in transcribing) but seems to sketch the thought-process of the one who sketches. As a result, we see conjunctions, associations, and errors ("t-when," "rp," "Hore Show, Horse Show), along with a further level of detachment from the subject matter ("I have seen, but I have seen, typing is a goof."). Hunt continues:

> the reader [...] receives the full process of the sketcher writing (not a product derived from the process). [...] The sketching writer, like a jazz musician playing a solo, plays the chorus through, without going back to excise a passage or correct an error. Indeed, errors contribute to the reader's sense of participating in the process of expression. (154)

Here, it is shown how the subjective side of sketching can activate a reader, in a manner not unlike the activation of a listener at a jazz performance.

As Kerouac further develops his sketching technique after *Book of Sketches*, he also further expands his fusion of object-sketching with subject-sketching. In the poems of *San Francisco Blues*, it becomes harder to even pin down which real-world object is being sketched (*CP* 709). For instance, this is how sketching starts to look three years after the experiments of *Visions of Cody*, and two years after *Book of Sketches*:

8th Chorus

Oi yal!

She yawns to lall

La la --

Me Loom --

The weary gray hat

Peacoat ex sailor

Marining meekly

Hands a poop a pocket

Face

Lips

Oh Mo Sea! (*CP* 200)

Obviously, since Kerouac has more strictly entered the genre of verse, we see increased compression and concision. But there is also more fracturing of the image, slippage of the referent, wordplay, sound play, and sudden indirection. After “Oi yal!”, which skirts lexical meaning, we are introduced to an unidentified “She.” This “She” could be the mother of the immediately preceding chorus, who after yelling at her children, has sent them off to work. But we are left to wonder what she is now doing, while yawning and making inscrutable sounds,

which the poem's speaker seems pleased to recreate. Is this a sketch of an actual present scene, a remembered scene, or a symbolic scene?

Immediately, the poem brings in a slightly more identifiable image, that of an "ex sailor," who is also presented in the bop-rhythmic idiom. Still, a dearth of physical details means the poem ends up calling more attention to its language than to its images. Nouns both accumulate and serve as adjectives in lines 5-6, and the alliterative "Marining meekly" of line 7 signifies as much by its sound as by its meaning. If the reader is seeking an explanation for what is happening – are we seeing two strangers juxtaposed on a street corner? Is the female character imagining her ideal man? -- we will require either additional objectifying description or a narrated explanation. Instead, the poem proceeds with imagery that is equally evacuated of clarity:

> The long fat yellow
> Eternity cream
> Of the Third St Bus
> Roof swimming like
> A monosyllable
> Armored Mososaur
> Swimming in my Primordial
> Windowpane
>   Of pain (201)

The goal of this sketch overall, it seems, is not to impart the reality of the object. Here we encounter elements of a hallucination: the fixation on the roof of the bus; the stretching of the bus, through movement, into an "eternity cream"; its morphing into a menacing, imaginary

"Mososaur." Are we given a clue, in the final two lines, that what we are witnessing is occurring outside the subject's window?

It is left ambiguous whether a real-life scene is being sketched, and whether words are being used to "paint" what is happening in the street. The object elsewhere in *San Francisco Blues* is barely perceptible, although it still serves a generative purpose as the basis for poetic improvisation:

13th Chorus

"No hunger & no wittles

neither deary"

Said the crone

To Edwin Drood.

Okay.

There'll be an answer.

Forthcoming

When the morning wind

Ceases shaking

The man's collar

When there's no starch in't

And Acme Beer

Runs flowing

Into dry gray hats. (203)

In poems like the above, improvisational performance gestures (like the speaker's drifting attention), are more salient than the poem's imagery. The poem begins with dialogue from Dickens' *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, where an elderly woman speaks of the benefits of using opium. The presentation then becomes fragmentary, in a manner similar to the chorus examined above. The first four lines stand off from, and seem unrelated to, the remainder of the poem. The line 5 apostrophe "Okay" does not make clear who or what is being addressed. Rather than participate in image or narrative development, this and the other conversational shards start to become part of a symbolic or synecdochic system. We have previously encountered the dreary "gray hat" of the sailor, while in later choruses we will also see the hats of businessmen; these objects are all linked to "sad" scenes of waiting or longing present in the city. What is strange in this scene is that this hat gets inverted, and beer flows into it, while mysteriously the wind ceases to perform its natural function of moving the unstarched collar. Perhaps the next chorus hints at the hat's symbolic meaning, since it includes a list of things ending (... "When gray beards / Grow no more"), and a supernatural "answer": that is, the knowledge revealed at the instant of death. And yet this explanation fails to satisfy us like some discourse on Romantic transcendence. Deeper meanings in this poem are made superficial by the strange address, the snippet from Dickens, and the conspicuous nature of the voice: it is these features of the subject speaking which we truly apprehend.

External reference in *San Francisco Blues*, whether to literary texts and figures or to historical data, often appears vague or mysterious. Such reference, like the poetry's object-realism, is so informally and incompletely integrated, that it seems to cheapen the imagery that we do receive. We may wonder why a poetic subject would introduce a thought about Dickens without making it relevant through some type of associative connection. While it might be

tempting to treat such incompletions as markers for an immature work, they are so persistently involved in the poems subjectivity that they must be an intentional abstraction – an omission of conventional elements for the purpose of highlighting the performative aspects of subjectivity. We might take for another example the organized labor choruses toward the end of the book:

59th Chorus

IL

W

U

Has tough white seamen

Scrapping snow white hats

In favor of iron clubs

To wave in inky newsreels

When Frisco was a drizzle

And Curran all sincere,

Bryson just a baby

Reuther bloodied up,

--When Publications

Of Union pamphleteers

Featured human rock jaws

Jutting Editorialese

Composed by angry funny

redhead editors (229)

The "59th Chorus" evokes the memory of three activist labor leaders, including Joseph Curran, who in 1936 was involved in a seaman strike in San Pedro, California (718). Following the Objectivism of the 1930s and 40s, taut lines like these might have been expected to produce clear images, but here, the image seems to dissolve into the voice. The strike itself is mentioned, but the only details presented are three objects that stand in for the event -- the white sailors, their white hats, and iron clubs. The poem neither extends this synecdoche, nor accumulates additional objective data, and we are deprived of what could imaginably be a striking image. Instead, Kerouac first distances us from the image by placing it in "inky newsreels." By this, it is suggested that the sketch is not of the event itself, a memory of it, or even an account -- the object set before the poet's mind is a black-and-white newspaper photograph. The distancing effect is furthered by a change in location, informing us that when the event occurred (or was it when the newspaper arrived?), San Francisco (rather than San Pedro) was a "drizzle." Then, the poem begins a catalog, linking labor leaders from other eras and regions, but giving us only one descriptive attribute for each ("sincere," "just a baby," "bloodied"), before moving on to a similar generalized portrait of unnamed journalists. The initial image is quickly stripped of its ability to convey the objective reality of this historical moment, while the descriptive potential of the poem starts to depend upon the ability of the poet to substitute brief, abstract noun phrases for the figures present in the scene ("human rock jaws," "angry funny / redhead editors").

This dissolving of the object into subject becomes not only central to Kerouac's development of sketching, but to the overall development of his bop poetics in the mid-1950s. To create a jazz-influenced blues chorus form, the poet has established a new relation between external, sketched material, and internal, "singing" subject. This constitutes the hybrid duality of the blues chorus form: sketched realism with bursts of subjective performance, striking a

balance between rational and irrational poetic thought. As the "59th Chorus" runs into the 60th, Kerouac allows the subject to continue to musically perform the sketch:

> No such luck
>
> For Potter McMuck
>
> Who broke his fist
>
> On angry mitts
>
> In fist fights
>
> Falling everywhere
>
> From down Commercial
>
> To odd or even
>
> All the piers
>
> Blang! Bang!
>
> I L W U had a hard time
>
> And so did N A M
>
> And S P A M
>
> And as did A M (230)

The subject again abandons the presentation of fact for the subjective sound of that fact. Rhyme and alliteration give a sing-song effect, conjuring the popular song genre, or a tune we might hear sung by sailors or dock workers. For the purposes of sound play, the poem employs a fictional name ("Potter McMuck"), colloquial phrasing ("from down Commercial,"), slapstick onomatopoeia (Blang! Bang!), and even acronyms (for the labor unions). The goal seems not to be the creation of a nexus of objective details that would describe the events of the historical strike; it seems instead to be to make a song about it.

It is not an unexpected development that there are parallels between the subjective performativity in the "blues chorus" poems and what we see in forms of popular music. When Kerouac notes in the preface to *San Francisco Blues* that the poems are inspired by "the jazz-blues chorus," he is hailing a departure from the realistic sketching mode. The "jazz-blues chorus" has been the subject of much discussion within music studies, and one of its key features is that it employs "standard" material as the background for the subjective interpretation of the performer. Meta Du Ewa Jones defines for us that, "the standard procedure in jazz entails borrowing from other songs [...] and folding them into a restructured melody, often transforming the original tunes' rhythmic framework and chord patterns" (*JP*). Meanwhile in an article entitled "The Poetics of Beat Improvisation," Richard Quinn reveals Charlie Parker's reliance upon the preexisting catalog of jazz music: "his regular use of the AABA form kept him connected to popular song traditions [...i]n fact, Parker composed very few completely original tunes, choosing to reinvent tradition through the imaginative appropriation of extant music" (Quinn 160). Quinn goes on to connect Kerouac to Parker by way of their parallel improvisations, but stresses that "[i]mprovisational activity removes the process of meaning-making from the isolated individual and hands it down to an interactive collectivity" (156).

Coolidge has shown that Kerouac was himself aware of both how jazz works upon pre-existing materials, and the collectivity this implies, by citing Kerouac's own writing on jazz:

> The tune they were playing was All the Things You Are... they slowed it down and dragged behind it at half tempo dinosaur proportions -- changed the placing of the note in the middle of the harmony to an outer more precarious position where also its sense of not belonging was enhanced by the general atonality produced with everyone exteriorizing the tune's harmony." (NIJ 43)

> "He [Lee Konitz] can take care of himself even though he goofs and does *April in Paris* from inside out as if the tune was the room he lived in and was going out at midnight with his coat on" (44).

It is not ironic that Kerouac uses metaphors of the "outsider" when describing how improvisation relates to the standard. By the early 1950s, Kerouac had already attempted writing from the conventional position of literary realism -- he had failed critically and publicly with the non-spontaneous praxis that produced *The Town and the City.* Kerouac's fictional and non-fictional prose features numerous references to the influence of Henry James, Marcel Proust, and Thomas Wolfe upon his work. For the author trained in realism, making forays into spontaneous and improvisational modes -- given the critical standards of the post-war literary establishment -- would have placed him in a precarious position aesthetically and professionally. Demeaning stereotypes regarding the Beat and bebop artist might also have been weighing on him, as he sought to balance between traditional and innovative poetic techniques. He requires, in 1954, a device that will ground his spontaneous poetic production in objective reality.

Thus in *San Francisco Blues,* Kerouac has adapted his earlier realist sketching technique to create a new compositional activity, one parallel to the jazz technique of improvising against the standard. His "standard" material is not any previous poetic or literary text – a previous aesthetic performance -- but is instead the material object, "set before the mind" to provide the background against which poetic improvisation may occur. Kerouac's sketching becomes a new spontaneous praxis method that models the intellectual and communal aspects of bop performance. The subject in a "blues chorus" poem shuttles between detailed presentation of an object and freely associative departures into sound and word play. The hybrid duality of the blues chorus form – sketched realism with bursts of subjective performance – ensures that its

author will not fall too fully into either of the realms of traditional realism or spontaneous composition.

This innovative compositional activity will reach its most advanced state, especially regarding poetic subjectivity, with the appearance of *Mexico City Blues* (1959). Composed in a rooftop hut in Mexico City, this book of poems "of uniform length and wailing" was completed in less than one month in 1955, just a year after the composition of *San Francisco Blues* (CP 708). The "wail" of Bop jazz again informs the poetry's sound, as Kerouac's prefatory note explains:

> I want to be considered a jazz poet
> blowing a long blues in an afternoon jam
> session on Sunday. I take 242 choruses;
> my ideas vary and sometimes roll from
> chorus to chorus or from halfway through
> A chorus to halfway into the next. (*CP* 1)

Like what we saw in the late *San Francisco Blues* choruses, this book's serial structure allows a subjective *overflow*. Each chorus (in theory) poetically meditates or "riffs" on one seen or thought object, but the poem's subject is free to stretch the act of meditation outside the spatial limits of that chorus; in this way, the book will resist hierarchical structuring. At any given point, the book's subject is autonomous within the ordered structure, and its fluid subjectivity becomes one of the book's innovative features.

