The Now Criticism: Vernacular Poetry Scholars from 1990-2005

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Abstract

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In the 1990s, the US poetry academy sought to create scholarship that represented diverse identities and appealed to public audiences. However, the poetry establishment misses a crucial opportunity to reconsider who might be said to count as a scholar, even as new forms of scholarship simultaneously flourished in nonacademic (or, vernacular) spaces. In response, this dissertation highlights a previously unacknowledged body of responses to poetry: vernacular poetry scholarship between the 1990s and early 2000s. This dissertation examines vernacular poetry scholarship that is highly creative, multimodal, and grows out of the excitement of cultural spaces that emerged at the end of the last millennium. Anglophone nonacademic critics connected to one another in order to share and interpret works of poets like Bob Kaufman, Audre Lorde, T.S. Eliot, and Sylvia Plath. This dissertation's analysis of nonacademic poetry scholarship helps to illuminate how humanities research emerges and evolves in community contexts.

Each chapter of this dissertation explores a different environment of vernacular research and exchange. Chapter one, "Performing 'Other People's Poetry:' Sampling and

Covering as Spoken Word Study," features embodied poetry criticism by spoken word artists including Tish Benson, Guy LeCharles Gonzalez, and Edwin Torres. Chapter two, "Poetry Scholarship for the Taking: Zine Textuality and Tactical Anthologizing," focuses on the criticism of "zinesters" who performatively explicate poems through writing and, frequently, collages that situate a poem's text next to writing and other cut-and-paste media. Chapter three, "'Lady Lazarus' and Me: Web 1.0 Poetry Criticism," focuses on early online criticism of Sylvia Plath's 1963 poem, "Lady Lazarus."

My findings attest to the vibrancy and diversity of Anglophone poetry criticism as a community embedded practice and invites the study of poetics to value and revisit the historical work of nonacademic scholars.

Overview

Introduction

An almost record-breaking crowd of 11,500 MLA convention attendees poured into the halls of New York City's Midtown Hilton in 1992, and literary theory was on just about every mind. For at least two decades prior to this momentous academic gathering, philosophical approaches to literature had shifted Anglophone academic scholarship away from the critical judgement of canonical works and toward the development, practice, and teaching of theory. Prominent professors who were trained as literary scholars were increasingly being identified (or self-identifying) with their approaches to text rather than the actual literary texts they studied and taught, and university syllabi across the US commonly included non-literary texts alongside more familiar literary forms. The future of literary studies (even this phrase came to feel increasingly unsuitable) seemed to hinge on what would come of these transformations to the discipline.

If we think of this MLA convention as a culminating point of the so-called theory wars, there was, however, no great contest between competing theories. Nor was this conference preceded by any sort of academic consensus on what theory even is—whether it represents a canon (Guillory), critical practice (Belsey), or an academic fad. Instead, the value and stability of theory-based inquiry *in general* had been prominently called into question by broader publics who felt disconnected. In response, scholars at the Hilton began asking frank questions of theories, from nascent third-wave feminism or New Historicism to the more staid deconstruction or psychoanalytic reading. Scholars turned collectively outward and wondered what broader publics think of these theories, how they might benefit from theory, and why they disdain or fail to consider so much theory. A

number of papers that year called for a similar solution: breaking the contemporary mold of academic writing on a surface level because academic styles had come to feel increasingly non-viable in broader culture and may have carried blame for theory's bad rap. Across a litany of different essays with varied political commitments and methodologies, it is not difficult to locate a prevailing assumption that popular audiences want to or ought to connect to literature (and poetry in particular) through academic-critical discourse. To democratically reform literary scholarship at this moment was to improve the connective tissue between publics and text, to reconnect broad audiences to literature.

In a panel chaired by Gerald Graff titled "Can Academic Criticism Be Popularized-and Should It Be?," Michael Bérubé, then an assistant professor at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, announces decisively: "the need is overwhelming for academic critics who can write for well-educated audiences or for subcultural communities" (91). Bérubé highlights the importance of constantly translating theory downward in order to address non-specialists as readers, which would, his thinking goes, result in a larger audience for academics and a more vibrant social life for theory:

> ...unless theory-speak gets translated into demotic vulgarisms *it don't*, as another Duke once said, *mean a thing*. It just doesn't signify at all. You can't rest content in the claim that academic work simply involves different knowledges and different registers from those of nonacademic work, because if Bakhtin is right, and he is, those knowledges and registers have to be in living contact and conflict with all manner of alien sociolects, including those of the "amateur" readers of the *Times Book Review* or *The Nation* or *Time* —

> and those of our caricaturists on the Right. This doesn't mean that all cultural critics have to renew their faith in the "general reader" and write in whatever fashion Robert Alter or David Lehman deems appropriate. (If we build a generalist journal in the cornfields, will s/he come and read it?) But it does mean we should try to imagine nonacademic readers who ask only that the languages of academic criticism be translated into their languages. (87)

Citing a number of American poetry's popular critics (e.g. David Lehman) and publications, Bérubé makes the case that theory only really matters when it lives on the ground, and hence only really lives in translation. Bérubé hopes that academics will write for readers who desire translated theory-speak. This conference paper, albeit with some self-aware irony, responds to common complaints about academic criticism, namely, that its investment in theory has made it overclever, myopic, and overly interested in academic questions. While Bérubé seeks to increase access to academic conversations, his paper describes participation in scholarly creation and community as one that remains grounded in a professor-to-professor discourse. Who can be said to participate in the creation of knowledges that matter is strictly limited, we can safely assume, to academic literary critics.

In a simultaneous panel (also held Dec 29, 1992, 8:30-9:45am), called "Framing the Frame: Theory and Practice," Charles Bernstein presents for the first time a well-known essay, "Frame Lock," that expands his prior critique of "official verse culture" to academic writing about poetics. "Frame lock" means flat writing about inherently angular and multivalent poetry, and it stems from Bernstein's observations as a recent initiate into

academic employment: ”universities reward conformism and conventionality under the name of both professionalization and currency.” Bernstein’s early 1980s critique of “official verse culture” takes aim at the mainstream poetry machine that “denies the ideological nature of its practice while maintaining hegemony in terms of major media exposure and academic legitimation and funding.” At MLA, Bernstein calls out a “repression of writing styles in the literary academy,” where theories are forced to work as tools in the system of advancement in university tenure and prestige, favoring a language of consensus over a more experimental language of disruption. Central to Bernstein’s critique is the observation that theory is being applied interchangeably to poetic analysis and that this produces the notion that poetic text exists as a stable artifact. A given theory (such as a feminist or deconstructive reading) likewise becomes a stabilizing procedure, such that one can do a reading with it and produce a result. Relatedly, Bernstein implies that hegemonic styles favor White Englishes (Bernstein’s description of academic theory as “strictly whitebread” is much to the point). Bernstein’s solution to poetry criticism’s problem, while far less developed than his critique, is to write in ways that are aesthetically and methodologically aligned with a studied theorist. To honor the language of theory, academic writers ought to recognize the call to theorize texts in analysis, rather than pinning down theory as a method and employing bland writing that in turn damages the revolutionary thrust of experimental poetics. The level of form cannot be sacrificed in the communication of ideas, and academics need to shift their writing and encourage graduate students to actually theorize poetry if, indeed, poetry shall remain a vital cultural force for, it follows, a public readership. Similar to Bérubé, we see in Bernstein the resolve to reform

critical practice. Ultimately, this call to reform the discipline maintains the elevated status and interpretive necessity of the academic poetry critic.

These two academic writers come from different places in an institutional and methodological sense—Bernstein an avant garde poet only very recently turned professor in 1992 and Bérubé a mainstream liberal lit critic—but each describes a problem of theory in relation to broader cultures of literary consumption. Bérubé seems intent on emphasizing a kind of *access to* theory, while Bernstein seeks to promote radical forms of academic writing, even if academic writers must thumb their noses at departments and their politics of career advancement. Despite these differences, both writers affirm a longstanding hierarchy of poetic interpretation that highlights the role of a critic who is installed in an academic institution. In different ways, each writer attempts to resolve the distance between poetry publics and the poetry academy by formulating new arguments for scholarly gatekeeping. That is, each describes a set of literary conditions where nonspecialists access poetic meaning through academic critics, and where academic critics remain the sole creators of meaningful scholarship.

What these academic writers show us is that the American poetry establishment of the 1990s wanted to revitalize academic scholarship in relation to broader publics. Yet what we do not see with them, or elsewhere in any significant way, is an attempt to seriously address the question whether academics are the only ones with something valuable to say about literature. What I see as perhaps the most stirring problem that would come to hang over the academic study of literature in the 1990s and early 2000s was not the theory wars or the unresolved relationship between multicultural canons and democratic participation as described by John Guillory (1993). Instead, the problem that

this dissertation seeks to confront and ultimately address is a set of deep assumptions about participation, namely, *who* gets to be counted as a poetry scholar. It is a problem of scholarship's value and visibility across identity positions and sites of literary research. Time and again, across political and theoretical divides, academics find common ground in redrawing the lines of participation to exclude vernacular and nonacademic thinkers from authentically participating in literary analysis of critical value.

And where this gatekeeping tendency in literary scholarship has often been felt the most—the research, criticism, and analysis of poetry—it is precisely here that we see an explosion of creative vernacular scholarship in the 1990s and early 2000s. The reason for this wave of scholarship can be undeniably attributed to the emergence of Web cultures, which gave broader audiences access to the exchange of ideas that was previously undreamt of. Other forms of scholarship took flight partially in relation to the expanding internet, and a number of important subcultural spaces and textual environments became sites of poetic discourse that have not been recognized. In this project I highlight the work of vernacular poetry scholars to demonstrate that there were indeed robust, vibrant groups and even communities that practiced poetry scholarship outside of academia. This dissertation fills in gaps in historical knowledge about poetics and poetry scholarship within the US and across other Anglophone environments by attending to the work of two dozen nonacademic scholars. Convening in self-organized environments with a sense of emergence and tremendous creativity, nonacademic poetry scholars created intellectual practices that centered identities, community building, and community needs in unconventional ways.

In the chapters below, I provide histories of nonacademic study that mess up or remix academic scholarly practice and take place in new sites. Vernacular scholars offer intellectual, performative, and critical responses to poetry from embodied positions in community space.[i] A Canadian teenager creates a vast personal web page with a multimodal essay about Sylvia Plath's nuanced understanding of death alongside personal writing, blinking graphics, and links to friends' pages. Spoken work poets gather in Brooklyn to pay tribute to the poet Bob Kaufman by covering his works in ways that are both creative and critical. A zine-making duo from Virginia collage cut and pasted lines from Black American poetries with images culled from magazine ads. All of these creative responses to poetry happen in emerging networks that often function as communities, where individuals contribute to visions of the future and find various needs met by others. All of these environments put at center the activities of making and exchange. These and other examples structure my account of community-based criticism, and they begin to provide the scholarly past we need in the academic discipline of English and literary studies. As self-organized, nonacademic intellectuals, they point a way forward for the study of poetry—that is, the inclusive notion of study that looks across different sites in responding to community needs. Moreover, these critics speak to the cultural vitality of poetry scholarship as it happened in the 1990s as well as its ongoing legacies into the 2020s.

Nonacademic or vernacular critics bring rich and creative approaches to poetic scholarship that imagine discourses of literary meaning and practices of making outside the available litany of conventional academic theories and genres by *living* literary criticism. This dissertation uncovers and explores networks where poetic study enjoyed a

vibrant life, and crucially, these networks do not conform to academic norms nor do they exist in relation to academic institutions. This project assembles and explores an archive of vernacular, nonacademic poetic criticism that provides opportunities to think toward alternative visions of scholarly poetic culture. I believe that there are inclusive futures in store for poetic scholarship that cross both the academy and nonacademic community spaces. In all their nonacademic glory, the poetic studies that I document in this project provide sometimes messy, oftentimes original, and invariably community-based accounts of poetic meaning.

Literary Scholarship and Participation

The participatory limits in literary and poetic scholarship that were being reinscribed in the 1990s, described in the above section, take root in longer disciplinary histories of English and literary studies. The expansion of the Modern Language Association (MLA) alongside an emerging American literary nationalism during and after WWI culminates in MLA president William A. Nitze declaring in 1929, "Henceforth, our domain is research" (121). Gerald Graff locates this moment as a decisive turning point in the development of the academic discipline of English as primarily a site of research. Where pedagogy once carried clout in peer reviewed journals, literary research methods became de rigeur post-1929. Graff emphasizes Nitze's use of the word "research" in drawing the lines of disciplinary history, but we may also look to the importance of the possessive pronoun—"our"—in Nitze's excerpted line, as to understand Nitze as announcing that MLA member scholars are the ones to do research on literature that could

be said to matter, or claiming literary research as *our* turf. The MLA announcement of a new research program simultaneously marks a legacy of research and a protection over this domain. Graff also locates the 1920s and 1930s as a time where criticism and scholarship emerge in competition under this broad paradigm of literary research. Specifically *academic* criticism promised to bring rigor to the previously amateurish and sentimental (coded not-so-covertly as feminine) analysis of poetry, while remaining committed to the ethic of literary appreciation (122). Scholarship, on the one hand, began to be associated with historical methods, whereas criticism sought to discuss literary value, yet it lacked specific methods and terms for describing such value.

Alongside the gradual emergence of academic criticism, The New Criticism develops out of post-WWI pedagogy in the UK and US, where prominent literary scholars, including Cambridge University scholar I.A. Richards, asked students to critically analyze poems with little to no reference beyond the text of a poem (Richards' well-known "experiments" spared even title and author). The 1938 teaching anthology *Understanding Poetry*, addressed to both teacher and student, sought to greatly expand access to poetry study and introduces the phrase, "the poem itself," in deference to poetic text as a unit of formal and aesthetic study. The New Criticism ultimately takes its name from a 1941 book of criticism by the academic and poet John Crowe Ransom. Whereas the introduction of *Understanding Poetry* creates an explicit opposition between poetic language and scientific language and welcomes students to track reactions and experiences of poems, Ransom advocates for a scientific method of close reading that strives to be rid of subjective impressions and reader experience. Ransom's methodology has been located in an anti-Communist cultural context, in opposition to the reading practices of Marxist sociological analysis (Hickman

and McIntyre 7). His writing highlights the usefulness of close reading to studying a curated set of modernist poetries featuring syntactical density and citationality, features that reward formal analysis and classroom discussions led by lecturers. In the post-WWII era, a generation of pedagogues sought to expand access to literary experiences for the academy's many new entries, while favoring professionalized forms of New Critical poetry reading in testing that stresses scientific approaches to poetry reading (Bertens 17). Later writers of the New Critical vein valorized the notion of an embedded organic unity as a marker of poetic quality, installing both an influential poetic ideology and all but requiring specialized academic training for the practice of poetic scholarship.

Yet, the New Critical pedagogical paradigm needs to be understood as progressively directed toward public access, where university newcomers were invited to engage in the practice of poetry scholarship. The moment of American university expansion of the 1940s-1960s welcomed students who were largely working class, first-generation college students, and New Critics sought to invite these students into literary scholarship on a large scale. The commitment to creating access on the level of scholarly participation—such as the method of close reading—would require institutions that are publicly accessible. However, this access-oriented pedagogy was installed in an institutional culture that tended to exclude Black, lower class, Indigenous, and other minoritized communities, and to devalue these community's knowledges when purportedly included. Participation in poetry scholarship under New Criticism became variously limited by one's racial and social identities.

A year after the 1992 MLA in New York City, John Guillory publishes *Cultural Capital*, which sought to excavate a broad range of 20th century literary teaching canons

and to explore the fate of theory for the 1990s. Demonstrating that canon formation is restricted to the institutions of the materially advantaged, Guillory suggests that we have put too much pressure on multicultural canons to function in a context of representative democracy. That is to say, the politics of being included on a syllabus are of a different order than the politics of democratic inclusion, yet we tend to conflate these two concepts of representation in debates. Guillory demonstrates how the rise of "vernacular literacy" in Britain is precisely what produces the 18th century category of "the literary" in a hierarchical relationship that "names the 'man of letters' as [literature's] producer" (123). Canons distribute socially elite language, and universities train the management class in this language. This institutional critique frames Guillory's chapter 4, "Literature after Theory: the Lesson of Paul de Man," which argues that theory functions as a canon in its own right. Guillory identifies the formation of literary theory as a parallel process to the opening of literary canons—to be more inclusive of Black, women, and non-White poets—that occurred after the 1960s (176). The "after" in the chapter's title reflects the prevalent sense among literary scholars in 1993 that theory was both very present as a structuring force of literary scholarship and simultaneously nonviable—theory was dying or already dead, yet virtually everywhere. The chapter takes a critical look at deconstruction in the American academy, which then operated like a cult that centered Yale-affiliated critic Paul de Man. His "rhetoricism" in literary scholarship paradoxically creates a way of making theory into a technical (professional-managerial) practice that positions itself as a correction to the "art" of criticism or appreciation (181). The paradoxes of this cult are evident in the necessity of disciples who performatively desire the academic critic and who produce and maintain a theory bureaucracy. Theory could have taken a direction that

connected across disciplines, but in the American academy, theory mostly or exclusively applies to literary analysis and builds a bureaucracy for institutional preservation.

While these developments are important to the academy, they do not represent the only narrative of academic writing about poetry. Below, I will describe a vein of poetry scholars (and other humanities scholars) who are useful to this project by defining the intellectual value of nonacademic people in relation to poetry consumption and use.

The Nonacademic Turn

In the long 20th century of poetry criticism, much academic poetry criticism emerges from a call to create research that approaches literature with a defined method. Because method tends to take shape in settings that are not broadly participatory, such as academic journal articles, these critics have rarely decentered and very rarely ceded their institutional authority in matters of poetry interpretation. A notable exception is critic and pedagogue Louise Rosenblatt, whose work locates university and even secondary literature classrooms as important sites for aesthetic and methodological debate and even the formation of interpretive guidelines. Rosenblatt's "transactional theory" of poetry interpretation, rooted in teaching literature at Barnard College during the 1930s, values the scholarship of nonspecialists within literary history. Rosenblatt seeks to identify interpretation within a given reader's habitus (experiences, biases, values), a relationship so important that the reader can be said to actually constitute the text in the act of reading. By not relying on metaphors of extraction, where meaning comes from or is extracted from a text, the need for a mediating critic vanishes under Rosenblatt. Transactional theory focuses on the relationship between text and of a given reader's position, and thus

encourages investigations of reader identity, power, language use, and institutionality. Other academic writers in the Rosenblatt strain—Stanley Fish, David Bloome, Janice Radway—seek to value the responses of nonspecialists to literature, if not to promote broad access to the creation of scholarship.

Around the millennium, a number of academic thinkers shifted critical attention toward nonprofessional poetry readers and nonacademic poetry audiences as constitutive elements of poetic culture. These writers help to reform our understanding of poetic cultures as inclusive intellectual communities, where the responses of regular people have mattered. Many of these writers recast the Marxist New Left historicism of the 1970s as down-up cultural studies, which became prominent in the US academy in the 1980s. David Kellogg's influential 1999 essay, "The Self in the Poetic Field," offers a schema for thinking about canonicity in contemporary American poetry while also considering the role of nonacademic audiences. Kellogg suggests that a poem's usefulness to audiences (whether individuals or communities) takes precedence over what poets' identities strictly *are*: "Less important than ethnic, regional, religious, or sexual identity per se is whether a certain poetry participates in, *or is read as participating in*, the social claims of one or more of these identities" (101). While his model is necessarily limited and incomplete, Kellogg pushes academic critics to consider contemporary poetry and histories of poetry in essentially community-based contexts. The point is not to erase identity features, but to suggest that poetries matter to communities because these poetries are useful to them. When a poem or poet is perceived as relevant to a community (for instance, in chapter 2 below, Audre Lorde's relevance to a Pittsburg queer community), we can discuss canonicity in a way that is more authentic to the community's experience.

In a 2010 article, Stephanie Burt returns to Kellogg's essay to ask, "What is nonacademic criticism...and what does it do that the other kind cannot?" Burt here approaches nonacademic in the sense of newspaper- and online-based reviewers of poems and collections. Despite diverging from this project's use of "nonacademic criticism," Burt describes features of nonacademic criticism in ways that resonate with the recovery aspect of this project: "Nonacademic criticism...looks for features in poetry that are not technical, not dependent on prior knowledge about a lot of other poetry, and not necessarily linked to any ongoing projects of scholarship or theory" and instead, nonacademics tend to provide "descriptions in terms of wisdom, attitude, tone, or in terms of how faithfully they represent events, or places, or character types, familiar from our own lives" (130). Burt is moving toward a framework for a nonacademic scholarship that replaces (academic) theory with relatability or embodiment as critical points of salience. Nonacademic criticism does not exist to translate the academy downward and outward, and it represents a separate sphere of poetic discourse and scholarship. Yet for Burt, all criticism seems to be caught in a professional binary: either *professional-Academic* or *professional-nonacademic* (literary journals, newspapers, magazines). As Burt writes, "'Nonacademic' and 'academic' here become categories, or boxes, of lenses, with many different lenses in each box." In this dissertation, nonacademic functions as a capacious umbrella of spaces that tend to be self-organized, under which various positions and identities become important. Relatedly, the critical compositions of nonacademic criticism that I study are inseparable from their environments (spoken word, zines, and Web 1.0). In some instances, identities are custom-made for an environment, such as a web user who uses the name "Christa" on her

blogger.com page but "Lady Lazarus" on her Angelfire-hosted home page (both environments contain Sylvia Plath criticism).

Joan Shelley Rubin's *Songs of Ourselves* (2007) examines the historical, longstanding (19th to mid-20th centuries), and distinctly American poetry naturalization practices that for a century were seen to convert different people into American citizens. Memorization, citation, and newspaper circulation connected across (and often explicitly sought to erase) difference in the effort to assimilate immigrants in a kind of poetry-fueled melting pot. Rubin also identifies poetry readers whose tastes complicate a neat separation between the texts of high and popular culture, where readers possessed "repositories of both the high and the popular—aware of, but not constrained by, a shifting boundary between them" (22). Thus Americans of all stripes found themselves between a regime of increasingly moralized poetry reading—for the so-called improvement of high schoolers and immigrants—and the oftentimes subversive reading practices that dismayed contemporary characterizations of canon and taste. Rubin demonstrates that canon formation is as much a product of later characterizations by academic historians than anything else, and readers themselves rarely read according to their class. Rubin shows that attending to nonprofessional readers subverts easy narratives of how people are thought to circulate and consume poetry (as well as popular "verse," as these terms were often used in contrast) in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

A number of studies track the linkages between poetry pedagogy and historical democratic participation, adding to Rubin's work. The work of Catherine Robson and Angela Sorby approaches poetry as something first encountered through formal school

learning—if not university academia, then another site of academic culture. Robson's *Heart Beats* (2012) studies a bygone American and British era of recitation, "where once grandparents, parents, and children, townsfolk and country-dwellers, rich and poor, were united by a joint stock of rich poetic knowledge" (2). Robson studies the cultural legacy of so much memorization, focusing on oft-recited poems like Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard'"—a poem that Robson names "the school's quintessential literary object" (129). Robson shows that Gray's poem acted as a cultural shorthand of the American literate, and finds that it was tied to understandings of class politics in the United States. "Elegy" represents cultural capital par excellence, and understanding not only its references to class (Robson identifies one speaker as a "scholarship boy"), but moreover its rhythms and cadence, signifies inclusion in post-Civil War United States society. An earlier work, Sorby's *Schoolroom Poets* (2005), identifies a "schoolroom canon" that has shifted with every generation since the antebellum period. When faced with the inheritance of pedagogical poems, schoolrooms react with two minds: by both enforcing continuity/tradition and inviting novelty. This means that the schoolroom is an important site for the shifting status of poems and even form. For instance, meter once considered "serious" in the 19th century becomes, in the 20th century, playful for adults and educative for young children. As with Rubin's historical analysis, Sorby locates the source of shifting canons in secondary and even elementary classrooms, a more distributed and less elite site of academic culture.

These projects are valuable to mine as cultural studies of historical poetics that specify the value of nonprofessional and nonelite poetry reading in longer cultural narratives. The perceived democratic value of poems and forms alongside the formation of

canons intersects with the dictates of classroom pedagogy and citizen formation—yet as Rubin and Sorby (and to an extent Robson) show, nonelite citizens have read poems in ways that help us redraw or question borders between popular and elite forms of reading. People we might refer to as ordinary or everyday folks read poetry that they were not supposed to, and the scholars who uncover these reading practices in turn complicate normative understandings of populist and highbrow divides, adding to the work of Andreas Huyssen and other scholars of modernism since the 1980s. However, the question of *how* these countless students and citizens read, interpret, critique, circulate, and study these poetries remains largely enshrouded, or merely guessed at, and thus these studies cannot speak substantively to how everyday readers or secondary students can be said to contribute to the *study of poetry* beyond opting to read certain poems (relatedly, the sense of "reading" in these projects is more aligned with literary consumption than theoretical interpretation). In addition, the present project differs from these studies as one that is not an educational history or study of historical methods of poetry instruction and their broader effects in culture. To this small list of scholarly works, we may also add, *Summa Lyrica* (1992), Allen Grossman's study that theorizes the elementary primer (the literacy textbook) as "constructing a culture in which poetry is intelligible" (Grossman 1992). For Grossman, it is both schooling institutions and the figure of schoolroom learning that undergird and implicitly structure forms of poetry reading that take place across culture. While not discounting the force of formal pedagogy in poetry reading, nor ignoring the fact that most people encounter poems in school in the US and UK, my project seeks to highlight those who study poetry in nonacademic environments.

Alongside cultural histories of nonelite poetry reading are studies of the political economy of poetic production, where historical poetics intersects meaningfully with nonacademic communities. Cary Nelson's landmark work *Repression and Recovery* (1989) locates forgotten Leftist poetries from the first half of the twentieth century, arguing that the production contexts of political poetries (from African American poets, women poets, and politically Leftist poets especially) reflect spaces and communities where poetry was useful to readers. Nelson extends his recovery and analysis project to material fragments that reflect the residue of these poetries' social uses. Other writers of the moment include Alan Golding, Robert von Hallberg, Joseph Harrington, Walter Kalaidjian, Jerome McGann, Michael Thurston, and Susan Schweik. These writers each strategically depart from the terms of New Critical analysis in order to highlight value that references poetry's usefulness to individuals and communities. Situating poetry's production and reception in community contexts allows us to value what New Criticism had previously ignored or disdained, what Nelson calls its "social function."

In *The Teaching Archive: A New History for Literary Study* (2020), Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan argue that nontraditional students have contributed significantly to literary theory. Their work seeks to counteract assumptions about an imagined critical past—theory as the output of solitary geniuses—and to instead highlight the work of students at institutions rarely valued by intellectual history. Developments in English disciplinary history that I allude to in this introduction also include a widening gulf between research and teaching in the profession, which is likewise signalled in the 1929 MLA address that announces a pivot to research. Of course, teaching would continue to structure the profession, but teaching also becomes increasingly devalued and casualized

into the 21st century. Buurma and Heffernan explain how theory is actually formed at institutions like HBCUs, state university branch schools, and community colleges, describing how it is co-created by students and teachers. Buurma and Heffernan find that the way we currently understand and use a theoretical past marginalizes everyday people from literary study. Their solution is to excavate the origins of theory in order to highlight the very material contributions of students and ordinary people, which disrupts accounts of solitary theorists and provides a framework for thinking about the impact of non-elite classrooms in humanities research.

Mike Chasar's *Everyday Reading: Poetry and Popular Culture in Modern America* (2012) is the first significant example that accounts for vernacular poetry consumption by tracking the historical residue of what Chasar calls everyday poetry readers. Quite uniquely, Chasar focuses his analysis on neither the canons and politics of the classroom nor the production of poems in a social context, but rather on how nonspecialists incorporate poetry into daily routine, lived experience, and private or public discourse—Chasar's work on nonacademic poetic culture partly inspires and continues to guide mine. *Everyday Reading* looks to a 20th century where printed poetry was widely consumed in order to understand, as Chasar writes, "how and why millions of people read the poetry they did; how and why that poetry influenced the reading, mass media, and communication practices we experience today; and how, at times, that poetry intersected with literary culture in the United States (8). The situation of poetry in "the lives of ordinary readers" often mirrors that of poetry in "twentieth-century American popular culture," and this connection matters in order to better understand the distinction between modernist and popular poetry reading habits. We see mainstream uptake of highbrow modernism on

television and radio; as well, parodies of modernist verse redouble as serious meditations on poetic language. Studying poetry in everyday contexts exposes the bonds that connected people, often at trying times. To the extent that poems were consumed, they were being shared interpersonally. At a number of points in his analysis, Chasar contrasts his approach to understanding poetry readers to that of the Poetry Foundation's 2006 study, "Poetry in America" (Bradburn et. al). In obvious ways, Chasar departs from the Poetry Foundation's survey data methodology and instead uses historical cultural and textual studies methods, from Stuart Hall and Cary Nelson, in order to track developments in uptake and appreciation. In less obvious ways, Chasar's archive of readers, as with mine, would not likely be categorized as "intentional" poetry readers by the Chasar studies patterns and exceptions of poetic reception in episodes of the American 20th century, including his grandmother's small archive of poems. The happenstance, sharing, and everydayness that characterizes the incidence of poetry in community life does not lend itself to the categories used by Poetry Foundation.

Methodology

My archive of vernacular poetry criticism presents an opportunity to explore the overlap between participatory cultures and poetic cultures. I understand participatory culture as making that is interpersonal and tied to a common environment or cultural set. Communications scholar Henry Jenkins coined the term participatory culture in a 1992 book, *Textual Poachers*, which analyzes the making and identity practices of girls in spaces of tv fandom. Not coincidentally, it is during the 1990s that Jenkins locates fans who take advantage of emergent ways to self-organize around interests. For example, we can

contrast pre-90s Star Trek fandom, confined largely to postal correspondence and in-person conferences, to the swiftly expanded frontiers of web-based Klingon translation and web page networks. Elsewhere, youth movements like riot grrrl forged ambitious, anarchistic media communities through the national and international distribution of Xeroxed zines. Hip hop culture blossoms into localized alternative scenes of intergenerational sampling. These expanded horizons of self-organization owe much to the emergent internet, what we now call Web 1.0. As a space apart from everyday life, Web 1.0 was topically organized in an infrastructure of interests, such that those with access and know-how were able to take part in this scaling up of interests and even build community with people they may have never otherwise encountered. Online or otherwise, we may now think of these groups as participatory cultures and can observe how much these cultures influenced future arenas of technology, commerce, education, and more. Participatory cultures also anticipate some elements of social media and produce nascent forms of democratic organizing (Jenkins Boyd Ito). People who felt invited to participate in these cultures sometimes can be said to own the culture. Investigating participatory culture allows us to determine where trends begin, but moreover to explore what might have been and what may be across all of these realms.

As Henry Jenkins, dana boyd, and Mimi Ito point out, the "truly" participatory remains a horizon, a dreamt-of set of relations where lingering racism, sexism, linguistic bias, and other forms of oppression no longer structure the material environments and discourses of participatory environments. Similar to these writers, my account of participatory culture in nonacademic poetic scholarship focuses on who can be said to

participate and in what ways with an eye to who is included and excluded. The truly participatory is, for me, a productive horizon.

Relatedly, my historical critical studies methodology focuses on textuality. As I show in this dissertation, paying attention to pieces of nonacademic criticism calls for simultaneous attention to the textual forms that environments promote and permit. It is difficult and counterproductive to generalize how nonacademic criticism looks or works with principles that are abstracted from a particular environment. In every chapter, I provide histories of scholarly environments in order to demonstrate how poetry scholarship is both shaped by and shapes cultural spaces.

My historical period coincides with the growth of the spaces I study in the US and abroad: 1990 marks the beginning of the World Wide Web, the beginning of the riot grrrl movement (which radically popularizes zines for a new audience), and the first National Poetry Slam. On the other end, 2005 marks the momentous emergence of popular social media, which concludes the era of "Web 1.0" and irrevocably shifts the cultures of zines and spoken word. For instance, after 2005, zines and their communities migrate online and most spoken word audiences begin to experience performances online via YouTube. Over the 15 years that I track, people connected in these spaces in order to exchange and proliferate ideas about poetry, and these exchanges are today available through archives housed in a variety of institutions.

One practical issue (or, from another vantage, opportunity) is my lack of direct interlocutors. Nobody else is trolling UseNet forums from 1992 for Sylvia Plath references. Yet because the poetry academy of the 1990s was uninterested in vernacular poetry

scholarship, and likely unaware of it, one goal of this project is simply to demonstrate the abundance of this scholarly work and to allow these scholars to respond to poems in their own terms. Historically, a couple issues have actively blocked the visibility of nonacademic criticism: its documentation, since so little has been collected in archives that are themselves precarious, and its occasional erasure by academic culture. This dissertation attempts to resolve both issues at once by gathering materials through original research, with materials organized by scholarly environment, and by highlighting the ways in which nonacademic scholarship creates meaning in terms other than, yet relevant to, conventional academic literary study. The residue from 1990s and 2000s vernacular criticism dwells in online forums, in anarchist library stacks, and in university VHS special collections. Academia, via university archives, is thus also a site where access to these materials becomes possible. Whereas vernacular poetry scholarship has always existed alongside poetry, what distinguishes the period I study, and one of the reasons I approach it, is the sheer quantity of available materials documenting vernacular poetry criticism. Taken together, the documents I analyze (including zines, video and audio files, and web pages) represent an unexplored record of poetry criticism that expands the terms of and allowable critic positions for the history of poetry scholarship.

Prior to the 1990s, there have been myriad community-based and nonacademic critical poetry readerships (including several notable feminist, Black arts, Latinx, and Indigenous writing and reading communities), and I hope other scholars and historians will seek out everyday, vernacular, and nonacademic intellectual practices that emerge around these and other community-based poetry criticisms. The 1990s through mid-2000s are unique for the amount of readily available archived material, which I study as a result of its

proximity to me via archives that I am able to come in contact with as a graduate student based in Seattle.

Key Terms for this Dissertation

I apply the terms "scholarship" and "criticism" to the culture I study and I do not do so as a way to uplift the individuals and communities I study to the level of the academy. Rather, what this project hopes to achieve is an authentic acknowledgement of the scholarship about poetry that is already happening in nonacademic community settings. Poetry critics in spoken word, Web spaces, and zines demonstrate a commitment to studying culture from outside of academic institutions and positions, and academic people can pay attention to these practices to glimpse how a poetic scholarship might look when it takes place in and responds to communities. Helpful to my analysis of vernacular study is Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, which seeks to reconfigure the category of study away from its familiar institutional forms that have erased the irrevocably intellectual work of working-class communities. Desiring to move away from the capitalist logistics they identify with university pedagogy and to instead align with possibilities of learning they identify within working class and Black radical traditions, Moten and Harney write:

> The point of calling it "study" is to mark that the incessant and irreversible intellectuality of these activities was already there…To do these things is to be involved in a kind of common intellectual practice. What's important is to recognize that that has been the case–because that recognition allows you to access a whole, varied, alternative history of thought. (110)

Moten and Harney seek to further expand the scope of recognized intellectual labor. They write, "These activities aren't ennobled by the fact that we now say, 'oh, if you did these things in a certain way, you could be said to be have been studying.'" They instead formulate the concept of study around spaces where Black and other marginalized peoples may self-organize in order to learn while not being tied to academic production schedules. Moten and Harney provide language that seeks to divorce the value of intellectual work from capitalist protocols, which helps to frame the self-organized poetry study I find in zines during the 1990s and early 2000s.

Poetry criticism and poetry scholarship exceed academic spaces and academic positionalities, and the way we approach these terms helps us to specify the value of new perspectives in poetic culture. Poetry criticism (criticism) and poetry scholarship (scholarship) are, quite simply, responses to poems; as well, responses to a poet or poetry more generally. I do not divide these terms on the basis of evaluation or context, and I connect them to one another throughout my discussion. I find it most useful to understand criticism as any response to poetry. A response may be individually embodied as critical feeling, communally directed in critical activism, or be some other kind of response. In this project, the term criticism and its adjectival, critical, do not necessarily reference discernment or, as is often the case in colloquial speak, negative judgement.

