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Poetry matters: Radical politics in postmodern American poetry

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POETRY MATTERS: RADICAL POLITICS IN POSTMODERN AMERICAN

POETRY

by

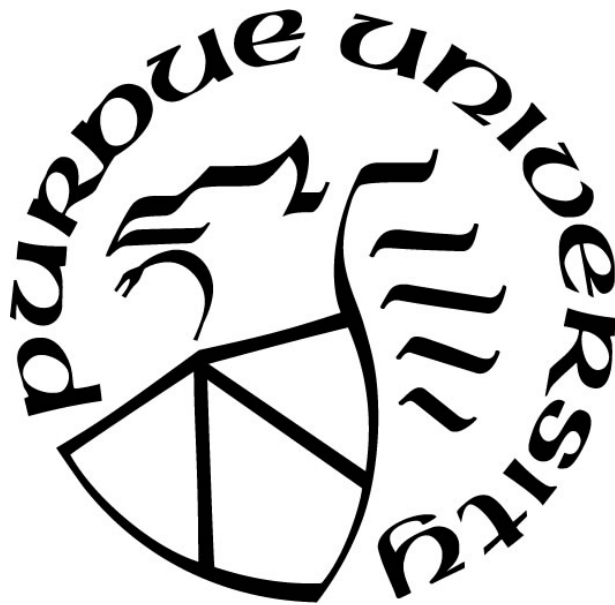
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A Dissertation

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For Neil and Louise

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ABSTRACT

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Directly or indirectly, poetry produced in the postmodern era is implicated in the politics of the time. Postmodern American poetry, then, is not reducible to a single poetic mode or to a specific set of stylistic features. In other words, a more comprehensive understanding of postmodern American poetry can be made by employing a flexible version of Raymond Williams' notion of uneven development, a theory that insists on the synchronic existence of dominant, residual, and emergent cultural elements. As the stylistically and politically diverse work of the six poets—Susan Howe, Robert Grenier, Gary Snyder, A.R. Ammons, Sherman Alexie, and Kenneth Goldsmith—examined in this dissertation illustrates, postmodernism is a period in which multiple modes or versions of postmodern poetry exist and flourish.

INTRODUCTION

Postmodern poetry, to appropriate a phrase from Linda Hutcheon, “cannot but be political” (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 3). Perhaps a poem flows with postmodernism, perhaps it fights against it, perhaps it attempts to ignore it, or maybe it evidences a combination or even a potentially contradictory mixture of these positions. Regardless, poetry produced in the postmodern era is implicated, directly or indirectly, in the politics of the time. In this sense, postmodern American poetry is not reducible to a single poetic mode or to a specific set of stylistically experimental features, as many critics have claimed. Instead, as the diverse work of the six poets examined in this dissertation illustrates, postmodernism is a period in which multiple modes or versions of postmodern poetry exist and flourish within a culturally dominated system. In other words, I argue that a more comprehensive understanding of much postmodern poetry can be made by utilizing a flexible version of Raymond Williams’ notion of uneven development, a theory that insists on the synchronic existence of dominant, residual, and emergent cultural elements.

As I argue in the first chapter, postmodernism is not dead. In fact, it is a distinct and ongoing historical period, increasing and intensifying like a wave moving toward a shore. A kind of energy, a process, it changes, crashes, and reforms. Recognition of its continued existence generates the ability to understand its influence, including its influence on poetry and the critical view of that poetry. As Douglas Kellner notes in “Reappraising the Postmodern: Novelties, Mapping, and Historical Narratives,” postmodernism engenders a “critical theory of the contemporary moment” that is

“transdisciplinary and multiperspectivist” (123). Historically, however, poetic scholarship has been resistant to this concept, a fact reflected in traditional forms of literary criticism, literary histories, and, less directly, in poetry anthologies. This resistance is also historically tied to a conception of poetry as a politically inert art and to a construction of literary merit that values aesthetics over politics. This complex but nonetheless definable history, which I discuss at length in the first chapter, helps to explain numerous constructions of postmodern American poetry in purely aesthetic terms, most often as an experimental style. Altering this view, I argue for a broader and more flexible understanding of postmodern poetry, one that construes it as part of an historical period. Such an understanding not only accounts for the proliferation of diverse styles during the postmodern era but also creates space for a closer examination of poetry’s relationship to the dominant culture.

In short, the first and remaining chapters constitute a kind of guide to walking the uneven and politically enmeshed landscape of postmodern American poetry, a term itself that is filled with numerous contradictions. Its various chapters represent examinations of *some* of the directions of postmodern American poetry over the past 70 or so years, along with their attendant politics. There is also a kind of periodizing in the author selections, beginning with Language Writing and the poetry of Robert Grenier and Susan Howe, whose work, along with the movement as a whole, significantly challenged the collusive efforts of publishers, universities, critics, and other institutions in their manufacturing and maintenance of a dominant aesthetic. In addition, Language Poetry also offered a symptomatic expression of a need to challenge the commodification and ownership of language by the dominant culture, particularly by corporations, media, and the purveyors

of history. Despite its current and inevitable incorporation and dilution, its varied poetics, historically speaking, still represent a largely oppositional and therefore emergent postmodern poetic practice.