More than in the previous works, however, the sketches will be centered on the object of one human individual, and the sketcher and the sketched will be allowed to merge to form the poem's subject. In *Mexico City Blues*, the most frequent object of sketching will be William

Garver, the heroin-addicted roommate in Mexico whom Kerouac met through William S. Burroughs. In three poems, choruses 52-54, Garver's speech will be directly transcribed. Critic James T. Jones has also helpfully catalogued the other Garver "Cantos" dispersed throughout the book; the 33rd to 40th, 55th to 59th, 70th to 80th, and 162nd to 166th choruses all contain this interlocutor that Jones says "may be muse, or […] metaphor (Jones 173). Beyond being a metaphor, Garver becomes the source of various experiments involving shifting subjectivity, occurring both within and across multiple choruses. The "36th Chorus," for example, begins with an ambiguous subject who could be identified as the book's generic narrator, the figure of Garver, or both. This is possible because, over the previous 35 choruses of the book, Kerouac pours autobiographical content into the book's generic narrator (consider "I am not Gregory Corso / The Italian Minnesinger -- / […] / KIND KING MIND / Allen Ginsberg has called me) (CP 6). Since both Kerouac and Garver are friends with Burroughs, it is now uncertain who speaks:

> Burroughs says it's a time-space
>   travel ship
> Connected with mystiques
>   and mysteries
> Of he claims transcendental
>   majesties (3-8)

This type of subjective ambiguity allows the poet-narrator to commiserate with the heroin-addict, a marginal figure even within the community of the Beats. It is an ambiguity formalized by the poem's lexicon and rhythms, where lines both simulate Garver's speech/thought and can be presented with Kerouac's trademark subject-sound.

There is thus hard alliteration in the repeated consonants, 'm' and 't,' and "speech" that spills over lines, simulating the rushing sensation of one long, bop line. The latter is made most evident by the enjambment after "mysteries" in line 6. Coolidge explains why Kerouac's lines "feel" longer despite the actual lineation: Kerouac is simulating the 4/4 time of Bop jazz, which encourages the overlay of musical lines over the continuous "one" feel (*NIJ* 43). Most instances of the subject in *Mexico City Blues* are composed in this idiom, and through it, the Beats' language-use patterns are universalized. Further on in the chorus, the subject continues to echo Kerouac's trademark sound through hypotactic and accumulative phrasing:

Pulque green crabapples
  Of hypnotic dream
In hanging Ecuad vine.
Burroughs says, We have destiny,
Last of the Faustian Men (29)

This stylized, surrealist mode contrasts with the matter-of-fact presentation of Garver in the 52nd through 54th choruses, with its dream-logic and fetched adjectives like "Pulque" and "Ecuad." The use of "Ecaud," with its suggestion of "echoed," is a move we might expect from the historical Kerouac (or Ginsberg) rather than the historical Garver (and yet we are reminded that either could have quoted Burroughs, and both subscribed to the apocalyptic philosophy of Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West).*

The "36th Chorus" continues to merge its subjects right up until its abrupt conclusion. In lines 14 to 20, the subject repeatedly mentions a "void," which could just as easily reference the negations of Kerouac's Buddhism as it could Garver's opiate-use:

No direction in the void

Is the news from the void

In touch with void

Everywhere void

No direction to go

(but)

(in)   ward (29)

Any sense that the subject here is entirely derived from Garver is undercut by the inclusion of artificial parentheses. An introspective (Buddhistic?) approach to the "void" has been added to lines where it would not have existed, and these contradict that the subject has "No direction to go." Meanwhile, additional distancing of the subject from Garver occurs in the poem's final lines, which are highly self-reflexive and read somewhat like stage directions.

Hm

(ripping of paper indicates

helplessness anyway) (29)

After the soft sound of "Hm," the remaining words clatter out the remainder of the poem, as a staccato-sounding afterthought. Coolidge describes such an effect as being like the hesitant "finishing" technique common in Bop jazz, where a drummer strikes the bass drum multiple times after the final "crash" of the song, and thus "stutters" it out. The "36th Chorus" ends with a poet's "helplessness," the feeling of incompletion even after poetic revelation, and the image of the poet destroying his own writing.

By merging the poet-subject into the historical-subject, *Mexico City Blues* often prioritizes poetic revelation over realist representation. If an ongoing sketch of William Garver hints at some transcendent meaning, the book's serial structure and autonomous subjectivity will allow that sketch to stretch across multiple choruses. In the 164th and 165th choruses, for example, a surreal and terrible description of one of Garver's dreams, about an act of cannibalism occurring in Grand Central Station, stretches across the narrative of two choruses, without any pause in the explication between them. The subject initially describes the dream-scene with a plain-speech, imagistic treatment:

> – He & friends get scraps
>   of meat & cabbage,
> All starving,
>   on floor are iron plates
>   hot, not too hot,
> They all start slowly
>   cooking, but keep moving up
>   as men with central
>   hotplate heat
>   get impatient & eat
>   meat half raw –
>   so he keeps pushing up
>   his little meat
>   towards the center – (116)

As the narrative continues, we might expect a culmination after these penultimate lines, each of which is capitalized (which distinguishes them from the previous, projective-looking ones):

> These people are all bums –
>
> Hang around in restaurants
>
> Where there's nothing to eat
>
> And you sit a table (116)

Instead, the chorus ends abruptly with the line, "And suddenly there's a guy." This line illustrates the freedom from closure that is so common in Kerouac's blues poems at-large. The narrative now projects the reader forward to the "165th Chorus" with anticipation, where it starts *in medias res*:

> under the table
>
> cooking your leg
>
> in some kind of steam
>
> — much quicker job
>
> with the steam on the leg
>
> than central radiant
>
> wildheat of cabbage
>
>   plates
>
>   in Grand C Station (117)

Here the poem continues with its mostly objective sketch of the dream imagery, where the narrator sticks to the facts. A line like "wildheat of cabbage / plates / in Grand C Station" is noteworthy for its specific yet surreal nature, appropriate to the illogic of the dream. We might be able to detect some allegorical content: Garver's leg is referred to as "your leg," to

universalizing effect, while the phrases “some kind of steam,” “much quicker job,” and “central radiant,” when taken out of context, might imply the strange menace of advancing industrial technology. Garver, and by extension Western culture, are being consumed by economic want, in a fit of horrible violence. But primarily, the sketch attends to its plain objective presentation, until we finally reach the revelatory moment that we expected to burst forth in the previous chorus:

> And I see: “Everybody’s eatin you.
> You eat them,
> makes no difference,
> the essence does not pass
> From mouth to mouth
> And craw to craw,
> it’s ignorance does.
>   ignorant form.
>   the essence is not
>   disturbed,
>   really,
> Like the sudden thought
> of India is a dream.” (117)

This is yet another example of sketching that contains a monologic departure, where a “seer’s” voice enters to interpret the object. The subject here constitutes a blend of subject-positions – he or she is didactic but does not adopt a high-lyrical tone. We still have the informal diction of “Everybody’s eatin you”, and the cliché, antipoetic lines, “From mouth to mouth / And

craw to craw." The one-word line "really," serves the dual-purpose of both foregrounding the subject's informal rhetoric and arguing the meaninglessness of the dream. The final two lines make a very oblique and vague association by stating that the events of the dream may be "Like the sudden thought of India." This further pushes the narration of the dream toward external considerations, and toward the imagination of the generic narrator.

We have seen how the subject in these blues poems is created by its merging with the object of the sketch. One additional feature of sketching in *Mexico City Blues* is the subject's occasional inability to say *anything*, or to continue making associations. The two "rest choruses," the 11th and 138th, are examples of where the subject is omitted, and the inability of sketching to reveal is shown. The 11th chorus is exceptional for having the fewest lines in the poem, and the first five seem to simulate a failed attempt at some type of lyrical song:

> Brown wrote a book called
>
> The White and the Black
>
>
> N a r c o t i c C i t y
>
> A n g e r F a l l s (1-5)

Raw, unpoetic lines like these might suggest that Kerouac's spontaneous method is failing him. Neither the image nor the reference is particularly imaginative, and it may in fact be that a book written this quickly and without revision must contain throwaway material. However, Kerouac quickly composes, in his subject, an awareness of his constructive failure. The poem formalizes a pause in the act of composition – the speed and conversational ease felt in the remainder of the book is thwarted here by 15 lines of typographically unused space. This "rest" is followed only by a parenthesis containing two lines: (musician stops, / brooding on bandstand) (6-7). One

might imagine a disrupted musical conductor, anxiously waiting for musicians to find the melody again. After this "rest chorus," the poem will literally resume what it was doing -- it jumps to the immediate present in the 12th through 14th choruses, and the subject reverts to a cataloging of the objects and events of Mexico City. This formally strange "rest" might have fulfilled a need Kerouac felt during the act of composition -- the naming of objects and subjects in the first 10 choruses had perhaps become repetitive. But the chorus has drawn this consciousness of a compositional moment into the subject of the poem, producing the unique effect of sketching the sketcher.

Such "rests" or breaks in the narrative often occur during lines approaching a sing-song absurdity. At these moments, we get to share with the poet the sense that his composition is trailing off into a pure association of sounds:

> It's really a Brooklyn Night
> The Aztec Night
> The Saragossa Night
> The Tarasco Night
>
> Jaqui Kerack
> Grow Opium
> In Ole Culican (138)

As the subject's image-presentation begins to dissolve into sound play, the poem breaks, and we encounter 12 blank lines and the descriptive end-couplet "(BLANK, the singer / sings nothing)" (9-10). What is simulated again is the subject's need to pause and regain procedural momentum;

after the rest's silence, the previous "singer" returns with several choruses featuring the first-person narrator, "I."

These "rests" or pauses in the subject-presentation of *Mexico City Blues* tell us a lot about the developmental arc of Kerouac's sketching technique. In both examples just cited, blank space is used to simulate an impasse in the composition of the subject. Kerouac has written in his poetics manifestoes that the procedure of sketching should involve an "undisturbed flow," and in his work he has shown great acumen in making startling associations to and from objects that are present, remembered, or imagined. He also proves himself adept, in his experimental fiction and elsewhere, at shifting the subject with interruptive dialogue. One would assume that he easily could have employed parataxis or dialogue in these compositional moments where the sketch breaks down, and his subject could have moved on to the presentation of the next available object. Instead, his formalization of an impasse with blank space suggests that Kerouac did not always find unexpected associations to be adequate for representing what is essential in an object.

As we have seen, sketching is as much a tool for dramatizing the poetic subject as it is one for revealing the poetic object. In *Book of Sketches*, the transparent language of an objective voice becomes the departure point, and the reader is engaged with the sheer multitude of objects that make up life on the road in America in the 1950s. As the subject shifts, it plays with our expectations regarding the traditional lyric subject, as moments of introspection become couched in the language of either an idealized "Beat" narrator or a more high-lyrical and traditional poet-figure. In *Visions of Cody*, we see in the shifting subject a distrust of even the most objective (tape-recorded) subject. And finally, in the "blues chorus" poems, we begin to see the subject dissolved through irrational, dream-like departures, and replacement by song and sound.

Sketching's developmental arc is a crucial element if we are to understand Kerouac's experiments with poetic subjectivity more broadly. We can fully concur with Clark Coolidge's reading of Kerouac's signature sound – that its personal and playful rhythmic dimension expands the expressive potential in the poetic line – and at the same time feel that Kerouac was uncomfortable with his patenting of this sound. After a few of his public performances of his poetry are met with negative criticism, Kerouac will withdraw to the recording studio and attempt to process his poetic subject in still different ways. A cursory glance at any of the hundreds of biographical texts or documentaries on the Beats demonstrates that there is much of the character of the poet in the subject of Kerouac's poems – the historical Beat poet really did "talk like that." And yet if the evidence from the poems is any indication, Kerouac's poetic formalization of Beat language intended both to embody *and question* that language.