Unlike Mike Chasar, I do not use the term "everyday" in my analysis of nonacademic and nonprofessional scholarship about poetry. My framework of nonacademic or nonprofessional contrasts not only to Chasar, but also to Raymond Williams and Henry Jenkins who describe culture that is ordinary (Williams) or mundane (Jenkins). I instead

highlight poetry criticism and scholarship in vernacular, nonacademic, nonprofessional environments and seek ways for it to speak back, instructively, to academic poetic culture.

In addition to employing the language of participation in my analysis of vernacular and nonacademic scholarship, I develop the framework of "community-based criticism" as simultaneously descriptive and aspirational. To be truly community-based is to center, and appropriately allocate resources to, the greatest needs in the most ethical way. Internet communities, or youth zine networks, can hardly be held up as bastions of community-based scholarship in this sense, as they are rife with tangles of bias and exclusion (see Mimi Thi Nguyen 2010). Yet the interpersonal relations initiated by emergent spaces occasionally leads to moments of unexpectedly beautiful exchange: a sort of, I offer this poem for you because you need it, or we need it. In chapter 2, for instance, a critic named Carol writes in a 1992 zine titled *Queer Intercourse*: "As we queers get ready for pride week in pittsburgh in june, joining to celebrate ourselves and our struggles, let us celebrate [poet Audre] Lorde by doing what she does so effectively...she lives her version of the liberation for all people...Lorde constantly forges connections within and across [identity] categories." The zine in which this quotation appears, with dozens of queer poems and advertisements for queer art shows, is an extension of Pittsburg's queer community in which poetry criticism becomes an inclusive community praxis. Carol provides community-based commentary on several Lorde poems from a place of identification, embodiment, and generosity.

As well, my dissertation seeks to explore—and is partly structured around—vernacular theories. Despite my criticism of theory in institutional culture, I seek to affirm

theory as vernacular practice. Theory is another key term in this dissertation. Theory here does not seek to define general interpretive principles, instead, theory puts literature in relation to identity and a problem. When Dina, a teenager living in Canada, describes the "virtual death" of Sylvia Plath, she provides a description of self-harm in Plath's poetics that is also deeply personal for Dina. In addressing a personal history in a poetic study, Dina creates theory that helps us understand her compositional environment. Web 1.0 offers web users like Dina opportunities to create and connect through death, that is, virtuality and death produce a web of community.

The terms scholarship and criticism are bound together in this dissertation, and the way I use them confounds their opposition by emphasizing their overlap and similarity. They are more or less interchangeable in order to put context into focus. This breaks from mainstream definitions of scholarship and criticism. Jonathan Culler, writing in T*he Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (4th Edition, 2012), provides definitions of scholarship and criticism that leave open the possibility of their overlap, writing, "criticism is often opposed to scholarship: the latter produces information, while the former may use such knowledge but offers interpretation and opinion. Yet this is an opposition that many scholars and critics quite reasonably would contest: scholars cannot produce good scholarship without interpreting and evaluating, and critics must be at least minimally knowledgeable to produce valuable criticism" (316-7). According to Culler, criticism is "any sort of writing about literature" (317). While this definition is somewhat inclusive of nonacademic perspectives, it also limits forms of scholarship to writing. My approach to scholarship and criticism embraces a wider swath of creating making, such as performed response, collage, and editing. In addition, the distinction between scholarship and

criticism that has taken shape over the 20th century does not matter in vernacular criticism/scholarship, and I use these terms more or less interchangeably.

This project's approach to scholarship is informed by Moten and Harney and contrasts to the circulation of scholarship in the 1990s poetry establishment that Berube and Bernstein found themselves in. In their 1992 MLA papers, Berube and Bernstein conceived of scholarship as a dividing line that separated identities: on one side, the creators of scholarship, on the other, a broad public of potential students or, as the new thinking went, audiences for more accessible or more experimental academic writing about poetry.

I approach archives as performative environments. Accessing materials is a dance. I touch them, I am touched by them, and we each transform. As I dig through zine crates or emulate images on screens, I leave fingerprints, accrue coffee rings, and contribute to bit rot. Archives are temporally performative in relation to research. They are spaces of exchange, creation, and community.

Outline of Chapters

In three chapters, I explore three nonacademic environments that each feature distinct histories, critical positionalities, and scholarly norms. All chapters demonstrate different connections between identity and poetry criticism.

Chapter 1 of this dissertation, "Performing 'Other People's Poetry:' Sampling and Covering as Spoken Word Study," features embodied criticism by spoken word artists including Tish Benson, Marc Kelly Smith, and Edwin Torres. Spoken word is an especially

rich site of scholarship, where the audience (its energy and vibe) is a constitutive element of critical performance. In an example of a critical audience-involved performance, poet Guy LeCharles Gonzalez performs his slam competition piece, "Fulano" in 1999. This piece contains a scene of protest and destruction, where slam performers fluent in Whitman, Neruda, and *Aloud* (a printed collection of spoken word and slam poets) join together in collective destruction of academia's proverbial Ivory tower. In a recording, the audience roars and interjects as Gonzalez crescendos: "*flames* shooting from our fingertips ["al-RIGHT!"], our *names* written in *ash*, for *all* ["yeah!"] to see." In the room, there is a communal imagining and reckoning: a slam poetry community performs the toppling of mainstream poetic culture (as Jericho) with its noise.

Chapter two, "Poems for the Taking: Participatory Poetry Study in Zines," focuses on the criticism of "zinesters," or individuals who performatively explicate poems through writing and, frequently, collages that situate a poem's text next to writing and other cut-and-pasted media. A zine's portability reflects the context in which it is produced, which is a non-commercial, frequently community-based context that allows for improvisation, opinion, and what may be variously termed inconsistency (in defiance of standard syntax or grammar) or error (with no professional copy editing). The design of zines thus contributes to riot grrrl communities, queer communities, etc., as tactical print media. I contextualize the revolutionary textuality of zines as a modification of Michel de Certeau's writing on tactical media. A New York City-based teenager named Amalle provides a theory of zines-as-vandalism that shifts the available terms of analysis offered by de Certeau. Vandalism damages the integrity of marketplace commodities or useful equipment. The zines I feature frequently include the destruction of academic anthologies, demonstrating a

connection between tearing and transformation in poetic scholarship. Graffiti transforms the undifferentiated space of an institutional bathroom stall into a unique site of cultural production, reusing industrially produced materials as a context for expression. Likewise, zines destroy the monotonous property of an anthology and reassemble the text in a photocopied noncommercial zine, transporting poetic language while also transforming it. I highlight the work of zinesters of color as well as zine-based scholarship about poets of color.

Chapter three, "'Lady Lazarus' and Me: Web 1.0 Poetry Criticism," focuses on early online criticism of Sylvia Plath's 1963 poem, "Lady Lazarus." This chapter focuses on the emergence of vernacular poetry criticism alongside the development of the web. I specifically focus on online criticism of a single Sylvia Plath's poem, "Lady Lazarus," because this text anticipates experiences of being online that web users connected with. Plath's text formulates the utopian possibilities of being reborn online while also serving as a resource to future web users who navigate marginalization on the early web. The Plath critics that I study below reflect that Web 1.0 is a third important space of vernacular poetry exchange and criticism, where internet users formed online identities around the text and persona of "Lady Lazarus." The dynamics of identity and power in the production of nonacademic poetry criticism that I highlight in the two preceding chapters are heightened in the most important emergent cultural space of the 1990s and early 2000s—Web 1.0. The first decade of the publicly available web, known to digital historians as Web 1.0, features a significant corpus of poetry scholarship that, much like spoken word and zines, does not conform to a hierarchy of poets, critics, and readers. Everyday people adopted internet identities (usernames and web personas) to share and discuss poems in

their own terms. The online development of poetry criticism mirrors the development of the web more generally. The early internet was difficult to access and navigate as a mass of forums that only admitted users with an institutional credential (such as a Harvard University or IBM email address), and poetry criticism was greatly limited by the interface and user requirements. As the web became a more freely accessible space of multimodal making, communities of performative poetry critique flourished. With the advent of search algorithms and social media, however, the forms of robust making that pertained to online poetry criticism withdrew. While communities sometimes persist after the closure of Web 1.0, vernacular participation in poetry criticism flattens.

Humanities Research Matters

Connecting studies of poetic and participatory cultures, my dissertation ultimately seeks not only to understand the shape of vernacular poetry criticism, but to find a means of connecting community-based intellectual practices to the cultural inquiry that happens in academic spaces. Although this introduction opens with a critique of academic scholarship and its investment in a participatory hierarchy, which tends to render invisible the work of nonacademic scholars, I have since found life-changing experiences of poetry in academic environments that directed me toward this dissertation project. I had fruitful college classroom experiences with poetry, and then, working at an arts nonprofit in Seattle, I became a creative writing teacher and youth worker. It was here that I discovered how poetry is not of merely symbolic value to communities, but can literally call a community into being. As a graduate student, I began to focus on national literary cultures

and grew interested in poetry curriculum, and while researching American and Irish secondary poetry education history, I kept discovering examples of nonacademic critical engagement with poetry. This dissertation explores ecosystems of archived work that are wholly nonacademic and rife with creativity and collective impulses. This project grows out of an interest in how young people are invited into communion and community with poetry in school, and it moves in a direction that seeks to affirm the intellectualism inherent in community, in our ever-changing sense of that term. In addition, this direction points to the community that can and will continue to exist in academic cultures.

Yet there are risks to this research—for instance, what if a nonacademic critic greatly misrepresents a poem? Or, what if, in an attempt to make nonacademic work legible and interesting to an academic audience, I misrepresent and do damage to the nonacademic critic? As this project progressed, I came to discover that, in all of this, there is good risk in letting nonacademic critics speak for themselves. It is good for academia to include more perspectives that are less gated, less "lensed." To once again invoke Moten and Harney, this dissertation project is not making an analogy between the real criticism of the academy and the "kind of" criticism happening on the ground, but rather I am daring to recognize that scholarship is happening all over and that it can help to direct our future work. Similarly, I hope not to idealize an organic and always virtuous community-based criticism (or, insisting it is virtuous simply because it is *not* academic). Over the pages to come, I dwell in the issues and problems of representation and access that tends to favor White middle class people in participatory cultures of poetic scholarship. I nonetheless want to affirm the possibilities that emerge for scholarship when we pay attention to intellectual formations happening at nonacademic levels. I am starting conversations that I

hope will continue. If we continue to discount the community contexts of cultural criticism, we are left with the growing distance between academia and community needs. Conversely, if we find ways to open our discipline up to community-based cultural criticism, we may find that the intellectual partners we need have been here all along.

chapter 1.

Performing "Other People's Poetry:" Sampling and Covering as Spoken Word Scholarship

You know what the problem is with you, homie? You don't read other people's poetry.
Lemon Andersen

Overview

This chapter inaugurates my exploration of vernacular poetry criticism in the 1990s and early 2000s. Below, I examine spoken word artists who reimagined the practice of poetry criticism through scholarly performances of existing poems. With a few exceptions, spoken word poets do not commonly use the frame of scholarship to refer to their poetry performances. Much more common in spoken word culture is the phrase, "other people's poetry," and the practice of studying and critically performing non-original poetry—scholarship that goes by other names. To different archives of spoken word I bring the frame of scholarship and relevant histories of poetics research. As I relayed in my introduction, I frame this work as scholarship not to import academic culture and elevate these practices to academia's level, which often tends to be imagined as a more sophisticated, or higher, place, but instead to recognize intellectual practices and legacies that are endemic to spoken word cultures.

In fact, scholarly performances in spoken word shift the boundaries of what we know poetry scholarship to be. The performances discussed in this chapter, all of them from the United States, remix how and where the critic speaks—not only because these

poetry scholars and critics often address crowded barroom audiences. While it is certainly the case that spoken word artists privately study other people's poetry (often studying devoutly and for years) in order to learn and hone their craft, these performers also bring nuanced interpretations of other people's poetry to the stage in order to communicate scholarly findings to audiences and to other artists. The scholarship of spoken word artists is an important yet virtually unstudied component of poetic culture, as it both establishes new poetic lineages and uniquely foregrounds the relationship between textual critique, embodiment, and local communities of poets and audiences. These innovations are relevant to poetry criticism in all its locations. In this chapter, I find that spoken word poets and their audiences created a culture of scholarship in performance that offers an alternative and simultaneous development to the academic discourse of poetics in the 1990s. Scholarly performances bring creativity, style, and embodiment to other people's poetry and often engage forward-looking institutional critique.

Across all of the instances that I highlight, perhaps the most resonant consequence of the poetry scholarship in these communities is the breakdown of academically established divisions between poets, poetry readers, and poetry scholars. Spoken word performances offer new forms of participation in scenes that aim toward inclusion and an anti-establishment poetic praxis. By revisiting scholarly performances between 1990 and 2005, I hope to gain a more complete understanding of one important arena of vernacular poetry criticism that flourished around the millennium.

(Moving Past) Spoken Word Trouble

Before I cite specific performances, I want to address a binary cultural treatment of spoken word, a certain spoken word trouble that continues to manifest in the present day.[ii] Spoken word's explosive popularity in the 1990s extended everywhere from sitcoms to high school curriculum. With so many eyes and ears tuned in to its frequencies, spoken word becomes one of the 1990's focal points of contemporary arguments for poetry's vitality, on the one hand, or its decline, on the other. Take, for instance, the well-known criticisms of Harold Bloom (slam poetry is "the death of art"), or Luis Rodriguez, who neatly characterizes these conflicts in his line: "spoken word is either the best thing to happen to poetry or the worst" (Rodriguez 22). Working within this growing divide, a number of prominent voices in the popular press have continually supported seemingly neat oppositions—between spoken word's mass appeal and mainstream poetry's limited membership of sophisticates, between the streets and the institution, between noise and poise, between confessionalism and craft. Throughout these oppositions also exist raced expectations—that spoken word culture puts Black people and other people of Color at the center and academic poetic culture is historically White. In so many ways, these oppositions are produced by an American racial context of lingering institutional White supremacy. Spoken word tends to be approached through oppositions, and moving past these becomes a necessary first step in ethically approaching spoken word traditions and communities. Because these oppositions do not arise naturally, and do not characterize either academic or spoken word poetry, I take care in my analysis to avoid relying on them or reinscribing them.

These oppositions tend to most dramatically erupt when contrasting spoken word to academic culture. However, even as spoken word poets often speak back to academia

through institutional critique (as with poets Guy LeCharles Gonzalez and Tehut Nine in the pages below), these two spheres also interact and collaborate. The present state of the spoken word archive reflects how complex and interpenetrated academic and spoken word poetic cultures have become in the decades since the 1990s. In order to write this chapter, I first needed to locate recordings of spoken word performances of other people's poetry and navigate working in these different archives. There are relatively few videos from the era that are made publicly accessible online (YouTube begins in 2005), and most of the audio and visual recordings I accessed were housed in university archives or privately stored. A number of spoken word spaces are both nonacademic and academic at once. For instance, The Performance Poetry Preservation Project is a public resource of analog and digitized recordings from local and vernacular spoken word "scenes," and this resource is located at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire. The Bob Holman collection is a similar archive housed at NYU.

It is tempting to imagine that these archives reflect a set of vernacular practices that struck a bitter but necessary bargain with academia in order to survive. Rather, what is more evident is the coalition and collective energy between spoken word communities and academic institutions in the present day. My own experiences during the research phase of this project bear this out. Reaching out to spoken word poet and quasi-academic writer Susan Somers-Willett in 2020, I was immediately embraced by an international group of slam activists and archivists (both academic and nonacademic) who supplied me with dozens of well wishes, video files, audio recordings, and email addresses to follow up with. The community was on hiatus during the pandemic, and since some of the venues that had hosted spoken word for decades were at risk of closing, community preservation was on

many minds. As I spoke with members of this suddenly online community, I found that academia is never concerned with devaluing spoken word, and spoken word is hardly anti-academic. Instead, spoken word criticizes forms of institutional power that exclude and devalue its artists and the communities they come from. There are scholars of spoken word featured in this chapter who hold academic positions (as lecturers or even tenured professors) and who are simultaneously spoken word poets embedded in local scenes (Javon Johnson, Susan Somers-Willet). Others are spoken word poets and nonacademic writers who occasionally teach at a wide variety of learning institutions (Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz, Mark Kelly Smith, Patricia Smith). In practice, spoken word is bound up in communities that intersect with academia, and a vibrant, international, academic-nonacademic community celebrates the histories and politics of spoken word culture. That I was welcomed is significant because I am an outsider to spoken word and an academic poetry scholar. Since the early 1990s, most academic poetry scholarship has failed to highlight spoken word histories in any meaningful depth. While my reach (my experiences, methodology, and comprehensiveness) is variously limited, I seek in this chapter to respond to the generosity of the spoken word community by celebrating the intellectual and scholarly legacies put in place by poets of the 1990s and 2000s, and in doing so, to confront and complicate oppositions that tend to structure accounts of spoken word in broader culture.

My approach examines what many presume to be academic (that is, scholarship and criticism) in the nonacademic. Also, I uncover complex practices around identity and performances that are not reflected in common characterizations of spoken word as simple confessionalism, often characterized as the public announcement of one's private truths.

The below performances summon identities and reflect political stances with careful intention and direct these performances to specific audiences. The performances that happen on stage are shaped by contexts that are local and sometimes very immediate, and spoken word enacts a complex relation to orality in poetry. Below, poets do not recite poems that exist in a stable textual form elsewhere, but rather they creatively embody poems that are designed for occasions. Practices around other people's poetry provide a focal point for examining the performance of identity and for scholarship in spoken word in ways that may move past oppositions and point toward an inclusive culture of participation of poetic culture. And finally, in this chapter I seek to highlight the diversity of scenes and performers as well as the experimentation that begins with identity. My discussion will highlight the way that spoken word artists, especially those from marginalized communities, find connection in poetic culture through scholarship and performance, and these conditions often frame participation.

As with other chapters, this exploration seeks to organize practices in vernacular poetry criticism during the 1990s and early 2000s while also acknowledging the limitless complexity and activity that is not being represented by my examples. The below examples come from mostly urban and entirely US-based slam competitions and spoken word open mics. However, spoken word is far from limited to these contexts, as it can be found everywhere from rural communities in Madagascar to Chinese college campuses (see Wells 2018). Rather than attempt a neat survey of spoken word culture in the 1990s and early 2000s, this chapter moves between sites that I discovered online, in books, and in university archives that are *incidentally* all within the US and useful to understanding the complexities of embodied performative poetry criticism in spoken word. Undergirding my

investigation is the belief that scholarly practice is the work of learning, and it is thus in no way confined to academic institutions. Spoken word poets align their artistic practice with social change efforts, and to that end, other people's poetry plays a significant and understudied role. Because of its visibility, it is important to consider, yet too rarely considered, how spoken word artists may have understood their work and communities to sit against a broader poetic culture that includes scholarship.

In addition, spoken word provided openings for a generation of poets of Color to lead with occasional visibility in poetic culture, and I would like to explore the consequences of spoken word as an access point to poetry and poetry criticism for members of Black, Latinx, and other minority communities. Ultimately, I focus on spoken word to think with its vernacular poetry critics in order to understand some of the consequences for poetry as a past, present, and future source of community-based knowledge. Such a hope is not predicated on a simple opposition between academic culture, or academic poetry reading, and its non-academic counterparts. Rather, what undergirds my approach is a commitment to seeing that future forms of poetry scholarship better recognize and respond to community needs, beginning with those communities most affected by racism, capitalism, and state violence. Paying deeper attention to more histories and models of poetry analysis makes way for future synthesis to take place. Focusing on the experiences of those who have been marginalized by academic literary analysis likewise points us forward together.

Grabbing the Mic as Scholars

In a now decade-old online video, spoken word artist Lemon Anderson explains to a live audience how he made it in the poetry world of the 1990s, and along the way, Lemon provides a rare account of the role of poetry scholarship within spoken word. This talk, viewed on TED's YouTube page, is not itself from the era under investigation, but it provides a firsthand meditation on being a participant in the era while introducing the concepts I seek to better understand in this chapter. As with all of the poets I study in this chapter, Lemon does not use the terms "poetry scholarship" or "poetry criticism" when he describes the reading and literacy practices that align with these frameworks. Lemon explains that he fell under the tutelage of pioneering performance poet Reg E. Gaines, where Lemon carved out a distinctive style, not of writing original text, but of performing what he calls "other people's poetry." Lemon describes a pivotal moment in 1996, where Gaines handed over a book: the collected works of poet Etheridge Knight. By privately studying these poems, Lemon learns to connect his lived experiences to a new performance style, recalling: "what Etheridge Knight taught me was that I could make my words sound like music. Even my small ones, the monosyllables, the *ifs, ands, buts, whats*. The gangster in my slang could fall right on the ear." Studying Knight, Lemon learns to "pull the mic away" and "attack the poetry with [his] body." Entering a lineage of Black poetry performers, Lemon brings his carefully wrought style to countless performances, including one on the HBO program *Def Poetry Jam*, where he performs Knight's "Dark Prophecy: I Sing of Shine," a poem composed in the Black oral tradition of toasting. Lemon performs this cover on both the award-winning Broadway show that ran from 2002-2003 and the HBO series, produced by Russell Simmons, which aired from 2002-2007.

The present chapter focuses on examples from archived spoken word culture of the 1990s because, as Lemon's piece makes clear, it is at this place of embodiment, audience, and vernacular poetry study that staid academic hierarchies begin to break down and alternate orderings of poetic culture emerge. Lemon's non-academic scholarship is evident in his performance of Gaines through the performative lens of Knight, an act of intertextual embodiment designed for a specific occasion. In his movements and vocality, Lemon is simultaneously the astute reader of a poetic text (Gaines's famous piece), a scholar who interprets and versions text for an audience, and a poet who makes the words his own. Indeed, Lemon's cover version differs in a number of ways from Gaines's written and recorded versions, and YouTube comments attest to ways that Lemon's cover of the poem *feels* original (for example, user valfitness responds to some of these commentators: "You payed very little attention. It was not his poem he was doing a rendition of it. And a damn good job at it!"). In addition, Lemon helps to explain how Black poets and Black poetries such as Etheridge Knight's helped to reconceptualize the value of poetry performance as scholarship.

Scholarly performances like Lemon's may also have lasting impacts on an audience's understanding of a poem. Lemon's performance of Gaines's cautionary ballad about desperation and poverty is presented as a case in point about a young man finding mentorship and redemption through the arts (elsewhere, Lemon describes a teenage bid at Riker's Island, a notorious New York City jail). Lemon performs this Gaines poem in order to illustrate his own history of learning how to perform in spoken word—as a young person, spoken word offered mentorship and an affirming path, while peers fell astray in a troubled environment. Another substantial shift in the poem's legacy is reflected in the fact

that, due to the popularity of this TED Talk, Lemon's cover is currently the version of record. Consider that Lemon's cover has about 25 times the views of Gaines's most-viewed YouTube video of this poem.

The shapes that poetry criticism took within spoken word culture of the 1990s and early 2000s contradicted the academic division of poetry's readers, poetry critics, and the poets themselves. As a three-headed performer (poetry reader, poetry critic, and poet) Lemon is not an exceptional case in spoken word. He occupied these positions simultaneously during the 1990s and up to the TED stage of the 2010s because spoken word culture provides a unique stage from which to do so, contradicting mainstream academic poetry participation. In this chapter, I will describe these new forms of scholarly participation by citing a number of spoken word artists whose embodiments of other people's poetry, often within original works, reimagine the poetry critic. I suggest that these performances seek to forge complex continuities with diverse traditions of poetry, even as they often mark rupture with the limitations of mainstream poetic culture.

Defining Spoken Word and Slam

The sheer breadth of spoken word, along with the difficult-to-overstate influence of local "scenes" on performances, makes spoken word tricky to define as an isolated component of poetic culture. Taking root in Black American culture and public literary performance, spoken word evolves in multiple overlapping communities during the 20th century, and community contexts are thus the most productive way to approach spoken word. By 1990, the most visible arenas of global spoken word were poetry slam competitions and spoken word open mics (a contraction of "microphone"), with

intersecting popular performance contexts like literary festivals, theater, and television. Spoken word's spread can be largely attributed to local community-based events and organizations, while its notoriety was bolstered by an increased visibility in far-reaching commercial media, including: two MTV Spoken Word Unplugged specials (1993 and 1994), a spoken word tent at the touring Lollapalooza music festival (1994 and 1995), the five-part PBS series *United States of Poetry* (1996), the documentary film *Slam Nation* (Devlin, 1998), the feature film *Slam* (Levin, 1998), HBO's *Def Poetry Jam* (2002-2007), and countless other homages and parodies on TV programs, commercials, and music albums.

Spoken word open mic performances emerge from a set of oral traditions in a lineage that remains contested today, and these poetic cultures were indelibly shaped in the 1990s by Black poets and other poets of Color. Spoken word artists including Tracie Morris and Jessica Care Moore have greatly benefitted poetry scholars by explaining the ways that spoken word is continuous with previous generations of Black poetry community and Black poetics. Care Moore describes a shared root in community-based performing and listening, and in a book review, she describes spoken word as the direct successor to the Black Arts Movement that took root in the 1960s in Harlem: "We've traveled the ocean on Amiri Baraka's Blue Ark and sang to Jayne Cortez's Blues while listening to what Nikki Giovanni was gonna do to her lover with a full orchestra in the background. Ain't nothing new y'all" (66). This genealogy of spoken word identifies with a "we" group of Black spoken word poets, contrasting to a more commonplace assessment that typically highlights white 20th century public poetry performers (i.e. Vachel Lindsay) as precursors to prominent members of the Beat generation (i.e. Allen Ginsberg), whose influence can be seen in the tendency for spoken word poems to be highly emotive,

political, and personal in content. While the true origins of spoken word, a vast and truly global set of literary cultures, cannot be definitely established by someone with my limited experience in scenes and scholarly reach, Care Moore is a helpful guide. Her assessment focuses on the shape of performance in current practice as Black art, rather than focus on a singular point of origin, and she also speaks to the continued necessity of Black power and the Black Arts Movement in literary culture. Additionally, Care Moore's quotation reflects the common spoken word practice of identifying the place, shape, and stylings of spoken word within larger and longer contexts of poetic culture. Thus, Care Moore also describes the most common impetus of poetry scholarship among spoken word artists, that is, to respond to the questions: what do my performances have to do with other poetry, and how might I make my case in a way that resonates with the present audience?

Poetry slams are a distinct and prominent component within spoken word culture, which is itself a broader frame. Slams are semi-standardized performance competitions featuring original poems with a 3-minute time limit. Judges assign scores to poets, and these scores range from 0.0 to 10.0. In general, slam judges are selected from a given audience and they employ nonstandard criteria (sometimes, a 9.6 here could be a 6.9 there, and who knows why). This evaluative procedure has been noted as variously democratic or haphazard, although it has never been assumed that the most important slam poetry has been the most awarded or that a poem's score always reflects its value (Aptowicz). Judging seeks to lower perceived barriers to poetic participation and shift the rubric of poetic quality while maintaining a basis for success—a success that has shown to be career-defining for some poets and artists. Slams could be found seemingly everywhere as the millennium approached, and this near saturation is reflected perhaps in the mistaken

tendency for "slam" to stand in generically for any performed reading. For instance, Hillary Clinton's White House Millennium Lecture makes this elision in concrete terms, as Clinton introduces the Poets Laureate Bob Hass, Rita Dove and Robert Pinsky prior to what she describes as "their own version of the poetry slam" (Library of Congress). Hass, Dove, and Pinsky proceed with readings of their own poems and poems by others while attendees listen politely—while the laureates indeed *perform* poetry, it is important to clarify that they do not slam.

Rather, the poetry slam reflects a poetic tradition and culture that was inaugurated by Marc Kelly Smith (a White, male, former construction worker) in a Chicago bar in 1984 and took shape over the 1990s, partly in relation to Black culture and Black aesthetics, thanks to transformative performers like Patricia Smith (Johnson). Slam has two occasionally overlapping valences. One is the local scene, based in any variety of bar, cafe, nonprofit, university campus, and church in the US or abroad. The recent work of Javon Johnson underscores the importance of scenes in slam, and Johnson importantly advocates for researching slam poetry culture as a participant within a scene, which is his methodology in 2018's *Killing Poetry*. Understanding a piece or performer in relation to their respective local scene is likewise a longstanding practice among spoken word historians.

In the centralized National Poetry Slam (NPS), the other slam valence, a network of teams that represent local scenes has competed annually since the two founding teams, Chicago's Green Mill and New York City's Nuyorican Poets Café, faced off in San Francisco in 1990 . Each and every local slam can, at least in theory, send a team of four poets to NPS, which in recent years has gathered around 75 teams from around the US, Canada, and

Europe for an annual competition. As a continually evolving literary performance culture, slam has a difficult to define relationship between its founding and its future, or even its past decade. Marc Kelly Smith has remained active in NPS activities and governance and continues to run the Green Mill Cafe's slam.

In many ways the center of slam gravity shifts from Chicago to Manhattan over the first half of the 1990s, when the Nuyorican Poets Café emerges as a hub of multicultural verse culture. "Nuyorican," a contraction of New York and Puerto Rican, simultaneously denotes a diasporic ethnic identity, a community of practicing poets, and a physical space. In 1975, poets Miguel Algarín and Miguel Piñero founded the café as a space of artistic common ground for their community. Algarín and Piñero write in their landmark anthology, *Nuyorican Poetry*, "The experience of Puerto Ricans on the streets of New York has caused a new language to grow: Nuyorican" (22). These and other poets of the 1970s reclaimed the term "Nuyorican" from its pejorative connotation that originated with islanders (those living in Puerto Rico) who would see New York's diaspora as disconnected (Noel 92). Scholar Urayoan Noel identifies 1990 to the mid-2000s as the "slam era" of Nuyorican poetry, seeded by the Nuyorican's reopening in 1989 as a tribute to the recently deceased Miguel Piñero (Noel 123). The reopened café was marked by the presence of poetry slams, imported from Chicago by white American poet and community arts organizer Bob Holman. After winning multiple NPS individual championships, in 1994 the Nuyorican further cemented its place in national slam culture with the publication of *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café*. This extensive collection, edited by Algarín and Holman, prints many writers (147 in sum), and many for the first time. Algarín and Holman each have poems printed in the book, and Holman penned the anthology's Poundian

invocation, entitled, "congratulations. you have found the hidden book," and which begins, "DO NOT READ THIS BOOK" (i). Emphasizing the importance of voicing and hearing in spoken word culture, Holman directs those holding the book away from expected (silent, solitary, domestic) book reading practices, away from academic analysis, writing, "Hear its meaning and, literally, speak it aloud."

Despite a longstanding and usually friendly rivalry with Bob Holman and the New York City/Nuyorican Slam scene that Holman co-founded with Miguel Algarin, Smith seems to be at ease with relinquishing notions of his historical centrality in slam. According to a phone interview I conducted with a slam poet who has associated with Smith in the past, named Dan "Sully" Sullivan, Smith does not seek to center himself in the future of slam. Sully remarked to me, "It was always about bringing poetry to more people…[Smith] has always wanted to look for ways to say, '*What's after slam*?'" (interview). Even as Smith maintained a significant presence in NPS governance, for Smith, it is poetry for him that overrides any particular vehicle.

Marc Kelly Smith is also well-known as a poet who competes in slams, and his piece, "Chicago: Smith to Sandburg, Sandburg to Smith," provides commentary on the degraded state of Chicago's labor and announces a Chicago revival of public-facing, oral poetry. Smith performed this poem as early as 1992—while I could not locate an audio or visual performance of this poem, the text version in Smith's published collection, *Crowdpleaser*, shows that the poem dramatizes a dialogue with Sandburg's famous 1914 poem, "Chicago." Conversing literally and figuratively with Sandburg (although it is not a two-way conversation), Smith uses extensive quotation of Sandburg, who strikes a celebratory tone. Sandburg notes Chicago as a hard-working, albeit exploited "Hog Butcher for the World." In

Sandburg's version, men do work few would likely find enjoyable, and they move with vigor, zeal, and "laughter" (a word that repeats nine times in Sandburg's poem). Sandburg famously apostrophizes his hometown as a sweaty restless worker: "Laughing the stormy, husky, brawling laughter of Youth, half-naked, sweating." His poetics are self-consciously socialist in the poem's simultaneous rebuke of capitalist exploitation and celebration of labor that responds to the needs of a social body.

In response, Smith writes: "You used to be Hog Butcher for the World. / Elmo, from Dakota, stuck those pigs because it was a job / / nobody wanted, and he had to take it. The blood came to his waist and the pigs squealed." (Smith 30). Smith shifts the tone of Sandburg's poem to emphasize the violence and dreadful requirements of labor, significantly revising Sandburg's celebration of laborers laboring. Marking a definitive lapse between an older Chicago and a present one, Smith's revision sheds light on the new plight of languishing workers in the city. Retaining the unsavory elements of Sandburg's poems—guns, poverty, injustice, prostitution, and other forms of the nation's dirty work—Smith describes Elmo and other characters who exist in isolation rather than sewn into a cloth of communal vision. Smith's response to Sandburg invariably turns phrases on their heads to convey a divided present state: the wrong things have changed, and now there is no laughing. Smith's poem also, albeit indirectly, addresses the revival of oral and public-facing poetry in the city. Speaking as Sandburg's interlocutor, Smith slam poem connects Sandburg's radical politics to new publics through performances at The Green Mill and elsewhere. Smith evokes a sense of capitalist despair in his piece, yet the intimacy of the settings in which this poem would have been performed defies the isolation that it describes. Spoken word settings like The Green Mill summon poetry publics into being, as

audiences. For Smith, spoken word poetry offers a unique stage for calling such publics into being, and it is on this stage that Smith is able to speak as a poet, a poetry critic, and an everyday poetry reader. His poetics have everything to do with audience engagement (hence the title of his collection, *Crowdpleaser*), which reflect spoken word scholarly practices that break down barriers for connecting to poetic history through performance.

Liveness in Spoken Word

In spoken word culture, there is significant community value in *being there*, meaning, one's presence in a communal space as an audience member, judge, or performer. The importance of being there reflects the importance of immediacy to experiences of slam poetry and other spoken word contexts. Within the small world of slam scholarship, Javon Johnson goes as far to suggest that scholars might participate in local scenes in order to specify claims about the culture from an embedded and participatory position. Immediacy also forms part of the aesthetic of spoken word performances that favor speed, noise, and repetition, soliciting and reacting to audience noise (pausing during applause, gaining momentum, etc.). Nuyorican Poets Café historian Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz writes that "the best slam poets can take the worst poem in the world, and—through performance and audience connection—make it new and alive and even brilliant (although perhaps only in a satirical way)" (43). While her statement is surely overstated (the *worst* poem, really?), Aptowicz describes a poetry performance culture that puts the quality of audience connection first while deferring non-contextual standards of textual excellence. Her statement reformulates Ezra Pound's "make it new" in terms of spoken word's oral performative culture that connect to an audience through stage presence. Theri A. Pickens

also emphasizes the importance of exchange between audience and live performer in slam, writing, "the ephemerality of the stage performance is not an obstacle, but the beginning of an ongoing conversation (20). In Aptowicz's view, slam quality is a function of this embodied presence, and as a result, one imagines that being a part of the slam room's energy equation (the connection between the performer and the audience) is surely different from witnessing performance on YouTube. The 20th century contains innumerable poetry communities that emphasize performance as a meaningful site of circulation, including Harlem Renaissance Poets, Beat Poets, Poets of the Black Arts Movement, Nuyorican Poets, Feminist Poets, and The Last Poets. None of these scenes come with the unique requirements of audience interaction that one finds in slam, where judges need to be physically present in order to score pieces. What is perhaps unique about spoken word of the 1990s with regard to embodied performance was how it was being taken seriously as an alternative to print circulation in significant numbers, for somewhat broad publics. As a result, there was an unprecedented popular excitement in the 1990s for the experience of live poetry as popular entertainment. Most spoken word poems exist only in stage performance (those that become available in print generally do not do so until long after their success in performance).