Considering that discussions of postmodern poetry are often limited to an examination of literary style, the third chapter is devoted to the work of Gary Snyder and A.R. Ammons, poets who are only selectively labeled as postmodern as a consequence of their association with the institutionally dominant aesthetic mode. However, careful consideration of the politics of their work reveals that both poets simultaneously engage with residual elements of the culture as well as various emergent postmodern social movements, especially those with origins in the anti-authoritarian politics of the 1960s, particularly deep ecology. In other words, despite writing in an aesthetic mode that is not typically considered postmodern and engaging in a complex politics that stands in direct opposition to the values of the larger culture, the transdisciplinary and heteroglossic work of these poets is undoubtedly postmodern.

The final chapter, which takes up the work of Sherman Alexie and Kenneth Goldsmith, is representative of yet another direction in the history of postmodern American poetry and poetics. Both poets engage with culturally dominant forms, although in radically different fashions, and both challenge the institutionally dominant aesthetic mode. Alexie, for example, through the postmodern practice of parody and politicized pastiche, engages and challenges multiple poetic modes as well as the inherited values of domination and colonization. Goldsmith's work, on the other hand, is intimately tied to an emergent technoculture and the reality of inundation and excess. Adopting a primarily conceptual practice, his aesthetics and politics are framed as a

response to this postmodern condition. Finally, both Alexie and Goldsmith inspire reflection on the history of cultural and institutional privilege and exclusion, although Goldsmith, unlike Alexie, does so unwittingly.

CHAPTER 1. TOWARD A THEORY OF POSTMODERNITY IN AMERICAN POETRY

It is not possible to write *the* history of contemporary American poetry, though it is, of course, worthwhile to attempt to historicize the present.

--Hank Lazer, *Opposing Poetries*

In recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in postmodernism, challenging numerous reports of its death. As the entry on postmodernism in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* reads, “The definition and history of postmodernism have both been highly contested; postmodernism was declared dead shortly after it came into being, yet it appears to be still with us” (Hutcheon et al. 1095). In *Literary Criticism in the 21st Century* (2014), Vincent Leitch notes, “I’ve been surprised to see a spate of books and articles on postmodernism published in the second decade of the twenty-first century” (121). He goes on to say, “Following its highpoint in the 1990s, marked by the publication of Fredric Jameson’s landmark book, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), interest in this topic has gradually waned only to come back now. It’s a question of survivance” (121). Following the return, Leitch provides an account and critique of several recent texts on the concept, while also offering a brief history of its use, arguing that “we still reside in the postmodern era with no end in sight” (121), although he insists that clearer definitions and descriptions of the “distinct phases” (122) of the period are needed. To that end, he charts four turning points, beginning with 1973 and the “establishment of a new global monetary regime of floating currencies marking a shift away from Keynesian Welfare

State economics” (122). In addition, he isolates the “dissolution of the USSR” in 1989, the “onset of Empire’s endless global war on terror” in 2001, and a fourth phase, beginning in 2011, “characterized by growing demands for political freedom, social justice, and economic fairness” (122). As for the latest phase, Leitch draws attention to its numerous Occupy movements, and although not specifically noted, Black Lives Matter, WikiLeaks, and Anonymous serve as important examples as well, despite that the latter two movements were founded in earlier moments. In addition, Leitch characterizes arguments about the end of postmodernism as an “unconvincing countercurrent troubled by the absence of anything to take its place” (124), and he contends that without postmodernism as a periodizing concept, “contemporary history appears haphazard, chaotic, and atomized” (122). He recognizes and acknowledges, of course, that the “term ‘postmodern’ has long been employed in three different yet overlapping ways—as a style, a philosophy or movement, and a period” (121). Nonetheless, the “period concept has long encompassed postmodern style and postmodern philosophy following Jameson’s widely accepted broad usage” (122). In other terms, as Jameson argues in *Postmodernism*, “If we do not achieve some general sense of a cultural dominant, then we fall back into a view of present history as sheer heterogeneity, random difference, a coexistence of a host of distinct forces whose effectivity is undecidable” (6). Distinct from other eras, the driving force of this “cultural dominant” is far from singular, though its reference point is decidedly economic.