What we will see in the next chapter is that revisiting a textual poem through performance presents a unique mechanism for challenging the stable subject of a poem. In both Kerouac's poetry recordings and Susan Howe's collaboration with David Grubbs in *Thiefth*, poetry that has already established the dramatization of the subject on the page can further that dramatization through the implementation of performative and recording technologies. In the case of Kerouac, he can contextualize his signature voice by setting it to jazz accompaniment; musical performance is coordinated with his performed verse in both time and tone. Kerouac will come to see the field of recorded readings as a space where he can blend attributes of the subject taken from multiple and disparate poetic texts. For Howe and Grubbs, the dominant subject implied by her role as poetic historiographer can be challenged by way of the technologies available in the 21st century digital recording studio. Through performance and collaboration, Howe and Grubbs can digitally dissolve and recontextualize the elements of a

prior text's subject-presentation, so that the subject-position most representative of the historical author herself is deconstructed. In both cases, the subjectivity in the textual poem is fundamentally altered, in ways that could not have been achieved on the page.

"The Margins of which will not permit": Recording The Context for Subject-State Poetries

In the previous chapter, I examined how Kerouac's method of sketching allows him to present a subject-in-process, by alternating between a rational, realist mode and a visionary mode based in the body and sound. Through the techniques of "sketching," two different types of poetic representation -- one of historical/material conditions and the other of the subjective flow of consciousness – come to co-exist in a state of exchange, within individual poems and across longer works. This state of exchange ensures that Kerouac's work shares a distinctive tension, or tendency towards "crises" in acts of representation, with the poems of Clark Coolidge, especially those written through the latter's "meditational" praxis. In the works of both writers, the line between continuous and discontinuous form is repeatedly crossed in both directions, owing to the stress that a praxis of intense centering creates. Coolidge has acknowledged that Kerouac's work influenced him to write outward from a "jewel-center" of imagery. Whether their imagined object is static, like a crystal paperweight on a desk (Coolidge), or dynamic, like a scene from a San Francisco street corner (Kerouac), both writers seem to be equally as concerned with practices of irrational transport away from objects (those accompanied by irruptive, discontinuous forms) as they are with practices centering upon these objects.

In this chapter, I will continue to discuss this hybridity of practices, though this time by way of audio recordings of poetry, by considering the poem's making as part of the recording process. Poets, including those previously mentioned, have put examples of meditative, sketched, or object-focused verse "on record," allowing us to examine whether such verse, as it shuttles between continuous and discontinuous forms, might be better explained -- or even fully realized -- by way of recordings and recording technology. Both recorded readings and performative recordings provide an audio analog, or (more experimentally) a sonic landscape, for

the poetry text; these media draw into relief how certain poems can actually "voice" conscious processes differently. Performative recordings help us to isolate the transitions and differences between rational and irrational poetic praxis "zones," a task we might not achieve using page-based media, especially when a poem's poetic subject is continually being processed.

To better understand the poetic praxis of previous chapters *through* performances, we will want to position recorded works vis-a-vis their source materials, or the textual raw materials that provide the conceptual framework for the recordings. As we shall see, Charles Bernstein paves the way for other scholars by arguing that performed poetry becomes its own *medium*. Bernstein reaches his conclusion by positing the "total work" of the poem, the sum of its textual and performed states. Where the text of a poem differs substantially from the recording (where even the title becomes changed), we can resort to discussing shared praxis concerns between them, since those might unify the instances of the work. This critical approach is important when looking at subtle compositional changes Kerouac makes to his blues poems when he performs them on record, and even more vital when looking at the formal mutation of Howe's *Thorow* text enacted by the recording of *Thiefth.* In our present analysis, we will not assume that either the textual or the performed version of the poem is meant to take precedence over the other, rather only that the poet self-reflexively has chosen two different sets of materials to capture the same subject-in-process. By multiplying instances of the poem, the poet makes our awareness of a subject-in-process even more thematically central, and a subjective *mode* becomes as much a topical concern as the subject's various positions.

This analysis will also require a reading of the material "constructedness" of the poetry recordings considered. We will require some historical context: to fully apprehend Kerouac's recordings of his blues poetry, for instance, we will want to consider his choice of accompanying

musicians, spoken performance instructions, and eventual decision to work without musicians. In other words, we will need to consider the arrangements surrounding these recording sessions, in addition to those within the recordings. To determine what the recording contributes to the "total" existence of a poem, it is important to determine whether the music is "ornamental" and/or what compositional purpose it serves. We can scrutinize the performances for how speech rhythms and embodied sounds impact the subject's voicing. The sonic landscape can be analyzed in multiple ways; the nature of any accompanying material, its placement, how it conditions the read component, etc., all contribute to the semantic field of the recording. This becomes especially critical to determining how the compositional practices of Howe and Grubbs compare to the practices of poets who put the subject-in-process exclusively into the print medium.

Thus starting with a brief history of Kerouac's poetry LPs will help explain what occurs when a subject-in process type of poetry "comes off the page": the informal and raw attributes of the recordings, along with the impromptu qualities of the collaborative act, show how the praxis of the performance conditions the praxis of the (textual or whole) poem. Kerouac first used a studio to perform his poetry in 1958, when he recorded *Poetry for the Beat Generation* -- the first of three LPs that he made in late 1950s. In "Jack Kerouac Goes Vinyl: A Sonic Journey in Kerouac's Three LPs," Beat chronicler Jonah Raskin views Kerouac's initial impetus for entering the recording studio as careerism, though avant-garde experimentalism eventually emerges from the poet's efforts. In an effort to transcend both his panned, drunken reading at The Village Vanguard and competition he perceived from the roughly contemporaneous recordings by his competitors Kenneth Rexroth and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Kerouac traveled from New York to a Florida studio in January of 1958, with "a huge suitcase of un-typed manuscripts [...] and

notebooks" (Raskin 80). Dot Records executive Bob Thiele had arranged for Kerouac to reunite with Steve Allen, in spite of the fact that Kerouac had questioned what he called the effete “prettiness” of Allen’s accompaniment at the reading at the Vanguard (Kerouac instead was searching for a more rough-hewn accompaniment that was "beautiful in an ugly graceful new way") (79). Allen’s account of the session contributes significantly to our understanding of it; he will later state how "there was no rehearsal" and the two had "no idea what would happen” (81). Kerouac came with an assemblage of written notes in the form of "a roll of paper…long and white" and "a lot of little scraps of paper" (81). Kerouac’s was a loosely aleatoric method, Allen describes, as Kerouac "reached into his suitcase 'as if blindfolded,' then picked out a few things to read, and showed them to Allen" who then, according to Kerouac, started to play, occasionally signaling to the engineer when to turn on the tape (81). In a mere hour, Kerouac and Allen recorded 14 tracks, ranging from under one minute to over seven minutes in length, producing an LP with 35 minutes of run-time -- at the conclusion of that hour, when the engineers announced that the performers had produced a "great first take," Kerouac replied, "It's the only take" (82).

Although Kerouac would eventually voice satisfaction with *Poetry for the Beat Generation*, the critical response was largely negative. A contemporaneous review by critic Bruce Eder, cited in Raskin, observed that "the two performances [Allen's and Kerouac's] co-exist and weave together without ever really joining" (84). Allen himself will lament that Kerouac "did not give a dramatic reading...I was the performer, he wasn't," while Kerouac, for his part, will demand to work with other musicians in subsequent recordings (84). While Raskin calls Allen’s critique an overgeneralization, it does seem that Allen was picking up on a formal attribute of the performance. While emphasizing the clipped, staccato consonance of his prose ("October in the Railroad Earth,” "Bowery Blues"), or alternatively while slowly drawing out the

vowel sounds of his verse (excerpts from *Mexico City Blues*), Kerouac's style seemed discordant with the style of Allen's piano improvisations. The scarcity of outward signs of vocal improvisation (variations on the text) suggests the poet is reading more than performing. For poems like "Deadbelly" and "Charlie Parker," it is conspicuous how little the performed texts deviate from what would become the print versions; between the two poems, only the former poem's final line, "Ha ha ha," is omitted in the reading. There is a measured consistency, across the tracks, in the length of the vocalized pauses that Kerouac uses to represent line-breaks. Even when Kerouac chooses to emphasize individual words, he mostly follows the script, increasing volume mid-line for words that were already unexpectedly capitalized in the text. Allen's loungy and idling piano work is certainly more interactive, as he uses tempo shifts and bars of rest to respond "conversationally" to the line-breaks and rhythmic fluctuations following several of Kerouac's lines.

That Kerouac saw an alternate potential for collaborative recordings might be inferred by changes he made leading up to his second LP of material, *Blues and Haikus* (1959). Against the suggestion from Bob Thiele that he again employ Allen for accompaniment, Kerouac insisted that his close acquaintances – the jazz saxophonists Zoot Sims and Al Cohn – replace Allen. The result seems to have been a more thoroughly-engineered and produced collaboration. Raskin recounts how Kerouac insisted that his volume be raised in the mix to match the new instruments' volume, while Sims repositioned Kerouac directly in front of a microphone (he can be heard at one point in the recording stating, "we're definitely overshadowing Jack") (Raskin 84). One specific exchange between the performers highlights the shift in Kerouac's compositional strategy for *Blues and Haikus*: when during a pause between tracks Sims tells Cohn to play "Western Jazz," Kerouac interjects that Cohn should instead "play what he wants"

(84). The "Western Jazz" being rejected is an apt descriptor for the genre of accompaniment that Allen had played with Kerouac previously. *Blues and Haikus* will end up having more bop inflections, and in particular, a call-and-response interpretive mode, where all three of Kerouac, Sims, and Cohn generate “riffs” that frequently mimetically represent Kerouac's subject matter of "birds," "bees," "businessmen,” and so forth.

A freeing of the exchange between musical ideas and poetry in turn seems to push Kerouac into new performative modes. The wording of the reading is still not radically different from what is on the page, but poems from *Mexico City Blues* read with Allen versus poems from *San Francisco Blues* read with Sims/Cohn now generate strikingly different audio artifacts. The track entitled "Poems from the Unpublished *Book of Blues*," (which Coolidge says encapsulates the "Kerouac sound") contains a reading style more artificial and constructed than any in *Poetry for the Beat Generation.* Choruses that are separated by pages of the printed text now seamlessly blend into one another. Words within the lines are rushed together, while the length of pauses for line-breaks is now highly variable, as they seem to wait for saxophone lines to conclude, rather than for regular time intervals to elapse. The effect is to clump the speaker’s observations into distinct vocalizations, linked to visionary insights, and this creates a much more discontinuous flow of audial information. We also see that the "dramatic" elements which Allen found lacking are now predominant and diverse. In the track "American Haikus," for example, Kerouac modulates his vocal tone to seemingly create a new persona for each successive poem in the series. Mirroring the shifting personae, the interspersed saxophone choruses in turn become unique tone-poems, reinforcing the previous haiku’s vocal tone and subject matter as presented by Kerouac. Finally, we notice that extended passages of verse are read in song, especially in the prosaic "Hard Hearted Old Farmer" and "Old Western Movies." Through this

technique, Kerouac generates his own melodies as a counterpoint to the saxophone or piano melodies provided by Sims and Cohn. By singing his own riffs against the riffs of Sims and Cohn, Kerouac effectively doubles the dialogic potential of the performative mode initiated in *Poetry for the Beat Generation.*

Although he had discovered a subtly complex mode for performing his poetry, Kerouac still did not appear to be completely satisfied with the development of his performance method. In the evolution of his recordings, *Blues and Haikus* marked a move toward new intersubjective (collaborative and dramatic) gestures. While these gestures were useful in calling attention to what I have called the "subjective crises" of his Beat poetics, they did not substantially improvise what was on the page, and Kerouac had not yet tested whether performative recordings could serve as a kind of compositional tool. Given the prescriptions of his statements on poetics, revision should play a diminished or subjugated role in the Beat writing that Kerouac promotes. But what if revision, rather than ornamental dramatic presentation, is the true innovation of his performative readings?