As a performance culture that values immediacy, yet one where "other people's poetry" forms a significant and scholarly feature of that culture—as I demonstrate it does—spoken word is a fruitful space for exploring questions of "liveness." What does it imply for spoken word as a resurgent live poetry community to include critical and scholarly performance? What is the status of liveness in spoken word performances? Where specifically does the performance lie in the relationship between text, audience, and

performer? In an era where most spoken word is consumed online (notably, I write this during a global pandemic where performance venues are closed), what is the status of live performance? An important conceptual debate in performance studies, “liveness” is contemporary to the rise of spoken word. In the chapter, "Live Performance in a Mediatized World," in *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (1999), Stephen Auslander asks, “what does live performance mean, and why is it demanded, within particular groups defined by shared cultural identity and/or tastes?” (55).

Peggy Phelan’s *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993),[iii] includes the unequivocal lines: “Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance” (146). Phelan seeks to advocate for the unique experience of performance, and Mathew Reason points out that, in Phelan’s view, the distinction between performance the live is not sufficiently established: for Phelan “performance … stands for live performance” (82). Phelan writes during a pivotal moment in queer performance history, where the 1980s AIDS crisis spurred a necessary queer nation building (necessary for survival in the face of a government that did not value these lives), and this project requires physical immediacy, being there live and in person. The performance culture that emerges from the necessity of this movement highly values liveness over media in the face of death. In Phelan’s context, the means of media dissemination are also gradually changing from tape to digital storage (discs and servers). Queer feminist performance is an important point of origin for the poetry slam as a live community building art form, and Phelan is cued into an outsider

performance culture that seeks to criticize mainstream culture in ways that are analogous to slam.

Philip Auslander provides a rebuttal to Phelan's celebration of performance-as-liveness (although, to be fair, Phelan does not use the term "live" in her study). Auslander contends that performance is actually inescapable. His book connects to postmodern scholars like Jean Baudrillard to argue that performance is not limited to liveness or even tied to it. Moreover, the idea of liveness emerges only chronologically after and ontologically in opposition to media. Liveness resents and fears "the mediatized" as a category of experience. Liveness is produced as a space of supposedly prior reality in contradistinction to the produced (and therefore less real) media reproduction. To further elaborate on his critique of liveness, Auslander sheds light on the commonplace oxymoron of "live recording," akin to that quintessentially 90s media situation of being "recorded in front of a live studio audience" (60). Liveness cannot be recorded without becoming non-live, and yet such descriptions are indelibly part of media markets. Liveness, then, is a tool of media marketplaces. Auslander argues that performance always features in cultural productions, even in text. Elsewhere, Charles Bernstein reiterates this point in terms of poetry in the introduction to the 1998 edited collection, *Close Listening*: "the poem, viewed in terms of its multiple performances, or mutual intertranslatability, has a fundamentally plural existence…to speak of the poem in performance is, then, to overthrow the idea of the poem as a fixed, stable, finite linguistic object; it is to deny the poem its self-presence and its unity" (9).

Spoken word artists, as vernacular poetry critics invested in a performance culture that critiques mainstream culture, anticipate the developments of this debate. They

understand all performance as mediated rather than pure and direct. Spoken word poetry performances uniquely figure media (other people's poetry), and the contexts in which spoken word artists performed were already multimodal and full of recording and playback technology. The presence of recording technology or playback technology expands the audiences who are able to witness a performance, and this is looked at as a good thing in spoken word, rather than a loss of pure performance. The presence of recording equipment in performance contexts is a given in my project, since I am able to study these performances, all of which were visually or auditorily recorded. In contrast to Phelan's point, these initial instances are indeed performances despite the heavy involvement of media and recording. The spoken word performers in this chapter are all aware of the multimodal environment of their performances, aware that there is a present physical audience and future audiences. To this end, some performers interact with the recording technology, such as Mike Tyler, who I discuss below—in a Berlin art gallery in 1994, Tyler jeers at and grabs the recording camcorder during a set of poems, crying out, "Film me! Film me!"

As well, spoken word audiences experience the pleasure of "other people's poetry" as more than the transfer of text that exists in a stable written form elsewhere (say, printed in academic anthologies). Instead, spoken word audiences understand these performances as pieces that really only exist in performance, in rich contexts that may include other media.

Political Embodiments in Spoken Word

The scholarly work that happens in spoken word performance will always need to be understood in relation to the bodies on stage. In spoken word of the 1990s and early 2000s, performance cultures provided broad representation of identities that were rarely featured elsewhere—of Black poets, Asian poets, Latinx poets, queer and trans poets of color, and beyond. Performer identities are often both visible and invisible, and bodies perform in relation to audiences and expectations through myriad and often barely perceptible shifts in vocality picked up by microphones and occasionally recorded by equipment. Slam and spoken word spaces include marginalized bodies that exist in precarious relationships to national, popular, and literary cultures. Thus there are overlapping features of mediation to continually acknowledge in the analysis of spoken word from the era, extending to local scenes, contemporary political milieu, and even the archiving and playback technologies.

Just as spoken word and slam poets are often uninterested in what academic voices have to say about their work, historians of spoken word culture often direct their writing away from academic audiences. Yet two poet-scholars straddle performance and academic worlds, Susan Somers-Willett and Javon Johnson. Somers-Willett and Johnson have produced important book-length studies of slam as they investigate a national community from within their local scenes in Austin and LA, respectively. Somers-Willett points out that slam contains and proliferates different forms, and it unmakes formal categories through performance (66, see also Noel 46). A given poem's identifiability as a "slam poem" has everything to do with context, as Somers-Willett emphasizes in her oft-quoted line, "The slipperiness of the slam poem is that it exists both everywhere and nowhere at once" (26). Not only is it difficult to isolate, analyzing slam poetry outside of crucial contexts is

potentially harmful to marginalized peoples. Johnson describes performances of Black identities (i.e. Black queerness, Black masculinities) that are performed in relation to a cycle of racialized violence that is both shocking and repetitive: "with black death looming so heavy," Johnson writes, "how can we care less about the death of black women, black queer folks, and our black trans siblings … black spoken word poets are penning thousands of poems that refuse any distinction between art and activism, between the popular and the political" (102). Johnson picks up on the connection between race and performance politics that Somers-Willett describes, but his book intervenes by positioning itself as a corrective. Importantly, Johnson is Black and Somers-Willett is White. At one point in Somers-Willet's argument, which explains how authenticity is an important currency of slam poetry and a marker of quality, the author heads into tricky territory around strategically reductive performances of racial identity and how these authentic racial performances are consequently rewarded by predominantly White audiences. Years later, scholar and poet Javon Johnson describes that Somers-Willett "never offers the possibility that the black poets who won, and win, are simply better...her book at times reads less like a critical inquiry into why black poets are highly rewarded and more like a troubling racial apologia for the lack of white success" (23). Here and elsewhere Johnson responds to the critical mistreatment of Black spoken word. Elsewhere, Black spoken word is maligned by decontextualized approaches to poetry criticism (as if slam were lyric poetry). Moreover, scholarship may harm the performers by, Johnson writes, "suggesting that performance poetry may be used as a strategy to invite students into other (often read as canonical) styles of poetry" (8). As a participant in LA's slam scene, Johnson describes slam's future-orientation and quest for structural alterity that manifests occasionally as a playfulness

around the language of death (i.e. "killing it" onstage). Johnson then mobilizes this community-based framework against those who characterize slam as the "death of art" to revise slam's legacy.

In slam performance, bodies come to the scene of performance with class, race, and gender, and perform certain texts in relation to this embodiment and in turn relate ideas to audiences. Javon Johnson emphasizes his positionality as a Black man in a community-based exploration of Black identities. As a White man writing about identities mostly unlike my own, I will try to emphasize the wisdom, scholarship, and intellectualism of performers of Color who find and share resources that enable art, survival, and beauty. As I explained in my introduction, academic poetry criticism has both intentionally and unintentionally erased the voices of critics from outside of the academy, and linguistic, cultural, and racial bias has supported white supremacy as a structuring force of academic participation. My writing is not the answer. I hope, though, that my research may point to and help frame the voices we need to hear.

Covering Poetry

The practice of *covering* other people's poetry in spoken word has its origin in popular music culture, especially hip hop. In music covers, an artist or group's cover version expresses a singular style (one might say, nobody else could cover it like *that*) as well as conveys respect for the original artist. Lemon's cover of Reg E. Gaines, described at the beginning of this chapter, demonstrates how a cover can contain intense admiration for a piece while also departing from previous textual versions.

Unlike music covers, spoken word covers defer questions of ownership that dominate music discourse, and instead offer a means of reconfiguring a text's connection to communities and bodies. The first usage of "cover version" and its shortened form, "cover," comes from a 1966 issue of *Melody Maker*, a weekly UK music newspaper. The international music industry has long required attribution as a legal practice, and there is significant risk associated with non-attribution. A cover version that fails to list an original songwriter (or, "non-attribution by a licensee") implies a legal dispute that may carry heavy fines. In the context of popular music circulation, questions of attribution tend to center property and capital. A question like—What does it mean that Sinead O'Connor's 1990 cover version of Prince's "Nothing Compares 2 U" has become her trademark as an artist?—will tend to inspire discussions of copyright and sales percentages. To be sure, O'Connor attributes Prince, whereas countless other groups (perhaps most notoriously, the British band Led Zeppelin thefted songs from lesser-known White and, especially, Black artists).

On spoken word stages, artists perform cover versions of a wide variety of poems. With the exception of the somewhat rare "cover slam" (a topic I had hoped to feature in this project, but a poetic culture for which almost nothing remains) covers are never done in competition. A cover is almost always a respectful homage, and the decisions made in performance, as well as the audience's reaction, reflect some of the contexts and effects of the performance.

At the 1998 National Poetry Slam (NPS), Taylor Mali, a White male slam poet, performs a cover version of "Skinhead" by Patricia Smith, who is a Black female slam poet. This was not a competition piece and was meant as a tribute. Smith was in the audience,

and tributes are a relatively common practice in the NPS community (Pickens 20). Smith's poem is a first-person narrative by a hateful, male, White nationalist. He rages against people of Color, especially Black men and women, and seeks to establish a White America, a "pure country," and mentions gatherings of like-minded individuals: "Sometimes it's just me. Sometimes three. Sometimes 30 … it's gon' be white on black in the streets. Then there'll be three million." The poem ends ominously: "So I move out into the sun where my beauty makes them lower their heads, or into the night, with a lead pipe up my sleeve, a razor tucked in my boot. I was born to make things right. And I was born. right. here." Susan Somers-Willett describes her earlier experience of viewing Patricia Smith perform the piece: "[Smith] wanted to understand a man who unconditionally hated who [she] was" (93). There is a clear and visible irony built into the text when it is performed by its author, Patricia Smith. She performs a character that actually threatens her life as a Black woman. Somers-Willett also witnessed Mali's cover in 1998, summarizing the performance's reception: "in short, the audience balked" (93). With this reaction, the audience clearly recognizes important context: Mali's performance exists in a US society that turns a blind eye to, and perpetuates, White supremacy. Mali's is a society where Black people die at the hands of White supremacist individuals and institutions frequently and publicly. Even though this poem was written to subvert rather than consolidate the thinking that supports White nationalism, it fails because Mali necessarily performs as a White man (in this case, a White slam poet in character as a White nationalist). Smith's ironically embodied performances implore audiences to consider their own participation in white supremacy by listening to this character. Embodiment does not loose citationality from race, class, gender, sexuality, and other contexts; on the contrary, it asks performers and audiences to

critically examine their participation in these contexts. As Hallie Wells notes in her dissertation on performing in Malagasy slam communities, "It is your entire body sitting there, with all of its experiences and traumas and privileges" (74). When Smith's poem runs up against the white, male body of Taylor Mali, he encounters and makes clear a limit to what can be covered up—the contexts a spoken word poem emerges from—and what cannot be "covered"—Smith's subversive authorship and embodiment.

Yet my research also shows that Mali is one who frequently plays the fool within the NPS community, and his cover was almost certainly intended as parodic rather than sincere or politically acceptable (Somers-Willet). His 1998 cover of Smith's stirring "Skinhead" was a self-aware act of clowning, done in full knowledge that the raced body performing a poem matters an awful lot. Mali was performing Smith's text in order to underscore this point and win affection from members of the NPS community, all of whom are familiar with Mali as a seriously successful performer with two NPS championships under his belt (with two more championships to come in future years). Even so, what was supposed to signify as a joke, albeit an uncomfortable one, instead comes across as White racism. Mali's community embeddedness does not undo his visible identity as a White man.

Mali's performance underscores the complexities of community in critical performances. Poet-performers form part of the audience and when they are onstage, they perform for audiences. Community-building and connection is an inherent and vital component for the aesthetics and contents of slam poems. but communities exist in larger contexts of power imbalances and injustice, such as efforts to uphold White supremacy through law or violence. To this end, critical performances sometimes fail, whether through competition elimination or poor reception and notoriety.

A second example of covering comes from Tish Benson in a performance that is captured in a video file located in the Bob Holman Audio/Video Poetry Collection (Holman 1996). Benson's cover was recorded during an open mic event at The Knitting Factory in The Bowery, Manhattan, in 1996. The 92-minute video was captured by a handheld video camcorder that records poets who perform with an average set length of 10 minutes. The eclectic group of performers includes members of the Last Poets (Umar Bin Hassan) and Nuyorican Poets Café (Everton Sylvester), as well as newcomers, who recite and perform poems, short stories, and rap. Bob Holman, who is White and a prominent supporter of spoken word for public audiences, acts as an emcee with a second unnamed Black man. Tish Benson enters the stage—Benson will later be known as a Nuyorican Poets Café slam competitor who also performed for HBO's *Def Poetry Jam* (season 4, episode 3, in 2004) after the publication of her poetry collection, *Wild Like That: Good Smelling Strong Stuff* (2003). Benson seems to be aware of the camcorder's presence: a poet earlier in the event requested that the camcorder be turned off, and the camcorder resets on Benson, who is staring into its lens.

Benson begins her set by reading aloud, from a book, Bob Kaufman's poem, "I am a Camera." Benson's performance of Kaufman's short poem concludes:

> …his *soul* dedicated to silence, is a fish with *frog's* eyes,
>
> the blood of a *poet* flows out with his *poems*,
>
> back to the pyramid of *bones* from which *he is* thrust,
>
> his death a saving grace, *creation* is perfect. (yeah. yeah.)"

The camera tilts downward during Tish Benson's set at the Knitting Factory (NYU Fales).

A prelude to her set of original poems, Benson, who is Black, covers Kaufman's poem with gravity and care. Benson reads aloud from what is likely a collected works of Kaufman, a Black poet who lived from 1925-1986. Despite any stability a printed book is assumed to hold over a poem, Benson's use of emphasis and pace riffs on the text's seemingly orchestrated arrangement of sound. In her cover, Benson holds onto the long O syllables—*soul* … *poems* … *poet* … *bones*—even though only one of these words (*poems*) falls at the end of a sentence or phrase, where such an emphasis tends to fall. The round vowels seem to hypnotize the hushed audience—an audience that has previously been chastised by Holman, the event emcee, for talking or laughing during sets. Clearly, this performance is intended as a sincere tribute to the poet who worked in between and across traditions and communities, connecting Black poetics, Beat Poetry (a term coined by

Kaufman himself), and Jazz, a combination that proved to be highly influential for future generations of poets (Hernandez 2002).

Kaufman's text engages a problem of artistic creation and takes its name from an iconic quotation from an earlier text—Christopher Isherwood's 1939 novel, *Goodbye to Berlin*. Kaufman's poem describes a poet's essential dislocation between an origin and destination. The piece's very title defers the poem's originality by pointing to another text. Benson's cover describes a movement backward: through his poems, a poet's blood "flows out with his *poems*," "back" to "the pyramid," which figures Africa as an ancestral poetic homeland (the earliest stone pyramids and lyrical poems are both Egyptian). Benson lingers on the word *creation* in the final line ("*creation* is perfect") and emphasizes the revivification that follows a self-annihilating poetic process, a bleeding out that leads to a global salvation, a "saving grace." In Benson's cover, poetic representation is costly, but its promise is nothing less than everything.

During the performance, the handheld video camera picks up audio of an audience member exclaiming, "yeah, yeah," as Benson finishes the final line. The tribute to Kaufman and continuity of poetic lineage is done solemnly, and likewise the audience response is an essential part of this recording. During Benson's performance of the poem, it is clear that the camcorder is being handheld by an audience member, rather than secured on a tripod. The recorder thuds and shakes, switches (curiously) from color recording to black and white, zooms in on Benson's face, pans and tilts over her body. The camcorder's gaze is itself performative and at times troublesome. One cannot help but be caught up in this camera's recording eye, which is also the eye of the audience.

In context, Benson's performance provides a revival of the oral Beat tradition as a specifically Black poetics. The longstanding whitewashing of Beat poetry connects to its commercialization in café culture and film. Bob Kaufman's centrality to the Beat poets is contradicted by his continual erasure from its legacy. Kaufman invented the term, "beatnik," and cofounded Beatitudes magazine with Allen Ginsberg. The relationship between spoken word of the 1990s and the beatniks was often deployed in the marketing of events, especially in New York City. Uroyuan Noel describes ways that early slam deployed the beatnik trope in order to whitewash and therefore more successfully market slam events, highlighting a beat-stylized poster of Nuyorican poet Edwin Torres wearing a beret (Noel).

Benson's Kaufman tribute, despite the emceeing of Bob Holman, comes from an event that solely features the work of Black poets like Benson, and demonstrates the formation of poetic community in the legacy to a Black pioneer whose distinctive poetics have inspired a strong following. While acknowledgement has come too late, Kaufman has indeed received increasing recognition in recent years, and Kaufman's collected poems were recently printed for the first time (October 2019, *City Lights Books*), garnering the poet a posthumous American Book Award. In this book appears a photograph of the partially burned, handwritten manuscript for Kaufman's "I am a camera." A section of the poem reads, "THE POET NAILED ON/THE HARD BONE OF THIS WORLD…THE BLOOD OF A POET/FLOWS OUT WITH HIS POEMS." Kaufman connects the nailing of Christ to a cross at Golgotha to a poetic predicament, that a poet's suffering is also deeply creative. In Kaufman's poetics, a poet's suffering and even death become linked to revelations of truth. The handwritten manuscript has narrowly survived, bearing the marks of textual decay

and destruction. Just as Golgotha provides Christ with a vantage from which to save the world, the poetry stage provides a view into poetic community that, despite attempts at erasure, persists through performances of tribute and beauty.

Sampling Poems

Sampling arose in 1980s hip hop music production and traveled to spoken word stages. The OED records the first use of the verb form of "sample," in the sense of "to obtain an excerpt of (a musician, instrument, or piece of music)," in 1989, with the music periodical *Record Mirror*: "Jungle Brothers...sampled anything that happened to be around at the time...and came up with the blueprint for Nineties hip hop" (OED). The Jungle Brothers, a pioneering hip hop group in the nascent "alternative" stream, created tracks that sampled broadly. DJs preferred to spin soul and funk records with breakbeats, from groups like Commodores, The Meters, Bill Withers, James Brown, and Sly and the Family Stone. Sampling is a production technique that emerges at the origin of hip hop and involves capturing, modifying, and copying drums, rhythms, vocals, and virtually any other piece of recorded sound. In the 1970s, DJs in the south Bronx (notably Kurtis Blow, Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa, Grand Wizzard Theodore, and Grand Master Flash) innovated sampling and other turntable mixing techniques that modified existing records into new multi-layered sounds, over which emcees would rhyme and rap. Like covering, sampling in music is both a community-based artistic practice and a feature of intellectual property law. Since samples are taken directly from produced recordings, sampling has generally led to greater controversy than covering. As sampling technology advanced and hip hop became more profitable and mainstream, there arose many significant clashes between

emerging artists and copyright holders, especially after Grand Upright Music, Ltd. v. Warner Bros. Records Inc (1991), a case that provided precedent for prohibiting unlicensed sampling outright. Since the early 1990s, samples that make their way onto album versions have required artists to secure clearance from the sampled track's copyright holders. The hip hop artist Jay-Z has emerged from several famous sample wars, such as using the minimally edited chorus of "Hard Knock Life," as well as the title, from the 1982 film version of *Annie* for the 1998 radio hit, "Hard Knock Life (Ghetto Anthem)." When compared to covering, sampling opens a broader range of critical engagement, and in the 1990s and early 2000s, sampling carried sometimes devastating consequences for recording artists.

In a few instances, sampling is explicitly incorporated in slam rules, such as the Austin, Texas poetry slam web page:

> It is acceptable for a poet to incorporate, imitate, or otherwise "play on" the words, lyrics, or tune of someone else (commonly called "sampling") in their own work. If you are only riffing off another's words, you should expect only healthy controversy; if on the other hand, you are ripping off their words, you should expect the full wrath and shade of the APS Council and/or Hosts (A.K.A., "Emcee"). If more than 50% of your poem is sampled from another source, you may be penalized 2 points or disqualified for not creating original work, at the host/scorekeeper's discretion (Austin Poetry Slam).

In the above text, sampling is considered to be at best "acceptable," and framed in terms of leniency. Too much sampling runs contrary to the core requirement of original work

performed by the author. In slam and other spoken word performance, authorship is being performed (Somers-Willett 24). Sampling pieces of culture and pieces of poetry offers poets a broad range of possible approaches to a poem, with a broad range of possible audience reactions. A sample may confuse the audience, and it may not register as sampling; it may lack a clear purpose, and may come off as a performance of pretention; it may come off as offensive cultural appropriation. Sampling does not lead automatically to poetic quality, performative authenticity, or high scores. But sampling nonetheless represents poetry study that intersects with embodiment as excerpted poetry that is situated in a new performance context. To frame sampling as study is to provide a framework of cultural circulation and a means of study that looks beyond academic networks and analyses.

Three poets published in the spoken word anthology, *Aloud*, visited a handful of German cities in September 1994 and performed once at a Berlin art gallery for about 60 spectators seated in folding chairs. I was granted permission to access a digitized video file of this event from the server of the archives at NYU Special Collections. Like the video of Tish Benson, this file shows a series of long takes from a single handheld camcorder. Other than these spare details, it is difficult to say much about context beyond this—the record is itself shaky. Details of this event are not in the archival metadata and have proven difficult to come by on Google.

These poets are introduced by an emcee—their names are Edwin Torres, Mike Tyler, and Willie Perdomo. These poets have by this point competed with differing degrees of competition success at the Nuyorican slam. In this Berlin reading, Torres and Tyler perform pieces that sample other people's poetry. In the video, Torres approaches the

stage after an emcee explains, in German, that copies of Torres's new audiocassette are for sale near the exit. Torres is tall, thin, bespectacled, with a billowy, fully buttoned up shirt. He performs a 25-minute set, and in each performance he makes careful use of gestures and nonverbal cues to convey meaning. For instance, in his "Indian Hand Poem," Torres uses hands gestures—a sort of "*this* kind, not *this* kind" signaling motif—in order to embody his poem nonverbally. His first few pieces are reminiscent of Urayoan Noel's description of Nuyorican poet Jorge Brandon, "often savoring syllables and stretching out word endings" (66). Torres blends Spanish and English dialects, finding, exploiting, and enjoying gaps between them. Torres is

In Torres' longest piece, "Meat," the poet briefly samples Shakespeare's Sonnet XVIII. Here is my transcription from the middle of the piece:

> As poetry it is *what* is sound, is it *what* is *language*? *Destroy one* language, it is, do the *screams* blend into, the *screams* blend into *everything*? Does the measure of sound everything *stop* and poetry be*gin*? Do animals scream poetry as they're de*stroyed*? They *WHAT*, is *fair*? To compare this to *that*? That meaning *not me*, not an *animal us*, us is *their* words, the sounds of *their* day, and how the sun works in *them*. *What* is fair? To *compare*, *thee*, to a summer's *day*? *Blend*, everything around us into what we call, *animal us* just word so human us, just animal.

As the emphases in the above transcription indicate, Torres's performance locates a rhythm and syntax that interrupts Standard American English. The performance likewise confronts an inherited ordering of language on another level—its relation to sound and species. In a more familiar ordering, we learn to understand and define meaningful sound

as language; likewise, language is the domain of humans and not animals; it follows that animals do not produce poetry and instead produce unmeaningful sound. At the conclusion of the above section ("just animal"), Torres begins an entirely nonverbal section where he gasps, squeezes, and agonizes, creating squeals that call to mind noises of human childbirth and animal slaughter. This is, seemingly, the nonverbal poetry of the slaughterhouse that responds to the poem's earlier question: "Do animals scream poetry as they're destroyed?" The connection between the live birth (of poetry) and the death (of animals) comingles in the performance of these sounds for an audience in a Berlin gallery. Torres vocalizes but remains mostly still, with eyes closed, through this 2-minute conclusion, and the cameraperson seems to fidget. It is no easy listen.

Torres here dramatizes the idea that nonverbal bodily performance is not merely an embellishment that adds to a poem, but instead constitutes poetry as its very stuff. This reflects Torres' enduring fascination with the limits and affordances of embodied performance. In 2017, Torres is quoted in an interview focusing on body-centered poetics: "Where does the brain meet the tongue to allow poetry the body? How does performance initiate change in the audience (in the world) starting with body language?" Torres seeks a practice of poetry performance that is not merely adapted to the body, not as if the body could be a means of textual delivery—rather, "to allow poetry the body" is to design and perform poetry that uses the body as language, such that the body's meat (human or otherwise) may find a way to speak.

In "Meat," Torres attempts inter-species bodily poetics, a special and disturbing spectacle, and one in which Shakespeare's famous sonnet is key. This canonical poem promises to immortalize a lover's memory, and specifically memory of their beauty, against

seasons. Shakespeare's poetic lines make a promise guaranteed by their textuality and by Shakespeare's signature, an unchanging monument to an unnamed "thee." For Torres, studying Shakespeare in performance is useful in this quest for answers to the question of meat speaking. Sampling Sonnet XVIII provides the poem with a poetic icon, a backdrop that is canonical and is permitted to go unattributed, but one that becomes open to significant revision because of this non-attribution. Shakespeare's sonnet concludes:

> Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
> When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:
> So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
> So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

Shakespeare's sonnet suggests that a poem be modelled after the beauty of a flame—it is the body of a young man become poem. "Meat," on the other hand, is embodied poetics that cannot be contained in print—its climax defies print as it traverses species. "Meat" is poem become body, and much to the point is the fact that Torres's poem "Meat" is not readily found in print (at least not in my several attempts). Sampling Shakespeare's logic while inverting its textual prescription, "Meat" frees the poet to employ his body in an ephemeral performance. Using his body as a tool that is (in its mortality) tied to death and a guarantee of ephemerality, Torres seeks to initiate change in an audience. Unclear in this performance is Torres' awareness of a camcorder, but the recording technology nonetheless captures the performance for future audiences.

The next poet up is Mike Tyler, whose set is characterized by an enormous, almost overwhelming energy. An advertisement for a different Nuyorican book tour reads, "Mike

Tyler…has been called 'the world's most dangerous performer' (he once broke his arm during a show)" (The Morning Call). His performance in Berlin features similar dynamism, coupled with frequent asides to the audience, to the effect of a nose thumbed at polite stage presence. In one unnamed poem, Tyler samples a number of canonical American modernist poets, introducing the poem with the lines: "I have stopped myself, for a long time, from using the word 'fuck' in a poem. See what happens."

> *Fuck*. *Fuck*. *Fuck*. (Tyler looks at audience) Do not *stare* at me, I am not *festooned* with *goblins*. Do I *dare…*? (Tyler paces around stage, grabs curtain, wipes sweat off forehead with curtain) Do I *dare…*? (Tyler dances in place, touches wall, asks:) Anyone have any matches? Do I *dare.* To *fuck* a peach? To *love* the apple of my pie? To rise at 1 p.m. and realize all the idiots are *tired* by now? Oooh, Oooh, Oooh, Robert Frost? *America*, America, America, is *knee-deep*, *knee-deep* to you now. Come back to me with your heart of *thought* with your tonsils *in* and your pitchfork of iron soul I am *bicycling*. In a Winslow Homer. I am tenderly holding a Mary Cassat. *Now*. *Now* is *some*day. (Tyler approaches camera) *Now* is *some*day. *Now* is *some*day. *Now. is. some. day.* (Tyler mouth in the camera lens). And now, I'm not *afraid*.

Tyler's poem uses canonical figures of American poetry—most significantly the reworking of T.S. Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and its famous line, "Do I dare to eat a peach?" as well as mentioning Robert Frost and invoking Allen Ginsberg's demotic national apostrophe in "America." Longing for a nation with tonsils in, Tyler's piece flags a desire to return to an untinkered-with, undoctored state where the poet may, through scholarship, find America in a state of pre-operation. Like Torres, these are unattributed samples that

are far from devotional—they exist to be transformed by an embodied performance. In this performance, Tyler, who is White, even interacts with the camcorder, putting his mouth up to the lens. At another point in his set, Tyler expresses anxiety over the recording of his performance. Tyler berates the camera from across the gallery, interrupting his poem—"everywhere there's cameras! Cameras! Don't we live, don't we even exist without the goddamn cameras? Film me! Film me!"

Mike Tyler's performance takes issue with artistic politeness. In contrast, he embodies an artist in breakdown, and his stage presence and asides reference destruction ("anyone have any matches?"). Tyler aims for comedic effect with mixed audience reactions, as uncomfortable laughter can be heard throughout. To quote further from Eliot's "Prufrock:" "At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—/ Almost, at times, the Fool." The performance of unexpected outburst finds material in a flipbook of modernist and Beat–era American classics, performed for a large and polite (and possibly quite confused) audience. In this poem, Tyler's voice is at first loud and belligerent, but by the time he mentions American artists, "bicycling in a Winslow Homer" and "caressing a Mary Cassatt," he is crooning, almost whispering. Tyler's rapid sampling of American poetry as well as painting provides a salvo to an artist's tortured psyche. Yet these works are shallowly sampled, cited briefly as if ticks on a canonical list ("Robert Frost?"), and these cultural objects are not deeply read or viewed, the dramatic effect of such art in performance is less a subduing of the soul and more a numbing of sensation—likewise the final line, "I am not afraid," can be alternately read as an achieved state of acceptance or a passive defeat in the face of a canonical reading list.

Tyler demonstrates the mediatized performance context of spoken word when he implicates the camcorder in his performance after running through a laundry list of media. His earlier exclamation—"Cameras! Do we even exist without them?" helps to explain the tension of the performance, which I see as a failed attempt to escape from mediatized culture and to confine oneself to a life of perceived authenticity (i.e. live experiences). Rather than an earnest search for an escape, Tyler's performance is better understood to emphasize the futility of such an attempt. The beginning of his piece is a profane satire of canonical poetry and art, where no nurturing depth can be found. Tyler repeats the phrase "now is someday," into the camera before speaking the final lines of the piece with deep sincerity: "I am not afraid." Whether through transformation or surrender, Mike Tyler accepts a poetic culture that records and plays back from a stage that is both now (happening in real time) and also some day (recorded to be viewed in the future). Both are sites of authentic performance.

Guy LeCharles Gonzalez is a NYC spoken word artist whose poems focus on topics like geopolitics, ethnicity, and a variety of personal relationships. Gonzalez performed his original piece, "Fulano," at the 1999 NPS semifinals when he was a member of the 1999 Team NYC-Union Square. I found an audio recording of this performance on Gonzalez's blog, which he regularly maintains (loudpoet.com). Gonzalez is also known as a founder of the NYC Louder Arts Project "Little Bit Louder" series, known for its politically inflected poetry. Here is part of my transcription of that performance (as with above, audience quotes are here included in brackets):

> "I look to the *future* so my *children* will not *die* in the *past*. These *are* the good old days of my father's stories. From another *time. His* father's from another *place*. It is

now and *then* and *later*, there is no *beginning* or end no *rise* or *fall*. It is *other* and none of the *above.* ["woo!"]. There is no *Barnes* & Noble category for it. ["yeah, yeah"]. They are not *ready.* They are not ready for the, *barriers* to fall, James *Baldwin* on shelves next to, *Stephen King* across from *Aloud* and the collected works of *Whitman* and *Neruda* under a *banner*: *NATIVE, literature*. ["mmm." "woo!"]. The artist once *again* known as *Prince* plays in the, *background*, the multi-hued *masses relax*, sip 35-cent cups of *espresso*. *Laugh* in the, *melting pot*. An unidentifiable *mass*, *humanity*. *Call, US, Fulano*. We are *poetry*, the future written on, *walls* of ivory towers *sinking* under their *own* weight ["woo!"], *flames* shooting from our *fingertips* ["al-RIGHT!"], our *names* written in *ash*, for *all* ["yeah!"] to see. At the base of the tower, standing over the dying *embers*, the *word*, *slammed* into *irrelevance*. I stare out at the crowd. Romans *scream* for my *blood*, dissatisfied with my *soul*. A spent match *falls* to the ground. To have *come*, *so far*, for *this*, seems, *such*, a *waste*.

Gonzalez's piece is a slam fever dream—where acquiring the power to change literary culture leads to its destruction: "*slammed* into *irrelevance*" … "*such*, a *waste*." Yet the poem moves beyond a simplistic slam pessimism, where a gridlocked minoritized poetic culture opposes a privileged, academic, mainstream one. In the text and performance of his piece "Fulano," Gonzalez issues carefully crafted critiques of capitalist poetic culture while looking toward a future democracy modelled after the slam community that includes various poetry forms and lineages.

According to his blog, where I was able to access the audio file, Gonzalez performed the 1999 version of Fulano "when we [Team NYC-Urbana] were facing the Nuyorican in the

most intense slam I've ever been in" (Gonzalez). Gonzalez's intensity permeates his speech in this performance—it is not hurried, but the whooping audience can be heard throughout, especially in moments of crescendo, such as when he lists poets and writers, "*Aloud* and the collected works of *Whitman* and *Neruda* under a banner: *NATIVE,* literature." In such moments, the momentum of Gonzalez and that of the audience feed back into one another. A distinct and uncertain "mmm" is audible at the mention of "*NATIVE*"—and a published version of this poem from 2002 edits this word, substituting "American." At the beginning of the section the pronoun "it" (it is *now* and *then*…) is unspecified, and I hear it in Gonzalez's performance as referring to the slam stage, where generations and dialects converge. There is no literary market for it—it is not bought and sold, and it is not authentically recognized by academic institutions. "Fulano" is anti-nostalgic, looking toward a largely unknown but certainly diverse future instead of essentializing a past heritage, and therefore responds to unnamed detractors. "Fulano," which is Spanish for an anonymous man—used similarly to "dude," or reasonably, "guy"—locates the speaker as both an anonymous no-one and the poet himself (whose name is Guy). He speaks for an enlarged multi-hued self—"An unidentifiable *mass*, *humanity*. *Call, US, Fulano*. We are *poetry*." Fulano is most frequently used in Puerto Rican and Cuban communities to indicate an anonymous or unknown person, so there may also be something radical or at least unexpected in identifying *as fulano*, or as simultaneously anonymous and Caribbean Latinx (Chamizo Dominguez 126).

In Gonzalez's poem, the *fulano*-poetry-mass burns not the poetic texts but the place from which they are read, the gatekeeping institutions that have formerly left these people out of participation. The *fulano*'s power is to transform institutions that fail to recognize

the needs of these communities and to rebuild them in the image of a nascent multiracial, multicultural democracy. There is unity in the *fulano* ("*Call, US, Fulano*. We are *poetry*") because of these differences, just as slam community and poetic culture (as represented by Whitman, Neruda, and *Aloud*) is unified because of the multitudes contained therein. The roar of the audience and the pattering, rhythmic, breathless voice of Gonzales converge in this performance that affirms the diversity of a community while finding a nuanced way to perform the breakdown of mainstream institutions. The community affirmation is useful to surviving this transition, not only for the poets but for poetic culture in general. "Fulano" speaks to the moment, just before the millennium, where anxiety about artistic legacy, poetry's popularization and degradation, and education converge. Amid the charred remains of the ivory tower, *fulano* is offered up as a shared identity and source of hope. Gonzalez's work of imagining does not explicitly state that the networked, rhizomatic democracy of slam competitions can offer a way forward for political culture, but his performance and the roar of the audience indeed prove how vital this structure of sociality and poetics has been for those involved.