In *Post-Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism*, Jeffrey Nealon extends Jameson’s argument while adopting his methods of inquiry and analysis. Echoing the language of Jameson’s famous text, he argues that “post-

postmodernism marks an intensification and mutation within postmodernism” (ix), since “capitalism itself is the thing that’s intensified most radically since Jameson began doing his work on postmodernism in the 1970s and ’80s” (x). Nealon’s nomenclature is questionable; an F5 tornado on the Fujita scale is still a tornado. His theory of intensification, however, is well-founded. Thinking of the economic collapse of 2008 and the slew of government bailouts that followed, Nealon writes, “Ultimately, these bailouts were not the abandonment of free-market ideology, but simply the other face of the privatized, free-market coin we’ve become so familiar with since the 1980s” (2). In particular, Nealon is thinking of the “now-ubiquitous ‘corporatization’ of large sectors of American life: welfare, media, public works, prisons, and education” (3). The transition from the economy and market demands of the ’80s is one of intensification rather than alteration, at least in a fundamental sense: “In the move from Fordism to post-Fordism and beyond, capital has become increasingly deterritorialized, floating flexibly free from production processes, and coming to rest more centrally in the orbit of symbolic exchange and information technologies” (20). Increases, intensifications, and concentrations of postmodern capitalist imperatives are readily apparent and distinctly observable in many areas of the culture: dissolving, merging, downsizing, outsourcing, corporatizing, privatizing, commodifying, globalizing, speculating, union busting. Valuing profit over social welfare, the current system of late capitalism, which might also be labeled finance capitalism or casino capitalism, “seeks primarily to saturate and deepen—intensify—its hold over existing markets, insofar as global capitalism . . . has run out of territories to conquer” (26). The exploitation and domination of markets, people, and the environment is now more common than ever, confirming Jameson’s

contention in the early 1990s that “this whole global, yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world: in this sense, as throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death, and terror” (*Postmodernism* 5). In this obvious way, postmodernism, as Nealon relates, is “not a thing of the past . . . precisely because it’s hard to understand today as anything other than an intensified version of yesterday” (8). Or, as Jameson notes in his postscript to a recent collection of essays on postmodernism, “[W]hatever the changes in nomenclature, we can be sure that the third stage of capitalism, as it is expressed in globalization and postmodernity alike, will still be with us for a bit longer” (*Postmodernism. What Moment?* 216).

The current intensification and expansion of the system of late capitalism is symptomatically reflected in many areas and institutions of postmodern American culture—a culture characterized by proliferation, inundation, and the dissolution of formerly distinct boundaries, both real and artificial. At the university, for example, the discrete definitions of academic disciplines no longer hold. Studying literature now entails studying history, philosophy, sociology, psychology, religion, linguistics, and various kinds of theory and cultural criticism, much of which goes in and out of fashion. Information is turned out and over at ever-increasing rates, as the new, in line with the logic of planned obsolescence, is increasingly valued. In addition, burdens of all kinds are concentrated and extended. Following the structure and imperatives of the larger corporate culture, presidents and administrators enjoy top-dollar salaries and generous benefit plans, endowments are treated as investment funds, students accrue almost unimaginable debt, academic departments undergo downsizing, reorganization, and

elimination, tenured faculty endure pay cuts and dwindling pensions, and, as Marc Bousquet relates in *How the University Works*, “undergraduate education is conducted by a superexploited corps of disposable workers” who often collect “wages and benefits inferior to those of fast-food clerks and bell-hops” (2-3). Despite resistance, these trends are increasing.

The cultural arts are no exception to the trends and standards of the dominant culture. In music, the proliferation of genres, sub-genres, and sub-sub-genres, each building up and expanding out into even more forms, and its rapid dissemination by a broad range of corporate online services, all of which grossly underpay artists, has created a condition of disaggregation and inundation that makes music, or even a single genre, simply unknowable. In the face of so much, maps and guides are needed. In addition, in this environment, music is experienced as a temporary stream; songs are favored over albums. Short-term enjoyment, the thrill and addictive quality of immediate consumption, is preferred. Connection is tenuous; obsolescence is both planned and inevitable. This, of course, says nothing of the music itself, which, as with many other cultural artifacts, pays little attention to history, tradition, labels, or aesthetic categories in its presentation of the “new.” Jameson’s insistence that “aesthetic production has become integrated into commodity production” and that the “frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods . . . assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation” (*Postmodernism* 4-5) now rings particularly true, as the transition from an economy of production to consumption appears nearly complete. Bolstered and emboldened by various kinds of digital outlets and media platforms, a similar argument could be made

about video, gaming, television, and film. Of course, the new is rarely new. Reproduction and recycling, forms of assemblage, are emblematic of the era, as the seemingly endless stream of film remakes and sequels demonstrates. In the case of much film, in fact, there is the real feeling that postmodernism really does have nowhere to turn but to the past.