In his third, final, and longest LP, *Readings by Jack Kerouac on the Beat Generation* (1959), Kerouac came as close as he would to reconstructing his writing via the recording process, since it was this session in which he first allowed significant changes to his source texts, primarily through excision and re-ordering. Because session producer Bill Randle wanted to focus the recording on the "almost hypnotic" aural experience of the poet's voice, there was no musical accompaniment (Raskin 87). With the assistance of Randle, Kerouac spent "hundreds of hours" selecting and editing his materials in advance of recording. In the previous two recordings, some of the pauses we hear occur when Kerouac rifles through his suitcase to find a poem that suits the background music; in *Readings*, we hear pauses at the moments when

(according to Raskin) Kerouac "changed the texts at the microphone" (87). The quality of the improvisation has thus been dramatically altered -- the poet's vocal delivery attends more to the nuances of the text than the environment, and textual alterations are not merely ornamental. The most noticeable revision is the cutting and merging of fragments of the verse. While in the previous recordings individual blues choruses were read complete and in isolation from one another, we now hear a medley of fragments. The second track begins with the apostrophe "San Francisco" that begins the “27th Chorus” of *San Francisco Blues*, but it omits the second stanza of that chorus and picks up at the second stanza of the “28th Chorus,” continuing uninterrupted to halfway through the “30th Chorus”. All four of these stanzas were originally concerned with making synecdochic substitutions for the city (using "bums," newspapers, streets, stores, etc.), so we might just assume he is omitting material -- like the object of “soda trucks” and the sound of seal “racks” -- only for the sake of compression/time concerns, rather than for a perfecting of the image. However, the reading then supplants the 31st chorus, which begins with "I knew an angel / In Mexico City," with material from a separate book, the “228th Chorus” from *Mexico City Blues*: “Praised be man, he is existing in milk /and living in lilies." Here, Kerouac allows one book's reference to Mexico City to recall another's, and allows a substitution. We are obviously encountering what the track's title suggests -- a medley. Abrupt jumps between poems and books of poems, which only occurred between separate tracks in the previous recordings, now appear during them. As if to signify the new splicing method, the vocal presentation becomes much more calculated, smooth, and monotonal, presenting the veneer of a single, continuous poem -- a poem that does not exist without this reordering. All of the excited and rushed qualities that were present in *Blues and Haikus* suddenly become absent in the later work.

The progression of reading styles across Kerouac's records seems appropriate to the overall project embodied in his 1950s spontaneous works. We recall that Kerouac sketched aphoristic "bop prosody" in small notebooks; sometimes his sketches stretched across multiple pages of the notebooks, which meant across multiple "choruses," but they generally were contained by the generative organizational structuring that each page/chorus provided. Although the sketches were collected in separate blues "books," the location of all but the site-specific poems within these books feels interchangeable, due to their associative and discontinuous nature (they might just have appeared in any order, in a single, Beat tome). So when it came to making his three recordings, it was not so much that Kerouac was shifting performance styles to suit different poetic praxes -- the same quality of sketched material was present in all three LPs. What the form of the recordings seems to allegorize (to again borrow Golston's use of the term) is how a poet's praxis-concerns are in flux when he enters different zones of consciousness pertaining to his material (historical) surroundings. In the recordings, the voice acts in unique, variable ways upon the material of the source text, thus recomposing that text. Naturally, during the recording process, other materials -- whether they be the sound of the accompanying musicians or a perception of the sound of the reader (as he overhears himself) -- will render the meaning of the original written text fluid. All the physical contexts for the reading, whether aleatoric or designed, may thus become responsible for new versions of the text.

The poet who is constructing a performative reading (rather than the one who just reads her poem) seems to be creating a new medium. In his introduction to *Close Listening: Poetry and The Performed Word*, Bernstein urges us to look at any poetry reading "not as a secondary extension of 'prior' written texts but as its own medium," a medium with a potential for new semantic features (*CL* 10). Poetry readings (whether or not they are recorded) destabilize the

fixed linguistic object of the poem, and inherently call forth multiple voicings that are internal to the poem (9). Bernstein sees this occurring not at the level of any supplemental artifice, or the "acting out" of competing voices, although he does not wish to malign more theatrical, musical, or dialogic poetry performances (15).[16] Instead, he thinks an immanent technique of poetry reading is "the disruption of rationalizable patterns of sound through the intervallic irruption of acoustic elements not recuperable by monological analysis" (13). We might expect that the physiology or physicality of the body/poet performing is what informs the "voicings" in the poem, especially for the works we are examining here -- works that embody psychological or physiological states that are new, unfamiliar, or heightened. But Bernstein insists that, as the poetry falls in line with the body-reading, the reading "materializes the text, not the author; it performs the work, not the one who composed it" (14). Rather than extraneous interruption, the "gasps, stutters, hiccups, burps, coughs, slurs, microrepetitions, oscillations in volume, "incorrect" pronunciations, and so on," become semantic features (14). For Bernstein, the limits of performative readings are where they veer into *becoming* music or theater, and he supports Peter Quartermain's prescription that "the poet's voicing of a poem should not be allowed to eliminate ambiguous voicings in the text" (11). At the same time, he insists that the "grain" of the poet's reading voice is vital to our perception of these ambiguous voicings. He summarizes, “[p]erformance [...] allows for the maximum inflection of different, possible dissonant voices: a multivocality that foregrounds the dialogic dimensions of poetry" (15).

The diversity of "voices" across Kerouac's recordings is produced by multiple techniques, and one can only surmise whether future forays into even more technically-advanced studios

[16] Bernstein describes such dialogic performances as the three-voice ensemble in Hannah Weiner’s *Clairvoyant Journal* as “exhilarating” (15). This naturally leads us to wonder whether he also would appreciate the more “loose” theatricality in recordings like *Blues and Haikus.*

would have further increased the multivocality of his work. It is perhaps a more avant-garde recorded medium he was driving at.[17] Later 20th century experimental recording techniques and strategies have furthered the potential for *compositional recording*, which has in turn expanded the praxis-potential for subject-in-process poetries like Kerouac's. The same techniques that have altered our definition of what a musical instrument is, like those used by John Cage and practitioners of *musique concrète*, have also altered the "instrumentality" of the text within performed poems. Just as certain pieces of monomusic by Lamonte Young raise the question of whether they are generically music, poetry readings set within *sonic landscapes,* containing musical and/or other sonic elements, challenge our ability to categorize these works within the genre of poetry. As we turn to our investigation of Susan Howe and David Grubbs' *Thiefth*, we continue to focus on the practices and devices of the work, with an eye toward the definition of its end-product. If Bernstein's poetry reading "medium" expands the expressive possibilities of the poem via technique, then new technological and compositional methods used in producing poetry recordings might add another layer of semantic potential (CL 15). As a result, "subject-in-process" poetries like those we have been positing could develop previously unimagined and new "voicings" through the means of the recording, or through the pluralized (textual/performed) existence of the poem.

Multivocality is clearly a feature of the text that forms the basis of *Thiefth (Thorow)* and of Susan Howe's work more broadly. That her work eschews the singular voice might be

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[17] It should be noted that Kerouac never truly pushed his recorded experiments into the realm of sound poetry. The variations of sound produced by Kerouac's readings are primarily due to his construction of different subjective postures or characters via his vocal intonation. While his written texts often dabbled in associative wordplay and onomatopoeia, his recordings, for the most part, did not extend this play beyond the sounds already enunciated by the written text. The closest we get to this are his alternate pronunciations of words, and some of his forays into song.

inferred from the phrasing of various critical titles regarding her work: "The Returning Voice," "Through the Words of Others," "The Stutter in the Text," and so forth. Gerald Bruns, in outlining the citational aspect of Howe's work, starts with a general thesis: "Howe's work is a project of self-formation through the appropriation of writing (and therefore the subjectivity) of others" (“VC” [Bruns] 28). For Bruns, Howe's subject-in process poetry begins (and then begins again) with voices: "a subject is pervaded by multiplicities," but it remains "porous" (41). To categorize the voices that will haunt Howe's work, Bruns and others often point to her own biographical statement from *The Europe of Trusts*: "I wish I could tenderly lift from the dark side of history, voices that are anonymous, slighted -- inarticulate" (41). The tender part of this lifting will be that she takes care to avoid appropriation, or using history’s "slighted" ones for her own radical, political, or poetic goals. This feature of Howe’s work makes it difficult to pin her to the projects of the Language School, or any other group. Brian Reed has observed that “[a] duck-rabbit combination of skepticism and transcendentalism is [...] a foundational part of Howe’s worldview” (Reed). Her choice of “inarticulate voices,” those of marginal historical figures, grants her the ability to be skeptical of romantic or transcendental tendencies in her work’s subject-formation; they expose how the source of such tendencies lies in historical systems of oppression. Howe is of course indebted to 1960s post-structuralist thinking and strategies of collage, but Bruns sees novelty in the way she adds "intersubjectivity" (rather than intertextualism) to that philosophical framework: "in writing she is always herself and others ("innumerable phantoms"), which is to say that she herself, as a writing subject, is formed out of her library encounters with other subjects, each of which is, moreover, historically, geographically, and [...] ideologically situated" (43).

Intersubjectivity and multivocality will be key features of *Thorow*, published in *Singularities* in 1990. In one of the earliest critical surveys of the poem, "Susan Howe: Where Are We Now in Poetry?" (parts of which appeared in 1991, in the Spring edition of *Sagetrieb*), Paul Naylor describes how voice serves a dual purpose. According to Naylor, *Thorow* seeks "to uncover that burial ground lying beneath the commercial veneer," by juxtaposing voices of "primal indeterminacy" with those of "positivist efficiency," but the poem also self-reflexively critiques the poet's own complicity, and the dangers of a progressive historicism that "asserts that the present age has moved beyond the barbarism of the past" (Naylor 52). Naylor sees *Thorow* as a balancing-act: Howe's poem both engages in historical critique and questions the methods from which her critique springs. In *Led by Language: The Poetry and Prose of Susan Howe,* Rachel Tzvia Back describes a similar duality in *Thorow*: "Howe's work seems always concerned with the possibility that in the attempt to give voice to the unvoiced of the early American landscapes, it may fail, voice only itself, and, thus become an accomplice in the deceptions and erasures of literature and history" (56). The duality described above becomes a unifying thread in critical discussions of the poem: *Thorow* problematizes the aesthetic act of sounding those whom history has muted, throwing the critique back toward even well-intentioned acts of poetic representation.

If there are formal explanations for why the poem has been viewed as such a dual critique, these must focus on the unique and discontinuous forms contained in the poetic text. Naylor observes that Howe actively avoids "complicity" via her poem's paratactic structuring, and in this regard he compares the form in *Thorow* to that in Walter Benjamin's "Theses": "both [texts] work by eliding the hypotactic elements of their text -- elements that direct the reader's attention along an "authorized" path of interpretation [;] [w]ithout the reader's participation, the

texts seem to be a jumble of phrases and paragraphs lacking in coherence and purpose" (Naylor 57). The poem’s interpretive challenge extends to the level of words -- Back points to the unidentifiable words and "word-pieces" on the poem's last page (but which populate the poem throughout, from the misspelled title onward), and suggests that, "half-stutter/half-lisp, themselves floating on the open page, [these “word-pieces”] represent this American poet’s commitment to inventing original terms for the "crooked" history of her continent" (Back 57). Back uses a full page of her essay to catalog the poem’s archaic word forms, pointing out stanzas where "almost every third or fourth word deviat[es] from rules of conventional orthography" (Back 51). Howe's archaisms, often pertaining to proper nouns, look like misspellings, and they throw off any attempt at instant apprehension of many of the historical and generic objects of the poem. The archaisms also relate to the poem's preoccupation with the naming function, established in Howe's introductory invocation of Deleuze and Guattari: "The proper name is the instantaneous apprehension of a multiplicity" (Howe 44). *Thorow* consistently questions the appropriation involved with any naming function. In addition to our struggle with Howe’s spelling, we are also thrown by the visual aspects of the latter half of the poem, where pages mirror one another, and the typography breaks, pivots, and is presented at oblique angles to the standard margins. In *Through Words of Others,* Stephen Collis artfully describes how the visual "pivots" enact "willful wanderings, [...] the struggle to resist imprinting and impression, containment and enclosure [...] [d]rifitings into the word forest where "there is no thorow passage" -- only meanderings within hieroglyphic wilds" -- or attempts at interpretation (Collis 46). The formal deviation in *Thorow* is not simply part of the critique of colonial and linguistic systems -- it wants to critique the historiographic and interpretive "norms” embedded in the language of poetry.