In addition to a critique of sanctioned poetry canons and slam's false promises, this piece stages a communal noise that can also be understood as utopian. This slam performance is probably the loudest of any I listened to in my research. When Gonzalez bellows in his description of flames shooting from "our fingertips," his voice is not easily distinguishable from the audience member shouting "al-RIGHT!" It isn't clear where the poem ends and ambient noise begins. With Gonzalez and his audience in recorded harmony, we can witness a collective yawp that gloriously collapses the walls and towers of official verse culture.

At the 2000 NPS finals, the final four out of 56 teams face off in Providence, and poet Tehut-Nine performs "Word Play" for team NYC-Urbana. Tehut appears resolute when he walks onstage and quickly begins a piece that turns phrases on their heads. A video of the performance is available on Paul Devlin's YouTube page. Devlin created the 1998 documentary, *Slam Nation*, which greatly expanded slam audiences in the US, and this performance is seemingly an outtake from that film. To this word play, the audience responds raucously:

> You should be *thin*king about *thin*king about *thin*king about if your *mind* is ready for Y,2,K; … Make sure your *SKIN* is Y, 2, *K,K,K, ready*; ... *OH*, what a *tan*-gled *web* we *weave*—everybody sing it!—*Oh*, what a *tan*-,gled *web*, we *weave*, when *first*, we *prac*-,tice *to*, de*ceive*; when *first*, we *prac*-,tice *to*, de-*ceive*; when *first* we *prac*-,tice *to*… *DIS*. *EVE*.

This performance combines impressive speed and rhythmic control with word play, where Tehut-Nine returns to a line, or a single word, and repeats it while shifting its meaning by employing a different emphasis (for instance, at another point in the performance, "Emergency" becomes "*EMERGE*, *AND*, *SEE*"). In the above quotation, Tehut-Nine coordinates a collective iambic chant of Walter Scott's 1808 poem, "Marmion." Tehut-Nine literally conducts the large audience, waving his arms, and speaks firmly and monotonously, instructively, didactically. Before the last two syllables, Tehut-Nine pauses, points downward, and raises his volume: *DIS. EVE.* Tehut-Nine is indicating his presence onstage, and his performance, like "Fulano" from the year prior, is high stakes. Also like Gonzales's performance of "Fulano," Tehut-Nine's scholarly mode is one of broad

assessment of literary culture in which slam uncomfortably resides. Tehut-Nine casts the audience as a school room, dramatizing the cultural space of the English-language elocution teacher. "*Dis*, *Eve*," (i.e. "this eve") means here and now, and pointing downward helps to flag his wordplay. The crowd responds with huge applause. This response marks a communal recognition of Tehut-Nine's citation of Scott as a critical act, defiguring the canonical historical poet into *dis eve*, a slam stage that promises multiculturalism, where things are tangled, complex, and unresolved. The message of Scott holds true even as it cannot be disentangled from his status as canonical and as a mainstay of English colonial education.

Tehut-Nine performs the poetic text with irony that verges on the sardonic. (His strictly maintained meter disproves a quotation from Bernstein's *Close Listening*, where he writes, "In performance, meter is eclipsed by isochrony" 14). Maria Damon, writing in the Charles Bernstein-edited collection *Close Listening*, explains that performance of banal text can, by dint of the performance's context and quality, prove transformative for audiences. Damon describes a scene in Elaine Holiman's film, *Chicks in White Satin*, where two Jewish women read a Hallmark card aloud at their wedding, a card that, according to one of the women, "perfectly expresses her feelings" (Damon 7). This card that might otherwise stand in for clichéd inauthenticity here becomes poignant for film audiences: "the context and the sincerity of emotion dignify the trite lines and complicate the high camp that the film could be; the moment is both comical and moving." Damon urges future analysis of spoken word to deeply consider context and to be attentive on multiple sensory and affective registers to elements of performance.

In a third example of a NPS competition piece that samples canonical poetry, Jeremy Richards competes with team Seattle at the 2002 NPS in Minneapolis. At the semifinal stage, he performs his piece, "T.S. Eliot's Lost Hip Hop Poem" with the accompaniment of teammate Nathan Ramos, who provides beatboxing and other backup vocal assistance. In the early 2000s NPS circuit, Richards was known for performing highly allusive nerd-lit pieces, including "William Shakespeare Gets Hooked on 8-Bit Nintendo" and "Sylvia Plath's Gangsta Rap Legacy." Writing in in *Poetry* in 2014, Lesley Wheeler describes innovative contemporary covers of T.S. Eliot, writing, "[Richards'] satire is so silly and deadpan, and so stylistically thorough, it becomes serious again. For these parody-homages, Richards chooses writers whose textual performances of self are especially layered." In Richards' performance piece, available on YouTube, he performs Eliot hunched and leery-eyed. His take on Eliot is capable of jarring non sequitur and audacious pronouncement—"I will stuff my desire in the mashed potatoes."—and his character performance is effete and a little ghostly, like a poetic Vincent Price. Richards relies on his voice and body language to transform into this new imagining of Eliot—after all, costumes and props are a breach of the NPS slam competition rules (so, it should be noted, is musical accompaniment, and it is unclear if Ramos's beatboxing drops the score for Team Seattle). Richards does not leave his body – not quite. His spectacles, button-down shirt, and the distinctive, elite, affected British accent together convey an in-your-face academic whiteness, but they do not betray the audience perception of Richards, a bookish young White man. Richards wears a stiff collared powder blue button down, signifying a kind of stodgy intellectualism, and yet multiple buttons are unfastened and the shirt fits loosely. In this relaxed, almost unhinged,

but nonetheless *repressed* embodiment, we are seeing another version of Eliot, but it is still recognizable Eliot.

Richards (left) performs Eliot as Nathan Ramos (right) provides accompaniment

Not unlike Gonzalez's performance of "Fulano," Richards seeks to criticize the institutions that have captured and freighted poetry with ideology, rather than criticize the poetry or its poet, T.S. Eliot. His approach to T.S. Eliot's characteristic style is an attempt to satirize the figure rather than poetics of Eliot as a bastion of canonical authority. Audiences of the performance hear and see a satirized version of a familiar Eliotan style: "Let us *roll*

then, you and I." The joke here is to dramatize the gap between gangster rap motifs—"…the evening stretched *out* against the sky / like a *punk* ass I *laid* out with my *phat* rhymes"—and Eliot's elite, Anglo-American, institutionally vaunted position in mainstream poetic culture. The joke is to play low culture against high culture with a not-too-subtle racial irony: Eliot's "lost hip hop poem" is farce because Eliot is just so glaringly White.

Importantly, this gap (between canon and fringe, Eliot and gangster) is a mirror of Richards' performance context, that is, between what Charles Bernstein calls "official verse culture" and the National Poetry Slam. In Richards' piece, Eliot sounds ridiculous as a gangster, he is, again, just so White. At first, the audience laughs awkwardly, unsure of what to make of the spectacle. And yet the joke builds as the ironic bravado quickens and intensifies—"*pound* for *pound* like Ezra Pound, no other literati *around* can *confound* the post-Gregorian quickness I bring to the *microphone*." The language of Eliot, or Richards' parodic take on Eliotic language, works fairly well against a dropped beat: "*Bring the pathos*!" Eliot's strangeness and linguistic density may, the performance seems to suggest, demonstrate that Eliot's printed poems anticipate the verbal play of hip hop lyricism. Richard has a talent for spitting what might be called "corny White guy rap." By the two-minute mark, the huge audience response registers that the joke lands in the NPS community.

This is no easy bit to pull off—a clowning appropriation of hip hop culture is in some ways reminiscent of Taylor Mali's unsuccessful take on "Skinheads" several years earlier. Richards, as a white Male competing poet, ventures into awkward and potentially problematic terrain to connect to an audience that is composed of competing slam poets. But Richards is exceptionally thoughtful in the delivery, and moreover he relies on his

visible identity as a White man in his performance of irony. Richards, as Eliot, is not masquerading in "Black voice" or requesting laughter at the expense of bodies that do not look like him. As a result of his attention to embodiment and his stylistic thoroughness, Richards is embraced where Mali is spurned.

Conclusion: spoken word lessons

During the 1990s and early 2000s, spoken word scholarship proliferated in order to be shared with fellow members of poetic communities—diverse audiences of performers and supporters. This in turn modelled forms of poetry learning that may inform future approaches to spoken word. The composition of scholarly performances varies greatly, and the critical treatments of a poet like T.S. Eliot do not automatically resemble one another because they take place within local contexts and communities of spoken word. Yet performers who sampled or covered poems consistently do so in a way that remixes a familiar hierarchy. This body of poetry scholarship challenges not only academic scholarship but an entire poetic culture that seeks to divide three positions hierarchically: onstage, a poet is a critic is a reader. The performances cited in this chapter all interpolate other people's poetry in new works through sampling or covering, and these practices demonstrate the importance of poetry criticism as an embodied and political act, not to mention a common one, in the rapidly growing world of spoken word poetry of the 1990s and early 2000s.

In the scholarly performances highlighted above, spoken word pieces are presented to audiences with different goals and contexts: in order to reclaim Beat poetry as Black art (Tish Benson), to forge continuity with other poetic communities like the Black Arts

Movement (Jessica Care Moore), and to reflexively position a piece in relation to other spoken word poetry (Lemon Andersen, Guy LeCharles Gonzalez, Tehut-Nine). In addition, spoken word performances show that the line between poetic performance and political action becomes blurred. Rather than separate poetry from a world of politics, stages point to the performances inherent in political action.

The forms of community learning and poetry scholarship among spoken word artists that I highlight reject an opposition between spoken word and mainstream poetry, despite the fact that such an opposition continues in 2021 to structure poetic histories, book reviews, and several levels of pedagogy. Taking the lead from poets, I do not characterize spoken word in the 1990s as "responding to" mainstream printed poetry from a secondary, marginalized, or devalued position. Nor does spoken word represent a totally separate or independent set of relations that disregard mainstream poetry altogether. Rather, the relationship between spoken word and mainstream poetry is a complex and localized culture of performative critical practice. In other words, spoken word is a space of vernacular poetry scholarship, based in communities, that highlights embodiment in the interpretation of text. In truth, the border between spoken word and mainstream poetry is porous, without a clear dividing line in print or performance, and moreover, spoken word has gone mainstream in a big way since the early 1990s.

To this end, spoken word criticizes itself reflexively and continuously. Take a slam performance like Guy LeCharles Gonzales' "Fulano," where, in a dystopian literary scenario, slam poets burn down ivory towers only to see one another "slammed into irrelevance." It feels like "such, a waste," according to Gonzales, to tear down gatekeeping literary culture through tremendous effort and organizing, only to end up forgotten and dwelling amid

ruins. Or consider Tehut-Nine's slam poem, "Wordplay," which creates a punning analogy between the NPS finals in which it was performed—"dis eve"— and Walter Scott's famous Anglophone pedagogy, "we practice to deceive." Tehut-Nine signals his disappointment in a greater slam community, which promised nothing less than to transform an unjust culture. Related to this common critique of spoken word as an empty promise of social transformation, anxiety of commercialization also characterizes spoken word performances that critique the culture of spoken word in the 1990s. The poet Maggie Estep was a prime target, as she aired a piece on MTV during a commercial break for the television program *Beavis and Butthead*, performed as an opening act at sellout concerts, and sold many records (for a poet), to the ire of many spoken word artists who rejected poetry's sellout in chief.

Today, in 2021, the trajectories of critique and reflexive community building continue in spoken word's community—however, spoken word largely (if not primarily) exists in pedagogical contexts and online video. To thousands of youth arts programs and literature classrooms in middle and secondary schools globally, spoken word often represents a skill to be learned or a job to be done. Increasing youth access to poetry, especially poetry that centers underrepresented identities, is a crucial development of literacy education in the era since No Child Left Behind, yet the education scholarship around spoken word tends to characterize its benefits to normative literacy. Since the mid-2000s, a number of scholarly works have focused on spoken word as a means of normative American literacy, such as the essay, "Developing Oral Proficiency through Poem Recitation in Elementary English as a Second Language" (Picpican-Bell 2005) or the book, *The Spoken Word Revolution* (Williams 2004). Around the US and abroad, many teachers and arts

nonprofit workers work in spoken word as a professional field. I write from Seattle in 2021, where spoken word and slam live in pedagogy. The continuation of spoken word into the 2020s is marked by institutionalization (as well as a significant online market, described in detail by Javon Johnson in chapter 4 of *Killing Poetry*). To be sure, there are a number of community-based spoken artists who continue spoken word traditions in my city and elsewhere. In the space where spoken word primarily lives, pedagogy, the focus is too often on mastery-based models of literacy education. The model of spoken word as a stepping stone to normative literacy acts contrary to the work of spoken word artists that I highlight in this chapter, and it only contributes to a hierarchy that puts learners below professionals.

Carmen Kynard's 2020 essay, "'All I Need Is One Mic'": A Black Feminist Community Meditation on the Work, the Job, and the Hustle (& Why So Many of Yall Confuse This Stuff)," offers relevant insight as it seeks to differentiate what is transformative about literacy education (the work) from what is institutionally required (the job) in a series of "meditations." Kynard writes of her students, saying, "only the most radical imaginations can conjure up alternative learning spaces that work towards new visions of a world that could be but has yet to be" (Kynard). In order to make space for the radical imaginations of all students, let us remain cued into historical efforts to create systemic transformation through language experimentation and community building. The critical practices of spoken word artists featured in this chapter may point to a way forward. Future spoken word pedagogies can take a page out of the highly crafted, reflexive performances of Tish Benson and others, who critique poetry in creative performances that assert continuities and critique. Designing pieces for an audience community, with bodies in mind. This is to

call to the practitioners of spoken word pedagogy (teachers and arts nonprofit workers) to attend to histories of scholarly practices in spoken word. Spoken word is an environment where embodied performance, local community, and poetic history converge in acts of scholarship. The continued institutionalization of spoken word as pedagogy raises the stakes for our attention to histories of embodied scholarship within spoken word culture. We risk losing touch with potentially transformative scholarly practices that connect poetic history to embodied and community-based performances.

In the upcoming chapter, forms of zine making demonstrate scholarly practices that are based in communities—but in zine communities, poetry scholars almost never meet face-to-face. As textually mediated discourse, zines promote forms of poetry criticism that are not available on stage, such as tearing and xeroxing pages from anthologies (although one could perhaps imagine a Norton-shredding slam poem without too much difficulty) and crafting and distributing textual collages. The embodied critique and audience interactions that emerge in spoken word criticism are largely absent in zines. As a result, zine creators are free to create and perform identities that emphasize or hide features such as race, which contrasts to the performance spaces of spoken word that emphasize the relationship between race and scholarship. In chapter 2, we will see that a radical textual politics operates in these largely youth-driven subcultural spaces, where poetry scholarship offers a means of challenging academic culture from positions that are often marginalized by academia.

chapter 2.

Poetry Scholarship for the Taking: Zine Textuality and Tactical Anthologizing

> I like the idea that no one I know is really going to read this. It's a public creation in a very private way, like a certain park bench or a tree bough or bathroom graffiti that is available to everyone but only known to you. … Here it is, yours, temporary proof of my existence for the taking.
>
> Amalle, *Rugburn Spectacular* #2, 06.28.1999

Overview

In the previous chapter, I showed how spoken word performances in the 1990s and early 2000s articulated new forms of poetry criticism that rupture divisions previously established in academia between poets, poetry critics, and poetry readers. The spoken word commonplace, "other people's poetry," and practices of critically performing and studying these poems, become essential to creative spoken word pieces that are no less original than so-called standard ones. The practices of sampling and covering poems in spoken word reflect the complexities of vernacular poetry scholarship that seeks to explore transformative poetic meaning in community contexts. For audiences of spoken word, to be in the presence of live performance provides a means of community building, as seen in archived National Poetry Slam audience responses. Poetry criticism within spoken word culture was being shaped by protocols of community building, responding to simultaneous needs: demonstrating continuity with Black poetic lineages, formulating a poetic subculture of political action, and placing poetic text in conversation with identities through critically embodied performance. These scholarly-critical innovations help point us toward a needed reassessment of 1990s poetic culture that maintained scholarly

gatekeeping and often failed to meaningfully recognize intellectual production outside of academia. I also suggest that these performances circulated in communities that understand all poetry as embodied and performed. Performers make clear that poems do not fundamentally precede performances, and that these performances are complex interactions between raced and gendered bodies on stages, those in a given audience, and the poets being studied. Just as spoken word's performance culture draws careful attention to the bodies on stage, it likewise draws attention the performed nature of all text in relation to issues of representation in poetic culture.

The implications for a poetry criticism that takes root at this kind of realness would not be isolated to spoken word, and the present chapter focuses on poetry criticism in a second area of nonacademic poetic culture: zines. Below, I highlight the poetic scholarship of zinesters, a term for people who create, publish, and/or distribute zines. Their critical performativity includes written responses to, as well as the presentation of (editing, layout, formatting, and circulation) poems by well-known poets. Various creative decisions inform how a piece of poetry criticism looks and moves in various small and, in general, short-lived zine communities and distribution networks. Similar to the scholarly performances of spoken word artists, zinesters created poetry scholarship that crossed divisions established in academia between poets, poetry readers, and poetry critics or scholars. As textual artifacts, zines ignore and betray these divisions as they reprint and criticize poems in order to circulate poems in unsanctioned ways and to address community needs.

In this chapter, I analyze zines that theorize and practice vernacular poetry scholarship. Sometimes this scholarship is positioned as a resource for communities and ongoing activism, and sometimes microstudy of a poem becomes a vehicle of self-

exploration within community, as zines provide a unique mode of the performance and construction of identity in relation to the circulation and study of poetry. As textual makers, zinesters use a variety of tactics to re-present poems outside of mainstream academic convention.

Zines: Tactical Anthologizing and Counterpublic Address

Zines (pronounced *zeenz*) contain multitudes of creative content, composed for different purposes and with varying audiences. They defy easy categorization. Typically, zines are handmade, photocopied, self-distributed, short-run, erratically issued, politically energized print media that enjoyed their cultural peak at some point in the 1990s within the Anglophone world (Duncombe). Zines are often categorized in genres like personal zines, or "perzines," as well as fanzines focused on topics like bands or anime, as well as literary zines and many others. Since the mid-2000s, a number of activists, historians, and scholars have made zines available to the public, and it is thanks to these individuals that I am able to access and research zines for this dissertation project. Jenna Freedman, who assisted this project when I visited Barnard College, describes zines in an article for *Signs*, the academic feminist journal: "Zines make up a genre of self-published texts that has grown out of the punk rock DIY ethic…zine form and content are not always of a quality or caliber that would make it through a mainstream publisher's editorial process…. By selecting and preserving zines, libraries capture these ephemeral materials, providing scholars and pleasure readers access to them" (Freedman 53).

As with spoken word archives, the present day of zine archives reflects a community-based effort that typically cooperate with universities. As I researched this

chapter, I visited zine archives in New York City, Portland, Oregon, Olympia, Washington, and Seattle, Washington, and these archives typically organize zines in categories like queer, literary, and personal. Libraries use homegrown systems to categorize and store zines for public and academic study—some archives are literally a stack of milk crates in a back room, while other archives like Barnard Zine Archive house zines in library stacks and catalogue them in sophisticated digital databases (Barnard shares the CLIO database with Columbia University, where all issues are catalogued).

Zine archiving is self-consciously political. In a recent article, Janice Radway argues that the cultural politics of zine culture of the 1990s has extended into zine archiving and institutional practices of the present day. Zine archivists create their own visions of public pedagogy that emerges from their past participation in zines:

> Those involved in [zine archival] practices were inspired to act by their past experiences with zines, which convinced them that the larger world of knowledge production should be altered by the active presence of zines in it. This presence is political because it challenges established hierarchies of forms and voices, the selection of those who are attended to as legitimate, authorized denizens of the major institutions that comprise contemporary knowledge production. To summarize the political effect of this work most bluntly, it has interjected the voices and works of adolescents into the legitimated precincts of knowledge production—that is, into magazines and books, libraries, and schools and universities. As a result, it has rendered teenagers not merely visible but audible. It has enabled their appearance in this realm as subjects in their own right, as writers worthy of

attention rather than as targets of surveillance, policing, and silencing by others. (145)

The archives I visited in my research tend to brand themselves as spaces where voices can be heard from different identity positions, especially youth. Barnard College's archive emphasizes the inclusion of zinesters who may not have had a voice otherwise: youth, queer youth, and youth of color. Because zines are self-published, they are seen as especially connected to voice, and zines often provided a feeling of radical opportunity for ideas and design. Radway's description of political archiving tends to focus more pon the inclusion of new voices in the relatively powerful institutional sites of public and university libraries, whereas the zines in this chapter mostly come from archives at nonelite, self-organized institutions. QZAP, for instance, is a homespun online archive based in Milwaukee, WI, describing itself as an "effort to preserve queer zines and make them available to other queers, researchers, historians, punks, and anyone else who has an interest DIY publishing and underground queer communities" (QZAP About page). Portland's Independent Publishing Resource Center identifies itself with a local DIY movement that began in the 1990s and presently "contains materials that are not otherwise represented in public libraries" (IPRC About page). Olympia Zine Library operates out of an independent bookstore, Last Word Books, identifies itself as a "repository for radical literature" (Last Word About page). Accessing zines in these spaces renders the voices of zinesters audible in ways that are aligned with special or marginalized communities, countercultural efforts, and independent systems of cultural

creation and preservation. Archives like QZAP and Olympia Zine Library show how zines are not always archived for general publics and institutional inclusion.

In these archives, I began discovering examples of creative poetic repurposing and response, such as when a poem is cut or torn out of an academic anthologies and pasted to a collage that highlights political efforts that matter to a given zinester. In the pages of *Picklejar* or *Rugburn Spectacular*, two zines featured below, we can bear witness to the tearing, transformation, and recontextualization of poems out of published anthologies, where the destruction of academic and commercial property in turn constructs zine culture's poetic counterpublic. Archived zines reflect practices of reusing poems, as well as responding to them, in ways that speak to individual and communal needs. I found that zinesters carefully create aesthetic distance, in the re-presentation of poems, from academia and mainstream commercial publication. This does not demonstrate a simple agon between zines and academic culture, and there are moments of important overlap between academic and zine-based writing about poetry.

Another important textual feature: zines are quite small and, notably for a poetry-containing object, highly portable. I discovered a zinester named who Amalle provides a reflection on her zine composition practices that drive home the cultural politics of small, tactical, and noncommercial print media. She describes her zine as "a public creation in a very private way…that is available to everyone but only known to you," and concludes her reflection with the salient lines, "Here it is, yours, temporary proof of my existence for the taking." Amalle's essay provides a theoretical entry point to my discussion. For one, her phrases, "for the taking," and "available to everyone," affirm the key portability of zines and the low barrier to accessing them. While at Barnard, I browsed her zine, *Rugburn*

Spectacular, published during the late 1990s and into the early 2000s. This zine is particularly small at 22x11 cm: a portable, pocketable object. A zine's portability reflects the context in which it is produced, which is a non-commercial, frequently community-based context that allows for improvisation, opinion, and what may be variously termed inconsistency (in defiance of standard syntax or grammar) or error (with no professional copy editing).

The design of zines thus conforms to communal efforts in riot grrrl (the punk movement), queer community, etc., as tactical print media. The work of Michel de Certeau and others helps to frame the aesthetics of tactical media that I explore in zine poetry scholarship, which forms an important backdrop to the poetry scholarship I discovered in my research. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), Michel de Certeau seeks to overturn the notion that everyday thinkers and, especially, readers are defined by the degree to which they are simply controlled by institutions. His book proposes a theory of practice that is composed of two broad elements—*strategy*, structuring on high from isolated institutions, and *tactic*, taking advantage of opportunities in real time (35). A salaried city planner, for example, who creates guidelines for future housing developments could be said to match de Certeau's understanding of strategy. On the other hand, construction workers who use company equipment for unsanctioned projects are engaging in tactical work. Within his discussion of tactics, in the chapter, "Making Do: Use and Tactics," de Certeau develops his well-known notion of "poaching," which relies on a metaphor of larceny or theft. Tactical poaching is an indelible feature of zine history, where a zinester would commonly stay after hours in their office job to print off the next issue, secretly siphoning off resources from a company for a special activist project.

The various forms of consumption that occur in a context of zines are anything but passive—participation in zines requires active interpretation, deep forms of design and making, and community building. Moreover, de Certeau writes that actively participating in tactical self-organized groups can work to undo harmful disciplinary frameworks. Rhyming significantly with Amalle's likening of handmade and networked publications to secretive public effacement, de Certeau writes:

> "[active users'] innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules … bring to light the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and make-shift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of 'discipline.' Pushed to their ideal limits, these procedures and ruses of consumers compose the network of an antidiscipline …" (xiv-xv).

In the early 1990s, fan studies and media scholar Henry Jenkins unpacked and further developed de Certeau's concept of "poaching," a process through which a reader may undermine the sanctioned interpretation of a text. Jenkins writes that individual fans may interpret text through *both* the dominant and the oppositional reading, rather than using an either/or model. In this sense, an interpretation of a poem frequently taught in schools could be both idiosyncratic and sanctioned. Jenkins also describes a twin result of fandom in the empowerment that comes from blurring the producer-consumer line, and the risk of falling into petty escapism. Jenkins' theory of "participatory culture" rejects that everyday people are merely passive "consumers of pre-constructed messages" but rather

are actively involved in "shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content in ways which might not have been previously imagined" (2013, 2).

Mike Chasar's 2014 book, *Everyday Reading: Poetry and Popular Culture in Modern America*, explores poetry scrapbooks in chapter 2. Individuals who scrapbooked poems transformed poetry from (what was seen as) public property into private property. This inverts the expected direction, because in the United States, where Chasar's examples come from, poems have historically been printed and reprinted in newspapers without author permission. Because of this, Chasar argues that de Certeau's poaching concept has falsely traveled to poetry:

> While scrapbooks were certainly produced at what John Fiske calls "the interface between the products of the culture industries and everyday life," I would caution against thinking of their makers as 'poachers' … Far from feeling like trespassers, many American readers believed that they in fact had a perfect right to the poems they were collecting—that no one owned them (copyright holders included), and that they comprised, instead, a cultural commons that users had a right to access and use however they saw fit." (53-54)

Contextualizing a longer history of poetry re-use in the United States, Chasar argues that poetry's distribution has often been seen as democratic and public. The 1990s somewhat complicates this history, however. Whereas on the one hand poetry enjoyed an enormous presence on television programs (see Chasar's *Poetry Unbound*, 2020), the 1990s also features a crackdown on informal web-based anthologies by publishers (see chapter 3). In the Norton age, zines transform poetry as pedagogical property into subcultural or counterpublic property.

To all of these writers, culture is not only consumed passively or mundanely, but is also commonly accessed through active theft, such as illicitly using office equipment after work hours, and then interpreted through simultaneous protocols (sanctioned or other) and transformed to serve individual needs. Oftentimes these thefts never come to the legal owners' knowledge. In any case, the underlying idea is that property is informally transferred and transformed. While in some ways agreeable with this framework, Amalle's theory of zine textuality adds the conceptual framework of vandalism to de Certeau and Jenkins. Comparing her zine, and by implication all zines, to "bathroom graffiti" or "a certain park bench," Amalle signals an important connection between zines' uses of quasi-public culture and vandalism. Rather than theft as a transferal of property, vandalism damages the integrity of marketplace commodities or useful equipment. (A park bench is publicly available, but it is not yours to keep—young people often get the same message with poems.) The below examples, most notably in the destruction of academic anthologies, demonstrate the connection between tearing and transformation. Graffiti transforms the undifferentiated space of an institutional bathroom stall into a unique site of cultural production, reusing industrially produced materials as a context for expression (activist slogans, affective jokes). Likewise, zines destroy the monotonous property of an anthology and reassemble the text in a photocopied noncommercial zine, transporting poetic language while also transforming it.

Zines, as tactical poetry media, contrast to academic anthologies, as strategic poetry media. In 1996, Norton publishes the fourth edition of its bestselling series, *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, which clocks in at 1,998 pages and 3.5 pounds (I weighed my copy to be sure). The 1996 Norton almost bursts its binding. Within its pages, we can locate a few

key contradictions: a 1990s politics of multicultural inclusion and representation strains against canonical tradition; the book's pedagogical usefulness is confounded by its sheer weight (who wants this thing in their backpack?).

Amalle's zines, described in greater detail below, happen to feature poets who are represented in the Norton (Theodore Roethke, John Berryman, and Anne Sexton), and her zine contrasts in some obvious ways to the Norton as a lightweight and noncommercial print object. Amalle anthologizes poems, reprinting them as excerpts embedded in reflective essays and carefully composed collages of mixed media. In zines such as Amalle's, anthologizing is practiced with a very different set of goals than a corporate publishing entity like Norton—poems are not provided to sell or canonize, but rather to build community and to make spaces for marginalized identities in the exchange of ideas and text (relatedly, zines were typically exchanged through the mail, or through record shops or bookstores). This in turn shapes the forms that anthologizing takes in zine culture. Amalle's pages include poems that are "for the taking," and free use of the media is asserted, if not assumed. Her transformations both take from other media—published materials are transformed pasted to her zine collages that speak to her queer romance.

Second, Amalle describes how a zine's style and materiality complicate the border between private and public media: "a public creation in a very private way." Amalle's is a public-facing writing that is also highly personal. She, like other zinesters, makes zines that ship through the mail to other zine readers, often receiving zines (or stamps) as payment for her latest issue. In this section of her issue as well as in other issues, Amalle writes as if in a private diary, yet her zine is a textual object that is made for a public readership, a counterpublic in whom Amalle comfortably confides. Amalle also describes her readership

as a relatively controlled network of readers and co-critics, explaining that her known connections do not cross over with her zine's readership: "no one I know is really going to read this." The zine nonetheless becomes a private object (like a diary) for a public (albeit a limited public) readership. This style of public address is noteworthy as an anticipation of blogging, a genre of private-public address that would become wildly popular several years after this zine appears, while exceeding the limited scope of making that is made available by blogging.

Zinesters address counterpublics in the highly allusive language of the insider. To this end, the work of well-known poets speaks in various ways. Some zinesters copy poems that highlight a political stance; others describe how poems fit into everyday situations; others provide language that fits complex affective situations. In zines, a number of highly sophisticated procedures move poems from a context outside of the zine to the zine page. In sum, these practice (such as tearing, typing, excerpting, drawing) free the poem from limited academic consumption of close-reading pedagogies and importable anthologies. The bibliographic tactics of the highly portable, improvised, and community-connected zine contrast everywhere with the professionally published (and expensive) Norton Anthology. Style is not an incidental feature to zine-based criticism, rather, style is at core of the intellectual content of zines.

Michael Warner (*Publics and Counterpublics*, 2002) focuses on the means of circulation and discourse in his definition of counterpublics. The "counter" in the book's title refers to what Warner calls "a conflictual relation to the dominant public." This communal antagonism happens simultaneous to the assembly of a space from which to critique dominant culture (118). On the inside of a counterpublic, member identities are

formed and imagined, and outside of these publics, a relationship to mainstream culture is established through discursive protocols (like slang) and other means. Counterpublics circulate discourses in the service of critique as well as identity formation, which requires a complex approach to private and public that mirrors Amalle's description of zine content. Her identity as a girl in a queer romantic entanglement means that she is multiply marginalized. Zinesters like her demonstrate resonances between poetry and counterpublic belonging—what is private to the world matters to a counterpublic of fellow zinesters, Amalle's select coterie of readers.

The archived materials that I examine demonstrate forms of poetry scholarship that begin in mediated, complex, personal, and political situations. One challenge I face in my analysis is to avoid assigning too much importance to a given piece of media in a zine. A poem may have been chosen for any number of reasons—as a scrap of text, a poem may perfectly fill a gap in a collage. Hence, spatial form, the length and shape of a poem, are likely common criteria for inclusion. Poetic form, as shape, helps to explain why short poems are preferred, a feature that resonates with on stage performance of "other people's poetry" in spoken word, where performances are often subjected to time limits, which in turn necessarily limits what can be performed for one's poetic community. Slam artists prefer to recite fragments or short pieces like sonnets rather than lengthy poems by necessity, and zinesters prefer to type out or reprint brief pieces because a zine issue typically runs around 10-20 pages in total. As zinester intent remains invariably unclear, I aim to allow textual practices to speak for themselves as radical, tactical anthologizing practices that are crafted for counterpublics that remix categories of public and private using their own terms.

Framing Zines—feminist texts and punk lineages

Prior to highlighting zines that feature poetry criticism, I will briefly attend to the rise of zines and the consequent academic writing about zines in order to frame their punk and feminist origins, as well as the occasional erasure of youth of color that happens in zine scholarship. Zines have a seed in punk culture and reached their zenith in the 1990s as feminist textuality par excellence, a lineage that informs how zines were produced and circulated in the era, as well as how they are made publicly available today. In the introduction to *DIY Citizenship: Critical Making and Social Media*, Matt Ratto and Megan Boler celebrate the democratic core they observe in zines, which they associate with a longer do-it-yourself (DIY) movement that comes out of music subcultures in the UK and the US: "like the lo-fi movements before them, these individuals and social collectives find value in the self-production of craft objects and understand this work as a protest against the increasing commodification of society" (10). Zines tend to cost very little, and payment generally covers the cost of postage or exchanged for stamps or zines—oftentimes, the production materials are pilfered from a job. Steven Duncombe, a zinester-turned-zine scholar, argues in his 1997 *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*, that borrowing resources away from jobs represents resistance to a "grim new economy of service, temporary and flexible work" (2). Duncombe understands zines as resistant to commodification in their very lack of regularity, unstandardized formatting, unstable genre, even sudden shifts in a zine's name or authors. As well, copyright laws, writes cultural scholar Nicky Marsh, were ignored, and "intellectual property was

frequently foregrounded and mocked" (2). Publishing practices in zines are political when considered from a vantage that takes (both where they are accessed and archived and the content itself, asking to be taken seriously as knowledge production even if few institutions recognize them); The presence of poetry in these zines is also political. Often, zine poetry publishing practices include commentary (i.e. evaluation, explication, theorization) and zine-published poetry always features a degree of intertextuality with other elements that coexist on the page(s) of the printed poem or within the issue.

Zine scholarship in the past two decades has mostly focused on zines' ad hoc textuality, communities, and organizing in relation to feminism. Alison Piepmeier's *Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism* (2009) seeks ways to recognize theorization that has been occurring in textual spaces that are often difficult to recognize from an academic vantage. Piepmeier writes, "Because zines are scrappy, informal, sometimes deliberately immature and provocative, and able to be produced by almost anyone, they haven't generally been recognized as a meaningful part of feminist history or as sites of feminist theory production, but they are both" (198). Piepmeier stresses the nexus between making on textual, communities, coalitions, and gender—"zines often function as spaces not only for gender construction but also gender play" (18)—and sees zines after the riot grrrl movement to be the vanguard of third wave feminism. riot grrrl is a girl punk movement that emerges in Olympia, Washington and Washington, D.C. in connection with a number of independent music labels and zine publications. Several of the zines in this chapter are associated with riot grrrl (note: also stylized with two r's, as "riot grrl").

Janice Radway adds to Piepmeier's project by investigating the subculture of riot grrrl, which, according to Janice Radway, "is generally understood as a spontaneous social movement of mostly white, middle-class girls and young women that developed in the wake of all-girl punk bands" (Radway 149). Many of the zines in archives today, and most of those below, engage riot grrrl in some way, running the gamut from wholehearted belonging to outright critique. Some other riot grrrl zinesters perform the paradox of outsider culture—such as a zine I found digitized on archive.org called *cupsize* #3 (1995): "I spell riot grrl with two Rs to signal my outsider status." In a sense, *cupsize* is quintessentially "riot grrrl," as it refuses a version of membership that is reduced to compliant and complacent insiderness.

Others, like zinester turned scholar Mimi Thi Nguyen, challenge the privilege and whitewashing that sustained riot grrrl. Nguyen writes, "actively creating a public culture of dissent—punk or not—will have to involve some self-reflexive unpacking of privileges/poverties and their historical and political contexts" (1998). Nguyen has emerged as a major proponent of the culturally transformative possibilities of zine-ing, and elsewhere advocates for broad and inclusive coalition-building among zinesters, who constitute a "culturally productive, politicized counterpublic" (2012, 175).