Intensification, proliferation, concentration, disaggregation, dissolution, and inundation are terms that equally describe postmodern American poetry. In an entry on his influential poetry blog, Ron Silliman offers a short history and analysis of American poetry anthologies, insisting that Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry*, published in 1960, is "still the most successful volume in the genre." More importantly, he notes that when Allen published his now-classic anthology, he chose from a relatively small pool of poets: "It included 44 post-avant poets at a time when no contemporaneous account of the total number of publishing U.S. poets estimated more than 100. In hindsight, I think those estimates were low and that a more reasonable figure in 1960 would have been somewhere between 200 and 500, but certainly not more than that latter tally." He goes on to say, "A half century later, there are well over 10,000 poets publishing in English in the U.S., a sum that is at least 20 times—and conceivably 100 times—the number active when Allen pulled together his book." This is a staggering figure that provokes feelings of confusion, unease, and, as with other cultural industries, a general sense of the field as unknowable. Needless to say, some method of reading, of understanding, and, importantly, of contending with the sheer scale, a kind of map, guide, or theory, is needed. As Silliman relates, "[T]he field itself has become so large & diverse that new tools, and new levels of specificity, are required to make sense of it." This is unquestionably true. At the same time, without a larger guide or map that offers a general sense of the

institution of poetry as well as its diverse modes and tendencies, specificity, to appropriate Jameson, will undoubtedly engender a view of the current state of postmodern American poetry as “sheer heterogeneity, random difference, a coexistence of a host of distinct forces whose effectivity is undecidable” (*Postmodernism* 6).

In *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson insists that the “dominant cultural logic” of postmodernism is also the “force field in which very different kinds of cultural impulses—what Raymond Williams has usefully termed ‘residual’ and ‘emergent’ forms of cultural production—must make their way” (6). Development, in other terms, is uneven. As Vincent Leitch relates in *Literary Criticism in the 21st Century*, “[P]ostmodern times describe an eclectic postindustrial era of pluralism and disaggregation, of hybrids and fusions, accompanied unsurprisingly by nostalgia, currents, and backlashes” (122). Following Williams and Jameson, then, one method of charting the history and present condition of postmodern American poetry is through the general framework of the dominant, the residual, and the emergent—a postmodern map rooted in postmodern methods of analysis and historiography. This is not, of course, to suggest a blind devotion to Williams’ model or Jameson’s landmark text, as the following pages and chapters will make clear. Nonetheless, the logic of this specific methodology, which construes postmodernism as an era, requires both contextualization and examination.

With little question, literary history is a complex and uncertain affair. At the same time, there is a historical and cultural imperative to delineate moments of transition and to chart the various directions and manifestations such moments originate. This imperative is not without its complications, as literary histories are implicated in and

directed by a broad range of social, cultural, and academic politics, including theoretical affiliation. Literary histories, in this sense, can be defined not only for what they engage but also for what they leave out. Histories of American poetry and poetics bear out this premise. However, traditionally, these histories, under the pretense of a claim to textual immanence and “high” art, have been adept at concealing social, cultural, and academic biases. In other words, steeped in the politics of close reading and its naturally accompanying concept of literary value, texts such as David Perkins’ *A History of Modern Poetry* or Rosenthal and Gall’s *The Modern Poetic Sequence*, to use two classic examples in the history of American poetry criticism, occlude, subjugate, and marginalize, often on the basis of race and gender, in an attempt to establish a normative vision of American poetic history. And although operating on slightly different terms, Donald Allen’s *New American Poetry* might be considered here as well. Of the 44 poets included in his anthology, only four were women.

Despite the decline of the New Criticism in the 1970s, more recent literary histories of American poetry have similarly avoided addressing and evaluating important political and cultural questions, expressing, as Maria Damon frames it, an “anachronistic reluctance to speak of poetry in other than formal or thematic terms” (“Postliterary Poetry” 36). For example, Marjorie Perloff’s *Unoriginal Genius*, published in 2010, is clearly informed by postmodernism as a “cultural dominant,” to use Fredric Jameson’s term, but it nonetheless fails to move beyond a largely “artistic” exegesis of postmodern American poetry. In fact, much of the work on postmodernism and poetry, postmodern poetry, and the postmodern in poetry focuses almost exclusively on the aesthetic similarities and differences between modern and postmodern poetry. Needless to say, these similarities

and differences are important literary and historical considerations, but, as Carrie Noland insists in “Poetry at Stake: Blaise Cendrars, Cultural Studies, and the Future of Poetry in the Literature Classroom,” the model itself confirms the tendency of poetic scholarship to present poetry as “innately beyond the political, impervious to the pressures of its occasion, and thus ontological in the sense that its value is not subject to change” (41). Paul Hoover, Jonathan Holden, Jon Erickson, Eliot Weinberger, and Helen Vendler might be criticized along similar lines.¹ Unfortunately, the depoliticized positions of these literary critics and historians do not fairly account for American poetry in the postmodern period, an era in which all art, to quote Linda Hutcheon’s well-known claim, “cannot but be political” (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 3).