Given that the criticism on Howe has highlighted the duality in the poem's social praxis – the critique of both the colonial conqueror and the historical spirit of that conqueror, embedded in the language of his historian/poet ancestors – the organization of the poem should not be unexpected. The dual critique appears both within and between sections of the poem. Will Montgomery helpfully summarizes the larger structure as follows:

> [T]he introduction stands apart from the numbered sections of the poem proper. The first section of the poem incorporates much material drawn from [eighteenth-century Irishman Sir William] Johnson's papers. The second is more concerned with Howe's own experiences at Lake George, as the landscape speaks through her and enacts the introduction's "I heard poems inhabited by voices…The Adirondacks *occupied* me. In this section, Howe at various points reprises in miniature Thoreau's descriptions of nature – either as quotation or imitation. The brief third section is the most fragmentary and [...] contains one of Howe's most impressive poems of textual scattering. (Montgomery 100)

It is important that while the content of the sections can be generalized in this fashion, Howe is constantly mediating the subject within each section; she does this by blurring the boundary between source and apprehension of the source. The book proper starts with a citation that is clearly external to the present: "Go on the Scout they say / They will go near Swegachey" (Howe 43). The figure of the Scout will go on to become a motif in *Thorow*, with the speaker of the poem stating that she "is acting the part of the scout"; Back describes the scout of *Thorow* as the "listener" traveling between both sides, following her own "track of Desire," uncovering the "traces of blood" through her merging of Self and other (Back 53). In the first poem's opening lines, the Scout appears as a real historical personage, and the directive to follow is one that the

fur trader Johnson may have actually written down in a diary. Immediately following the first two lines, though, the poem is evacuated of empirical, historical groundedness, by way of more symbolic configurations: "I have snow shoes and Indian shoes / Idea of my present / not my silence" (43). This may perhaps be additional citation, but if so Howe now culls phrase material which could just as easily appear in the diary of any contemporary winter visitor to Lake George and the Adirondacks. The lyrical voice continues on with abstraction, utilizing fragmented syntax and referential vagaries:

> Surprise is not so much
> Hurried and tossed about
> That I have not had time (43)

If this is still an account from William Johnson, what is the historical cause of the inscrutable nexus of "surprise," "hurr[ying]," and his/their being pressed for time? The next stanza abruptly returns us to the objective moment of the French and Indian War, with a "Fort" and those coming to "get a scalp," but it just as quickly shifts back to language more appropriate to postmodern critique: "domain of transcendental subjectivity / Etymology the this / present in the past now / So many thread" (43). Is it likely that this language is a cut-up of Johnson's 18th century entries? The lack of narrative apparatus and enumerated source documentation leaves us wondering where Johnson's observations leave off and those of the poet's subject/speaker might begin.

"The present in the past now" is an apt description of the poetic landscape that the poem constructs. As the presentation shuttles between historical anecdote and amorphous lyric commentary, a poetic field that is *imaginative* develops, in which different temporalities may be

present. Naylor has described *Thorow's* poetic landscape in terms of Howe's relationship to pure poetry:

> As she told Reinfeld, *Thorow* consists of a "landscape out of bits of words" and is about "what time does in a landscape." Yet the crucial difference between Howe and other pure poets [...] is that she does not attempt to seal this world off from the real world of historical fact but to make visible the holes in traditional historiography. (54)

Although careful selection is involved in choosing which "inarticulate voices" should be placed in this imaginative landscape, Howe seems unconcerned with "telling the tale" of any particular historical personages; Sir William Johnson instead becomes a useful historical fact and an instrument for exposing history's gaps. As Howe explains in an interview with Montgomery, Sir William Johnson was an intermediary between the colonialists and the native Americans, responsible for trades between the English settlers and various native American tribes (753). As an Irishman and a societal go-between, he is comparable to the "Scout" figure, in that neither is entirely representative of the two societal forces the poem dichotomizes – "positivist efficiency" and "primal indeterminacy." The historical Scout referenced by Johnson, Back explains, would have been "not settler or settler's outcast, not Indian or Indian's victim; this scout has "snow shoes and indian shoes" both, and seems intent upon traveling between the two sides, following her own "track of Desire" (Back 53). It becomes clear that, while they do not *stand in* for the subject-in-process, these entities are part of a pure poetic landscape in which the subject's formation takes place. The line "The past in the present" describes the historical overlay through which marginal figures or "inarticulate voices" come to affect Howe's experience of her own imaginative landscape.

To illustrate the effect on the poem's subject of putting *Thorow* on record, it is now necessary to move from referring to the *Thorow* text to referring to the Howe and Grubbs collaboration in *Thiefth*. The only significant commentary on *Thiefth* is provided by Will Montgomery, who in multiple works dedicates paragraphs of analysis to the biographical, historical, and formal features of the recording. For background, Montgomery first introduces his readers to David Grubbs, the co-founder of the 1990s post-rock group Gastr Del Sol. Montgomery cites John Cage and Tony Conrad as the musical influences most relevant to Grubbs' work in *Thiefth*; they are the forebears most responsible for the droning ethos, established through the electronic processing of cello and saxophone improvisations (740). Although no field recordings are at play, the manipulation of previous performances by Swedish saxophonist Mars Gustafsson and Greek cellist Nikos Veliotis also draws on the influence of the pioneers of *musique concrète*. Grubbs himself wrote at some length about the nature of *musique concrète*, and significantly he focused on its *non-musical* aspects. He draws a distinction between Cage and *musique concrète* innovator Pierre Schaeffer by using the latter's own argument that, although they are "discovering a world of sound," *musique concrète* composers do not "fool themselves into thinking that they are making music" (Grubbs 59). Grubbs also has referenced a later dissident figure from the concrete movement, Luc Ferrari, who introduced the concept of "causality" to his compositions; Ferrari distinguished his own work by stating that, "[m]usique concrete was a kind of abstractisation [sic] of sound – [its practitioners] didn't want to know [...] its causality [...] Whereas here I *wanted* you to recognize causality…it wasn't just to make music with but to say: this is traffic noise!" (61). Grubbs' reading of Schaffer's and Ferrari's methods helps us to position his performance in *Thiefth* vis-a-vis other performances where poetry is set to music (Kerouac's, for instance). Although one might argue that there is

musicality present in *Thiefth*, one should also be on guard against designating even the recording's instrumentation *music*, or especially background music.

While the poetry reading becomes its own medium, according to Bernstein, *Thiefth* becomes a separate medium from the poetry reading, according to Montgomery. "The recording of *Thiefth*", he explains "is more than a document of poetry reading and more than poetry accompanied by music" (740). "Integrated aural unit" is the technical term he uses to describe the work. Montgomery describes the work's formal "unity" as follows:

> Howe's words are given additional force by Grubbs' slow-moving, drone-based sonic sculpture. These drones are combined with very finely timed editing of Howe's voice, sometimes to produce an aural analogue of the visual scatteredness of parts of the work on the page, sometimes to dust the main text with fragments from Howe's prose introduction. [...] The musical element of the recording sits in equivalence with the spoken words, changing the reader-listener's encounter with the poem. The sound editing introduces skips and jitters that mimic the stuttering quality that pervades Howe's thinking on poetry. (740)

Although Montgomery never enacts a "close listening" of the record, he does make a few scattered observations of its effects. Significantly, he argues how the musical component's "relative abstraction" within the work allows it to serve as a "textural foil [running] with and against the grain of the text" (99). This will need to be investigated further; along with his claim that the music of *Thiefth* provides neither a "melodic or harmonic argument" that might constitute a musical narrative, and that it "retains its intractability and untranslatability [...] in the dense aural weave of the voiced poem" (TPSH 100). Though non-specific to the particularities

of the recording's form, Montgomery's descriptions for *Thiefth's* formal attributes become a useful departure point for examining the recording on a granular level.

The first track, "Thorow (Introduction)", builds slowly, through successive and then layered saxophone notes and electroacoustic noises (screeches, beeps) punctuated by silent pauses, until, at the 1:14 mark, Howe's voice enters. As the poem's door creaks open, Montgomery's interpretation of the general tone of the sonic accompaniment seems accurate: "looming tones" do seem to materialize Howe's "Underthought," (referenced in section 2 of the text) and the "traumatic past" (*TPSH* 100). When Howe's voice enters, it is fragmentary, made of either cuttings or splices of read phrases from the text that, crucially, do not all derive from the textual introduction. For example, at 1:22 we encounter "You are of me", which comes from the penultimate book-page of the printed text, and six seconds later we hear the "[...]and I begin" of the subsequent line, though the previous phrases "& I of you, I cannot tell / Where you leave off" have been omitted. In the remaining 1:30 of the approximately three minute track, we are presented with even smaller fragments – Howe's words are sometimes reduced to their constituent consonant sounds – so that the textual analog for these sounds could be any of a number of words in the poem. The sonic landscape being constructed in the first track gives an impression of randomization, so that we are entering a field in which we do not know where we are positioned, and where meaning will be difficult to assemble; the effect is somewhat comparable to how we encounter interstellar "events" in the John Cage work, *Atlas Eclipticalis.* Some of the word-bits are layered over each other, some are heard over saxophone and electronic treatments, and (noticeably in the last 30 seconds of the track) a few are heard during longer musical rests. The track concludes without any significant variation that might provide some sense of resolution – the soundscape opens and remains ambiguous.

The ambiguous nature of the recording introduction makes it clash with the doctrinaire textual introduction. The text's introduction has itself been the source of much critical discussion. Like the introductory materials included in other Howe poems, it stands apart because of its being prose; in *Thorow*, the issue also arises as to whether its polemical social or cultural arguments condition the interpretation of the body of the poem. Montgomery takes issue with multiple facets of the text's introduction: its invocation of Todorov and his problematic argument that colonial "nomination" is the equivalent of (rather than consequence of) "taking possession"; its assimilation of Native American with "the wilderness," which in turn violently yokes patriarchy and colonialism; its potential for disenfranchisement through its assigning the "feminine" a role as radical disrupter (which Montgomery claims in turn makes the feminine "inarticulate"); and its unequal treatment of thinkers whose writing contradicts Howe's "unsullied origins" myth of the early American landscape (*API* 742). Montgomery's reservations all seem meritorious, and they also appear to be an adequate justification for his later conclusion that the "demoted" or "demolished" *Thiefth* introduction is a "significant revision [that] returns the poem to itself" (*TPSH* 99).

At the same time, our discussion of the praxis of the poem's subject-formation might benefit if we view the textual introduction differently. We can also hold the perspective that both the text's and the recording's introductions *contain* the multivocality that informs the "dual-critique" aspects of the poem. If we detect problematic overtones of cultural snobbery in the textual introduction's portrait of the modern day Lake George – with its Poundian cataloging of Dairy-Mart, Donut-Land, and other institutions of consumerist culture – we can also see them being balanced or corrected by the disjoined "Narrative in Non-Narrative." In this latter two-thirds section of the written introduction, Howe introduces the European adventurer-traders;

through juxtaposition, Howe makes the consumerist artifacts of contemporary, small-town America into a consequence and a sign of colonialist "positivist efficiency." In the recording, meanwhile, the displacement of the cultural critique out of the first track (but intermittently *into* the body of the remaining tracks) also mediates or questions the fact that materialist criticism is part of this poem at all. In both the text's and the recording's introductions, there is a hesitance to let any observation stand for and be attributed to the speaker, as she remains in a nebulous, transhistorical landscape (that is not unlike a confused or unsettled conscious-state); we might conclude that the speaker of the introduction, like the speaker of the poem proper, is not the exclusive author of her thoughts.

As we move to the "Thorow (Part 1)" track, the relationship between musical sounds and the poem's imagery varies in subtle ways. For the track's first poem, the musician remains silent, as the speaker situates herself in the context of the wilderness surrounding colonial fortifications. With lines referring to the "Idea of my Present," "Etymology the this," and "transcendental subjectivity", the speaker seems to want to pull herself out from silence, and into an awareness of the material conditions of weather and the nearby Native warriors. The second through the fourth poems, meanwhile, will contrast the "Desire" of the forces aligned with primordial nature (Scout, storm) with the forces that are "Measuring mastering" ("monarch of Europes," "European grid"). In what seems an appropriate gesture, the music returns: this time with the noise of an electric, mechanical drone that begins right after the speaker's reference to a winter storm, and sustains until "When the ice breaks up" (45). From the fifth through the eighth poems in the track, Howe is heard settling in to a description of the speaker's travels between the colonial settlements. The speaker considers the colonial inhabitants: their "Singing their War song," their need of "Constant Parties of guards," their accession and dominance ("thorow out all

/ the five nations / To cut our wete"), and her ancestral relationship to them ("I am / Part of their encroachment"). The musical accompaniment now seems to shift to mirror the speaker's consideration of colonial life – we exclusively hear a single note sustained by a saxophone. While it is generally difficult to interpret the non-representational tones in *Thiefth*, we begin to see a sound signification encoded by instrument choice and musical patterning. "Part 1" loosely connects rumbling/mechanical drones, synthesized electronically, with nature and consciousness, while it associates sustained notes on the natural wood and string instruments with human civilization and settlement. An allegorical movement toward continuity and order seems encoded in these sounds.