Others have helped to reframe the textual lineages of zines at large. Nguyen, along with other former and current zinesters of color, have raised their voices in order to articulate that zines may be traced to forebears other than 1930s sci-fi fandom and punk. For instance, in *Broken Pencil*, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarshina's zine published in 2004, an essay called "Brown Star Kids: Zine Makers of Colour Shake Things Up" claims that it is just as plausible that zines emerge from white-identified institutions (i.e. sci-fi, punk rock,

riot grrrl) as "out of the self-publication methods utilized by Chicana, Latina, Black, Indigenous and APA artists, poets and writers during the '60s and '70s" (quoted from Zobl 3). While many zinesters are highly aware of the racial dynamics of their subculture, others select and interpret poems in small circles of exchange, where subcultural critique is not a primary focus.

An emphasis on identity and community guides my analysis of zines. In addition, I seek to find new terms of the exploration of vernacular poetry study, which I believe offers, and in turn requires, a different view into poetry study as a broad concept. Helpful to my analysis of vernacular study is Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, which seeks to reconfigure the category of study away from its familiar institutional forms. Desiring to move away from the capitalist logistics they identify with university pedagogy and to instead align with possibilities of learning they identify within working class and Black radical traditions, Moten and Harney write:

> To do these things is to be involved in a kind of common intellectual practice. What's important is to recognize that that has been the case–because that recognition allows you to access a whole, varied, alternative history of thought.

These writers seek to further expand the scope of recognized intellectual labor. They formulate the concept of study around spaces where marginalized peoples have historically self-organized in order to learn. Those in spaces of nonacademic discourse have not been tied to production schedules. Moten and Harney provide language that seeks to divorce the value of intellectual work from capitalist protocols, which helps to frame the self-organized poetry study I find in zines during the 1990s and early 2000s. I seek to be ever watchful of

bias, valuing the efforts of Nguyen, Piepzna-Samarshina, and others, while also finding ways for nonacademic scholars to speak on their own terms.

Poetry Criticism in Zines

I explore poetry critical practices in zines, and I seek to approach the work of zinesters in way that is analogous to and complements the work of zine archivists. The zines I investigate below feature well-known poems, or works by well-known poets, within their pages: torn-out and photocopied pages from anthologies, poems copied line-by-line using a typewriter, collages containing handwritten excerpts, and more. By well-known poetry, I refer to any poetry that circulates in mainstream print and pedagogy. These poems become part of zines, and the zines become part of the poems. Like librarian Jenna Freedman, I seek to make visible and audible the scholarly production of youth in the 1990s and early 2000s, especially youth of color and queer youth. Freedman suggests that there is latent transformative power in circulating youth-created objects in a serious or sanctioned place, writing, "imagine how empowering it might be to a young person to see a title like *Fuck You, High School!* on the shelf of the library or in its catalog" (57). I believe there is also great possibility in the various performative practices around poetry publication and criticism that circulated in various zines of the era. The anonymous young person that Freedman mentions, who may be experiencing libraries anew through an encounter with a zine, may also look inside a zine and experience a poem anew, or poetry anew. A library, or a poem, that previously appeared inhospitable, may suddenly feel relevant, possibly even feel like an exciting vehicle of discovery.

As print objects—typically A5 or A6 (210 x 148 mm -or- 148 x 105 mm) booklets—that are gifted and exchanged through the postal service on a trade or paid-with-stamps basis, zines are a site worthy of vernacular poetry investigation because of the breadth of critical engagement that one can find in them. Contrast an unrecorded conversation about reading a loaned edition of a given poet's collected works, which obviously won't stick around as long as a zine (assuming, of course, that there is funding for archivists). Second, zines are deeply designed. Re-presenting a poem in the made space of a zine means that young people make room to perform and engage with poems in ways that are far less available in academia, where linear prose is the norm. In zines, collages are typical, and in academic publishing, it's difficult to even imagine a peer-reviewed collage. Third, zines are distributed to networks, and connecting interpretation to communal needs and tactics likewise presents new terrain for critical engagement—the goal of this investigation is ultimately to enlarge critical practice and seek greater inclusion in the study of poetry and culture.

As I looked through hundreds of physical copies of zines and files of scans in four archives—Barnard Zine Library (NYC), Olympia Zine Library (Olympia, WA), Queer Zine Archive Project (Milwaukee, WI and online), and Independent Publishing Resource Center (Portland, OR)—I uncovered an increasing number and increasingly diverse array of poems (largely 20th century, American, lyric poems) amid textually complex and often strikingly personal zines. I became particularly drawn to so-called "perzines," meaning personal zines, which focus primarily on the subjectivity (politics, relationships, art, consciousness) of the zinester.

The below zines are presented in chronological order from date of publication. They demonstrate poetry study that departs from mainstream academic reading. Rather than define a method in relation to other writers, tactical interpretive strategies of community building become central to the poetry criticism that happens in zine culture. The below zines interpolate poetic text in personal and communal efforts.

These zines likewise require different kinds of attention, for instance, to various elements of design on a given page that provide physical and thematic framing for a poem, and this poem may be one more piece of, part of and distinct from, a collage of media; other media incorporated on the page; or, other contents within the issue and other issues, since a zine is a text made of texts that calls for close multi-register attention. These zines put in focus the experiences of youth of color (*Picklejar*, *Hollyhock*) and queer youth (*Queer Intercourse*, *Picklejar*, *Rugburn Spectacular*) and cite punk and riot grrrl cultural participation (*Hollyhock, Volcano Girls*).

Queer Intercourse #4 (1992)

Published by Guerilla Press Collective in Pittsburgh (stylized as "Pitzberg" on the issue's cover), the many issues of *Queer Intercourse* emphasize collective efforts of a local queer community in its grassroots production and independent bookstore distribution. Today, researchers can access *Queer Intercourse #4* online, through the database Queer Zine Archive Project, a grassroots, "labor-of-love project" online archive project based in Milwaukee, WI. This issue lists 20 contributors in its masthead, and its 30 pages contain comics, original author-submitted poems by poets John Champagne, Jack Fag'an, Larry Roberts, Jessica Burns, Henry Collier, and Deborah Pursifull, and essays about queer sex

and activism in Pittsburgh and beyond. A two-page essay by Carol, called "Queer Communities: Reflections on Yearning for and Building on What We Are," features the excerpted text of two Audre Lorde poems, which seem to have been typewritten by Carol, as Lorde's text appears to be consistent with the essay's type font. Of all the zine excerpts mentioned in this chapter, Carol's is the only here that does not print a poem in the context of a photocopy collage—this may be a consequence of the date of publication, 1992, when zines were perhaps more stylistically aligned with mainstream printed publications, even as their contrasted dramatically. Carol describes the value of Lorde's poetics in lucid and inspirational terms. Identifying as queer, the author Carol does not explicitly name other identity features such as gender. As well, Carol explains that Lorde's struggles with cancer (Lorde passes in November 1992, a few months after this zine appears) provides the impetus for the essay. I have typed an excerpt of Carol here:

> Do whatever it is you can do to nourish the spirit of one of our people's greatest warriors. … As we queers get ready for pride week in pittsburgh in june, joining to celebrate ourselves and our struggles, let us celebrate Lorde by doing what she does so effectively...she lives her version of the liberation for all people...Lorde constantly forges connections within and across [identity] categories"

Rather than proceed analytically through lines of Lorde's poems and inductively build to a conclusion, Carol begins and ends with a consistent goal for her communal exercise in poetry study: "Facing…forms of oppression within our community honestly." Carol's essay champions Lorde as a leader in a community in which Carol belongs ("one of *our* people's greatest warriors"), and as an exemplary voice of authenticity. Lorde mentors in that she models a means of finding strength and connection in identity, and in turn opens up spaces of coalition that become stronger through difference. Carol continues:

> We are responsible for the quality of community we build, in Pittsburgh, nationally, or worldwide. I've lived in enough supposed Meccas of queer culture to know that there are no easy answers to this yearning. It's about each of us being fully who we are, telling our truths, daring to live the

> dreams of who we can be, supporting each other even - and especially- as we disagree. … Not speaking for others, [Audre Lorde] claims her own position from which to speak. She writes…"

The above quotation terminates in the text of Lorde's 1978, "Between Ourselves." In this difficult poem, Lorde recounts an ancestral betrayal, where a man sells the poet's great-grandmother into slavery. In the version of "Between Ourselves" published in the 1978 collection, *The Black Unicorn*, Lorde writes: "Under the sun on the shores of Elimina/a black man sold the woman who carried/my grandmother in her belly." This detail is not included in Carol's excerpt. In the 1978 version, Lorde illuminates the trauma that establishes a kind of narrative tension in the poem's opening lines. Where once Black faces provided the speaker with reassurance that the poet was not alone, now, writes Lorde, "black faces/…would destroy me for any difference." Lorde famously writes at the intersection of identities as a lesbian, Black mother, woman, and poet. Her practice of intersectionality, along with the ancestral betrayal, denies Lorde the experience of what she calls in the poem, "easy blackness as salvation," and Lorde identifies practices of exclusion in her Black community ("destroy me for any difference). Lorde's poem speaks from a connection to ancestral West African theology (including the deity Eshu) in order to affirm the necessity of inclusion for all people by addressing ancestral trauma—no doubt, including an enduring White supremacy in the United States.

Importantly, Carol's excerpted version of the poem leaves out Lorde's confrontation of exclusion within Black community that takes root in the traumas of the European and American slave trade. As well, Carol does not create a varied textual field of collage. In an essay, Carol is focused on describing a personal relationship to the poem in order to mobilize a collective understanding of unity through diversity, again, "to live our visions."

To this end, Carol focuses away from the complexities specific to Black queer intersectional identity that Lorde's poem begins and ends in. Carol's vision does not attend to these dynamics, not only in her analysis, but in her strategically partial printing of Lorde's text. Carol's essay is a textual performance located in a zine committed to celebrating Queer love and sex and it carefully betrays the academic notion of a poem's integrity. Carol does not represent the poem's entirety or synthesize its many parts, rather, Carol picks out what is useful to her call for queer unity and anti-racism.

To find a poem in *Queer Intercourse*, a zine that exists to strengthen and uplift a community, is not to isolate meaning, but rather to contextualize meaning within communal efforts. Lorde's poem includes the lines: "if we do not stop killing/the other/in ourselves/the self that we hate/in others/soon we shall all lie/in the same direction." Through scholarship, Lorde's text speaks directly the call for Queer unity, one that is potentially unbordered by geography ("in Pittsburgh, nationally, or worldwide"). Lorde provides a vision of inclusivity that is also a warning: that to suppress the other involves the impulse to kill "the other/in ourselves." The externalization of otherness is an error that is actually a repression of one's essential diversity, the shared diversity that unites all people in Lorde's vision of identity. To suppress this diversity in favor of the singular is to contribute to a devastated future of unity and death, where we "lie in the same direction," that is, dead. Embedded in Moeller's essay, the poetic text becomes part of a social text, such that Lorde's words are neither private to Lorde's biography, nor are they the intellectual property of *Queer Intercourse*. Instead, resources are shared. Moeller's use of Lorde's poem motivates unity. Even as it comes from a particular voice, the poem's message belongs to a broad Queer counterpublic. Alison Piepmeier writes that, within

feminisms of the 1990s, "zines enact a public pedagogy of hope" (20). Moeller's essay is able to call on a network through a medium whose very existence, and certainly its message, buoys hope for the future of a Queer power movement.

Moeller's essay concludes with a reflection of racial reckoning that bears a striking resemblance to my own in summer 2020:

> I write this essay in the wake of the Rodney King decision in Los Angeles and the subsequent uprisings. Notice how the dominant press tends to see the uprising itself as the problem, rather than the racism, devastation and despair that have been with us long before those thousands of fires broke out. Our cities (note the euphemisms here for those who are poor, oppressed, and fighting back) have been declared the greatest risk to "National Security." It is vital that we all look honestly at every force, within each of us and our oppressed communities, as well as in those in power, to effectively transform them.

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Published the same year as *Queer* Intercourse #4, Elizabeth Long's essay, "Textual Interpretation as Collective Action," stresses the social infrastructure of reading, arguing that "the ideology of the solitary reader suppresses recognition of the infrastructure of literacy and the social and institutional determinants of what's available to read, what is 'worth reading,' and how to read it" (193). In the face of a hegemonic model of the solitary reader, Moeller's piece performs textual activism in the form of the handmade, self-distributed zine, and interprets Lorde's text for a collective.

Picklejar #19 (1995) and #20 (1995)

Over several years in the mid-1990s, the zine *Picklejar* was produced in Virginia by two high school students, Eve and Hugh, and ran for around 21 issues before splitting into two short-run spinoff perzines, *Femme Skunk* (1996, Eve) and *One Mint Julep* (1995, Hugh). The creators' sexual and ethnic identities (both identify as queer, Eve is White and Jewish while Hugh is Black with Irish and Afro-Haitian descent), as well as their lives in the American south, frame the zines' form and content. Within *Picklejar*'s youthful, amateurish, hand-drawn covers and plain 8.5-x-11 single-staple format, one can discover essays, zine and book reviews, and collages that incorporate a highly developed style—bookish, brassy, and quite funny. Almost every page features a collage that employs a highly typical format

for personal zines, where a number of textual fragments or images are cut or torn from an original source and scanned to make one composite image.

fig. 2

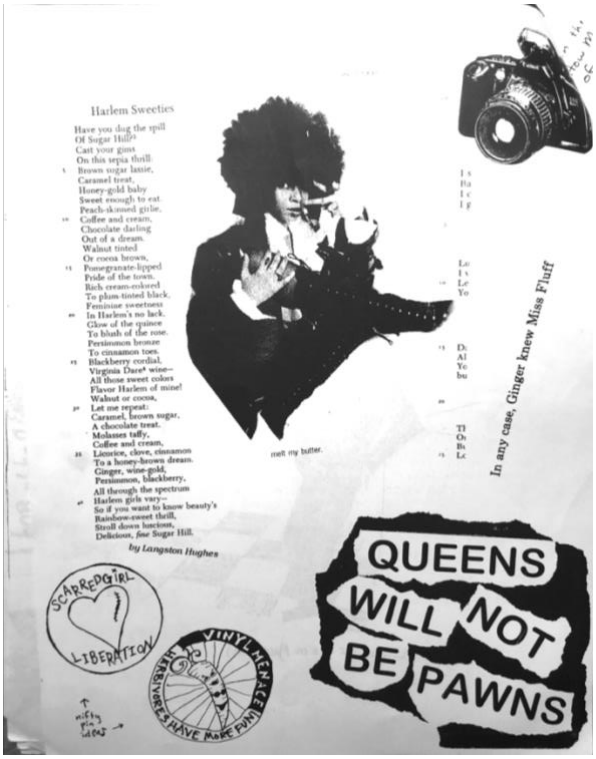


fig. 3

Collages like these are typically composed by scanning an original paper copy comprised of items that have been assembled and glued to a page. A collage could also be made, at least in theory, by arranging these items directly on a glass scanner.

Picklejar #19 (fig 2) takes a page out of an unnamed anthology, reprinting the full text of Langston Hughes' poem, "Harlem Sweeties." *Picklejar*'s layout and collage emphasizes the poem's indeterminacy between looking and gazing, while also celebrating "Harlem girls," and by extension, Black womanhood, as something that is both heterogenous and beautiful. Hughes' poem catalogues an assortment of colors-as-flavors: "all those sweet colors;" "beauty's / rainbow-sweet thrill." One the one hand, the poem's

clip and intonation sound like advertisement, as if publicly listing pleasurable things that are for sale. Blackness and consumption are linked indeterminately. Simultaneously, the poem uses the clarity of this public-facing voice to celebrate black womanhood as an undeniable bounty: "let me repeat: / caramel, brown sugar / a chocolate treat."

Eve and Hugh have housed Hughes' poem in a collage that emphasizes and amplifies the poem's divergent impulses. A posing Black woman with large natural hair, a pirate shirt, and high boots seems to have her photograph "taken" by an oversized Canon camera (likely clipped from a magazine ad) at page upper right. Her pose is simultaneously guarded and seductive—snipped from a catalogue, she appears to make a scissors gesture herself. Pasted nearby, the clipped text, "melt my butter," dissolves any doubt that the image is sexualized. Simultaneously, large-font torn and pasted text shouts from the bottom-right corner, "QUEENS WILL NOT BE PAWNS," a Derek Jarman quote. The stark clarity of Jarman's Queer power slogan is carefully placed in context of the sexualizing and voyeuristic collage elements. The lack of linearity or narrative in the collage allows the competing elements to remain opaquely connected by design. Does the sexualized woman contrast with the Jarman quote, or do these elements agree with one another? Do the editors emphasize drag performance, where a woman wearing pieces of traditionally male clothing (a suit and pirate shirt) and upsets gendered expectations? While indeterminant to a degree, this poem, text, and image collage affirms ownership of Black beauty standards by Black people, such as the zinester, Hugh, and the self-assured-looking woman with a camera pointed at her natural hair.

Furthermore, the collage suggests that Hughes' daring poem signals support of Queer activism. While the collage does not cite Hughes' essay about Harlem drag balls,

"Spectacles in Color," there are important similarities in his description of Harlem girls and drag girls, which opens the possibility that "Harlem Sweeties" is a poem about (or in some ways continuous with) drag culture. Hughes's essay, also a chapter in his 1940 book, *The Big Sea*, is tonally complementary to the poem as it catalogues and celebrates sensorial delights of women on display in Harlem. In his essay, the array is visual, in the poem, it is gustatory. In his essay, Hughes recalls "gorgeously gowned…whites and Negroes who, powdered, wigged, and rouged, mingle and compete…like very pretty chorus girls" (Hughes). Both the essay and the poem celebrate diverse Black people on proud display in his bustling neighborhood. Towards the conclusion of "Harlem Sweeties," Hughes writes, "Harlem girls vary." Black migration to Harlem between 1910 (when Black people represented about 10% of the inner neighborhood's population) and 1930 (by then, well over 70%) coincided with new communities of Black art and poetics. The "Sugar Hill" section of Harlem, in the neighborhood's Northwest corner, was home to important clubs and homes that Langston Hughes frequented. "Harlem Sweeties," written in the 1920s, puns on the placename, "Sugar Hill," while developing a public-facing voice announcing Black beauty. Due to deep, violent, and systemic White racism in New York City and nationally, it was radical for a Black person in Harlem such as Hughes to speak publicly, much less to publicly praise Black beauty. Drag becomes an important feature of Harlem in this era, and the ostentatious masquerading of the girls in "Harlem Sweeties" rhymes with that of the drag girls in "Spectacles in Color," and "Harlem Sweeties" is coded as a queer text through creative editing practices. In the collage, Hughes is figured or presented as a poet of Black Queerness.

The "Harlem Sweeties"-focused collage in *Picklejar #19* provides a powerful example of vernacular anthologizing, recontextualizing Hughes' poem in a visual work that uses other materials poached from advertisements or texts in order to create a new text that celebrates the connection between Queer activism and diverse Black womanhood. The poem is an integral piece of a textual performance. In this collage, "Harlem Sweeties" is left almost entirely intact, apart from the author line, which has been cut and pasted at an irregular angle. We can see clearly the numbering of lines and stanzas, which is typical of academic anthologies and provided as an aid to teachers who might ask students to attend to a particular line. The elements surrounding the poem, the various pieces of image and text that have been hand-torn or cut, provide much of the interpretive and scholarly content that are external to the poem. Together, they defigure a commercialized racial gaze (i.e. a camera from a Canon advertisement) and affirm the power of Hughes' poetry to transform a society held back by racist and homophobic expectations of beauty.

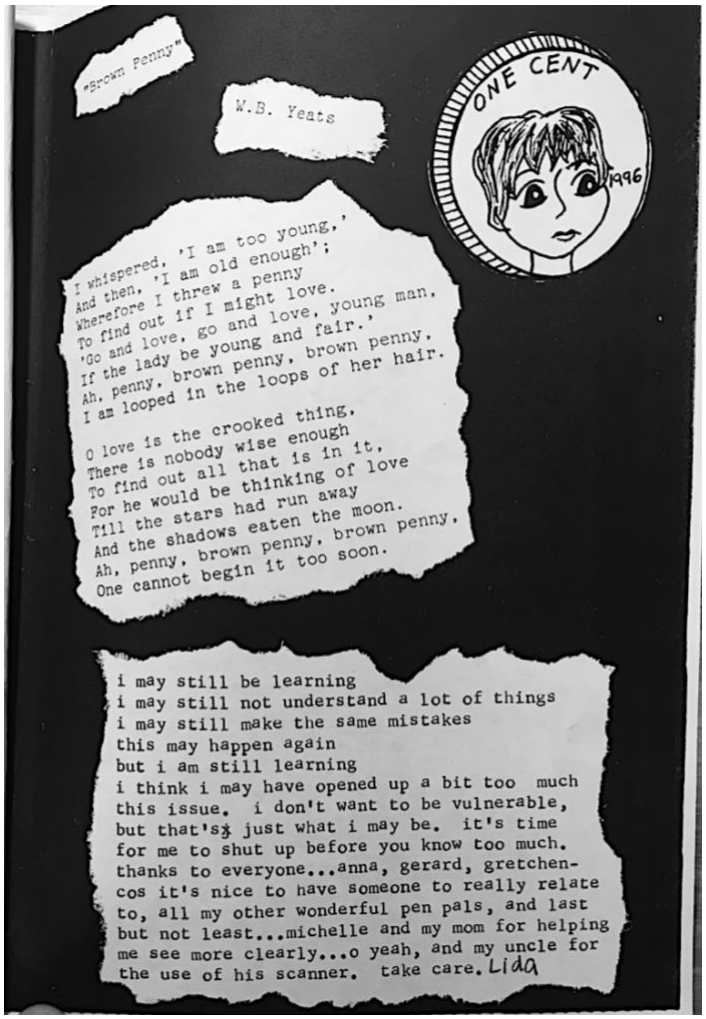
The subsequent zine in the *Picklejar* series, issue #20, includes an installment of the zine's running feature titled "da girl page," with a printed excerpt from Paula Gunn Allan's poem, "Some Like Indians Endure," amid reviews for recently released books *The Poems of Nikki Giovanni* and *Afrikete: An Anthology of Black Lesbian Writing* ("from Audre to Aretha—how can you resist?"). Gunn's quote: "we never go away/even if we're always/leaving" cites a concurrent displacement and presence that is all too familiar to indigenous and queer women. Overall, *Picklejar* studies poems that reflect identity as something that is brought up not as a stable entity, but that is produced in language. *Picklejar* typically curates queer of color poets, and collages accentuate the tensions that inhere in the poetic text, treating the works of Queer of color poets not as rhetorical figures,

but as material reality that is continuous with the reality of identity production—and zine production.

Hollyhock #5 (1996)

Hollyhock #5 prints W.B. Yeats' 1910 poem, "Brown Penny," on the last page of the issue, preceding a concluding reflection written by Lida, the zinester who created and distributed *Hollyhock* in the mid-1990s. Like the above *Picklejar* issues, *Hollyhock #5* (1996) is part of the Barnard Zine Library, donated by Mimi Thi Nguyen and the POC Zine Project in 2013. The zine's creator, Lida, is described by Barnard as "a Rutgers University student and feminist [who] writes about being Thai-American, riot grrrl, and relationships in her cut and paste personal zine." This final page, when viewed in an open-book format, is to the right of the penultimate page of three photographs Lida took at a Throwing Muses concert. The majority of *Hollyhock #5* discusses Asian American girlhood, with a piece that describes why Lida feels lost in music scenes, and another piece related to a recent, disappointing romance.

Fig. 4:



Lida creates typewritten text that has been hand torn at the edges and placed against a black background (possibly, the black space is the scanner backing), with separate sections for the poem text, the concluding note, author/title, and a neatly drawn and cut out penny drawing (fig. 4). The concluding note includes:

> i may still be learning
>
> i may still not understand a lot of things
>
> i may still make the same mistakes
>
> i think i may have opened up a bit too much this issue. … this may happen again. … it's time for me to shut up before you know too much. thanks to everyone … o yeah, and my uncle for the user of his scanner. take care. LIDA.

When viewing this page, this concluding reflection appears to be a continuation of the Yeats poem because it features identical formatting: line breaks, the same typewritten font, torn paper. Indeed, on the level of looking and not reading, Lida's 15 lines appear to be entirely continuous with Yeats' 16.

Even as her words are graphically continuous with Yeats' poem, Lida's understanding of the poem is not immediately clear—specifically, her determination about the concluding line, "one cannot begin it too soon." On the one hand, Yeats' conclusion about love may be quite reasonably read in connection to the poem's claim that love requires more than billions of years to ponder ("until all the stars had run away"), and so one may infer that the final line be read as, in my words: "since you will never truly know love, it is therefore never too soon to begin love." Or, this poem may well be a warning along the lines of: *because* love is "the crooked thing," an ominously unknowable entity, the poem might instead be offering advice along the lines of, "don't love until you are ready." Both of these readings of the poem are reasonable.

In lieu of a clear determination, Lida provides an indeterminate reading that is supported by other content in issue 5. Early on in the issue, an essay titled, "This is the beginning of the skeletons falling out of my closet…," includes the lines, "This is for me. This is about me. … I have to deal with all that shit I bottled up…from since I was a kid." Then, when Lida mentions that she recently opened up her heart too soon and decides that for the healing process, "I'm gonna be my own therapist." As well, the drawing of the expressionless penny—a drawing of a young person, possibly a self-portrait as the lowest value of US currency. From one angle, *Hollyhock* #5 basically comes down to: I was not ready for my recent disaster of a relationship. At the same time, Lida is documenting early

stages of healing and concludes with hope to begin again—"I may still be learning." Thus, it cannot be said with certainty whether Lida was staking pain or pleasure in the exact copying of Yeats' poem into the device of her zine via a typewriter and borrowed scanner.

Lida maintains the distinct possibility of multiple readings, and the productive tension that arises from such indeterminacy, throughout her zine. Lida's design and presentation of Yeats' text thus contrasts curiously to the scholarly version I keep in my apartment (*WB Yeats, The Poems*, UK Everyday Classics, 1992). In the notes section, editor Daniel Albright writes: **"**here is another example of a poem that concludes a volume [*The Green Helmet and Other Poems*] in a spirit of wise simplicity and smiling ease." Albright determines that this poem settles on the first, decidedly positive, answer to the final line. I find this assessment a bit quick to resolve the kinds of tension that Yeats is so often praised for drawing up. Lida's poetry study concludes her personal zine by resisting the textual closure that Daniel Albright maintains in a contrasting textual format—a tightly bordered scholarly edition. Paul de Man's *Allegories of Reading* provides a markedly similar lesson in another of Yeats' concluding lines, this time from the late poem, "Among School Children:" "How can we tell the dancer from the dance?" De Man ponders whether Yeats asks us to consider this a rhetorical -or- grammatical/literal question. De Man writes:

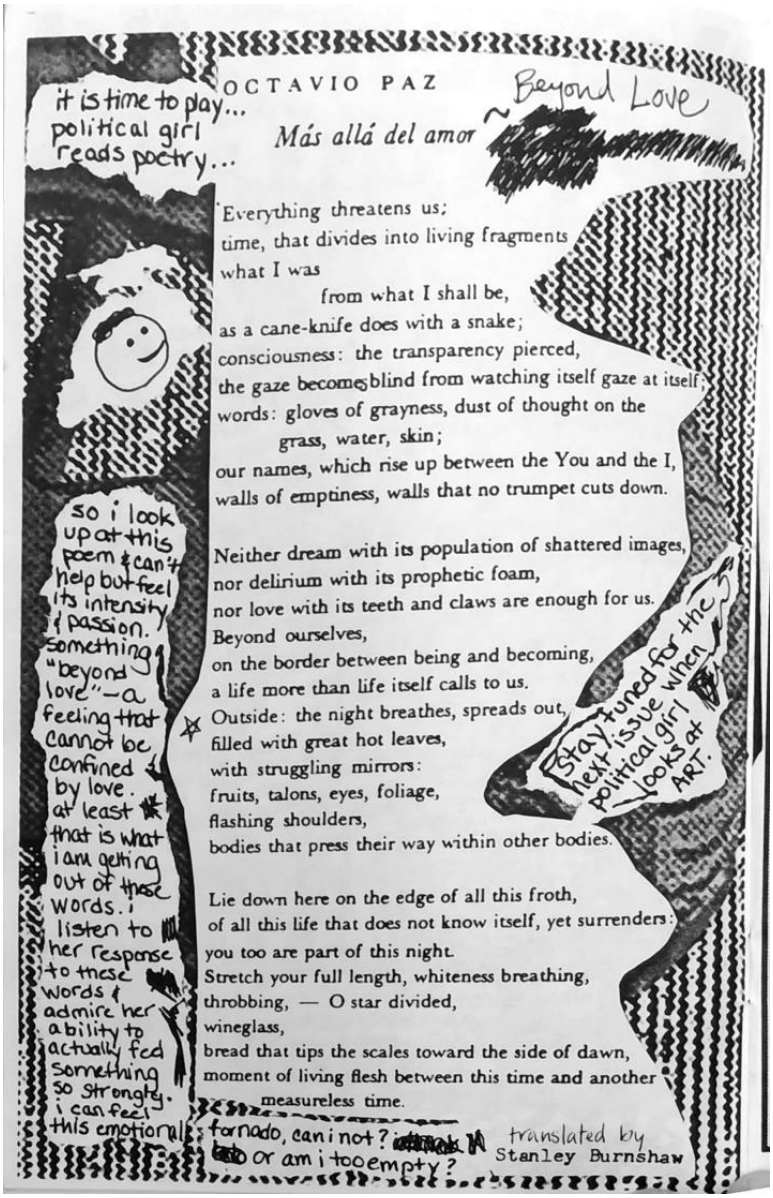
> Two entirely coherent but entirely incompatible readings can be made to hinge on one line, whose grammatical structure is devoid of ambiguity, but whose rhetorical mode turns the mood as well as the mode of the entire poem upside down…Neither can we say, as was already the case in the first example, that the poem simply has two meanings that exist side by side. The two readings have to engage each other in direct confrontation, for the one reading is precisely the error denounced by the

other and has to be undone by it … none can exist in the other's absence. There can be no dance without a dancer, no sign without a referent (12).

The pages of Lida's zine document a movement toward healing. As she writes on another page, "this was supposed to be the skater girl special… a lot of the things I say may be repetitive or even contradictory. But this is how I deal with things. I'm learning to trust myself more." For Lida, to heal from heartbreak is to reclaim the power to create culture**,** and Yeats' poetic text offers Lida raw material for eventual healing.

Alice is an Island #2 (1997)

Fig. 1



The perzine *Alice is an Island* was issued by Robyn while she was an undergraduate in New England in the mid-1990s. I discovered issue 2 of this zine in the Olympia Zine Library. While I did not find bibliographic information there, I later found out that the San Diego State University library site includes the following description among the metadata for its issue of *Alice*: a "personal zine with issues loosely based around a common topic,

such as gender and sexuality or class and labor." In addition, *Alice* alludes frequently to riot grrrl, in connection with the girl punk movement of the 1990s.

The page in fig. 1 features poetry criticism as a collage of disparate textual elements: printed poetry that has been cut out of an anthology (another instance of textual vandalism), handwritten text on torn paper, and a smiley-face drawing against a patterned backdrop, also on torn paper. The text of the poem, "Más Allá del Amor," by mid-20th century Mexican Poet Octavio Paz and translated by Stanley Burnshaw, is featured on the page. The arrangement of pieces is not symmetrical and does not follow orthogonal composition, and there are several instances where Robyn scribbles out words. From a design standpoint, Robyn lacks the finish required for academic work and certainly fails to meet traditional standards for a poetry collection. Of course, Robyn does not aim for academic or mainstream publication, and her zine should not be seen as a shoddy imitation of a professional publication. Instead, Robyn seems to relish in the amateurishness of a zine aesthetic that breaks from familiar mainstream publishing norms.

Next to Paz's text there appears handwritten commentary. Robyn's gloss of the poem signals an overt admiration for the poet's writing. The poem is surrounded on all sides by some form of commentary. There is an abundance to this criticism, and one may assume Robyn had misjudged the length of her response when she tore the piece of paper on which some of the criticism is written, as there are addended pieces. Along the left-hand margin, Robyn describes in terms of a feeling response. This impressionistic criticism ends with two questions that are probably intended to remain unanswered:

so I look at this poem and can't help but feel its intensity & passion. something "beyond love"—a feeling that cannot be confined by love. at least that is what I am getting out of these words. I listen to her response to these words & admire her ability to actually feel something so strongly. I can feel this emotional tornado, can I not? or am I too empty?

On the page, Paz is being critiqued from a position that is self-consciously constructed and artificial. The complex interplay of identities in the interpretation of Paz provides a second collage. As a multi-issue zine, *Alice is an Island* draws on a broader conceptual framework described in issue 2: "*Alice is not a real person, rather, a mixture of all the women I know*." In the zine, Alice is a persona of Robyn's. Alice is so multidimensional that she can critique poetry through *alternate* identities—that is, Alice's alternate identities, or sub-identities—like "political girl." These zine identities are signed under the name of Robyn. The Alice identity is a kind of collage in herself, representing a "mixture" of all the women Robyn knows, and even then, Alice is only one of the positions from which the poem is engaged. On this page, Paz is interpreted by Robyn as the zinester (the writer, publisher, and distributor), by Alice as a collective of women, and finally as "political girl," who provides impressionistic criticism in the margin. Here, political girl indicates a desire to connect to an emotional state that Robyn understands (or rather, these collaged critical positions understand) to be reflected in the poem contained in the vague and restated line, "something 'beyond love.'"

Much like a long-playing concept album, with issues as tracks, *Alice is an Island* loops and layers found media samples over confessional prose and cultural criticism, committed all the while to forwarding a general theme. *Alice is an Island* #2 contains a poetry criticism and review section marked at the top of page 5 with a handwritten title: "it's time to play…political girl reads poetry…" (fig. 1). Robyn photocopies the original Spanish title,

handwriting in the translated title, "Beyond Love," for the Octavio Paz poem, first written circa 1940. Robyn's transformations to an original text are fairly extensive: the page has been cut, torn, scribbled on, handwritten on, and pasted to a backdrop of incongruous patterns. These transformations take on a pattern: prior to being pasted against the background, Paz's text is cut (likely using scissors), whereas the handwritten pieces of self-reflection are torn (likely by hand).

Robyn's production of an identity, "political girl," is likely a tongue-in-cheek way to signals riot grrrl participation—whether or not Robyn sees herself as a girl who is particularly political, the moniker is a fairly typical mode of self-branding under the auspices of girl power or girl pride. *Alice is an Island* #2 is associated with riot grrrl and received positive mention in the review zine, *Riot Grrrl Review* #4 (1997), where the author writes, "Reminiscent of Exedra zine. I really like Robyn's critical approach." Reviews, especially within riot grrrl, tend to focus on uplifting zinesters and building community. It is also possible that "political girl" references the broader *Alice* theme, wherein this character is a particular one of the myriad girls Robyn has known in her life. In addition, the section's call to attention ("it is time to play…") reflects the irony native to riot grrrl, and Maresco refigures poetic study as game show. This pokes fun at a perceived gap between the content of the page—a response to a cerebral love poem that cites intense feeling—and game show material.