Hutcheon suggests that all art in the postmodern era is ideologically situated, that aesthetics, artistic content, and cultural politics no longer exist in discrete spaces—a suggestion that invariably raises important questions about the political *agency* of postmodern art. However, the undeniably ideological nature of postmodernism—extensively theorized by such cultural critics and postmodern theorists as Frederic Jameson, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, David Harvey, and Linda Hutcheon—

¹ See Paul Hoover, ed., *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology* (New York: Norton, 1994, 2013); Jonathan Holden, *Style and Authenticity in Postmodern Poetry* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1986); Jon Erickson, *The Fate of the Object: From Modern Object to Postmodern Sign in Performance, Art, and Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995); Eliot Weinberger, ed., *American Poetry Since 1950: Innovators and Outsiders* (New York: Marsilio, 1993); and Helen Vendler, *The Music of What Happens: Poems, Poets, Critics* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1985).

demands that both histories and interpretations of postmodern American poetry be informed by *both* aesthetics and politics, *both* text and context. This is not to say that postmodernism does not, in many instances, signify a dramatic alteration in poetic practice or poetic substance, as this is certainly the case. It is to say, however, that much literary criticism and many literary histories obfuscate the relationship between poetry and various kinds of politics, therefore limiting and narrowly defining the concept of literary value. Such neglect reflects a systemic and systematic attempt to maintain an idea of American poetry as a purely aesthetic practice, and one, therefore, free from political implication or political aspiration.

Postmodernism, however, is not simply a style or an aesthetic. It is essential, as Frederic Jameson insists, “to grasp postmodernism not as a style but as a cultural dominant: a conception which allows for the presence and coexistence of a range of very different, yet subordinate, features” (*Postmodernism* 4). This simultaneity of difference and subordination—a variation of Williams’ notion of the dominant, the residual, and the emergent—no doubt inspires Jameson to claim that not all “cultural production today is ‘postmodern’ in the broad sense I will be conferring on this term” (6). At the same time, Jameson’s conception of postmodernism as a cultural dominant establishes postmodernism as a “hegemonic norm” (6). To that end, Jameson implies that all cultural production in the postmodern era, beginning, for him, sometime in the middle to late 1950s, be assessed within “a general modification of culture itself with the social restructuring of late capitalism as a system” (62). Postmodern poetic production, then, following Jameson, is unavoidably imbued with and implicated in the politics of late-capitalist culture. Of course, these politics, as Jameson fails to make clear, are often

grounded and mediated by the politics of class, race, and gender, which does much to explain specific and general resistances to many of the dominant values of postmodern culture, most of which are intimately tied to the economic. In the context of postmodern American poetry, this raises a number of relevant and important questions and issues.

In the first case, this “modification of culture” suggests that poetic production in the postmodern era cannot be separated from larger cultural productions, including the artifacts of mass media, which results, of course, in the diminishment of poetry’s status as a “high” art. Postmodern poetic production is subject to the same laws of late capitalism—its wholesale commodification and participation in a new global economy—along with the rest of postmodern culture. Definitions and boundaries of all kinds fall apart. This collision and collapse of formerly opposed cultural spaces, produces, at least in the most symptomatic cases, reflective aesthetic practices and poetic content. In light of these practices, questions also begin to emerge about the political agency, if not exigency, of postmodern poetry, and, to be sure, postmodern art in general. However, while critics and theorists from Frederic Jameson to Jean Baudrillard seem to have little faith in the possibility of a politically viable and critically aware art, other critics and no doubt poets recognize an ideologically positioned attempt to produce a critical art from within the culture of late capitalism, from within, in short, the postmodern condition.

This brand of postmodern American poetry, perhaps still most adequately represented in Language Poetry, or Language Writing, a movement that began in the early 1970s and reached its zenith in the late 1980s, and which includes the varied work of such poets as Lyn Hejinian, Bob Perelman, Charles Bernstein, Susan Howe, Ron Silliman, Bruce Andrews, Carla Harryman, Hannah Weiner, and Robert Grenier, is what

I consider as a *primarily* emergent postmodern mode, a point I will return to later. At the same time, this mode is by no means limited to Language Poetry, as it most certainly includes the formally experimental and/or politically progressive work of such poets as Gary Snyder, A.R. Ammons, Sherman Alexie, John Ashbery, Amiri Baraka, Ted Berrigan, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, Wanda Coleman, Clark Coolidge, Jayne Cortez, Ed Dorn, Kathleen Fraser, Erica Hunt, June Jordan, Amy King, Tan Lin, Nathaniel Mackey, Frank O'Hara, Ron Padgett, Norman Pritchard, and Joan Retallack, to name some. Nonetheless, the self-consciously experimental style of Language Poetry—characterized by new and often alarming syntagmatic structures, an extreme visibility of artifice, a mixing of seemingly distinct discourses, a metrical procedurality based, for example, on chance, and an often nonexistent, nondetectable, or fragmented subject matter—attempts to legitimize a poetic theory and practice rooted in the lessons of postmodernism. Recognizing the inextricability of aesthetics and politics, such writing is also invested in a postmodern politics that questions the aesthetic and ideological legacy of modernism and its contemporary remnants along with its challenge to the obdurate consumer-based values of late capitalism.