Grubbs continues to employ techniques of musical minimalism and repetition in "Thorow (Part 2)". The speaker's praxis moves from meditations on her position vis-a-vis the colonial past to her becoming aware (with the assistance of the writing of Henry David Thoreau) of the environment of the present. The coordinated musical passages will sustain a single note on the cello, and will thereby seem to produce a meditative musical surface that mirrors the depth of psychic processing and interiorizing involved with Howe's becoming self-aware. A short, contrasting, two-note motif will recur with moments of revelation or departure in Howe's logic. We can map such a coordination: in the 5:41 running-time of the track, there are three interruptions by the horn motif, each being temporally associated with the speaker's language of revelation. The motif first appears as the poem's speaker sets out on an inspirational nature walk (seconds one through 15), a walk which occurs on "Mount Vision." It next appears at around the 50 second mark, where the speaker comes to the formulation: "In the machinery of injustice / my whole being is Vision." And finally, the motif is again heard at the 1:54 mark, immediately after the lines, "Force may desire wander / Jumping from one subject / to another[,]" and before the

lines, "In a chain of Cause / The eternal First Cause / I stretch my arms out / to the author." Other than at these three moments where the horn motif appears, the musical background of the track only contains the sustained, electroacoustic drone of cello and bass sounds. The combined praxis is one where revelation erupts and interrupts the poetic images, and where that revelation is marked by musical difference.

"Thorow (Part Two)" also utilizes superimpositions of voice, produced by an overlay of vocal tracks. These operate similarly to the instrumentation – although they often mark a reservation or revision, rather than revelation. As "Part 2" marks a shift to a more concerted construction of self, via nature, we might expect the speaker's subjectivity will become more defined, or that she will gain in self-awareness and self-certainty in the face of history. We detect the opposite, however, when the speaker's voice is technologically made multiplicitous; the same contradictions and hesitations in the speaker from the "Introduction" and "Part 1" are perpetuated. *Thiefth's* technical aspects ensure that we never gain certainty or a foothold on where the speaker stands – the internal and external environment keeps shifting. Naylor (and subsequently Back) believe the first line, "Walked on Mount Vision," places Howe both in the "Word forest" of imagination and upon a fictional Adirondack peak – it is here that she will end up possessed/inspired. Critic Jenny White here contrastingly sees Howe referencing the actual "Mount Vision" outside of Cooperstown, NY. This might explain Howe's reference to the "Armageddon at Fort William Henry," which now becomes a reference to James Fennimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohegans* (White 254). Howe does this, White urges, to conflate Cooper's complicity, through his historiography and use of the "conquerors'" language – with her own.

As if to reinforce the conflation, the recording superimposes a reading of the textual introduction over lines two through five of this poem. We receive these two disparate readings, one of prose and one of verse, at once:

> I thought I stood on the shores of a history of the world where forms of wildness brought up by memory become desire" (Howe 41)
>
> New Life after the Fall
> So many true things
>
> Which are not truth itself
> We are too finite (49)

The construction plunges the reader into indeterminacy: while the voice speaking the introduction's part confidently envisions a shape for all of History, the voice speaking the lyric part questions the universalizing of Truth, with a kind of Nietzschean skepticism. As "Part 2" continues, the speaker will continue to grasp at a "truth," with the lines "I stretch out my arms / to the author" (51). Specifically, she is struggling with Thoreau's transcendental concept of "wild savagism," the notion that a writer must wander and be raw in his or her writings, in order to return us from the "positivist efficiency" of language to the primitive senses of words. The recording implements a fragment of introductory prose – "penetrated by the edge of the author, traverses multiplicities, light letters exploding apprehension supposes when individual hearing," – which problematizes the concurrent lines that search for truth. This fragment confuses the direction of transport (who is reaching out to whom?), and whether reading Thoreau will bring

the speaker clarity or further questions. By the conclusion of Part II, the subject will *not* become more grounded nor shed complicity; she realizes she must drift:

> Unconscious demarkations range
>
> I pick my compass to pieces
>
> Dark here in the driftings
> In the spaces of drifting
>
> Complicity battling redemption (55)

The multiplicity of voices in the recording – both textual and literal – helps to symbolize how the subject cannot settle on a singular linguistic or historicizing strategy.

Finally, it is in "Thorow (Part 3)" that the full potential of the recorded medium for affecting subject-in-process strategies becomes realized. The relationship between text and its variations produced by performative reading, which Bernstein urges is not studied enough, has already been complicated for *Thorow*, through the recording strategies of *Theifth* (CL 9). This relationship only becomes more complex when Howe and Grubbs perform their variations on the part of the textual poem which, because of its typographical experiments, had *already* informed a new medium. There will now be constructions in the soundscape for modeling the indeterminacy of the concrete poetry text. Both the visual and audio instances of "Part 3" exemplify what Bruns calls "four dimensional space" in a poem, where the reader "moves temporally through the space [by seeing *or* by hearing] and so alters it" (*TMP* 75). Of course, the temporal movement through this "space" is now governed differently, due to the running in

time of the audio track. Burns descriptor "verbivocovisual" seems apt here as well – the track becomes a variation on a kind of poem that must be "simultaneously read, voiced, and seen as architectural", a poem "made of words that can be experienced as an objective structure and voiced as a *score*" *(TMP* 71).

Will Montgomery, in an essay entitled "Text-Score-Text" introduces another analogous medium (and perhaps a praxis concern shared across the arts) when he explains how composers who use text-scores in conjunction with field recordings, like Michael Pisaro, generate questions similar to those raised by discontinuous poetic texts. Towards this end he quotes Pisaro, for whom text scores both elicit and prescribe performance: "The text score is asking for translation. It is also an incitement to action." For a text-score like Manfred Werder's *harmony series*, which contains poetic fragments and no musical instructions, "the poetic fragment *is* the score" (*TST* 101). For *Thiefth*, especially Part 3, the we might begin to see text of *Thorow* as a score, where the recording becomes a translation into the audible. The recording is a singular "event" like that conceptualized by Alain Badiou and exemplified by works like 4'33" (88). For Montgomery, text-scores, field recordings, and the place-oriented writing of poets like Charles Olson and William Carlos Williams (and we would assume Howe) share a praxis with similar purpose: the destabilization of "discursive boundaries" (101). To further explain, he suggests a salient passage from Lytle Shaw's *Fieldworks: From Place to Site in Postwar Poetics*:

> As poets became experimental historiographers and ethnographers of place, as they took poetry into an expanded field of buried historical and immediate social relations, they also necessarily engaged the authority of those disciplinary fields traditionally used to frame, contextualize and historicize these literal spaces. One

> of the most fascinating results of these excursions into new fields…is [a] series of generative recordings of disciplinary terms and practices. (101)

Shaw calls these recordings an "unbinding measure," a term that seems relevant to Howe's dual investigation (critique/self-critique) of the site of colonialism's encroachment upon the natural environment.

In terms of praxis, the most radical "space" in Part 3 is a sonic, rather than a physical, landscape. In his own criticism, David Grubbs traces a doubleness in the development of the term "soundscape" after Cage's *Imaginary Landscape No. 5*[3]*:*

> [t]he term "soundscape" tends to be used to refer to both the distribution of sounds in a given space (with the implication that this space is *defined* or *described* in the perceiving of the sounds it contains), as well as any sonic representation of space. It is an aural view of any environment as well as an mediated representation of space. (56)

Thiefth presents as a soundscape in that it utilizes voice, instrumentation, and sound effects in a highly mediated arrangement, but it also does so by representing a dialectic of consciousness for a subject meditating on her own participation in historical materialism. The manipulation and mediation of these sounds of subjective awareness are much more at-play in "Part 3" than the previous parts, and the effect is that even individual words become difficult to distinguish. There is a proliferation of audio glitches, which might suggest glitches in the meditation of the speaker, or the introduction of error. The glitch, like the departures from the meditative objects in Coolidge and Kerouac, is an appropriate formal device for understanding the subject-in-process of *Thiefth.* In *Cracked Media,* Caleb Kelly points out that the glitch, which is technically a "digital tick caused by lost or incorrect binary code," often disappears when the computer is

rebooted, though the technology is "bent, almost to its breaking point." A glitch is generally not terminal, and it allows for a return to the intended sound. Even if a recording technology is pushed to cause a "crack," there is still a use: "[t]he sounds produced [...] are filled with noise, as unintended and extramusical sounds are pulled from the technology[;] media will perform other than intended while it is cracked, but it can be fully restored to its original form after the event" (34).

The difficulty with the glitching of "Thorow (Part 3)" is that it appears as the poem is concluding, and as it seems to be rushing towards a climax. Is the program of the subject's formation heading toward a crash, and does the dissolution (of syntactical order, word formation, linearity, etc.) suggest an ultimate failure to piece together the subject's relation to history? The subject is assuredly being rushed somewhere, as the tempo created by word placement is faster in Part III, and it seems to increase as the track continues. This increased and increasing speed is not necessarily something that can be conveyed by the written text – while there are distribution and sound strategies that might make the eye "jump" more quickly from word to word, or the hand to more quickly turn the page, the discontinuous materials of *Thorow* might just as easily get the reader "stuck" on a particular word or word association, slowing the reading process. In other words, there is unlikely a written praxis that could suggest to the reader the excited rushing that the performance enacts. The whole poem (the sum of its versions) is being fundamentally altered by the recording.

Increasing tempos combine with an increased volume in "Part 3," with the individual and separated words (separated by blank spaces on the page) seeming to explode and disrupt, especially in contrast to the hushed vocal and musical tones from earlier in the recording. The overall effect is quite cinematic – it feels as if we are building to the climax of an action-thriller,

where plot events occur so abruptly and unexpectedly, due to montaged editing, that they impact us physiologically. The sounds are so divorced from a musical narrative, that they almost simulate a hallucination (a not-so-pleasant one); this sensation, however, might at least be signified by the pivoting typography. Howe notably chooses to start reading from the margin of the justified (on the page) text, bursting forth the line, "Cannot be / every / where I / entreat / snapt" (Howe 56). This line thematizes the psychological challenge of positioning oneself in the history of colonial encroachments. As Howe attempts to return to the margins, or to the text as it should appear, a superimposition on the page is mirrored by superimposition in the recording. But while the marginally justified word "French" is audible, the inverted and overlapping French word "batteau" is not. Superimposed words in this track are often digitally altered or cut in such a manner that we cannot fully perceive them. Meanwhile other words are digitally slurred, stuttered, or stretched, as we hear with the word "messages" in this same stanza. The indeterminacy in the shape of words further encodes multiplicity, or makes the messages more precarious.

Glitched sounds stand in for moments in the text where the typography confuses the ordering of the lines. Here it does so at the word "covery," where (in the text) the word stretches from the margin into a justified (though inverted) stanza. Thus the recording allows a sonic representation of the relation between Howe's marginal and justified texts, though here that relationship is constructively blurred. Another effect of digital treatments is that not every word in the text is equally "present" in the recording. This goes beyond editorial omissions for the sake of time (the track is only 3:07 long) – instead, words that are visible on the page are sometimes obscured by the audio superimposition of other words.