At first glance, Robyn's page and her analysis of Paz's poem may not appear to build community, this zine demands to be understood in its context of networked distribution. Robyn describes the poem as an event of affective contagion—an ineffable state communicated via poetic vector: "can't help but feel its intensity & passion. something

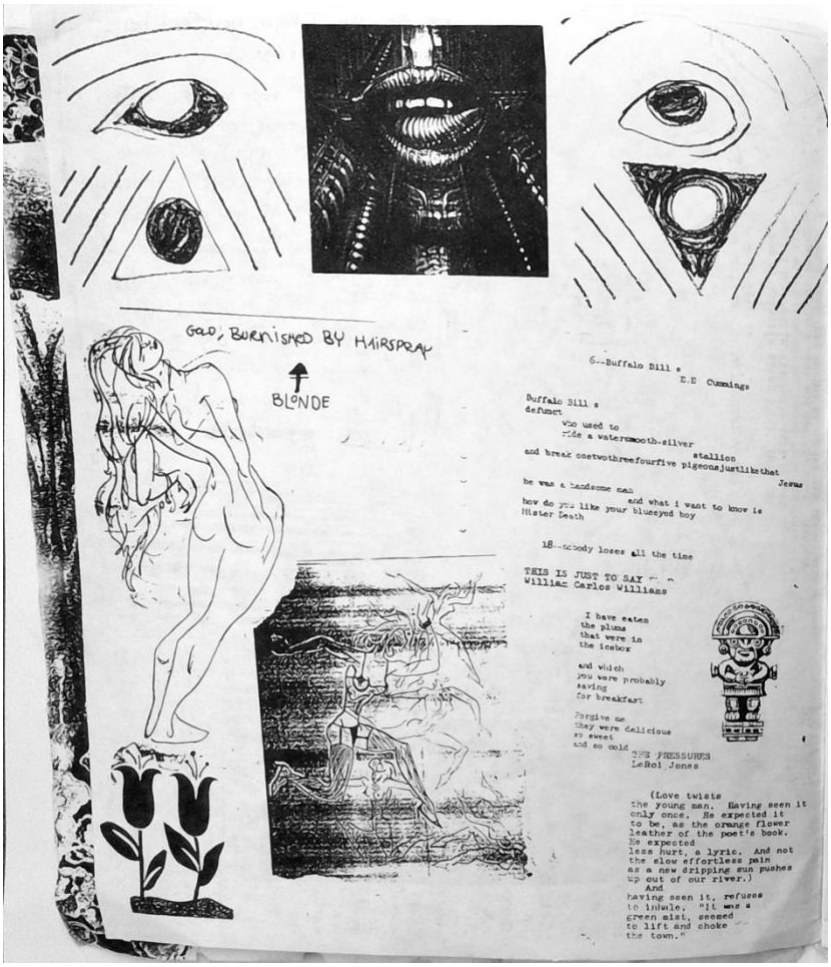
'beyond love.'" Her commentary opens with this affirmation of intense connection, inverting the poem's divisive and enjambed opening lines. The two questions at the close of the passage ("can I not? or am I too emotive?") seem to respond to an anticipated set of concerns that stem from the response to the poem. By asking them, Robyn asks readers to consider her alienation from real feeling. What begins as a comment about a feeling turns out to be a comment about the communicability or veracity of that feeling.

Readers of Robyn's poetry study are invited to consider their own complex feelings as an entry into Paz's text—the humorous smiley face, the brave and subtly subversive naming of girl stereotypes ("emotional tornado"), and the handmade layout and distribution, mimicking the poem's movement between disintegration ("cane-knife") and mystical synthesis ("you too are part of this night").

Volcano Girls, [1997-99?][iv]

Volcano Girls, found in an archive crate in Olympia, Washington's Olympia Zine Library, reprints poems by e e cummings, Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), and William Carlos Williams in a zine dedicated to exploring body issues and body type expectations among girls. There is no bibliographic information available for this zine, and the creators explain that they are two sisters in their teens. Poems can appear seemingly anywhere in the issue, and three poets and seven poems are featured in the issue. The poems by e e cummings include "Buffalo Bill s," "I Sing of Olaf Glad and Big," "mr youse needn't be so spry" and "who knows if the moon's;" Amiri Baraka's included poems are "Love Twists" (as LeRoi Jones), and William Carlos Williams' is "This is Just to Say."

Fig. 5



On a page midway through the issue (fig. 5), three spare poems are photocopied in a cramped bottom right quadrant of an 8.5x11" page: "Buffalo Bill s," "Love Twists," and "This is Just to Say." This page features three divisions of three: there are three panels at page top (eyes or lips); three drawings at left (two nudes and flowers); three poems at right. To push against the tidiness of this tripartite layout, there are several erratic insertions—an olmec talisman aside Williams' poem, and the handwritten line "GOLD, BURNISHED BY HAIRSPRAY," with "BLONDE" written beneath it and a drawn arrow connected the two.

The level of form holds a clue to the commentary reflected by the decisions in the composition of the collage. In the Williams poem, a pattern (12 syllables per stanza) is created just to be broken (13 in the final stanza—with the unnecessary syllable, "and"). Likewise, the tripartite pattern being established in the layout of the page is broken just as it is established by the incursion of erratic collage elements. The sisters behind Volcano Girls draw original images more often than they repurpose poached images or textual objects from other media such as magazines. Their handmaking of a poetry-focused zine collages nonetheless understand media as intertwined with the protocols of poetic text. The poems become media—essentially, words in a shape—that exists alongside drawings and other text in a field of making.

This textual field is poetically dense and deeply indeterminate, yielding no easy answers to what this critical engagement may signal. Nothing about the placement of these poems suggests ironic juxtaposition. Two of the three poems describe colors and two of the three describe natural objects—plums in Williams and flowers in Baraka/Jones. Is it that these poems speak to the issue theme of body issues? Williams' iconic poem, for one, may be said to engage compulsive eating ("I have eaten"). Yet cummings squarely describes dying young ("mister death?"), and Baraka/Jones engages heartbreak ("love twists/the young man"). Together, these three themes register the *sturm und drang* of adolescent development, which was famously described in the early 20th century by psychologist G. Stanley Hall. The intensity of each tribulation (compulsion, violence, love) makes it difficult for adolescents to resist them, according to Hall, who emphasizes fear in the adolescent habitus. Similarly, these poems are famously brief and linguistically intense. This brevity and the excessively adolescent content together signal a parodic intent behind this collage.

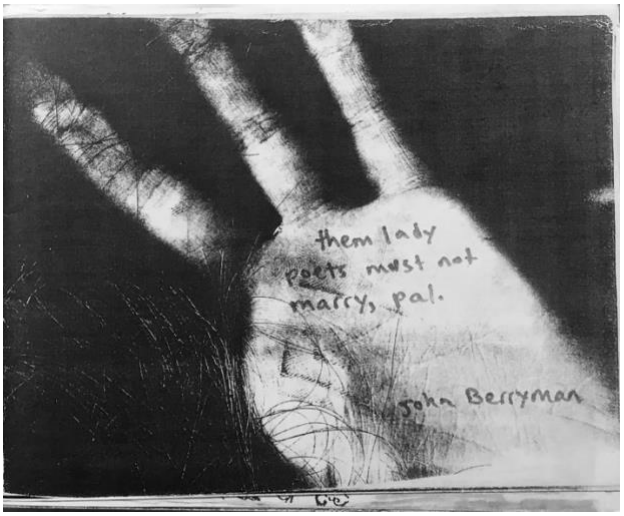
Two girls speak back to adolescent tropes by collaging poems alongside their carefully curated (contrastingly controlled) drawings and fragments. These poems do not speak to the zine creators' vision as text alone. Only after these poems become zine media do they speak to a liberating vision of girlhood.

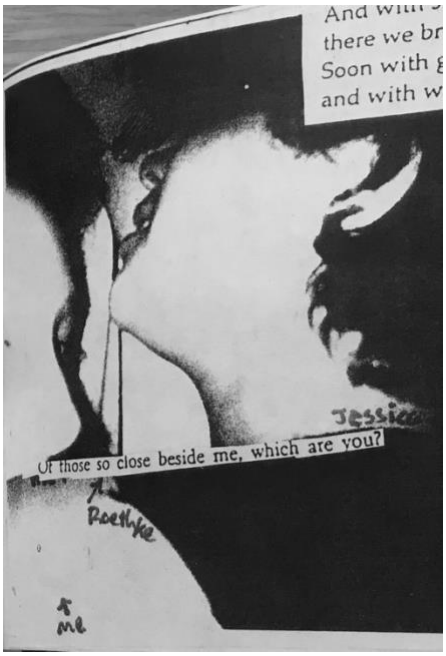
Rugburn Spectacular #2 (1999) and #5 (2001)

Amalle, a young person who identifies as female, created a multi-issue perzine, *Rugburn Spectacular*, during her time in high school and through her early undergraduate years. Its unusual dimensions (22x11cm), its high-quality paper, and its yarn binding are unique material features that reflect a project of special care. While always difficult to estimate how many copies of a given zine circulated per issue, it is likely that *Rugburn Spectacular* was an especially limited one due to the additional cost and labor of producing copies of the handmade zine. Two issues I browsed in the Barnard Zine Library contain a wide variety of textual excerpts—from songwriters (Dar Williams, Catie Curtis), prose writers (Virginia Woolf: *Orlando*, "Street Haunting" essay excerpt and diary excerpts), and poets (W.H. Auden, Theodore Roethke, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, Sharon Olds, and Liam Rector).

Fig. 6

Fig. 7





Issue #2 contains a copy of Amalle's failing grade report in P.E. class at Horace Mann, her secondary school in Manhattan and an institution that Amalle occasionally criticizes in prose writing. This issue also provides a number of essays on a romantic relationship with a fellow student named Jessica. The page in fig. 6 has a somewhat radical form—instead of media affixed to a paper backdrop, this image features the combination of flesh (palm), text (John Berryman's "Dream Song 187"), and hair pressed against a copier screen. This John Berryman excerpt comes from "Dream Song 187," a poem in Berryman's dream poems, which is a single long poem that is also a dream diary containing 385 songs and is considered an important long poem of the 20th century (the earlier published book, *77 Dream Songs*, won the 1965 Pulitzer Prize). In the excerpted section, a character named Henry addresses, both lecherously and satirically, American women poets including Emily Dickinson and Anne Bradstreet: "Miss Dickinson—fancy in Amherst bedding hér." The overblown machismo of Berryman/Henry is hardly supposed to be read as a series of

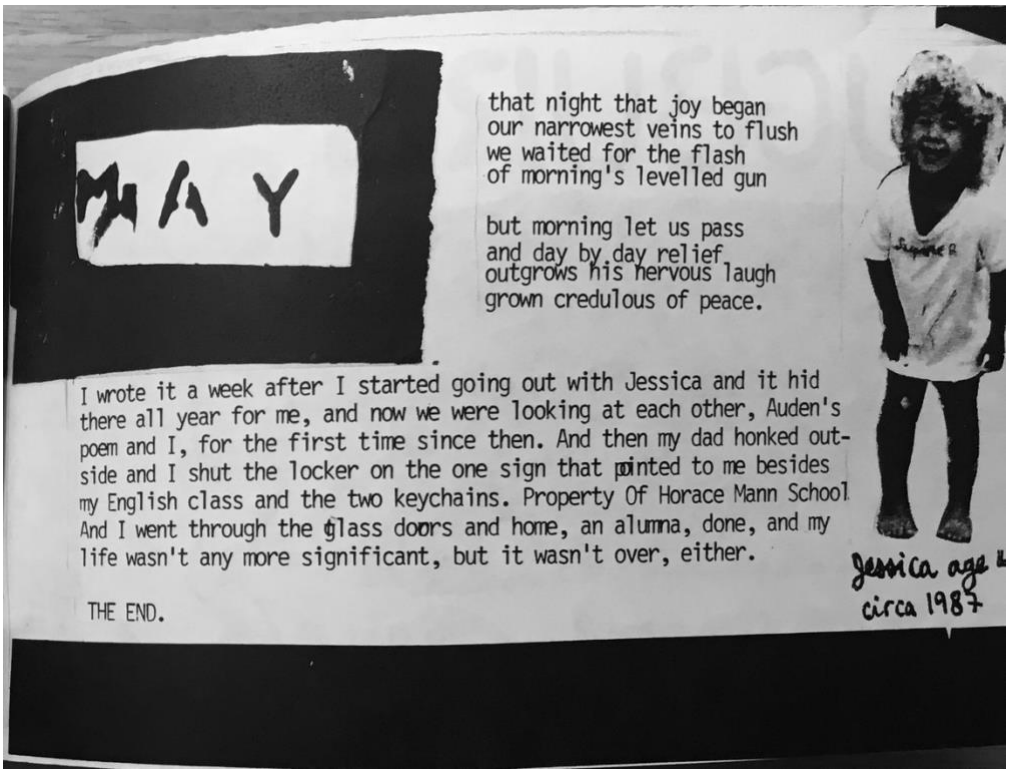
earnest yearnings, and the crude and offensive poem underscores a self-awareness and subtle criticism of literary capital. Reading this dream song as self-aware, a fetishization of these writers through the character of Henry conjures a desire for Dickinson and Bradstreet in ways that are mostly detached from their writing, lusting instead for what they have come to represent as vaunted, emblematic, and canonical figures of American women's poetry. Henry notes their seductive availability in an attempt to connect himself to their status in American literary culture. Amalle incorporates a line from this poem using a layout that figures the indeterminant space between asserting distance from the preposterous quote—talk to the hand, Berryman!—and allowing the complicated, tongue-in-cheek poem to speak from the intimacy of flesh. Quite possible, Amalle's page also indicates agreement with the suggestion that marriage is incompatible with desirable futures for women poets.

In the same issue, Amalle designs a page that cuts and pastes a line from Theodore Roethke's 1952 poem, "The Waking" (fig 7). The page background is a photograph with two faces and three names: from left to right are "me" (Amalle), "Roethke," and "Jessica." Roethke's quote appears to be cut directly out of a book and is positioned between Amalle and Jessica, reading, "of those beside me, who are you?" The page uses tagging playfully in order to provide attribution for Roethke's text, but it also figures the poem excerpt as a denizen of the very private scene. The poetic excerpt is both a mediating force—separating the two, a third wheel—and a nostalgic connection—uniting them in recognition. Amalle's romance is figured in and through a poetry excerpt that is, in this page of the zine, literally a part of their relationship.

Created two years later, *Rugburn Spectacular #5* documents Amalle's transition from high school to her first semester at Swarthmore College. It features a lengthy essay that describes a hunt for "revelation" as Amalle walks through her last day of high school. The essay begins:

> In English this year our heroes journeyed in an ordered wilderness of signs. Everything pointed to them and every symbol yielded up a meaning. On the last day of school, I looked for the signs that pointed to me, that sanctioned my release into summer and validated six mostly boring years. I even brought a camera with me to take pictures of any last-minute revelations…I wasted my film in English class; there were no revelations…At the end of the day I emptied my locker into a plastic bag, stripped the photographs down to an Auden poem I'd copied onto the red metal with a sharpie on the first day of school. It opened like an eye.

Fig. 8



Following this evocative prose, a typewritten excerpt from W.H. Auden's poem, "Five Songs" sits within a collage (fig. 8). This poem features the memorable lines, "we waited for the flash/of morning's levelled gun." Amalle presents Auden's text across from typewritten

personal writing. In her essay, Amalle provides context for her poetry study, explaining that her experiences in a specific day shifted her understanding of Auden's lines, a poem that had occupied her locker the entire school year. Rather than reconnecting Amalle to the stable meaning of the poem, her encounter with a poem shifts in relation to what happened during that important and disappointing day, and in a longer experience of relationship and heartbreak with Jessica. While nothing in the "ordered wilderness" of the school was able to "point to" Amalle, what ends up affirming Amalle's absolute core, unmistakable as ink, was hiding away in the made space of a locker: this poem from Auden. Located behind the careful accumulations of high school, Auden's poem is at center of Amalle's identity in this zine. Elsewhere in the issue, it is evident that Amalle's relationship with Jessica has deteriorated by this point. Auden's excerpt represents a poetic text that is already so deeply marked by Amalle's "very personal" experiences. The poem, printed in every version of Edward Mendelson's edited *Collected Poems* since 1976, features intricate end rhymes that comingle an urging of extraordinary caution—the nervous anticipation of some unnamed doom, "morning's leveled gun"—with an unlikely and extraordinarily calm resolution—"grown credulous of peace." Searching for something to remember, and searching for something to be remembered by, Amalle re-presents a poem (photocopied, mailed) that is the most honest version of herself she can offer.

conclusion: after anthologies

Zinesters participate in nonacademic textual economies that allow for transgressions against the divisions that separate poets, academic critics, and everyday

readers. Because of this, the writing of a zinester like Lida (a Thai-American teenager) can appear at first glance akin to that of W.B Yeats, without no clear differentiation between where one writer begins and the other ends. In zines, academic and mainstream publishing rules aren't being followed, and, quite possibly, these rules were never learned in the first place. In the 1990s and early 2000s, zines offered a way for young people, especially young women, to participate in poetry criticism that was crafted and exchanged in small scholarly networks. In this regard, the identities that are being performed in relation to poetry criticism exceed what is made available in academic poetry criticism. As noted by numerous feminist scholars, zine publics tend to confront gender discrimination and discrimination based on sexuality while often failing to address race or class. To this end, poems speak to the issues that matter to zinesters.

Zinesters do not study poems as an academic would. For one, the poem is often vandalized in study: torn or cut into pieces, excerpted, or visually transformed to fit the vision of a collaged textual performance. Zinesters create objects for a community of readers and fellow zinesters, and poetry becomes media (albeit especially rich media) in collages. The creative and sophisticated criticism of zinesters involves the destruction of academic anthologies, reflected in the clipped or torn printed text that is present in almost every one of the above examples. The liberation of poetry from heavy, strategic pedagogy into mobile, motile collage reflects a tactical culture of poetic study. The young people represented above connect their experiences of marginalization, affective environments, and activism to poetic text. Zines represent counterpublics assembled largely through a relationship to other media. The poetry criticism in zines, ultimately, subverts divisions

between poets, critics, and readers through critical textual practices that vandalize academic texts and transform them into tactical media.

In the 1990s, published anthologies were far more important than they are in 2021, such that they once became battlefields for multicultural canon wars. The call for substantial and non-tokenizing inclusion of poets of Color represents an important step toward desegregating poetry markets, such as changes made to the Norton referenced in this chapter's introduction. An important push to include non-White poetries in supposedly representative American anthologies also resulted in ever-larger volumes, and the rebellious acts of criticism above frame the importance of ready (and portable) access to poems. Poetry could be something read on the go, zines and the poems within were "for the taking," in the words of Amalle.

From where I write this in 2021, anthologies have all but died out as a vital force of pedagogy and poetic culture. This is largely a consequence of the internet displacing print culture's circulation of comprehensive texts like encyclopedias and anthologies. Textuality in the age of digital making becomes something unimaginable from the vantage of 1992. Yet poetry *anthologizing* persists in online spaces. Poems today live primarily in digital environments, and spaces governed by literary nonprofits house these works, such as Academy of American Poets' extensive list of poems and poetry essays, or Poetry Foundation, based in Chicago, which operates an online anthology of over 40,000 poems by securing permission or rights to poems. Online anthologies are tremendously useful in teaching and scholarship—when I teach poetry, I often link to Poetry Foundation. Yet in this present context, new issues of access emerge in our time after anthologies. The most pressing questions become less about whether to include more poets and poems into a

single corpus, and also less about how to ensure the poetry's free movement between individuals. Instead, in an age "after anthologies," but not after anthologizing, how do we increase access to poetry literacies that connect poems to action and experience? While I do not have the answer to this question, the distribution of poems and creative responses to them in zines that I feature above provides a model of subcultural and counterpublic distribution of tactical poetry criticism that may inspire future research in the field.

The upcoming chapter 3 features web users who reprint, share, and critique Sylvia Plath's poem, "Lady Lazarus." In the chapter 1, identity both preceded and suffused the site of performance, whereas in this chapter, identity becomes highly mediated by textual practices, which variously discloses or hides race and other identity features. In the upcoming chapter, identity is constructed in the act of scholarship. I provide examples of web users who attach themselves to "Lady Lazarus" as a web identity and as a resource for navigating hostile environments. In chapter 3, I will explore the ways that specific environments in Web 1.0 enable and also shape the kinds of poetry criticism that could happen online.

chapter 3.

"Lady Lazarus" and Me: Poetry Criticism as Identity Formation on Web 1.0

Lady Lazarus is the nickname I began to use after reading and understanding a poem by Sylvia Plath.

Christa, "Lady Lazarus' Blood Bath" home page
http://angelfire.com/fang/ladylazarus

Because she was not accustomed to enjoying normal, everyday life, this type of "virtual" death was all the more real to her; it was, paradoxically, the only thing she could do to make herself feel truly alive.

Dina, "Pieces of Me" home page
http://angelfire.com/on/piecesofme/plath.html

Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.

Sylvia Plath, "Lady Lazarus"

Overview

Over the two preceding chapters, I explore a variety of scholarly practices that emerged in the nonacademic environments of spoken word and zines. The communities that formed around these creative cultural spaces became key to the blossoming of vernacular poetry criticism that took place in the 1990s and early 2000s. In both areas, poetic text becomes part of original and highly creative responses to poetry, spoken word performances and zine essays or collages, that I am able to access through archives. Whether they take place on the stage or page, these performances blur the line between poet, reader, and academic critic. Vernacular critics disrupt the stability of poetic positions—of poet, poetry critic, and poetry reader—that have historically structured

mainstream poetic culture. Spoken word artists and zinesters blur these boundaries in critical performances and point to more inclusive forms of participation in poetic culture.

Across both chapters, I highlight examples that demonstrate the connection between community needs and scholarly practices—vernacular critics study poems as they call for greater unity, or to call for the acknowledgment and inclusion difference in communities, or in advocating for different kinds of attention. Across various contexts and with different audiences in mind, vernacular spoken word and zine critics compose creative and critical responses to poems in relation to aspects of identity. As well, community building and community membership become essential features of poetry discussion and critique in vernacular scholarship. To the extent that a slam artist or zinester critiques poems, they do so from an embodied (and often explicitly raced, gendered, geographically located) position. In both chapters, identity precedes critical performances in texts and onstage, with two notable exceptions, where identity is actually constructed in relation to the site of performance. In one, a zinester named Robyn (*Alice is an Island*) creates the "Alice" persona through which she interprets poems, and in the other, Seattle-based slam poet Jeremy Richards performs a satirical competition piece as T.S. Eliot. Still, in both of these examples, the vernacular critics do not pretend to really *be* their personae—instead, these masks are put on and taken off in performance with a shared (between performer and audience) understanding of the persona's artifice.

I also highlight how nonacademic spaces of poetry criticism occasionally reinscribe White supremacy, even as they assemble counterpublics that occasionally center the needs of marginalized communities. There is an important distinction between the textual/material condition of zines and the embodied address of a spoken word

performance. While zines offer a depth of compositional possibilities rarely found elsewhere, they also allow for a comparatively greater evasion of named positionality. This textual condition occasionally reproduces White hegemony in zine spaces that exclude people of color from fully participating. Zinesters associated with riot grrrl and other zine subcultural communities tended to value and circulate a discourse that did not welcome or meaningfully include non-White identities, as Radway, Nguyen, and Piepzna-Samarasinha point out.

The dynamics of identity and power in the production of nonacademic poetry criticism that I highlight in the two preceding chapters are heightened in the most important and widespread of all emergent cultural spaces in the 1990s and early 2000s—Web 1.0. The first decade of the publicly available web (known to digital historians as Web 1.0) features a significant corpus of poetry scholarship that, much like spoken word and zines, does not conform to a hierarchy of poets, critics, and readers. Everyday people adopted internet identities that were more or less explicit (including the adoption of usernames, web personas, and intentional style) to share and discuss poems online.

As I explored early web-based poetry criticism, I found that the development of Web 1.0 poetry criticism mirrors the development of the web more generally. The early web contained high barriers to access as it was a collection of forums that in general only admitted users with an institutional credential (such as a Harvard University or IBM email address). Early 1990s web-based poetry criticism was greatly limited by its interface and user requirements, although it connected people across the globe who had questions and ideas about poetry. As the web became a more freely accessible space of multimodal making, communities of performative poetry critique flourished. Years after the

millennium, the advent of search algorithms and social media, however, actually limited the forms of robust making that pertained to online poetry criticism and it introduced the Web 2.0 condition of inescapable commodification through user-created content. While communities sometimes persisted after the end of Web 1.0, vernacular participation in poetry criticism flattens, even as participation expands.

This chapter focuses on the emergence of vernacular poetry criticism alongside the development of the web. I specifically focus on online criticism of a single Sylvia Plath's poem, "Lady Lazarus," which is a text that anticipates experiences of being online. Plath's text speaks to the possibilities of being reborn online while also serving as a resource to future web users who navigate marginalization connected to female identities of the early web. The Plath critics that I study below reflect that Web 1.0 is a third important space of vernacular poetry exchange and criticism, where internet users formed online identities around the text and persona of "Lady Lazarus."

In this chapter, I provide analysis of vernacular criticism that highlights the role of poetry criticism in online identity formation, where identities do not precede performative poetry scholarship, but are instead formed through it. This takes the developments that I track in the previous two chapters into a third direction. Many critics took up Plath's poem on the level of identity—rhetorically *becoming* "Lady Lazarus" across a variety of digital environments. As Christa writes on "Lady Lazarus' Blood Bath," a blog in 2002-3, "Lady Lazarus is the nickname I began to use after reading and understanding a poem by Sylvia Plath." Christa's development of an online persona becomes a pretext to, as well as a performance of, vernacular digital scholarship of Plath's poem. I was surprised to find that Christa is far from alone in being "Lady Lazarus" when online, and I decided that this

practice of poetic identity creates openings for scholarly engagement—poetry scholarship that provides a means of community building, an individualizing mark of sophistication, and a response to marginality online. Below, I explore Christa's web compositions alongside a rough dozen other instances of online discourse and critical engagement with "Lady Lazarus." In the following section, I frame my approach to Plath's poem prior to exploring examples of "Lady Lazarus" criticism on the historical web across three distinct web communities: UseNet, home pages, and blogs. I will show how the development of the web enables and limits forms of connection and community around poetry during the period in question.

Virtual Death in "Lady Lazarus" and on the Web

The poem "Lady Lazarus" stages a scene that complicates normative understandings of death and identity in ways that anticipate being on the Web. Readers of Plath's 1962 poem witness a character/narrator who goes by the name, "Lady Lazarus," and who provides a revenant spectacle. This woman narrates both her past deaths and a present situation of dying and rising from the dead—only to witness the poem's second spectacle, a sudden fiery death. The poem's explication, narrative, and action of death give rise to the shocking and iconic concluding lines. As a hush falls over the crowd upon Lady's fiery demise, she intonates: "Out of the ash/I rise with my red hair/and I eat men like air." Lady Lazarus dies and quickly rises before a crowd that is variously described as peanut-munching and terrified. She has died, has risen, yet she is "the same identical woman." Her past and present versions are identical, but not continuous.

A Canadian teenager named Dina provides a theory of "virtual" death in response to "Lady Lazarus" that provides a key insight into identity formation in Web 1.0. Writing in virtual space, a home page in the 1990s that is tightly controlled by Dina's skillful web editing, Dina's theory connects a textually grounded analysis of "Lady Lazarus" to the compositional context of a home page. Dina explains that Plath's cyclical deaths and rebirths in the poem are the expression of a "madwoman persona," and even suggests that these deaths (rather than the rebirths that follow) provide some comfort for Plath, the poet. The death that is written catharsis gives life, which is creative direction. Similarly, being reborn on the Web signals a creative death of oneself.

The poem reflects the mixture of misery and pleasure that inheres in "putting it out there" that is, writing confessionally for a limited online audience. In Plath's works and in early digital space, the presentation of personal pain and deathliness finds an audience. Plath figures readers as an amused crowd, and Plath's compositional context of midcentury transatlantic poetics differs greatly from late century nascent web spaces. In practice, however, web users picked up on the resonance between the two situations and ran with their new Lady Lazarus identities. They could die and be reborn online, and learned to use their poetry knowledge to terrify.

In the poem's first section (roughly stanzas i-viii), Lady Lazarus announces her death ("I have done it again") and her resurrection ("a sort of walking miracle"), revealing that the present scene is not her first experience of death and rebirth. She even expects similar experiences of death in the future:

And I a smiling woman.
I am only thirty.
And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three.
What a trash
To annihilate each decade.

Lady Lazarus describes death as a once-in-a-decade experience, and we can infer that she expects to live to the age of ninety, having "nine times to die." The malapropism, "what a trash," both tweaks and intensifies the commonplace phrase, "what a waste," while also signaling her exclusion from society in the crowd—trash is something rejected and hidden away. It is trashy to end each decade with death, and this brings a trashy pleasure that Lady Lazarus takes for herself. Lady Lazarus continues:

What a million filaments.
The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot——
The big strip tease.
Gentlemen, ladies

These are my hands
My knees.
I may be skin and bone,

Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.

Like Lazarus of Bethany in the Gospel of John, Lady Lazarus has just walked away from a place of entombment where she has been laid (dead) and emerges (reborn) to the amazement of a public crowd. The self-sufficient Lady Lazarus does not require Christ in this extraordinary event, what the crowd proclaims to be "a miracle!" Conveying all of the narrative action, description, and background herself, Lady Lazarus performs her spectacle alone. The New Testament scene provides Christ's most important miracle and prefigures

the coming resurrection, while Plath's poem, although not published until the Ted Hughes-edited *Ariel* (1965), anticipates Plath's eventual suicide in February 1963. The scene not only mirrors the New Testament, it likewise mirrors a 20th century circus sideshow, albeit without a promoter who shouts through a megaphone in order to sell the spectacle. A curious inclusion in the poem, the line, "What a million filaments," signals an ennui tied to being looked at, as with flash bulbs that may capture Lady Lazarus' death spectacle.

Elements of Plath's life interweave with the account of Lady Lazarus—the biographical Plath almost dies by accident around age 10, attempts suicide around age 20, and most notably, this poem's composition precedes the poet's death in February 1963 by only several months, when the poet was 30.

Yet as Dina points out, virtual death is much more complicated than a common understanding of metabolic cessation. It does not merely provide an opening for afterlife, death in its virtual form can also give life. Web 1.0 users fastened new profiles and positioned new identities in relation to the deaths of Lady Lazarus. On the digital frontier, you are still you, but also not. You are a you that has been created by you: an avatar, a screen name, a user, with all the possibility and power that comes with a mask. And there is a strange power in Plath's performance of death, the grabbing hold of a gawking crowd's attention in death-defiance, that precedes a sudden terrifying death, and the sudden terrifying rebirth, to rise "eat men like air." Plath asks readers to consider ways that public and virtual death can be an agentive (active) choice rather than a (passive) passing,

Web users performed and provided their own theories for digital rebirth as they lived again (and again) through pseudonyms, personas, avatars, and other web presences during Web 1.0. Rebirth (along with associated concepts of resurrection, renaissance, the

undead) is a commonplace and necessary virtual experience. There is a ubiquity of being another online, relayed in the fact that so many have been in on the joke of Peter Steiner's famous cartoon caption—"on the internet, nobody knows you're a dog" (in the cartoon, a dog sits at a computer). Web 1.0 archives record not just individuals but emergent online selves, new identities engaging an internet of possibilities. The palpable intensity of participation that accompanies these selves is perhaps the defining affective feature of Web 1.0.

In their study of the online circulation of social capital, Samuel Best and Brian Krueger describe new selves that are motivated by fugitivity. After removal from online spaces, "targeted users often can change their screen name (alias) and return to the community reborn" (398). Users choosing to scrap rather than salvage their ties to a community often have greater advantage in a long view of online sociality. Others argue that web connection represents a moment of societal rebirth, such as Douglas Robertson in *The New Renaissance: Computers and the Next Level of Civilization*. Robertson's account of technological progress, published by Oxford University Press in 1998, welcomes computer-equipped nations into "Level 4 Civilization" (xi). In both of these examples, the structure of rebirth is one of improvement and relatively clean break from the past. In the 1990s, the web represented a set of possibilities for forgiveness, liberation, and transformation.

Of course, history and power do not simply disappear with the arrival of new technology. The opportunity to be digitally reborn ushered in new forms of troubling racial passing and racial profiling on the early web. In her 1995 essay, "Race in/for Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet," Lisa Nakamura provides a number of important demystifications related to web identities, arguing that any user can't become

anyone they want to be when online. Racial passing and tourism by white men has material consequences in and beyond the web:

> Asian passing masquerades … discourage "real life" Asian men and women from textual performance in that space, effectively driving race underground … a default "whiteness" covers the entire social space of LambdaMOO—race is "whited out" in the name of cybersocial hygiene (190).

Web culture has largely assumed and centered a de facto American male (who is White, middle class, and a native English speaker) subject, with broad effects for a globalized network, the full extent of which remains unreckoned with to this day. Cultural and economic barriers that were in place in the 1990s web continue to widen gaps in access to capital in a digital global economy (Canclini). Nakamura's analysis focuses on a sphere of online gameplay (LambdaMOO) that is relevant to all online selves. The act of (mostly White men) putting on false racial and gender attributes can function to consolidate the inequalities that racial categories support and to consolidate the very existence of those categories in an online world that could be otherwise. In leaving open an otherwise, Nakamura remains quite open to the possibility of transformative web futures. Her writing demonstrates that incorporating an awareness that virtual selves sometimes leads to the erasure of difference can motivate a study of who people are when they go online. She ends her influential essay by envisioning a web that is not only disruptive of power imbalance but also productive of revolutionary identities through practices that would be considered aberrant under current codes: "performing alternative versions of self

and race jams the ideology-machine, and facilitates a desirable opening up of what Judith Butler calls 'the difficult future terrain of community' in cyberspace" (193).

Web 1.0 Poetic Culture

As she coined "Web 1.0" in 1999, Darcy DiNucci primarily focused on the underlying architecture of information: "today's Web is essentially a prototype—a proof of concept," she writes in design-oriented *Print* magazine. DiNucci describes the limits of the predominant coding language of the day, HTML, as well as contemporary design standards, in order to speculate about future changes to web formats on then-emerging interfaces, such as devices, which were then in a very raw form (mostly, Game Boys and palm pilots). DiNucci centers two concepts that are seemingly in tension, the "fragmented future" of many types of hardware and interface—supported by coding languages and delivery mechanisms that haven't been dreamed of yet—and the internet as "transport mechanism … The ether through which interactivity happens" (32). DiNucci is oracular, correct in pointing out the contrasting directions that Web 2.0 would take, the simultaneous diversity of interfaces and systems and the way that the internet has atomized into ubiquity in the ensuing web. Yet, despite her writing, DiNucci has been denied the status of "trend spotter" or "oracle" associated with Reid Hoffman and Tim O'Reilly (at some point each man has been called "The Oracle of Silicon Valley"). DiNucci's lack of reception in Web intellectual culture reflects a persistent misogyny.

DiNucci's characterization of a changing web helps to characterize patterns of poetic engagement, as web users have continuously exchanged and posted thoughts about, and

recommendations for, poems. Web 1.0 is the internet's inaugural public epoch and it is typically dated beginning 1993 or 1994 (the launch of the first web browser or its popular adoption) to around 2005 (the popularization of social media). Web 1.0 represents the time before user generated content, such as social networks, wikis, and folksonomies—accessing online spaces also required institutional affiliation, for a time. In contrast, Web 2.0 (2005-2015) is characterized by social networking, internet connection across more devices, downloading and navigational speed, and ubiquity. Thus, Web 1.0 represents an internet that irrupts in, rather than undergirds, public and private life. In those days, one "went online." DiNucci reminds us that on Web 1.0, the internet was incredibly slow and, in contrast to today's web, highly textual. A homepage browser would have received primarily textual information that can be compared to designed words on a page. As a slow-to-load poetic space, the textual web required significant time to load a page to a desktop system, and users would have likely paid deeper attention to, and attention to more of the text on, a given page than in the instant scroll- and app-based web of today. A poem may not have been so quickly passed over by friends or random browsers or "lurkers" on a personal webpage. In early web forums, textual messages were generally made as responses to one or more earlier messages in a thread, and poetry discussions in these spaces tended to argue over meaning. On homepages and blogs, developments in infrastructure meant that users could embed hyperlinks to the full text of poems that had been anthologized elsewhere, or link to other homepages or literary sites as references or further reading.

The poetry that circulated on Web 1.0 is diverse and plentiful, and Sylvia Plath stands out as a poet widely engaged with from the earliest archived forums. By 2001, the

Yahoo! Member Directory indicates Sylvia Plath was the poet with the second most members (675), behind William Shakespeare (1912), and ahead of Emily Dickinson (338), Arthur Rimbaud (278), Allen Ginsberg (267), Walt Whitman (225), Dylan Thomas (98), and Adrienne Rich (10).[v] These top poets are Anglophone with the exception of Rimbaud, and most are American (*Yahoo*! was, and is, based in the USA).