Still, this raises the problem of where to place and how to historicize the poetry that doesn't "look" postmodern. The first and most obvious solution is to deny the relevance and effectiveness of the term to deal with the art. Such a solution, however, is unacceptable, for at least two reasons. In the first place, denying the relevance of postmodernism as a cultural dominant suggests that postmodern poetry lacks essential aesthetic, political, cultural, and ideological differences from modernism. Second, what remains in this view is simply a celebration of (or lament for) cultural plurality, of

heterogeneity and difference, a denial of cultural transition, and, perhaps, a conception of poetry as a politically inert art removed from the culture in which it was produced. Again, a more plausible explanation can be made by employing Raymond Williams' notion of uneven development, a theory which insists that, at any given historical moment, there are dominant, residual, and emergent cultural elements. Postmodern American poetry, in this sense, cannot be reduced to a set of stylistic features that might be freely adopted in service of creating a "postmodern" poem. Rather, as Williams' historical and cultural model implies, postmodernism is a period in which multiple modes or versions of postmodern poetry obtain and flourish.

Such a conception of the existence of different cultural forms within a culturally dominated system no doubt construes postmodernism as an era and not as a style. In addition, this conception of postmodern American poetry advances a postmodern historiography in favor of traditional literary and historiographic methods based primarily in textual and aesthetic models of interpretation. It also challenges the assumption that literary history alone is an adequate framework for exploring poetic value. As Christopher Beach argues, many literary histories of and works of criticism on postmodern American poetry—J.D. McClatchy's *White Paper: On Contemporary American Poetry*, Jonathan Holden's *The Fate of American Poetry*, Dana Gioia's *Can Poetry Matter?*, or Vernon Shetley's *After the Death of American Poetry: Poet and Audience in Contemporary America*, for example—operate within a "realm of 'high' or traditionally literary culture, leaving unexamined and unproblematized the significant relationship between poetry and other forms of culture and discourse" (*Poetic Culture* 15). In other words, traditional methods of historicizing poetry—whether explicitly in the

form of literary histories and literary criticism or indirectly in the form of poetry anthologies—leave out an investigation of political and cultural value. Often directed by taste, these normative-building and primarily textual and aesthetic-based historiographic models do not fairly account for the diversity or quality of postmodern American poetry. These points require elaboration.

For many decades, histories of postmodern American poetry have sanctioned a specific model of literary historiography, one that has functioned to exclude, occlude, marginalize, and omit on the basis of literary merit, a value typically presented as objective, disinterested, and unmediated by politics of any kind. Generally speaking, this model has been situated in an aesthetic-based logic—inherited from the New Critics—that insists on the supposedly inherent qualities of art. Harold Bloom, for instance, in “Criticism, Canon-Formation, and Prophecy: The Sorrows of Facticity,” contends that literary critics “can only confirm the self-canonization of the truly strong prophets and poets. What we cannot do is invent their canonization for them” (17). Here, Bloom presents a familiar line of historiographic logic, namely that poets establish themselves as part of the canon by virtue of their self-evident artistic excellence. Great poets and great poems, the argument suggests, simply exist, and the process of historicizing (and canonizing) is therefore ideologically innocent. Literary historiography, in this sense, is an apolitical practice that does little more than describe the aesthetic practices and literary products of the “truly strong prophets and poets.” Perhaps needless to say, Bloom positions himself outside of the history he is constructing, as a detached and nonpartisan observer. This move, a historical, theoretical, and political sleight of hand, is also evident in a number of other important critical texts.

In *The Music of What Happens: Poems, Poets, Critics*, Helen Vendler claims that poetic canons are created not by “governments, anthologists, publishers, editors, or professors, but by writers” (37). For Vendler, like Bloom, the canon is free from the literary taste, political will, and the influence of institutions, including literary critics. On the contrary, it is “composed of the writers that other writers admire, and have admired for generations” (37). In other words, Wallace Stevens’ admiration for John Keats explains, according to Vendler, why “those writers turn up in classrooms and anthologies” (37). Again, like Bloom, Vendler’s poet-based theory of canon formation is ostensibly apolitical but indirectly supports a model of literary historiography in which the critic exists outside or beyond the production of art, as a detached and unbiased observer. In the end, of course, this model of literary historiography is far from apolitical. As Alan Golding argues, such “institutionally well-placed” critics as Vendler employ their “canonizing power without acknowledging it” (*From Outlaw to Classic* 51).