A distracted general tone can be imparted, while emphasis, or moments of clarification in the muck of word clusters, can also be achieved. These effects are observed most notably at the 1:01 mark of "Part 3": after 13 seconds of accompanying noises (the saxophone motif and the chirp and grumble of electronica from earlier), all background noises and superimpositions cease, and Howe reads the following lines whilst adopting a vocal affect and pacing that might be expected in a traditional poetry reading:

> The Frames should be exactly
>
> Fitted to the paper, the Margins
>
> of which will not per[mit] of
>
> A very deep Rabbit (56)

As these lines, justified in the *Thorow* text, now become a marginal aside, they seem to self-reflexively comment on the politics of poetic form. In a poem circling the issues involved with poetic representation, this is perhaps the moment where the voice emerges to question the rules of the game, or the "positivist efficiency" of inherited poetic languages. If a reading of the logic of these lines is possible, it might be that formal versification, bounded by artificial "Frames" and Margins," fails to explain the details of objective reality, such as the movements of a rabbit buried in the snow. For reinforcement, the cacophony of voice, saxophone, noise, and superimposed voice return immediately after the above passage, to cataloging the largely archeological artifacts from the Lake George of the past.

In another moment of sonic clearing, the previously mentioned lines emerge from the cacophony: "You are of me & of you, I cannot tell / Where you leave off and I begin" (58). Here we see implemented the final compositional strategy of the *Thiefth* recording, that of the simultaneous reading of two separate stanzaic "columns" into the right and left tracks of the

recording. This technique is only used briefly, as the speaker shifts between a panned and a full stereo reading across the columns. But it more literally allows the listener to experience the poem's multivocality, and reinforces the abstraction of Howe's parataxis. On the page, the right-hand column uses phrases to produce an attenuated image, while the left-hand column mostly uses a single word per line, in order to produce something more like a word-image.

The effect of turning these poetic modes into two separate tracks, played simultaneously, allows the simulation of the poet's experience of her own praxis, and the tension that is the high-stakes moment of choosing a language for putting history's "inarticulate voices" on the page.

As "Thorow (Part 3)" comes to its final movement, the word "strict" – which appears only once on the page, in the line "Strict counterpoint" – is superimposed multiple (at least 4) times over noisy word clustering. It is as if Howe is here trying to discipline herself, perhaps into a praxis that involves a formal counterpoint. She may speak in the polemic/theorist's voice of the introduction, she may speak in a lyrical voice, or she may speak through the citation of those muted by history – but she *must,* she insists, speak with all of these voices. "Strict" is the restriction that page-based poetry places on the subject-in-process and the multiplicity in its voices. As the background noise recedes for the final time, the reading turns to a linear presentation of single, broken words. Along with these alexical portmanteaus, we hear the superimposition of "word bits," adding hesitancy or confusion to the landscape. This poem that voices a forgotten-but-ever-present historical moment is reduced to a blurting of sounds which themselves seem to question whether signification exists outside any moment. On the page these words look like Old English or English archaisms – "anthen," "uplispth," "floted" "Thiefth" – but in the recording this effect seems lost. The electronic treatment seems to turn the sounds into naturalistic ones, with the electroacoustic chirping (crickets? birds?) and the 's' sounds that

become a hiss, or the "ah" syllable extracted from a word to become the sound of a pure, human breath. The track ends by subtly allegorizing the solitude of human beings in unspoiled nature. And it ends literally with "Thiefth," a word which might signify how we are robbed of such an experience of nature.

Merely cataloging the formal and technical aspects of a recording like *Thiefth* almost instantly initiates a meta-analysis, or a discussion of the interplay and exchange between poetic praxis and poetic subjectivity. As collaborators work to perform discontinuous source texts, they are faced with the absence of a single human voice that would allow the organization and performance of that text's sounds. Their construction decisions, as they largely do for Howe and Grubbs, may gear toward embodying states of consciousness – those both modeled by the poem and inhabited by the maker of the poem *as she was making it.* If a particular aspect of a conscious state cannot be simulated through typography, or even described in words, then sound effects, non-representational music, and the sound technologies of the digital recording studio might make up the difference. These recorded, performed readings achieve a complex expansion of the subject-in-process poetic discourse in a sometimes unnoticeable fashion; performative recordings, unlike complex page-based poems, are listened to in the background and on repeat, are broadcast on the radio, and are voiced without an active reading even occurring on the part of their "consumers."

Although we have been referring above to Howe's expansion of the means for subject-construction, we should also concede that a collaborative performance like *Thiefth* complicates the issue of poetic agency, especially with regard to the performed subject. Through his musical performance, his role in the composition's arrangement, and any of a number of other compositional mechanisms, David Grubbs participates in what becomes a unique subject-in-

performance. Both Howe and Grubbs therefore have agency in the work, in ways that converge and diverge. If we were to consider Grubbs' agency in *Thiefth* we might compare and contrast it with the agency of musicians participating in other collaborations, including those working with the Beats and the poets of the Black Arts Movement.[18] As such collaborations become more common, such an investigation might start with the assumption that the available means for performing the subject are increasing. It would be possible to consider both the nature of musical agency in these contexts and how collaborative performances change our traditional understanding of the poetry reading and poetry performance.[19]

This chapter has focused on how the collaborative performance of poetry can both reinforce subject-in-process strategies already operating in a text and introduce new non-textual methods for dramatizing the poetic subject. The evolution of Jack Kerouac's recorded readings suggests that he saw them as a means for generating new subject positions out of previous poetic materials. Musical accompaniment allowed him to blend the subjects of disparate blues choruses in order to suit a musical context, while subsequent removal of the accompaniment allowed him to enact more focused development of prior subjective modes. Howe and Grubbs' collaboration in *Thiefth* allowed Howe to expand a critique of her subject's complicity in history, both by that subject's placement in a contextualizing soundscape and its further fragmentation and juxtaposition vis-a-vis the historical subject. In each of these quite different examples, the

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[18] A reading that goes beyond the musician's agency might incorporate *Pull My Daisy*, a short film directed by Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie. In addition to considering the impact of jazz composer David Amram's "soundtrack" on the script's subjectivity, the agency of the filmmakers might be considered. For more on Black Arts collaboration, Meta DuEwa Jones's critical histories might be instructive, including *The Muse is Music: Jazz Poetry from the Harlem Renaissance to Spoken Word* (2011).

[19] For a preexisting discussion of the latter, we might turn to Peter Middleton's *Expanding Authorship: Transformations in American Poetry since 1950* (2021).

available means for performing subjectivity get expanded beyond what the textual poem might allow.

The works discussed in this chapter thus illustrate that subject-in-process poetics is *itself* in process, and that poets continue to seek means for calling attention to the performative subjectivity of their work. In the context of our previous chapters, these recordings seem to highlight a different variety of compositional awareness of the relation of poet to poetic subject. Textual production stabilizes even unstable poetic subjects, in that the texts become an authoritative version of a strain of subjectivity. Kerouac's signature sound, even if vocalized at a traditional poetry reading, has already been established as fact by his writing. Susan Howe's theoretical introduction to *Thorow* contextualizes the poetic text, but the contextualization of its role within the larger text gets determined by the reader. In poetries that seek to challenge the dominance of their stabilized subjects, performative recordings and non-poetic materials allow the poet to expand the challenge.

To conclude this study, we will return to our view that there are both pre-social and socially-formative aspects to such dramatizations of the subject. Poetries of the 21st century may be seen to perform subjectivity differently when historical documents or events condition our awareness of the historical subject serving as the basis for poetic subject-formation. New forms and strategies enter the field of subject-in-process poetics when poetry considers questions of social formation.

Conclusion

After considering different strains of American subject-in-process poetry, we might imagine a revised version of Kristeva's *chora,* for describing the dynamics of the compositional moment. We have seen from our examples how discontinuous forms need not always be caused by irrational drives, even if these drives are participating in the associative and musical aspects of a composition's praxis. Discontinuous forms can instead be preselected by the poet for their usefulness in the arrangement of the subject. Poets can draw both their personal experiences and self-reflexive awareness of the patterns of their consciousness into the compositional state anterior to writing, and intentionally put them into play with the body, music, and the irrational. It is not necessary that the resulting poetic subject be a sublimation of the lyric or compositional "I," as is the case for Artaud's "scream." The more traditional lyric subject does not have to be annihilated by the subject-in-process – rather, it can be put to use – and its occasional presence does not diminish the drama of subjectivity in the work.

The traditional and/or stable lyric subject can contribute to what we have been calling the hybridity of contemporary poetic subjectivity. We have witnessed how introducing moments of subject-stabilization to a poem can actually *heighten* the drama; it is a feature of Coolidge's returning to the crystal, Kerouac's setting of the object before the mind, and Howe's incorporating her personal diaries and theories, that stable-subject presentation often becomes the instrument for throwing the poem's subjectivity into flux. Occasionally a poetic "self" might require the grounding of a traditional lyrical presentation and a discourse of the "I," before the poem's proper language for self-definition or critique can be achieved. At the same time, we noticed at the conclusion of the last chapter that subject-dramatization might unfold in the opposite direction. To further explore her poem's subjectivity, Susan Howe allows the third

section of *Thorow* to depart from, rather than arrive at, an unstable subject, in a section marked by fragmentation and parataxis at the level of the word. A fragmentary departure point may suggest that the language the poetic subject has inherited from history is untrustworthy, or that a subject's boundaries and definition are still inscrutable.

In the wake of both Language and historical developments, it might be our critical tendency to link the presence of discontinuous poetic form to a social movement, or to challenges to the hegemony of language. Recent trends in contemporary poetry and poetics are often geared toward the political and the social. The fracture and division of early 21st century world politics have generated a further critical demand and/or an audience for a poetic critique of the language of the dominant subject. Skepticism remains whether an isolated, asocial, or stable subject is useful, and such skepticism applies even when the poem's subject expresses or "speaks" the resistance of oppressed communities. This is understandable, as it is often difficult to locate an oppressed community's history, given the omissions and "silences" within historical production. Why should we assume that poetry can uncover the voice for a subject who has been silenced by history? Efforts to fictionalize the "silenced" subject of history run into historical credibility issues. Are we to take seriously a poetic social critique if its accounts of history are not accurate? Helpfully, the mechanics of subject-dramatization have been expanded to meet the increased skepticism of poetic subjectivity.

We turn to two recent works, both of which give a more in-depth treatment of the dynamics of history. The first of these is *Zong!* (2008), a book-length poem by the Canadian-Trinidadian poet M. NourbeSe Philip that is one of several recent poetic explorations on the Middle Passage. We are specifically looking at this poem because it provides another example of the subject-in-process in relation to historiography, and because it confronts what has been

made absent from history. Comparable to how Howe ends *Thorow,* Philip's book begins with bits and pieces of language floating on the mostly white "sea" of the page. Beginning a poem by scattering and repeating pieces of a word as familiar as "water" not only drops us into the poem without the "I" of a self, but it also diminishes the feeling that an "organizing consciousness" is guiding us:

w w w w a wa

w a w a t

er wa s (Philip 3)

Like Sarah Dowling, we may gather together the shards to create a text that's more familiar – she translates the above poem to read, "water was our water, good water, oh one dey/day, one day's water, water of want" (*PV*). In spite of such acts of reassembly, we will find that the repetitions and restarts give the poem a stuttering quality. Linear and word-level fragmentation throughout *Zong!* will be pushed to their limits.

The dissolution of narrative and descriptive elements will also be heightened. Dowling notes that the only word that is unbroken in the above poem is "our," which suggests that we are in the presence of a lyrical chorus. But what human "singing" takes place here? Every phrase, word, and word-fragment in the poem is drawn from the dry, juridical language of *Gregson v. Gilbert* (1783), a decision in the matter of an insurance dispute arising from the murder of 150 African slaves. As the trial decision is the only extant historical record, there is no reference point for recreating the perspective of the slaves through traditional methods. Philip generates West African names for those unnamed in the document, by fracturing and anagrammatically combining words from the legal decision. She creates for them inarticulate utterances in the form of French, Latin, and Yoruba words and word-sounds. These and brief phrases in demotic

English are placed as interruptions, amidst the apostrophes and other lyrically traditional phrasings of the white Europeans who committed the atrocities. The slave poetic subjects are not allowed to narrate thought, only action, because as non-persons, their words "do not carry the same implication of interiority as the dominant, Western subject's lyric "I" (*PV*).