Thanks to the Internet Archive Project and other means of accessing the historical web, poetry researchers can track changes across three decades of internet history, including those spaces that have since become defunct—or outright deceased.[vi] New discoveries extend a shared understanding of poetry's everyday cultural work and usefulness in an age that routinely notes its demise. In this chapter I explore the history of only one poem, "Lady Lazarus" on the web in order to locate some interpretive practices and circulation routes that are born digital.

Plath's work stages a spectacle of death and, especially, rebirth that has challenged online readers for generations. As became evident during my research, this poem provides various resources (affective, communicative, and community-building) for web users. The morbid poetic persona shocks its audience ("do I terrify?") and performs a death show; this death then transmutes into an active and forward-looking rebirth—"I rise with my red hair." Rebirth, in a new form, phoenix-like, is a ubiquitous experience on the web, and web users constantly begin again, for instance, when internet participation happens in spaces that are temporary. Sometimes this temporariness is swift and final—such as the Geocities shutdown of 2009—and more often it is tied to relevance, evidenced by many points of no return—UseNet's "Eternal September" in 1993 or NewsCorp's acquisition of Myspace in 2005—after which a forum becomes untenable for many users, such that web presence is

established elsewhere. Plath's text lends a myth, and sometimes an identity, to the strangeness and possibility of being online.

"Lady Lazarus" is often the first or second work cited in connection to the figure of Plath, alongside "Daddy," *The Bell Jar*, and excerpts from the poet's letters. Christine Jeff's 2003 film, *Sylvia*, starring Gwyneth Paltrow, speaks to the centrality of the poem to Plath's legacy by opening with the "Lady Lazarus" excerpt, "Dying/Is an art." Jeff's film spurred over 125 distinct IMDB message boards, many of which debate the film's treatment or mistreatment of Plath's poetry.[vii] Plath circulates widely in secondary and university academic culture, appearing routinely on AP English tests and academic anthologies, and students seek answers online. For a recent example of the Plath-loving web, on October 23, 2019 wikitrends.net reported that the Sylvia Plath Wikipedia page was the page with the third most unique views (below "Wikipedia" and "Bible" pages, and just ahead of the page of the recently killed "Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi"). Although this surge was due to the Google "Doodle" celebrating Plath's 87th birthday, this degree of poetry web traffic is probably unprecedented for Plath. Clicking on the Google Doodle hyperlinks to a page of Plath quotes, and the first is: "Dying/Is an art…"

The difficulty of "Lady Lazarus" does not necessarily fulfill the usual poetic criteria, like syntactical density, parataxis, or citationality. Instead, the poem challenges readers through unfixed references to the Holocaust, New Testament, and burlesque. "Lady Lazarus" seems to speak for Plath herself by anticipating the poet's forthcoming suicide. The poem is an imaginative act that is difficult not to see as a kind of suicide note, and we, "the peanut-crunching crowd" who pay a mysterious "large charge" to view "the big strip tease," know (for the most part) what is coming. And despite the crowd's gaze, the poem

boldly and triumphantly identifies the gawked-at pain, even death, with a kind of self-empowerment. Lady Lazarus seems all too knowledgeable of the coming rebirth—"do not think I underestimate your great concern"—as she performs death for and before us. Readers themselves become figured into the public spectacle of Lady's death as she "melts to a shriek." Connected causally with the resolution of the final line, the incantatory and Coleridgean lines—"Out of the ash/I rise with my red hair/And I eat men like air."—the crowd is contained in a state of rapture until its men are annihilated. It is in overcoming our reading it that the poem locates Lady Lazarus' power.

Or perhaps this "peanut crunching crowd" is not every reader (contradicting critics like Mary Lynn Broe and Jaqueline Rose), and the crowd is instead a figure for a specific, yet unspecified reader, such as a detested man in poet Sylvia Plath's life (see Bawer) or a purposefully vague presence that accompanies public displays of self. In this sense the crowd functions for readers as a target for "Lady Lazarus" and a cultivar of sympathy for her readers, whose witness extends beyond a crowd, suggesting the poetic action is a scene within a scene. We are pleased at the outcome of the poem, even as it terrifies, and even if the figure of the crowd stands apart from the final consumption of "men like air" (men as easily as air) or "men like air" (men akin to air). Lady Lazarus possesses a great and terrible gift, as Plath says about the poem, which is precisely to be reborn.

In a 2001 essay, Langdon Hammer engages Plath's poetry as a product and retheorization of midcentury pedagogy. Her poems convey a productive failure of poetic protocols, overburdening student-poets with contradictory imperatives: inherited form and spontaneous authenticity. Hammer identifies Plath's pedagogical inheritance through careful inspection of her textbook markings. Plath's aesthetic tension that nonetheless

proves highly productive reflects John Guillory's comments on the New Criticism: "every poem becomes an image of the institutional space in which it is read, a perfect mirror in the imaginary of that space" (Guillory 34); Hammer writes, "that mirror is in place in Plath's work, which derives a conception of the sacred from the classroom, conceived as sacred space itself" (77). Although Hammer does not demonstrate interest in Plath's readership, as do the many studies that document fierce identification with Plath's work. Hammer's intelligent connection between poetic shape and institutional shaping can extend to Plath's readers. Which is to say, when the below users discuss or repost "Lady Lazarus," they produce a virtual mirror of the conditions of production that may refract light toward the future possibilities of the web. These users' words and creations always exceed their status as documentation. Like Plath's marginal notes on her copy of *Understanding Poetry*, or the rose pressed within it, conveying the costs and futures of poetry instruction, online exchanges related to "Lady Lazarus" become texts *about* the possibilities that inhere in Web 1.0 participatory culture.

The revenant "Lady" does not explicitly invite readers to see things from her perspective. To interpret the text from a place of self-identification also comes with a cost—it can be dangerous. I have suggested that much of the poetic difficulty of "Lady Lazarus" occurs in interpolating the text in a lived context. Relating to Lady Lazarus as a web user proves difficult in different web contexts. The poem also spurred further performances addressed to public audiences, similar to the poem's address of "gentleman, ladies" – even if, as Susan Gubar argues, the spectacle is ultimately for the pleasure of "Lady Lazarus" herself (199). Web users existed in/as communities simultaneously exploding with popularity and on the brink of annihilation, and Plath's poem is more than a

barometer for web culture, it is a figure of and for the internet: a space for rebirth, intense feeling, and densely layered attention and textual engagement.

Across three forums—UseNet, personal sites, and early blogs—everyday online engagements with Sylvia Plath's 1962 poem, "Lady Lazarus," provide images of the possibilities and dreams of web culture from its nascent stages. The three forums not only establish chronological contrasts, they imply and enable different kinds of engagement with poetry by way of information architecture, participatory norms, and available communities.

Web 1.0 readers scrutinize the staged scene with varying degrees of identification with the character of "Lady Lazarus." What connects web readings is a sense that the poem is not tethered to familiar institutions or norms, opening forms of self-identification with the text that would likely not otherwise be communicated. Some share their criticism of the poem to change minds about death, to specify Plath's relevance to online culture, or to find a community of Plath fans. At the same time, significant divergences in critical engagement across online forums suggest that the pan-searchable web, while enabling a larger scale of collaboration, also works against the democratization of online poetry criticism.

Digital archives promise reliability, efficiency, and above all, permanence. However, none of these is the case. Data disappear constantly, and sometimes through massive and irretrievable accident. In 2019, boingboing.net reported an accidental Myspace data loss that was (at that point) unprecedented—12 years of user data lost forever, no backup. Although web archives are vast, I do not approach them as comprehensive or even lasting records. Because there is no dust online, notes Carolyn Steedman, decay is halted. But, as Mathew Kirschenbaum notes, the institutions on which web-accessible data rely (archive

projects included)—to say nothing of the bit rot and physical decay of stored data—are anything but perennial and secure. As our world hurtles toward futures that seek to rewrite the past, the stakes of historical web exploration have never been higher.

**UseNet* (1990-1995)

Users who participated in Lady Lazarus criticism on UseNet demonstrate how the poem's usefulness in misogynistic environments, where a White male majority was often hostile to a minoritized identities on the web, such as women across identity categories like national origin, race, and sexuality. "Lady Lazarus," however, eats men like air. Excerpting and glossing "Lady Lazarus," UseNet users placed the poem in relation to their online identities. The poem's toughness was a feature of participation in UseNet's particularly misogynist environments, and it connects users who seek to explore the meanings of Plath's text in a context of the emergent web.

UseNet postings are called "letters," and they represent some of the oldest publicly accessible internet records. A number of letters demonstrate internet-based discussions of "Lady Lazarus" as far back as 1991. As threaded discussions devoted to a wide range of specific topics (including ultimate frisbee meetups and bigfoot sightings), many UseNet newsgroups are archived by Google Groups (groups.google.com), which provide metadata such as time stamps and user information for each archived letter.[viii] Newsgroups (for example, "alt.angst") are communities that frequently share discursive norms, unique language, and "local" celebrities and villains. UseNet launched its newsgroup service in 1979, and by the late 1980s had hundreds of thousands of active users. With the popularization of web browsing in 1993 and 1994, UseNet became a top destination for

everyday users. David DeJean writes: “Although its name makes it sound monolithic, Usenet is perhaps best described as a huge, loose collection of informal information-exchange communities that have little in common beyond their naming convention and their reliance on the Network News Transfer Protocol used to manage Usenet messages.” This is to say that discourse on UseNet should not be understood as determined by the forum apart from its procedure: a post must either begin a thread or respond to another post in the thread, which occur in hierarchies. Any example of a newsgroup is soc.bi, where soc. (social issues) is the top-level hierarchy and bi. (bisexual) is the second-level.[ix] By far the largest hierarchy, alt. emerged: “around the refusal of operators to create a group to discuss drugs … a number of participants simply created a new hierarchy of newsgroups … sending traffic around those who did not want to carry it” (Hardy, 1993).

Judith Donath writes, “It is easy to imagine why people may seek information on [UseNet]: they have a problem and would like a solution” (1998, 2). The basic UseNet formula—that someone wants information and others provide it—is established by trust in shared motivation and belief. When it comes to understanding newsgroup culture, tech journalism and academic texts broadly agree on the importance of September 1993, when Internet Service Providers like AOL first enabled paid access to UseNet. Prior to this month, users needed to be associated with a university or employer, and this is usually reflected in a user’s account name (ending in …@wisc.edu, ...@ibm.com, etc.). September ’93 marks a sharp uptick in flame wars (ultra-aggressive argument) and spam, and many newsgroups lament the side-effects of expanded access. A February 1995 post in alt.angst suggests that the writing of ferrets stored in jars of glycerin is “Prolly better than the dreck flowing out of AOL into UseNet.”[x]

Prior to this, UseNet usage was mediated solely by institutions that granted access. In "Standards of Conduct on UseNet," Jones et. al. write: "turnover patterns…co-vary with the academic calendar," and because of the reliance on university-owned computers, "always gnawing at the edge of the user's awareness is the knowledge that what is given can be taken away" (103). The below newsgroup posters generally have academic affiliations and while their reticence is not a defining feature, the specialness of participating in a privileged forum may inform some of the discourse. Also, the shift to (paid) democratization of UseNet has important consequences for the shape of communities that discuss poetry.

Avery Dame-Griff researches queer and trans communities using the historical internet and his 2019 article, "Herding the 'Performing Elephants:' Using Computational Methods to Study Usenet" provides a reminder to include overlapping contextual layers in UseNet analysis. He highlights three issues in studying UseNet: "accounting for the different platforms and interfaces through which users could access Usenet, contextualizing newsgroups within their contemporaneous topic-specific discursive sphere, and accounting for the ethical concerns of working with message metadata" (223). While my project does not take a data analytics approach, I identify each post by its thread and try to provide framing in relevant, if brief, context. Because of the Google Groups interface I used, I was unable to determine how users accessed newgroups other than their email address, which often indicates institutions. I only include names of posters if they include it in their .sig.

One contextual feature I would like to highlight for is the UseNet signature (hereafter .sig), which is a file that is automatically addended to a posting. Typically

identifying the sender, a .sig in professional settings often functions as and resembles a business card, with position and employer noted. Music lyrics are more typical in the .alt hierarchy. A .sig can be changed for every posting, while some users keep the same .sig for months or years. In her 1998 study of deception on UseNet, Judith Donath writes that "signatures…are the on-line world's most deliberate identity signals" (41). As she provides examples of trolling, category deception, and identity concealment, Donath continues, "although the signature itself is an easy to copy conventional signal, it is often used as a means to link to more robust and reliable indicators of identity and to show writer's the affiliation with a subgroup" (sic).

In October 2019, I entered the following search strings on the UseNet archive at groups.google.com:

1. "lady lazarus" after:1990/01/12 before:1995/12/02
2. "dying is an art" after:1990/01/12 before:1995/12/02
3. "I eat men like air" after:1990/01/12 before:1995/12/02

482 threads mention the poem in some form (see footnote for a link to an index I created).[xi] These forms include excerpts, reprints, and discussions of "Lady Lazarus" on UseNet between 1990 and 1995. Results from strings 2 and 3 include posts with textual excerpts from the poem for users who either did not attribute the text or did not type the poem in its entirety. Search 3 yields by far the most results (323), and the majority of these results are .sigs. In general, I found that most reprints of "Lady Lazarus" on UseNet happen in the context of .sigs. The span 1990-1995 includes the "Eternal September" shift.

As I began to explore archived threads, I expected to find crowdsourced Plath criticism—questions to an unspecified audience—with increased spam after September 1993, but instead, the vast majority of what I found includes quotational and citational practices that are embedded in contexts of subculture, political identity, and newsgroup discourse.[xii]

A few non .sig Lady Lazarus appearances stand out. Jenne (…@drew.edu) posted to a thread on rec.arts.poems on 12/17/93 with a single, unreplied-to posting of an original poem, "Empress Sylvia," that figures Plath's power as political tyranny ("Empress") whose ability to "live through" others resembles a menacing spirit possession:

> *How many eyes have you gazed from?*
> *Lady Lazarus never dies — she breathes*
> *through me and she and he.*
> …
> *Your seduction rivals the Sirens.*
> *I am not your final poem*
> *I am not Frieda*
> *pleae, don't summon me now, not this way*
> *not your way....*

To be reborn through "Lady Lazarus" is to be dragged unwilling ("not this way") into spirit possession, drawn by the poet's seductive Siren call to an unnamed fate: rebirth, suicide, or perhaps writing poetry? The mythological (Homeric Siren) dwells alongside the biographical (Plath's daughter, Frieda Hughes), and the child song quality—"me and she and he"—mirrors Plath's management of unspeakable pain through infant speak and simple rhyme in "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus." The phrase "final poem" inverts the popular understanding of destructive suicide as Plath's final poem into a constructive act—Frieda—reuniting poiesis with its former Aristotelian association with making and maternity.

A thread entitled "Sylvia Plath" on 8/5/95 in rec.music.tori-amos contains seven postings. The thread begins with a letter from Sal (…rmit.edu.au):

> Hi Guys.... As a major Toriphile, and Sylvia Plath fan, I was wondering if anyone else out there appreciated Ms. Plath too. She is sort of Tori-ish, in her own way. Very tortured.. Very cool. Here is a quote or two from one of my favourite Plath poems: Lady Lazarus …

After this, Sal prints the final third of the poem: "I turn and turn" to "And eat men like air." Attention to the posted text is minimal at first as responders offer almost exclusively suggestions for further reading: first "Daddy" and an apt excerpt of Amos' "Butterfly"—""Daddy dear, if I can kill one man, why not two?"—then "Mad Girls Love Song," then *Bell Jar,* then another *Bell Jar* comments, then quick impressionistic praise for the posted text ("I like Lady Lazarus. It's the bestest. :) -Charlie"), and finally, maharet919:

> i don't exactly connect plath with tori....i think that plath was a lot more troubled in a way....i mean she did commit suicide. yeah tori is emotional, but i don't think that she and sylvia are much alike....but I understand...there is something about the two that sort of connects.

Even though this thread happened after "Eternal September," the newsgroup coheres around the topic, adding relevant questions and comments that deepen a line of thought, even as about half of the posters have a non-institutional ISP such as AOL. Reading Plath into Amos, and vice versa, the thread opens up and documents questions of influence. The final post questions the basis of a comparison to Plath. If Tori Amos fans understand the songwriter's lyrics as highly autobiographical, "Lady Lazarus" is a foreboding influence that die-hard fans may not want to associate with the singer songwriter, and perhaps this accounts for the ambivalence inherent in maharet919's comment.

In 1992, Erin Zhu posted several dozen times in at least a dozen newsgroups using the following .sig (or a variant email address: ....@gevalt.mit.edu:)

/-/
Erin Zhu /
(617) 661-8151 / Out of the ashes,
872 Mass. Ave, #707 / I rise with my red hair,
Cambridge, MA 02139 / And I eat men like air.
...@zariski.harvard.edu / —Sylvia Plath

Presenting the sign of what is probably the most prestigious social capital in the US—being "Harvard"—across a dividing line from the final chant of "Lady Lazarus," almost resembles a kind of translation. Is Erin Zhu calling forth the attributed author's association with elite education, well documented in diaries and *The Bell Jar*? It is more likely that the serves a role particular to Erin Zhu's activities, as her postings typically intervene in conservative threads having to do with reproductive rights, the place of women in society, sex education, and other issues in gender and sexual politics. Her institutional affiliation together with the Plath excerpt operate as a shield and sword. In a thread "Why I like to be single, but can't!" in soc.singles on 5/20/92, she responds to misogynistic "ranting" (marked by >):

> I thought of replying to this long passage of ranting by pointing out a few obvious errors in the text, but after seeing this line:
> >We man are more intelligent, stronger, more capable.
>
> I just had to give it up. Sorry, but I can' take anybody who says that sort of thing seriously enough to respond at length. But it _is_ a great piece of satire if read correctly. Yup.

Whether or not Erin responds to a troll—a user making insincere comments that angle for conflict—she positions herself as a corrective ("I thought of…pointing to a few obvious errors"). Her .sig, as an essential component of the UseNet letter, rather than an addendum,

and it conveys intellectual authority (Harvard) and poetic rage ("I eat men like air") that emphasize the restraint of her comment.

> Further down this thread, a different user posts a reply to Erin Zhu:
>
> > First, look at the .signature "...I eat men like air", with an obscure reference, implying that men are objects, i.e. worthless little critters that women must live with for some tiresome reason, and that women have some inherent right to look down upon men as begin bestial and evil, and use that position to be destructive and critical, instead of supporting and nuturing. [sic]

Purporting a close reading, this poster takes a few steps away from the text—the "obscure" writer comparing men to air, the poster suggests, is "implying that men are objects;" he concludes that the text is condescending to men, suggesting a general man – woman agon "for some tiresome reason." Erin does not reply and the thread has not had another contributor since 1992. While unpleasant, this exchange is relatively commonplace on UseNet. Reductive, problematic, and full of conflict, this is also a pre-"Eternal September" thread (meaning, users are accountable to their institutional access provider), and out of the ash of flame warfare, Erin Zhu calmly proceeds to her next opponent, armed with a "Lady Lazarus" excerpt. Plath's text forewarns that Erin Zhu, like Plath, will not as much endure flaming as annihilate opponents who are full of air.

The newsgroup alt.angst, especially active 1994-1995, mentions Plath on a regular basis. On 2/4/94, DLH writes in the alt.angst thread, "i share a birthday with sylvia plath," canonizing the poet with the posting, "Plath: the patron saint of Angst...if we believed in saints." According to contemporary Washington Post reporting, alt.angst is "a somewhat disorganized collection of rants and gripes. The newsgroup is much smaller than soc.singles and conflicts look different, as tongue-in-cheek humor, irony, and self-effacement are all discursive norms The 14th is officially 'Great Big Blowing Void Day'

here." On GBBV Day in 1995, Erik misquotes the "dying is an art" tercet of "Lady Lazarus," a user named Henry partly corrects the line, and Mitchell provides the entire poem—"I happen to have it online," Mitchell writes. In 1995 the text of "Lady Lazarus" was not a Google search away, as there was not effective and widespread web search. Providing accurate reprintings of poems online was a necessary service, although this thread ends with the poem text.

On the alt.angst thread, "you know it's time to hit the prozac when..." on 11/14/94, user Nuala is concerned about "horndog email" received through participating on soc.bi and insists, "my .sig isn't a pickup line." Others in the thread make suggestions, and a user named rage offers the following: "it takes a brave man to hump the net.leg of someone who calls herself 'rage' … maybe nuala should try 'killer fahey' instead. / or 'lady lazarus.'" Rage ends this letter with a new .sig: "out of the ashes i rise with my flaming red hair, and i eat men like air." Changing a .sig to make a point, or a postscript, is not an unusual occurrence in alt.angst. What is surprising: in future posts across different newsgroups, Nuala actually inserts this text (the corrected text, incidentally the same excerpt as Erin Zhu) into her .sig.

Nuala's new .sig attracted attention within and beyond alt.angst, and she provides a rationale for the .sig in the thread, "Hopes Shattered," which has 38 posts and begins on 3/11/95 with a post about a breakup. Some replies suggest prior familiarity with the original poster, Greg. queen of caffeine remarks on Nuala's .sig: "sure, I'm not claiming sexton is the be-all and end-all of Angst Poets — just better, in my estimation, than plath, who grows oh so tiresome. (but I do like the red hair/eat men like air thing.)" troll is less equivocal in their critique: "I think that self-pity and disdain is what those lines mean in your sig. >But hey, I may be wrong." Nuala responds:

> To me [the lines from "Lady Lazarus"] mean trying to get over self-pity. But that's not why they're in my .sig. I'm trying (and not doing very well) to change my personality somewhat at the moment. I used to be very open and fluffy on the net but this got me into lots of trouble and people were also often disappointed when they then met me in real life. So now I'm trying to have attitude and basically scare people of the idea of mailing me unless they have something to say. And the quote seems to fit. And I have red hair.
>
> Nuala, who deosn't define as an 'angst-chick', btw.
>
> > — *Out of the ash/I rise with my red hair/and I eat men like air* — Plath
> > I've tried relaxing, but — I don't know — I feel more comfortable when I'm tense. Yes, it is my real name, no, it has nothing to do with Sandman and, yes, I have been asked that before.

Asserting distance from an 'angst-chick' archetype, Nuala suggests that Plath's text is both a snarl that will keep away unwanted contact and an affirmation of self, words that perform brave action and promote "get[ting] over self-pity." The interpolation of the text into a consciously constructed UseNet identity is an instance of Web 1.0 heteroglossia, a text (Nuala's web presence) articulated alongside and through another text ("Lady Lazarus") (Holquist 324). Nuala explains that she is not putting her interpretation of the poem as "trying to get over self-pity" on display. It is almost as if Nuala wants the poem to *do* something instead of *mean* something, a poetic utility that, we gather, may ward off unwanted UseNet exchanges.

Nuala's change of .sig will stay with them for years of prolific contribution, and Google Groups search yields around 200 threads from Nuala with the excerpt of "Lady Lazarus" present in their .sig. The poem invokes toughness and an opportunity for a new online presentation of self. "Lady Lazarus" is simultaneously a mask (as a new persona or net personality), a defense (against unsavory email), and a challenge (to rise)!

Home Pages **(1994-2003)**

Homepages are webpages that can be deeply customized around a web user's life and interests. Two of the most important free webpage hosting platforms around the millennium were Angelfire and Geocities. The co-founder of Geocities, David Bohnett, famously wrote, "This is the next wave of the net—not just information but habitation." Bohnett's statement reflects the excitement that comes with the permanence and belonging of web-hosted home pages. With a free and endlessly customizable (or so it must have seemed) space on a globally accessible site with a unique URL, it was suddenly possible to *really* live online. Bohnett's statement perhaps digs at UseNet in the phrase, "not just information," and it appears that a transition from UseNet to Geocities or other home page ecosystems was a commonplace migration. In 1997, Judith Donath frames the transition between these forums in terms of increased risk and accountability:

> The Web-based home page presents a crafted self-presentation, showing how one wishes to appear … While it may not be terribly costly to discard, say, a name on AOL in order to escape from the consequences of actions done under it, one is far less inclined to abandon an online presence that has taken great effort to create (7).

Some UseNet newgroup communities actually attempted to establish continuity between the two networks by transitioning a UseNet community to a home page network. This happened when the alt.gothic UseNet group migrated to a webring on Geocities, which is a means of networking home pages. However, communities such as this seem to be the exception. For most web users, creating a home page was to break with the old and begin again.

Geocities was a hugely popular free web hosting service, and in 1997, Geocities' 1 million users represented 7% of all web traffic. After Geocities was acquired by Yahoo! (when), interest waned and in 2009 38 million unique pages went dark when Yahoo! shut

down Geocities. Many pages can be viewed using the Internet Archive Project, which is the method I used to find the below pages. The Internet Archive Project's Wayback Machine enables tracking across historical versions of a page, revealing changes—for instance, Lucy (cited below) removes the link to her speech from her home page between April and July 2001. Users created digital domiciles using text editors that required no coding background and pages were structured in neighborhoods based on (but not restricted to) topics. If a user was interested in the "Art and Writing" topic, they could choose the Soho or Lofts neighborhood and might be assigned an address that resembles the following url: geocities.com/soho/2342.

Users made pages that printed Plath poems, page of photographs, Plath analysis written from school or for internet audiences, and links to other Plath pages. I located over 20 home pages that contain substantive commentary on "Lady Lazarus." I discovered sites dedicated to Plath and some even to Lady Lazarus through a number of avenues. The most important and robust Plath curation of the home page era is Plath Links (plathonline.com/links.html), a home page site that functions as a node for other sites dedicated to Plath, listing over 100 pages. This site was maintained by Emily Pollard, initially at a smaller Geocities-hosted version of the site, and it suggests just how significant Sylvia Plath was in the era of home pages. This site was a boon to my research. Otherwise I would have had to solely rely on informal networks—through user Links pages that list sites of interest—because a Google search for Geocities sites yields very limited results. Emily's Geocities site is a phenomenal example of a hand-coded community hub that produces unexpected combinations and experiences of digital culture, or what Abigail De Kosnik calles "rogue archiving." Such digital places serve to promote "accumulation" and to

"resist time." Avant garde archives corral, preserve, and make accessible digital material *in new genres*. Emily's categorization criteria promote unexpected combinations: works made by sometimes anonymous individuals from Australia to Leipzig, all of which celebrate a poet from 40 years hence. While not avant garde, a second deeply appreciated and commonly linked personal page is maintained by Anja Beckmann (stinfwww.informatik.uni-leipzig.de/~beckmann/plath.html; uses purchased domain http://sylviaplath.de after 7/22/2003).

A number of bibliographic sites primarily disperse texts. However, distributing copyrighted Plath texts online runs the risk of being shut down by publishers and the Plath estate. A Plath poetry anthology by Faye Messick (angelfire.com:80/va/madgeline/plath.html) offers credit to publishers Faber and Harper & Rowe starting sometime after 11/5/99 and before 2/26/00. Peter Steinberg, who operated the Plath tribute site, "A Celebration, This Is" (geocities.com/Paris/Cafe/8648/) told me in an email that his site was shut down in 1998 for the same copyright infringement. As I clicked through different history versions of Prospero's (home.ptd.net/~prospero) large anthology, the following note replaced what had previously been a page of several dozen poems:

> *Sorry, people, but the poems are gone forever. Please don't send me any e-mails regarding this, I have neither the time nor energy to deal with any of it.*
>
> *To Whom it may concern*
>
> *I am writing on behalf of Faber and Faber, the UK publishers of the works of Sylvia Plath. It has come to our attention that the web site at : http://home.ptd.net/~prospero/daddy.html which you apparently maintain, has posted in it's entirety a copyright work of Sylvia Plath. …*

Emily's Links page connected me to Dina's "Pieces of Me" site (angelfire.com/on/piecesofme/), an ambitious and deeply crafted home page first set up in 1999. According to the archived site, Dina is a 12th year secondary student in Ontario with a Chihuahua named Bagel. Dina experiences depression, cherishes friends like Ilana who she met through a depression IRC, and belongs to the anti-self-harm webring, "Bodies Under Siege." Dina's home page focuses loosely on the topic of depression and builds community and provides resources around this topic. Her site has at least two dozen pages that discuss poetry, HTML coding, and Simone de Beauvoir (among other topics). In its hand-coded design, with spinning graphics and irregular placement of links, and in its radically personal content for a home page, "Pieces of Me" evokes a confessional web. Dina writes on the front page: "I find it wonderful and therapeutic that I can let my mind free here.. there's so much that I have to keep inside.. there's so much that I can't talk about.. but.. I can write about it here.." While not espousing a simple belief in a talking (or, webpage editing) cure, Dina's opening statement nonetheless makes clear her purpose to seek healing and connection through a web presence that she has agency over. As well, the front page of "Pieces of Me" is massive, requiring a good deal of scrolling and hunting to find specific pages. Dina's site rewards patience, as many links are initially difficult to find. Three of Dina's pages focus on the work of Sylvia Plath, and in one, an essay of almost 3,500 words dives into Plath in greatest depth, and it is called "An essay I wrote regarding the themes of death in the poetry of Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton." Dina zeroes in on the complexities of dying in "Lady Lazarus:"

> Throughout these lines, Plath develops her 'madwoman' persona. Extremely successful throughout her life, Sylvia believes that she can also die exceptionally well. She does not mean that she has literally died, of course, but rather that she has

> already killed herself in a figurative sense. Because she was not accustomed to enjoying normal, everyday life, this type of "virtual" death was all the more real to her; it was, paradoxically, the only thing she could do to make herself feel truly alive. Plath also expresses her sense of empowerment in this poem...[and is] altogether without self-pity. She seemed to view death as a physical challenge that she needed to overcome. She spoke of suicide with a wry detachment, and without any mention of the suffering or drama inherent in the act.

In this passage, Dina provides a theory of "virtual" death, which connects a textually-grounded analysis of "Lady Lazarus" to the compositional context of a home page. Dina implies that death can be figural in addition to a literal, biological death, and that a symbolically mediated space, smartly phrased as "virtual," can provide opportunities for multiple deaths. The poem deals frankly with suicide, without sentiment, "drama," or gratuitous emotion. Death, when handled with care, provides a means forward when the normal life before you proves untenable. In addition, Dina suggests that virtual death is meaningful in proportion to marginality in spaces that are not "virtual"—the implication being, both in poetry and online. Dina writes, "Because she was not accustomed to enjoying normal, everyday life, this type of 'virtual' death was all the more real to her."

Plath writes, "dying is an art," and Dina responds by recognizing that death in art is a special kind of death, and she affirms the "paradoxical" benefits of this virtual death. Virtual death makes Plath feel "more alive" and reveals a more confident and creative version of Plath the poet. Dina understands that even though "she has not literally died," Plath's death in the highly mediated textual field of a poem composed in the perspective of a madwoman persona is nonetheless quite real, and even healing. According to Dina, "Lady Lazarus" is a persona that represents a decisive departure from a normal life. Dina

differentiates between Plath and Lady Lazarus, the latter representing a "madwoman persona," but Dina also understands the constitutive connection between a poem and its creator.

Dina's confessional web presence—in its highly crafted networking of ideas, encodes a way of moving forward with death. Poems and home pages each contain possibilities for creative action that begins with personal pain. Plath encodes her pain through a madwoman persona that proves to be productive. Dina's rigorous vernacular poetry scholarship likewise encodes (or codes) and reflects community, but also personal growth, that emerges from putting it out there. If it appears from Dina's excerpt that the depth of engagement with poetry on personal sites, as compared to UseNet or blogs, is much higher, that is because it is. In addition, the highly wrought web presences provide a depth of field that is incomparable to other Web 1.0 venues. Dina's site represents a water mark for the depth of making that accompanies vernacular poetry criticism in the era.

I discovered another page with numerous essays that discuss death in Plath poems. Emily's "Links" led me to a page without a name—I will call it "In Memory" (angelfire.com/journal/plath) after the inscription on the home page (the Internet Archive Project has captured neither the guestbook nor contact page). This site's design is quite spare and neat—a portrait of smiling Plath the most significant visual feature, and a few words in small font point users to two essays. Essay 2 systematically introduces a piece of writing that cannot abide an academic institution:

> this is an introduction to what is supposed to be a research paper entitled, the dark side
> of sylvia plath's poetry." i wrote that paper and it sucked. so, i have decided that i will not turn it in. blank facts with no life or emotions is all that lies on my previous

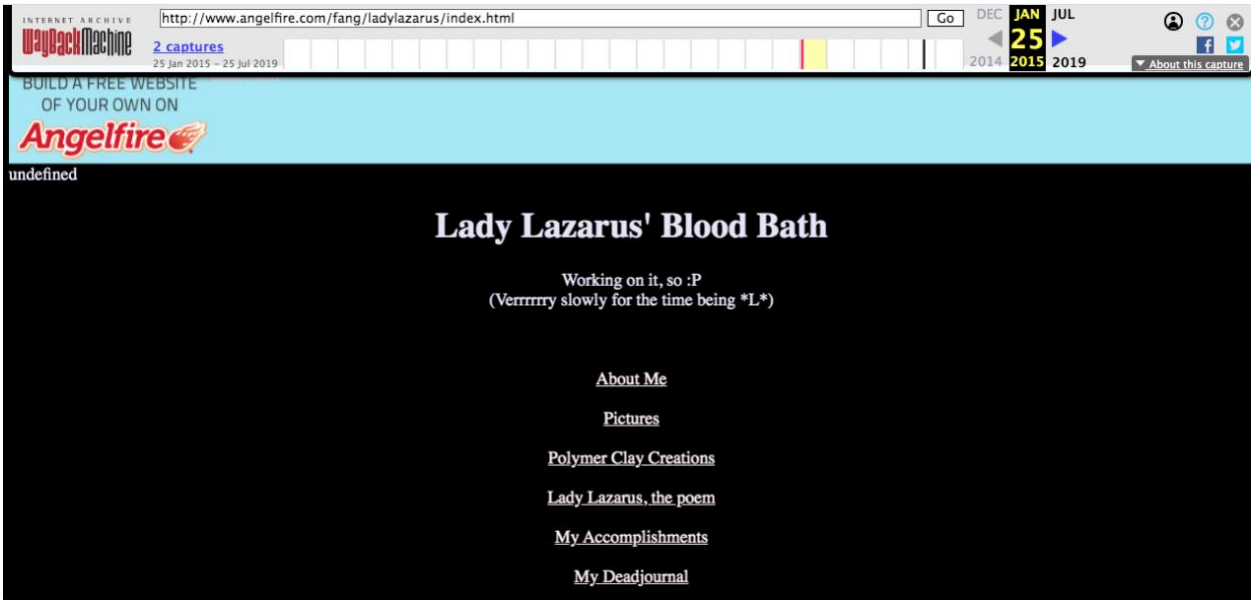
> paper. instead of turning in that paper and receiving a grade no lower than 80, i am going to write from the heart. i am going to tell my feelings and opinions of sylvia plath's writing, her mental illness, and her actions. i will add a works cited page but i will lack sources. i know that you're not supposed to speak in first person when constructing a literary paper. this paper will also exceed the maximum number of words allowed … i know that the average professor would be pretty pissed if i turned in a paper refusing to follow his guidelines. perhaps this is a paper full of rebellion or maybe i am simply more of a writer than a student.

"In Memory" is nonacademic by necessity. This piece of writing has been designed for a home page, as writing that is both private and public, with textual features designed for the web. The piece seeks to liberate verbal expression from what has seemingly stilted writing heretofore: a professors' guidelines (referred to by the pronoun, "his"), the assessment of writing, and a vacuum of life, emotions, feelings, and opinions. "In Memory" continues not in an argument but in a refusal to submit to demands of cogency. It is a heroically failed essay, with a lengthy biographical discussion of Ted Hughes, the unfaithful husband, and other moments that lead to "guilt," such as Plath's miscarriage. After describing Plath's death, the essay ends with the highly traveled "Lady Lazarus" excerpt: "Dying/Is an art." In contrasting artless academic writing to the work that their homepage made possible, "In Memory" leaves open the possibility that they side with death as an expressive mode, but do little to explore the text of "Lady Lazarus."