Employing a model and line of logic similar to both Bloom and Vendler, Dave Smith, in *Local Assays: On Contemporary American Poetry*, contends that poems “exist in forms but poetry exists only in form, in the fused moment of language where we seem to behold the beauty and curve of life freed from the bondage of time, place, and effort” (89). Here, Smith, a passionate advocate for the creative writing workshop, offers a defense of poetry that openly dismisses postmodern interrogations of language, proposing, instead, an aesthetic model in which language provides direct access to an objective reality. In addition, poetry, for Smith, is archetypal, an essential and spiritual aesthetic manifestation unconstrained by history, politics, or culture; it is, according to this model, relatively static. Like Bloom and Vendler, Smith’s conception of poetry conceals an

implied model of literary historiography that essentializes aesthetics and textual interpretation in service of a broader and implied politics of literary merit, the formal consequences of which are exclusion, occlusion, marginalization, and omission. As Hank Lazer relates, “Smith seems to regard his position as an embattled one, threatened on one flank by experimental writing and on the other by an overdecorous formalism” (*Opposing Poetries* 10).

Given the long-standing dominance of this aesthetic-based interpretive model, it is also not surprising to see critics, historians, and anthologists openly denigrating forms of historiography that operate outside its boundaries, including its traditional conception of literary value. Eliot Weinberger, for instance, in the introduction to his anthology *American Poetry Since 1950: Innovators and Outsiders*, complains that those who attempt to construct the canon “according to gender and race should first consider how many poets genuinely qualify within these chronological limits” (xiii). In emphatic fashion, Weinberger insists that such “extra-literary categories” as “ethnic background and sexual preference” have taken academic and cultural precedence over “aesthetic beliefs and practices” (405). As odd as it might sound, he fashions his predominantly white and mostly male anthology as a corrective to what he labels as identity-based forms of literary history and literary criticism, a decidedly conservative political position that is very obviously invested in maintaining a narrow conception of American poetry and poetic practice.

In addition, this model of literary history, most often based on an academic protocol of textual and aesthetic differentiation, attempts to codify postmodernism, if it takes up the term at all, as little more than a reactionary period *style*. For instance, despite

her initial claim in *21st-Century Modernism* that discussions of twentieth- and twenty-first century poetry and poetics are dominated by “the tired dichotomy” (1) of modernism and postmodernism, Marjorie Perloff adopts a similar position in her attempt at tracing the “unfulfilled promise of the revolutionary poetic impulse” (5) of early modernism in postmodern poetic practice. In short, her historical analysis of the postmodern poetic landscape relies almost exclusively on a hermeneutics of reminiscence. For instance, in her discussion of Susan Howe’s *Thorow*, a highly politicized and clearly deconstructive rewriting of early American colonization, she locates the aesthetic significance of Howe’s use of sound-based meaning in the zaum poetics of Russian Futurist Velemir Khlebnikov: “The relation of sound to meaning . . . is thus reminiscent of Khlebnikov’s *zaum*, where the semantically unrelated ‘salt’ and ‘sun’ are linked by poetic fiat” (170). Other instances abound. In Charles Bernstein, she finds the unfulfilled promise of Eliot, and in Lyn Hejinian, she finds the poetics of Gertrude Stein. In sum, Perloff’s textual and aesthetic-based logic of reminiscence insists that any connection—in form, syntax, image, or theory—between a modernist poet or poem and a postmodern poet or poem is simply a reaction to or an extension of an early modernist impulse. Writers, in this sense, are largely unaffected by their social, cultural, or historical circumstance.

To be certain, this does much to explain Perloff’s overall resistance to and ultimate omission of the term “postmodern,” insisting, instead, that the term has “lost its momentum” (2) and that the “modern/postmodern divide has emerged as more apparent than real” (164). With little question, Perloff’s resistance to postmodernism as a concept is rooted in an aesthetic-based model of historical and literary progress as well as the notion of a stable lyric subject—a position seriously problematized if not rejected by the

very postmodern writers she discusses. What's more, her exclusion of the concept of postmodernism as a cultural dominant and, therefore, as a theory of social, historical, and cultural transition—an obvious divergence from such earlier texts as *Radical Artifice*—indirectly fashions an apolitical and ahistorical model of literary history that values text over context, content over form, and aesthetics over politics. As Frederic Jameson implies, historiographic models immersed in the politics of style often fail to take into account fundamental transformations in the nature of economic and cultural systems:

[E]ven if the constitutive features of postmodernism were identical with and coterminous to those of an older Modernism . . . the two phenomena would still remain utterly distinct in their meaning and social function, owing to the very different positioning of postmodernism in the economic system of late capital and, beyond that, to the transformation of the very sphere of culture in contemporary society. (*Postmodernism* 5)

In this sense, Perloff appears more as a guardian of the gate than a champion of the forward guard.