This dissolution of the slave subject's narrativity also occurs at the book's larger structural levels. The poetic text possesses a uniquely interruptive texture, with the slaves' above-mentioned utterances, or incomplete "sobs," appearing as italicized words or phrases, juxtaposed with the non-italicized words of the white European:

there is

oh

oh

the *oba* sobs

again *ifa* *ifa ifa i*

fa over and over

the seven

seas (Philip 60)

Philip innovates the dramatization of her poem's subjects because the dehumanization of slavery demands that she must do so. The poem, as a meditation on the trial document, must deal with the extraneous position of the slaves within that document. The slaves cannot be presented as human subjects, because legal doctrine made them "subjects of property" (*PV*). The slave subjects start as historical footnotes, with their reconstructed names first appearing as footnotes in the earliest poems in the book. As the context for considering the victims shifts from sea to courtroom, we see a corresponding structural change as well – in the second section "DICTA,"

Philip places nothing below the line (still appearing) that designates the footnote area. In observing this, Dowling points out that we have more directly entered the trial and its documentation, where "all other opinion becomes orbiter dicta": "the slaves' status as dicta is more literal [...] they are absented even from their position as footnotes, and do not appear in the text at all" (*PV*).

Philip seems well-aware of the issues involved with making historically-denied persons or "selves" appear as poetic subjects, as she refuses fictive narrative strategies for reparation. Dowling discusses how *Zong!* does not repair history by "prioritiz[ing] disappeared voices [...] to let the victims speak," but instead "creates a contrast between different types of vocal utterance in order to break the association of voice with personhood" (*PV*). This is why the imagined self of *Zong!* is denied the language that might appear in other subject-in-process poetry. The core problem with telling the story from the perspective of the slave is raised in a deconstructive reading of the book by Deborah Goldgaber:

> Certainly there is something like a *counterfactual* speech – speech that *was* not but could or should have been – and this speech would not be *merely* fiction. But this speech, as the work of imagination, would not prima facie have the sort of credibility [associated] with historical accounts. Certainly it would not count as anything like historical or juridical evidence. Philip knows this, and this is why she will content herself with neither the idealities of representation nor imagination. (Goldgaber 212)

We might extend this analysis: fictionalizing a voice from history via the lyrical subject may in fact *reinforce* the credibility of the real-life historical account, in this case the credibility of the

judge who rendered the slaves "sacrificed property." In the case of *Zong!*, the oppressive class is the only group whose presence is historically verifiable.

Zong! points to new subject-in-process strategies that result when poetic subjectivity collides with historical source material. In cases where the poetry cites historical documents, the subjects of these textual objects may contribute, or literally replace, the poem's lyrical subject. In *Thorow*/*Thiefth*, we see the work compositionally acting upon diverse materials from history – including the poet's own personal history – and the organization of the materials serves a highly self-reflexive examination of poetic subjectivity. But in *Zong!,* the poet does not even allow herself to use her own words, and organizes the material in an insistently historiographic manner. Her focused attempt to reestablish the consciousness and/or presence of a historically-erased Other distances the work from her own self-reflective consciousness. Bringing the subject-in-process into direct contact with an objectifiable history often involves drawing into contrast the disparate languages of subject and object, which in turn allows the consideration of the relation of self to social.

A second example where we see the subject-in-process being brought into contact with history is Caroline Bergvall's multimedia work *Drift (*2014). Bergvall is of French and Norwegian origins, and is based in both London and Geneva (it is worth noting that both Bergvall and Philip are outside of the American tradition, since this fact suggests the international presence of subject-in-process poetics). Like many 21st century media-as-performance projects, *Drift* is followed by a secondary text which fills out the performance – the materials of this text are nearly as varied as those of the performance, as it contains illustrations, photographs, reproductions of handwritten characters, translated poems, historical documents, and biographical prose. We turn to this text not only for its formal variety, but because it

illustrates how subject-dramatization can be impacted by both the qualities of cited historical objects and the way the author orients herself to them. *Drift,* like *Zong!*, reflects on Western culture's castaway groups; those in Bergvall are left to die in the plain sight of a mass-mediated culture, rather than in the obscurities of a legal text. At the center of the project (both the book and the performance) is a section entitled "Report," which consists almost exclusively of a direct citation of a human rights report. This summary document, which uses "a wide range of digital mapping and modeling technologies" along with human testimony, forensically reconstructs what happened in the case of the "Left-to-Die Boat," a 2012 incident in which 63 migrants died of thirst and starvation after their vessel drifted off its course from Libya to Italy, even though the ship traveled through heavily-surveilled international waters and encountered numerous vessels (Bergvall 71-81). Bergvall's method of citation accounts for a divergence in the poetics of her work: while Philip must manipulate the language of a document to draw its dehumanization into relief, Bergvall needs only to *reproduce* the language of her document (albeit in the highly mediated context of the larger performance) to do the same.

By direct use of external and disparate materials, and collage-techniques, Bergvall shows us how starkly juxtaposed various subject-positions can become within a work. As mentioned above, she reproduces lines from the human rights report without alteration, although she does performatively invert the color of her text by printing white words on a black page. The report is also puzzlingly followed by 13 black pages showing constellations of white dots (are they constellations of stars? blips on a sonar chart?) (82-96). These images serve a similar function to the poem's untitled preface, a series of 16 illustrations of horizontal lines that have been scribbled over (7-22). All the materials that surround the "Report" source text seem to simulate the barriers to our comprehending it, like the mediating noise that dulls our apprehension of what

is catastrophic in a televised news report. Even the poetry and self-reflexive poetics writing that is included in separate sections in *Drift* can be read to obscure the clear prose of the "Report" section. In the "Seafarer" and "Shake" sections, Bergvall creates modernized lyrical intertexts out of the Icelandic *Vinland Sagas*, the medieval Anglo-Saxon poem "The Seafarer," and early Gnomic Norse poems (185). While all of the lyrical material seems to point toward the theme of being lost at sea, the multilingual and fragmentary verse complicates rather than clarifies the subject's position vis-a-vis the account of tragedy.

Bergvall's performance and book problematize subject-dramatization as a response to events existing outside of a poem. In attempts to reflect on the humanitarian crisis of 21st century migration, both its lyrical and non-lyrical subjects' expressions are marked by struggle. We encounter non-lexical noise. The "Seafarer" poem breaks down into letters and phonemes at its conclusion, while the Norse translation in "Shake" concludes with handwritten hieroglyphics that become progressively more "illegible" due to a blotting of the print's ink. And in the mostly prose and autobiographical "Log" section, much of the discourse deals with the obstacles that the poet's own subjectivity presents in the composition of the work, especially the anxiety related to a loss of one's subjectivity during writing. The poet expresses how a distancing from the textual historical materials becomes a coping mechanism for her:

> So I let the writing find its place, work its way, without asserting too much control. (131)
>
> My role will be to shorten the narrative and relay the report's complex piece of memorialization, interpretation and investigation through live recitation. To

> register the event by recitation. Letting the recitation become a resonating chamber, a ripple effect. (134)

The overall effect of approaching the external and the historical through poetic subjectivity is allegorized as a "fog," and it encompasses a total loss of the self (139). Only returning to the course of the materials will allow the poet to find herself.

Looking at Bergvall's poetics of loss and direction leads me to a final question regarding Kerouac's subject-in-process. Bergvall concerns herself so much with an external object – in this case a human rights report – that it both replaces and displaces her own consciousness from the poem. I begin to wonder: did Kerouac ever truly lose himself, as he implied, through his sketching of external objects? One of the most conspicuous features of Kerouac's poetry is a voice that promotes his "Beat persona," an historically apposite character that Kerouac surely would have been satisfied to identify with. Kerouac does not merely fictionalize and narrate the Beat – he is also preoccupied with embodying his Bop prosody with the speech sounds, syntactical rhythms, discursive thought-processes, and even the vital energies of such a character. In some senses, the external reality that Kerouac is centering on and sketching is *himself*. This is not to say that his poetry is self-centered, or that the expansion of its forms would not serve some purpose within a 21st century poetics of political and social formation. Reinventing Kerouac's subject-in-process today would likely involve updating its slang and colloquialisms to meet contemporary standards. This in turn would allow the embodiment of contemporary poems with the personal and local languages of present-day, culturally-relevant subcultures.

But the true value of Kerouac's subject-in-process poetics to the present might lie, in fact, in its *asocial* aspects. Kerouac's self-reflexivity perhaps reaches its apogee in *Visions of Cody*

and the poems of *Mexico City Blues*, where extended representations of compositional thought are paratactically connected to subjective presentations of reality. These solipsistic moments allow the poet to address complex issues of Beat representation (and misrepresentation), including the dichotomy of the communal and the individual Beat. Where Kerouac might have developed multiple "singer" characters or performers, and made them more distinct through formal variance, he instead counters the Beat stereotype through an inward-looking multivocality. Exploding such a self-reflexive praxis today could potentially allow us to explore the more general dynamics of cultural and subcultural exchange in our society.

With regard to compositional physicality, I am imagining a 21st century Beat poetry that further deconstructs language, calling attention not only to the musicality of linguistic "flows," but to the mechanisms whereby thought words are influenced by sound. Kerouac's sound play and wordplay was not, as is often assumed, merely the byproduct of semantic thought, or his furiously fast typing. In his incorporation of the Joual dialect, use of portmanteaus, and onomatopoeia, one might see an orientation toward sound's usage that is more rational and symbolic, and less determined by "violent passage through the *chora*." I am intentionally referencing the dialectic introduced by McCaffery in his reading of Kristeva, because I am also imagining a Kerouac invested in Barthesian vocal granularity, or even the "liberation and promotion of the phonetic and subphonetic features of language to the state of a *materia prima* for creative, subversive endeavors" (162). New compositional technologies of jazz after Bop, especially those that involve atonality, might also be added to the picture of what Kerouac's subject-in-process looks like *after Kerouac*. The intention here is not simply to indulge the imagination in a game of compositional "what could have been"; rather there seems some critical imperative for such hypothesizing. We can directly infer from the statements of Coolidge and

others that the subject-in-process poetics of Kerouac were influential, and while we may not be able to identify poetic forms in Kerouac that are without precedent in modernism, there is inarguably innovation in the praxis that would combine those forms and reformulate the lyrical subject.

Another reason for drawing Kerouac into contemporary poetics is that, while we may acknowledge his influence, the lasting legacy of Kerouac's subject-in-process experimentation is by no means guaranteed. Criticism might overlook his praxis if it focuses too much on his persona. I mentioned above that Kerouac's poetic "Beat" subject is one that encourages its identification with the historical Kerouac. Often, his subject's tangential thoughts, references, sounds, etc., are patterned in such a fashion that they evoke Kerouac's persona. There is the risk that his construction of the subject will be seen merely as autobiographical rumination, cut into lines.

Poetic works for which such authorial signatures are front-and-center thus benefit from historicist critical studies that at least loosely connect an author's poetics to her biographical background. As we mentioned at the start, the playful subjectivity running through Eliot's *Prufrock*-era poems is part of what leads Marjorie Perloff to consider how his interpersonal relationships at that time might have been correlative. Although looking at poetic subjectivity through the lens of literary history always poses the risk of reading the poet's personal subjectivity into the poem, returning again and again to textual forms and their relation to poetic praxis more generally (as Perloff does so successfully) mitigates that risk. We should not read the poet's social identity at the time of composition into the compositional praxis (as cause), but we may want to hypothesize what a poet's compositional theories or ideas (about subjectivity or otherwise) contribute to the poetic forms that appear at a given moment.

The value of ending this study with *Zong!* and *Drift* is that the encounter between the subject and history in these works puts pressure on the writers I have previously discussed. To explain this effect requires that we return to what the initial goals of this study were. We wanted to recover from select poetic works an aspect of subject-formation that is pre-social, or something important and vital about poetic subjectivity which might be lost if we jump to a politics of positionality in our reading. Granted, there are serious reservations that must accompany such a focus on the pre-social aspects of the subject-in-process. This study's effort to frame the way jazz improvisation impacts Kerouac's poetry has precluded discussion of the masculine excess and misogyny in that poetry. Meanwhile, narrowly investigating how Susan Howe forms a subject out of the history of Lake George required that we not dwell on the reductionism in her portrayal of that modern day town. My primary interest in subject-in-process strategies and forms stems from the fact that they empower readers to inhabit a critical framework temporarily outside of ideology critique, where the interplay of subjects opens us up to the multiple available means for thinking about real-world objects. Thus our imagining a future Beat poet becomes a critical enterprise less invested in the question of how to inhabit an aesthetic community or subculture, and more invested in the question of how a poetic "self" gets formed. Once this latter, complex question is addressed, we may find that we are more well-equipped to critique the relation of the poetic subject to society at-large.

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