Lady Lazarus' Blood Bath (angelfire.com/fang/ladylazarus/index.html), published on the Angelfire platform by Christa, is the only site I found, rather than a page within a site, dedicated to the poem "Lady Lazarus"—to be fair, the page is not exactly dedicated to the poem, but rather, is named after a web identity inspired by the persona in the poem:

> I have various "identities" I use online. … Although I change my nickname on MSN Messenger somewhat often, two of my other main identities are Black Widow, and Lady Lazarus (which is the one I used for this Web page.) Lady Lazarus is the nickname I began to use after reading and understanding a poem by Sylvia Plath of the same title (Lady Lazarus)." ... "The poem was even written during my birthday time (just a different year — exactly 20 years before me).

Christa ends this reflection by noting that 20 years, or 2 decades, passed between the poem's composition and her birth. This note stands out in the context of Lady Lazarus, which remarks on the persona's death and rebirth that happens on the decade—Christa connects the theme of the poem that identifies the importance of the decade to death and rebirth as it works in Lady Lazarus. If she were born 19 years after the poem was written (and Plath's 30th birthday), it would be different.



Christa's names and identities have been culled from various cultural sources. Elsewhere on the page, she writes: "Meatwad is another ID I like to use sometimes. That one I got from Aqua Teen Hunger Force," referring to a cartoon that aired between 2000 and 2015. This page fits within a hierarchy (it is the info page, a subpage, to the home page). Even though Christa uses other usernames when online, this performance as Lady Lazarus activates a

set of interpretive practices, as Christa must consider what the poem means for the digital environment she exists across her multiple identities. Christa's page is spare but includes a page with the text of "Lady Lazarus," another page with images of her polymer clay creations, and more information about her family life. Christa is transparent about the fact that "Lady Lazarus" is a web identity for a real person named Christa. Her analysis of Lady Lazarus, while minimal, foregrounds that Lady Lazarus is a fugitive and ghostly presence whose identities multiply. Nowhere does the site clarify its grotesque subtitle, "Blood Bath," but perhaps this image sketches in the scenes of swift man-killing that Lady Lazarus is known for. At the bottom of a page with the poem text, Christa links to two online forums (since defunct—plagiarist.com and plathforum), and recommends reading the opinions of web users who have deposited ideas on "Lady Lazarus."

Another web user named Erin O'Neill maintained a Geocities site (http://www.geocities.com/ecoiieee/spterm.html) that includes a reproduction of her college term paper that interprets Plath's "Lady Lazarus." She writes:

> "Plath was outlining her future in "Lady Lazarus," writing tellingly about her pattern…She sees her situation as something to display like a circus side show … Plath wants her secrets revealed, and she wants a crowd, she does not want propaganda covering her up like the holocaust—she wants attention…Resourceful, indeed, the speaker recognizes her gifts and commends herself for them. Sylvia Plath took her battles and traumas and created from them in a skillful manner.

Erin's vision of Lady Lazarus centers a personality that requires a crowd, revelation, and the theatre in order to activate innate resources. Erin figures the biographical "battles and traumas" of the biographical Plath in place of the persona of Lady Lazarus. Plath "created from" sources of pain such that pain, if not death, promotes skillful making.

A second essay comes from Lucy, an Australian secondary student in the early 2000s whose Geocities page discusses "Lady Lazarus" amid an epic mess of updates. Lucy's front page contains a humble hyperlink: *Click here to read the transcript of a very brief, small speech I gave to my English class on Plath*. That document begins: "The following is a passage I wrote for my year 10 School certificate English oral assessment" and clarifies that the class was unable to hear the speech because of time constraints—"i went heaps overtime and they shut me up when i was about halfway through reading the text here!"—and because other students were unable to access the poetry they had not yet encountered. Once again the creative poetic reading practices that flourish on home pages pit online spaces against school institutions. Lucy's ensuing discussion of "Lady Lazarus" is thrilling—she proposes that Plath was experienced in death and that her suicide attempts put her in contact with death, which fed her poetic power.

Lucy deleted her speech—the entire page, not just the link to it—at some point between April and July 2001. Some web activities are pregnant with possible meanings, such as naming oneself after a poem, but deleting personal content feels unambiguously final. Her text is dead not only because her home page was hosted on the eventually discontinued hosting service, Geocities.com. Internet archiving projects have exhumed an undead web. Its pieces are torn and often do not render. In their partialness, like the speaker's fragmented remains, the archive is visible as an emulated, piecemeal body. As a deleted text pulled from the dredged Geocities abyss, Lucy's text is doubly dead. And perhaps it is because of this that her culminating formulation—"And what does Plath mean, so multiplicitously, by dying?"—as an open-ended musing grounded in Plath's complex,

immersive textual field—disrupts the ideology machine. Multifaceted and duplicative, multivalent and duplicitous, "Lady Lazarus" is an occasion to live again.

It may be productive to see Plath-dedicated home pages such as Emily's and Dina's as ekphrasis. Web 1.0 poetic culture is endlessly intertwined with made things—such as pages, poems, and communities, and interpretive protocols. If UseNet represented an explosion of letter writing, the home page era was a craftsperson revival. The affective climate in 2019 around the home page era is highly nostalgic, marked more by broad embarrassment and a sense of low-stakes fun. This nostalgia informs present-day media campaigns (in 2018, A.V. Club writer William Hughes calls the *Captain Marvel* film promotional page a "glorious 90's Geocities fever dream"). Digital artist Cameron (http://cameronsworld.net/) created a nostalgic digital art installation that can be scrolled and clicked through for hours. But can nostalgia also be transformative? In addition to its conservative function as a lament for the loss of pure origins (Spivak), it may also point to and motivate the actualization of alternative structures of belonging and communicating online. While digital artists Richard Vijgen ("Deleted Cities") and Cameron Askin ("Cameron's World," cameronsworld.net) approach nostalgia as a curiosity or digital aesthetic forebear, Olia Lialina and Dragan Espenschied, with their One Terabyte of Kilobyte Age exhibition at the Photographer's Gallery, seeks to act as midwives for the rebirth of "extreme creativity" as it manifests in home page creation. Such a rebirth is useful in order to reimagine what, for instance, web friendship can be outside of social media protocols. To these efforts, archived Geocities pages can assist in imagining alternatives and futures for web sociality.

Blogs (2001-2005)

The popularity of home pages on Geocities and Angelfire dropped off gradually from 2002-2006, a period when blogs simultaneously saw explosive growth. Around the time Yahoo! purchased Geocities in 1999, Brian Fitzgerald wrote the LiveJournal code—the template for many important blog platforms to come—during his freshman year at the University of Washington. That same year, writes Jesse James Garrett, there were 23 blogs on the internet, and by the middle of 2006, 50 million blogs graced the web.

The third environment featured in this chapter, blogs, demonstrate a transition into Web 2.0 characterized by casual and constant connection through social media and devices. Most blog formats, beginning with Blogger.com, enabled quick posts and easy-to-assemble networks of friends whose posts could be viewed with minimal navigation. Blog homepages presage social media feeds. In contrast to decentralized sites, blogs enforce consistent formatting across pages and to a lesser degree across blogs (basic features of a user profile, calendar, and followers list must be viewable). Emily Nussbaum writes in 2004 that these shifts resulted in the illusion of choice in blog formats and a flattened look and feel of the web: "While the sites that are hosts to online journals may attract different crowds, their formats vary only slightly: a LiveJournal is a Blurty is a Xanga is a DeadJournal is a DiaryLand" (15). Nussbaum is correct that blogs are more or less interchangeable from information infrastructure standpoint, but these distinctions matter to users. One LiveJournal user, sariea, who marked “Lady Lazarus” as an interest, describes a fairly typical blog use boomerang—account destruction and rebirth:

08 Mar 2005|11:58am LAST POST HERE
[mood | annoyed]
i have seriously HAD IT with live journal. i'm sick of getting "you cant post blah blah blah" because of "maintenance" what-EVER... i have a new journal (and a cooler one at that) so update the links, kiddies... here's my new journal: http://sariea.diaryland.com/
22 Mar 2005|09:47am diary land sucks major booty i'm back at livejournal under a new name update your lists, peeps *http://www.livejournal.com/users/sariea/* sariea out

Ignacio Siles, in *Trajectories of Blogging*, writes that in the age of the blog, "the World Wide Web has turned into an important means to share voice, that is, the narratives through which individuals give a public account of their lives." While sharing a public account of one's life is demonstrated by the UseNet newsgroups and home pages that I have viewed, blogs represent a decisive shift in visibility. It isn't that blogs put bloggers *in the public*, as typical blog readership is extremely small, it is instead that the environment alters the structure of address. Blog posts have comments sections and tagging capability. Over time, users expanded types of content and legitimate meanings of blog, which can contain many forms of content (Lenhart and Fox). Relatedly, a blog is so tied to a referential and representable individual. A blogger I found, "Sexy Sadie/Sleepy Jean," (http://chironsoldier.deadjournal.com/profile) provides a pithy restatement of this principle: "I'm not as happy as I seem irl and not as sad as I seem here. ok? :)"

LiveJournal today maintains a searchable archive, while under ownership by a media conglomerate based in Russia, where the platform is today popular (and highly censored). I discovered blogs by searching for interest tags using each site's search feature. Here is what I searched in LiveJournal:

https://www.livejournal.com/blogs/en/lady%20lazarus
"Lady Lazarus" = 15 members
https://www.livejournal.com/blogs/en/sylvia%20plath

"Sylvia Plath" = 580+ members

The below blogs come from LiveJournal and DeadJournal. DeadJournal is a blog environment that puts a macabre twist on the more familiar and welcoming LiveJournal platform ("morgue" instead of "directory" … you get the picture). DeadJournal, like "Lady Lazarus," delights in its aesthetic of darkness, and there is something deliciously dark in exploring each. In LiveJournal, DeadJournal, and other blog platforms like Xanga, many bloggers use a version of Lady Lazarus as a username.[xiii]

DeadJournal user "SylviaAnne" (haruka2077.deadjournal.com), who identifies she/her pronouns online, demonstrates an enduring connection to the poetry of Plath and "Lady Lazarus" on her DeadJournal. SylviaAnne's posts mention meetups and authors related to goth, pagan, and anime subcultures, as well as dedicated reading of her two eponymous poets, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton (hence, SylviaAnne). She describes a trip to Barnes & Noble where she purchased a history of Mclean Hospital, which housed Plath, Lowell, and Susanna Kaysen (author of *Girl, Interrupted*). Many posts are about poems, and three are about Lady Lazarus. On Friday, January 23rd, 2004:

> *5:14 pm *yelps with joy* I just got my tapes in the mail and FINALLY got to hear Sylvia read "Lady Lazarus"!!! It was sooo amazing, her voice is so strong and you can hear her clipped intonation of all the words. I need to go listen to it 50 more times!!! WHEEEEEEEEEE!!!*
> *Current Personality: ecstatic Current Reading: listening to the sound of Sylvia....*

This post comes several months after a string of other "Lady Lazarus" related posts. On August 31, 2003, SylviaAnne prints "Lady Lazarus" in its entirety (I do not include it here). On the following day, SylviaAnne posts this reflection on Plath:

> *I love Sylvia Plath. I know, I know, I've said this before, but it bears repeating, especially as I've now moved on from the stupid Buddhist book to a collection of her poems. The one below is one of my favorites... For various reasons, I'm not sure if they're complicated or not but I dunno how I would explain them right off the bat. Some of her poems I find beautiful, etherial... Sort of crisp and cold but insightful. Some others I find peculiarly fascinating, like poking at a corpse to see how it decomposes. *grin* Sorry, must be the September in the air that's making me expectionally morbid today. But please, read the poem below and let it seep in a bit. I'd be interested to hear what y'all think. Current Personality: thoughtful and mind-wander-y"*

Crafted for a DeadJournal audience that often builds community through morbid humor, this post finds a reason to *grin* in response to Plath's scene of death and rebirth. Here, "Lady Lazarus" is given to a DeadJournal audience, typed out to them in a separate post with the above framing, as an opportunity to figuratively poke a decomposing corpse and let the language "seep in a bit." In the damp, campy graveyard of DeadJournal, this poetry criticism builds community with other bloggers through a description of death's squishiness. The poem's scene of decomposition ("the eye pits...The sour breath...the flesh/The grave cave ate") is an opportunity for inventive composition. The body in the poem resembles the poem itself, decayed and full of openings.

Several months later, on January 5-7, 2004, SylviaAnne reflects on rejecting the advice of her doctor (presumably a psychiatrist), which is: to stop reading Plath:

> *So, my doctor ordered me to stop reading Sylvia Plath. I guess she's afraid it will make me suicidal. But I believe that suicide is more like a gene, or a seed- you have it or you don't, and if you do, you carry it around inside you all the time. It is interesting to note, though, that just about all of my literary role models committed suicide, or at least died young. I guess I can see why she's worried. *chuckle* …. Current Personality: melancholy | Current Reading: the book my dr. ordered me to stop reading...*

This post provides a more intimate view of a life with "Lady Lazarus." Ignacio Siles says blogs provide access to "the narratives through which individuals give a public account of their lives," and here, SylviaAnne provides a diary entry that relays a visit to a doctor that included a recommendation to stop reading Plath. This refusal to comply with medical-poetic advice, indicated in "Current Reading: *the book my dr. ordered me to stop reading…*" is a rebellion not only to medical advice, but moreover a refusal to accept a misreading of Sylvia Plath. Plath does not sow what was not already there—in other words, suicide does not result from poetic fandom and poetic scholarship. Importantly, SylviaAnne avoids clarifying her relationship with suicide or suicidal ideation here. Plath's poetry offers SylviaAnne not only an important connection to a DeadJournal community, but also a means of exploring her own mental wellness in relation to poetics. On this blog, the nexus of virtuality and death produces a community who reads and responds to these posts. Even though blogs like SylviaAnne's DeadJournal allow for only a narrow scope of making when compared to personal home pages, they nonetheless signal how young people implicated poetry into the new world of personal, public-facing, and networked blogging during the era.

Active 2003-2005 on LiveJournal, user Lady_Lazarus1, whose listed name is Lady Lazarus, deeply customizes her blog. Other posts indicate that Lady Lazarus is female, newly Buddhist, and a psychology major at Carroll College in Montana.[xiv] The posts have been customized to feature electric blue font on a black background, making posts very difficult to view. In terms of her blog design, Lady Lazarus took advantage of LiveJournal's option to customize even the page navigation language. For instance, the button that

normally reads, “view earlier posts” is here, “Put the candle back!” (alluding to a Mel Brooks film); instead of “forward” it is “oblivion” (the title of a poem that she wrote); the home button is “spirit is a bone” (alluding to Hegelian phrenology); the hyperlinked phrase “catholic purgatory” links to carroll.edu, homepage of her Catholic alma mater. Her biography section contains an excerpt of Plath’s poem: “Dying/is an art…” A post on March 18, 2004 (link: lady-lazarus1.livejournal.com/8336.html) reprints the full text of the eponymous “Lady Lazarus,” below a short message: “sometimes you need someone else's words to say it for you.....” Below the poem is an icon of Sally from *The Nightmare Before Christmas* with the text: “Current Mood: melancholy.” Below this, a comment from a user, whose username is “þenance_” (also listed in “friendsies”), reads: “she obviously needed a bucket of bon bons.” A day later, Lady Lazarus replies: “....the poor man's Prozac!” This final comment is dated March 19, 2004. Web user Lady Lazarus’ suggestion that the poem can “say it for you” expresses the opinion that poetry functions as a proxy communicator or messenger, and by leaving the referent open (“it”), readers are left guessing as to the possible referents of Lady Lazarus’ reflection. The brief exchange between Lady Lazarus and her blog community shows that darkness has a different currency on LiveJournal than it does on DeadJournal. The user þenance_ responds cheekily—the suffering of the character in “Lady Lazarus” obviously won’t disappear with bon bons, and this user invokes the image of a chocolate-crazed mid-century housewife. Going in for a joke that criticizes gender stereotypes and makes space for thinking about mental health treatment, both Lady Lazarus and þenance_ (her network) see the poem as an entry point for a poetry criticism that is impressionistic, historical, and networked.

A second DeadJournal blogger, Christo has a blog linked from their home page, "Lady Lazarus' Blood Bath," mentioned above. Christo created this blog after creating the home page. Here, Christo clarifies their performance of identity, and the format suggests that the blog is a space for sharing private details. The blog resembles confessional poetry—unlike UseNet, which is centered on community or topic, and unlike home pages, which are centered on making, blogs are designed to provide brief reflection spaces and updates for a public audience. Christo addresses a post thus: "I was reading some people's commens on Sylvia Plath's poem "Lady Lazarus" (which is a poem I really like and got one of my nicknames from), and thought the following posted comment was interesting." Christo implies a specific audience in this message. Exploring Christo' page, I failed to find one comment despite 300-400 updates between December 2002 and May 2005 on their years at Auburn University in Alabama, their father's chemothererapy, raunchy personality quizzes. I'd like to say they write for themself, but Christo often asks for comments. Yet from another view, Christo's carefully sustained efforts to produce a record of the heart push back on expectations of a public readership that hamper so many bloggers. For instance, in 2004, *The New York Times* interviewed a lapsed blogger in the article, "When the Thrill of Blogging is Gone: "The Internet is different now," who said over a cup of tea in Midtown. "I was too Web 1.0. You want to be anonymous, you want to write, like, long entries, and no one wants to read that stuff." Most blogs have extremely limited readerships, and if blogs structure participation that is only valid to the extent it receives approval by a broad general public, they limit the possibilities of making in response to culture. Christo demonstrates a sustained commitment to blogging for oneself, and Lady

Lazarus provides numerous opportunities to return, again and again, to a virtual space of identity formation and self-expression.

conclusion to chapter 3: poetry in a dead web

Is the internet dead?

Hito Steyerl, *Too Much World,* 2013

And what does Plath mean, so multiplicitously, by dying?

Lucy, "Death and Plath," 1999

From where I write in 2021, poetry happens primarily online. Individual poems are anthologized by nonprofit organizations (chapter 2) and performances are made freely viewable on YouTube (chapter 1), essays are peer reviewed on shared Google Docs, poetry e-books are digitally checked out from libraries, and daily poems arrive in email inboxes. As I mentioned in other chapters, scholars need to more fully embrace the reality that online environments represent the most common locations of poetic culture. The present web hardly resembles the "Web 1.0" explored in this chapter. In contrast to the era of slow connection, textual media, and home-spun, interest-based communities, we hardly know the difference between being connected and not.

In a 2013 essay, video artist Hito Steyerl asks us to consider what might come of our unawareness of being online. Steyerl's essay questions if the internet were already dead. She asks this question not believing it is past, but as a way to assert that the internet is so completely continuous with 21st century modes of existence as to no longer constitute a realm apart. The internet as a space apart is indeed dead. Steyerl notes, "It is all over,"

connecting the internet's omnipresence to its passing. The internet has phased out of our consciousness by becoming like air. We are overly engrained in circulation routes that speed faster toward an ever more surveilled and commodified future. Because of this, the essay warns ominously of a death culture that will come as a result of the internet. On the other hand, Steyerl dreams of and actively seeks "circumventing and bypassing corporate friendship and hardware monopolies." She seeks to use the internet to disrupt the future that seems most likely:

> Never before have more people been dependent on, embedded into, surveilled by, and exploited by the web. It seems overwhelming, bedazzling and without immediate alternative. The internet is probably not dead. It has rather gone all-out. Or more precisely: it is all over!

Today, poems move easily, but online infrastructure makes commodification and surveillance difficult to escape. As I explore poetic culture today, I find targeted ads in my inbox and on YouTube, my user data collected as I browse online anthologies, and facial recognition software pre-installed on my devices.

Attending to archived vernacular poetry criticism on Web 1.0 bears much fruit, and one major consequence of this discussion is to demonstrate that vernacular poetic culture can look different—indeed, it looked and moved very differently as it proliferated prior to our present web of commodification and circulation. Even as its environments have always been flawed and enabled various forms of abuse and bullying, where White male identities were often centered, earlier forms of the web connected people in self-organized communities that emphasized disparate and diffused making and affective bonding. Of the three environments studied in this chapter, home pages especially enable deep making

(hand-coded web pages) that created networks independent of marketing and commercialism. Users would frequently create hyperlinks to one another's pages to give credit or to point online Plath readers to more resources. This represents an important historical precedent for democratically sharing and creating vernacular poetic culture online. We need to recognize that online poetic culture can look different and that users have a voice in the infrastructure of sharing.

In addition, vernacular criticism may also help point online poetic culture forward by showing the forms of life that emerge after death. This chapter shows how poetic afterlife became a seed for community. Like its title character, the poem, "Lady Lazarus" provides an image of death that summons a crowd, and its wide circulation on Web 1.0 brought people together in critical performances on UseNet, home pages, and Blogs. People came into new forms of being online that felt like rebirth, and the avatars, profiles, and usernames model online identity after the Sylvia Plath's poem as a deathly, fierce, sophisticated presence. Users, especially young women, found resources in Plath's "Lady Lazarus." Many sought a kind of poetic afterlife by connecting their experiences to Lady Lazarus, rebranding their online selves after Plath's revenant character. During Web 1.0, online poetic afterlife is entwined in identity formation and community building, and the forms that identity and community take are indelibly shaped by specific web environments.

Increasingly networked, surveilled, and globally visible forms of participation have flattened what today's web users can do to craft poetic community, even as access to poetic resources has never been higher. As the internet of 2021 creates massive amounts of wealth for the very few and increasingly commodifies daily life, we move toward a kind of death, but it is not a final one. Lucy and many other Web 1.0 users found resources in "Lady

Lazarus" in the face of death, because the poem connects the death of an old self to the birth of fierce new selves. As we move toward death in late digital capitalism, we can revisit the work of vernacular critics to imagine futures—death has meanings that are "multiplicitous," and death can build community around a poem.

conclusion

This dissertation emphasizes identity and community because these are important scholarly elements in the vernacular poetry criticism of the 1990s. Yet, as I have moved through three chapters, my discussion has hardly attended to my own identity and scholarly positionality as an investigator of poetic archives. As I conclude this project, I will briefly review what brought me here in order to emphasize the directions that I hope my project will support.

I first became a student of poetry during high school in the mid-2000s, but it was when I was an undergraduate in the late 2000s and early 2010s that I first became meaningfully invested in writing about (and performing, editing, and composing) poetry. I remember watching poetry events hosted at the campus coffee shop as I worked long, unbusy shifts as a barista. I grew friendly with several campus poets and, when a poetry magazine sprung up, I submitted poems and soon became assistant editor. In the course of a few months, poetry became my thing, and I helped to organize and lead a number of poetry workshops and readings. I felt an irrepressible sense of connection, history, and relevance to the work we, a loose collective, were doing, although it never felt like work. I now understand this moment of transition as one that marks not only when poetry began to matter, but also when I shifted from seeing myself as a student of poetry to being a poetry scholar. In my remembering, I did not become a scholar when I received a degree or when I first published a piece of writing. Instead, I started becoming a scholar the moment I found community in poetry and contributed to this community. When experienced through

a deeply interpersonal and peer-led environment, poetry lit me up, and this in turn illuminated my subsequent work in humanities classrooms as a student and teacher. After finding a poetry community, classrooms provided a means of continuing and expanding the resources and relationships I located in community, even though the initial relationships all but disappeared after I graduated from college. Those undergraduate peers and classrooms partly brought me here, to the PhD in English, where I have found resources to develop relationships and teaching practices based in publics and communities.

The other experience that brought me here was when, eighteen months after college graduation, I became employed part-time at a creative writing nonprofit and organized poetry programming for Seattle youth, creating workshops, after school tutoring, and in-school projects. I spent several days per week introducing young people to one another through poetry, alongside other creative programming. Poetry became a touchstone for creative communities that were sprouting within a neighborhood and city. For one project, I helped middle school students interview nearby employees and passersby for a collaborative neighborhood poem; for another, our young people created found poetry through internet research; for another, young people wrote and performed poem-inspired songs and rap lyrics for a weekend workshop. Frequent open mics, hosted at a neighboring bookstore, hosted anywhere from one to thirty community guests who witnessed student performances of poems and songs. These events sought to connect young people to one another and may have helped them experience their neighborhood anew—as a place of belonging and supportive relationship that valued youth voice and poetry. This learning around poetry was important to youth development and leadership, and at the same time,

it often had nothing to do with classrooms or curricular standards. As a feature of community, poetry seemed to me capable of just about anything.

As a doctoral student, I investigated poetry education history as my PhD exams approached. With the help of my adviser, I came to a crucial *aha* moment as I remembered what I learned—that I have lived a connection between scholarship and community, and that I have worked in a poetic community that exceeds academia. My project's focus on nonacademic poetry criticism comes out of these experiences and from the recognition that I did not really see this topic being addressed in the academic study of poetry, which is: to frame what has elsewhere been called everyday poetry reading (Mike Chasar) or vernacular literary consumption (Jenkins) *as scholarship*, and then to see where it might take me.

I struggled to find academic voices from the 1990s who sought to locate community-based humanities discourse such as the study of poetry in relation to the poetry academy (one exception I have not explored in this project is the Favorite Poem Project by former US Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky). In the 1990s, many sought to reform academia into an increasingly community-connected practice, but scholarly participation was nonetheless being defined hierarchically in relation to nonacademic people. In the introduction, I suggested that in the 1990s academy we see movement away from the understanding nonacademic people only as students or potential students, but also a considering them also as audiences (or potential audiences) of written academic work. Yet this does very little to resolve a participatory dilemma, where it is only academic scholars who formulate responses to poems in situations that matter.

This dissertation puts in focus examples from different kinds of poetic archives—beginning with spoken word stages, into zines, and across Web 1.0 spaces—and it offers glimpses of nonacademic poetry criticism that was practiced with a connection to identity and community between 1990 and 2005. I found that researching in unprestigious places that are nearly 30 years old, and in some cases older, presents unique challenges. What is left, for instance, of the VHS record of local slam stages? Armed with, in general, very little or merely gleaned context, I often relied on my ability to re-imagine scenarios where vernacular criticism happened. However, I also found that writing about these spaces offers a way to preserve them—my screenshots, descriptions, and analyses are a form of continuity as well as transformation. In some ways, my goals of transformation are obvious in framing textual performances as scholarship. Yet I also try whenever possible to allow vernacular scholars to speak instead of speaking for them, an effort to keep their frames of analysis alive. I also found, as I reached out for more materials, that at several points I had my light for poetry re-lit when scholars, activists, librarians, and poets who were active in the 1990s welcomed me into their enduring communities as guests. Sending out a few cold email requests to individuals (including Bob Holman, Susan Somers-Willett, and Danny Solis), I was met with an abundant generosity and bear witness to poetic bonds that lasted decades. The saved email addresses and old phone numbers, and moreover these interpersonal relationships through poetry helped move this project forward.

My approach to organizing this project shifted after I gathered materials, and the ordering of environments is not rooted in a hierarchy or progression—for instance, beginning with spoken word orality, moving into zine textuality, and culminating in a web-based ordering of poetic cultures. I have provided accounts that I hope will complicate

approaches to culture that nominate textual culture as more advanced than oral culture, and that recognize the complex, mediated textuality and intellectualism in performing spoken word. Rather, I organize these chapters around the practices of identity that emerge in nonacademic poetic scholarship. In spoken word, poetry performance becomes tied to the identities that poets bring on stage, necessarily in relation to race, gender, and other identities. Who performs the poem matters in ways that shape the audience response to, and content of, the criticism of a poem. Whereas embodiment and identity matter in all three environments I explore in this dissertation, in spoken word, identity is visible on stages. In zines, identity becomes a component of confessional textual making, and in digital web space, identities are formed in relation to poetry.

These archives have not been visited much, or at all, by other poetry scholars. This is especially true of the zines and Web environments I researched in. In addition to being one of the first to consider the value of these places in relation to poetry scholarship, the way I approach and frame my archive also sends up flares that I hope will illuminate new (or more modestly, a tweaked and modified) directions for historical poetics research. I emphasize the formation of identity, interpersonal relationship, and community in historical and constantly evolving environments. Spoken word, zines, and Web 1.0 all have distinct histories and textual norms that shape the kinds of community that were being built, and in turn impact the poetry scholarship and criticism that happen there. While far from comprehensive in my selection and coverage of environments where poetry scholarship happened between 1990 and 2005, this project nonetheless brings new kinds of attention to the historical developments of spoken word, zines, and Web 1.0 as spaces for the creation and exchange of poetry scholarship.

In this project I choose to pick up a participatory framework developed first by Henry Jenkins in the early 1990s. I also found inspiration in the scholarship of Fred Moten and Mike Chasar. These writers each provide unique ways of framing the value of nonacademic intellectual practices (respectively: fan cultures, vernacular study, and poetry usage) that help me connect across instances of vernacular poetry scholarship. Jenkins proved most valuable in my analysis of zines, where youth zinesters commonly cut or tear media from magazines and books to create and distribute objects. The destruction of pedagogical anthologies like the Norton in order to make tactical print media represents an enduring zine practice. Moten and Chasar provided more of a directive to pay close attention to the particulars of engagement rather than impose an academic theory of cultural use.

Vernacular theorists add to these ways of thinking about nonacademic intellectual culture. Zines, for instance, can be understood as a space of productive vandalism, and not only as tactical theft. Zinesters defer questions of ownership that Jenkins and de Certeau rely on—who can be said to *own* Langston Hughes criticism is not as important as how Hughes' poem becomes useful to the queer youth of Color who create zine collages with it. Vandalizing poetic culture is to make use of it and in the process, to leave traces of use, such as in tearing out a poem and pasting it to a collage, or snipping fragments (lines and words) from a poem. In Web 1.0, as Dina and a dozen other vernacular Plath scholars show, users enter a space where death becomes useful to new online identities. "Lady Lazarus" invites Web 1.0 users to consider ways that death can bring forms of transformation and even community. Web users connected to the text of the poem and were reborn in online poetic identity. Many of them thrived in digital environments that were sometimes

misogynistic and sometimes unresponsive. In addition, this dissertation finds that spoken word is a site of important historical poetry scholarship. What spoken word poet Lemon Andersen frames as the act of interpolating scholarship through embodied performance helps me to explore covering and sampling practices in slam and spoken word. Audiences are part of the record of this scholarship because poets compose a given performance for local contexts and because the archived records of scholarly performances are run through with audience noise and energy. I show how poets position their identities in relation to poetic performance in order to establish lineages between scenes, poems, and communities of poetry.

Yet, it is still pretty difficult for me to imagine academia seriously incorporating zines, Web 1.0 spaces, or even spoken word pieces into a history of poetry scholarship. In some ways we are not ready for the barriers to fall, as Guy LeCharles Gonzalez says in performance at the 1999 National Poetry Slam. I hope that this dissertation contributes to a growing sense of the importance of Web-based humanities, of zines' importance subcultural histories and textual politics, and of the radical aesthetics of spoken word performance. In the future academy, vernacular intellectuals will, I hope, help to lead us forward.

In conclusion, I seek to move toward better supporting different forms of poetic community (such as in neighborhood-based nonprofits, in university literature classrooms, in managing literary programs, and participating in scholarly communities) and better recognizing the importance of vernacular scholarship across historical moments and types of engagement. Even though I do not approach my archives as a spoken word poet, a zinester, or a poetry web maker, I feel connected to the work of my interlocutors as a

member of communities of poetry. In fact, the way I understand my position in poetic culture has not shifted all that much since 2011, when I worked as a barista who helped oversee the campus poetry venue. As a 20-year-old poetry fan, I came to feel most at home not when I was on stage, but rather, when in a position that allows me to take it all in—and more importantly, where I can enable others to feel comfortable in poetry community. Take a seat, have a macchiato, and let me show you the ropes.

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Notes:

[i] I am a graduate student supported by a public research university that is located on unceded territory inhabited by Native peoples who identify as the Duwamish, Suquamish, Snoqualmie, and Puyallup, as well as the tribes of the Muckleshoot, Tulalip, other Coast Salish peoples, and their descendants. I recognize that the work I do from this university and online has material effects on the Indigenous people on whose land I am a guest. My home, classrooms, offices, and the servers I use for this project are each on Native land. I am grateful to live and work as a guest on these lands with the Coast Salish and other Native people who call these areas home.

[ii] While there is no shortage of spoken word lamentations written in the past decade, two important moments are Adam Plunkett's 2013 review of Patricia Lockwood for The New Yorker, which criticizes the slam legacy that had suddenly, and irrevocably, moved online to occasionally go viral. Plunkett reinscribes the opposition between poetic quality and poetic access, writing that "crowd-pleasing poetry" appeals to the "lowest common denominator" of digital readers. Rebecca Mead, while not critiquing specifically slam or spoken word, characterizes a new generation of popular, spoken word-adjacent "Insta poets" (many of them female of Color) as a "rejection of craft."

[iii] Matthew Reason marks the beginning of the liveness debate with Eugenio Barba in 1992 (19).

[iv] [iv]Olympia Zine Library does not provide a date for this zine, nor was it postmarked. This range of 1997-99 is based on references *Volcano Girls* makes to "8 Arms to Hold You," a Veruca Salt album released in 1997. The track, "Volcano Girls," was featured in the 1999 film *Jawbreaker*.

[v] Accessed 12/02/01, this ranking remains consistent in 2002. See: https://web.archive.org/web/20011109212655/http://members.yahoo.com/interests/Poets-1600020083

[vi] In this chapter I use the terms "web," "internet," and "online," and these terms are not interchangeable in practice. The internet is a *network* structure that precedes the web. The web is *information* found on pages, typically located through web browsing. Online refers to a status of connection *to* the web, *through* the internet.

[vii] New York Times film critic A.O. Scott criticizes the "skimpy use of Plath's own words." IMDB message boards take up a similar question: "I think the major thing people are overlooking is the fact that they wanted to use more poetry in the movie but were denied access. Therefore, they had to make very good use of the 'Fair Use' legal loophole in order to get some of Plath's work in there." http://web.archive.org/web/20170211055526/http:/www.imdb.com/web/20170211050312/http:/www.imdb.com/title/tt0325055/board/thread/34057307

[viii] The UseNet postings related to "Lady Lazarus" that I found are all publicly available on Google Groups, which has archived much of UseNet following its acquisition of the DejaNews UseNet provider in 2001. My search spans 1992 to 1996 and marks the before and after points for paid ISP access and web browsing, which enables a graphical interface instead of a textual one. DejaNews innovated Newsgroup access with web browser access and a search feature.

[ix] UseNet organizes by topic through hierarchies. By 1999, there were thousands of top-level hierarchies in use across the Usenet, and thousands of lower level hierarchies. Of the top-level hierarchies with more than 100 newsgroups in 1999, “alt” had almost 6 times as many newsgroups the second (alt had 9234 to fido7’s 1618), according to livinginternet.com (https://www.livinginternet.com/u/uw_hier.htm). Communicative acts happen within a hierarchy of groups and typically reference the topic announced at the beginning of a thread.

[x] https://groups.google.com/forum/#!searchin/alt.angst/plath%7Csort:date/alt.angst/83G6eDN4Pwo/ZBpeMOjEvlMJ

[xi] http://www.sites.google.com/uw.edu/ladylazarus

[xii] Jeff Howe (2005) coined “crowdsourcing” in *Wired.* A concept hinging on outsourcing labor through an “open call” to an “undefined” group of users; “From the people formerly known as the audience” (2).

[xiii] Xanga is today inaccessible, but usernames are publicly available in a txt file. Searching through these, I found 35 usernames with references to Plath’s poem, among many possible ones: Being_Lady_Lazarus; iladylazarus; Lady-lazarus86; lady86lazarus; LadyLazarus3642; ladylazarus88; lazaruslady; lady_lazarus; lady_ _lazarus; ladylazarus00; LadyLazarus3642; ladylazarus88; lazaruslady; lordlazarus.

[xiv] In LiveJournal, a listed name like “Lady Lazarus” is non-exclusive, as opposed to the necessarily unique designation (ie “Lady_Lazarus1”)