In *Differentials*, published in 2004, Perloff adopts an even more conservative position by advancing the New Critical politics of “close reading” (xiii) in response to theoretical and/or ideological evaluations of poetic texts that, for her, place the “literary work in a secondary position—a position where the poem tends to be no more than an example of X or a cultural symptom of Y” (262). As Christopher Nealon argues in *The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century*, Perloff’s work provides “a powerfully depoliticizing language for poetry in the 1980s and 1990s” (11). In fact, Perloff’s call for “close reading” might be seen as an early example of antitheory, that

“odd phalanx,” as Vincent Leitch relates, that has “a dozen or more contemporary . . . factions in North America and the United Kingdom” (*Literary Criticism in the 21st Century* 11). In short, her model of literary history is an extension of the style-based model employed by Bloom, Vendler, Smith, and Weinberger. Of course, it is by no means unique to Perloff.

In *The World's Hieroglyphic Beauty*, Peter Stitt insists that the “minority movement known as postmodernism” is a “rather specialized approach to the possibilities of literature” where “the spirits of play and parody are preeminent and in which the poet’s commitment is to the logic of the poem’s world rather than to the external truth of the world that surrounds him” (69). The implication here is obvious. Postmodern poetry is not, for example, a response to and engagement with the complex social and cultural politics of late capitalism. Instead, for Stitt, postmodern American poetry is simply an aesthetic emergence, a “specialized” and “minority movement,” a self-reflexive *style* in which the postmodern poet does little more than engage in an apolitical practice of “play” and “parody.” Aside from its valorization of aesthetic-based models of interpretation, Stitt’s definition of postmodernism also serves to tacitly establish an opposition between “experimental” and “mainstream” modes of poetic production, a commonly adopted position. In fact, this position is evident in one of the most frequently referenced texts on the topic, Paul Hoover’s *Postmodern American Poetry*, first published in 1994 and then significantly revised in 2013.

In both editions of *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*, Paul Hoover insists that postmodernism is the “historical period following World War II” (xxix). In addition, he insists, in the first edition, that “postmodernist poetry is the avant-

garde poetry of our time” (xxv), a claim that is slightly adjusted for the second edition, where he argues that the term postmodern “refers to avant-garde poetry by American poets from 1950 to the present” (xxix). Leaving aside the somewhat puzzling conflation of postmodernity and postmodernism, it is clear that Hoover is less concerned with cultural politics than he is with aesthetics, as his historiographic model isolates aesthetic alteration and innovation as the key historical markers of postmodernism. In Hoover’s terms, postmodernism, as he argues in both editions, “suggests an experimental approach to composition, as well as a worldview that sets itself apart from mainstream culture and the narcissism, sentimentality, and self-expressiveness of its life in writing” (xxix). In the second edition, he adds that postmodernism is “considered a reigning style, one that continues in the twenty-first century” (xxix). However, if postmodernism is synonymous with experimentation, then his historical designation—the “period following World War II”—is arbitrary and irrelevant. How, for example, does Hoover’s definition of postmodernism account for such writers as Sharon Olds, June Jordan, Michael Harper, Gary Snyder, A.R. Ammons, Nikki Giovanni, Wendell Berry, Maxine Kumin, Li-Young Lee, Anthony Hecht, Adrian Louis, Adrienne Rich, Joy Harjo, Robert Bly, Mark Strand, Sherwin Bitsui, Mary Oliver, Jane Kenyon, Jane Hirshfield, Rita Dove, Linda Hogan, Chitra Divakaruni, Louise Glück, Mark Doty, Maya Angelou, Mark Turcotte, Dana Gioia, or Jorie Graham, for example, poets whose “approach to composition” is often less than experimental but whose politics and poetic content are clearly implicated in the complexities of the postmodern era? Interestingly, of the poets mentioned here, Gary Snyder is, in fact, included in both editions of the anthology, though the selection of

poems is wholly at odds with Hoover's claims about experimentation, highlighting the problem with Hoover's historiographic method.

Understandably, Hoover's *Postmodern American Poetry*, like all anthologies, operates by a process of omission and exclusion. However, it does so in service of maintaining a narrow understanding of postmodern American poetry. In other words, "mainstream" poetry, or, more specifically, poetry invested in the first-person lyric and lyric subjectivity, is summarily dismissed on the grounds of its dominance. As Hoover notes in the second edition, "These new poetics tend to work in opposition to the motives of mid-twentieth century romanticism, which served as the dominant model from 1950 to 1990" (xxxix). Hoover offers no explanation for his choice of 1990 as the end date for the self-expressive lyric. In addition, his notion of ideology, despite its Marxist overtones, seems to have little to do with political revolt, resistance, or opposition; nor is it a term that deals directly with or refers to questions and issues of race, gender, class, and/or cultural politics, as is often the case in both neo-Marxist and postmodern accounts of contemporary culture. For Hoover, opposition, as he notes in the second edition, is "resistance to dominant and received modes of poetry" (xxxix). In sum, Hoover, like others, constructs postmodernism as a purely aesthetic emergence, a period *style* at once defined and determined by its formal characteristics. In doing so, he represents postmodern poetry as an impulse toward the aesthetically innovative, as an "experimental practice." Interestingly, he notes, in both editions, that the anthology "does not view postmodernism as a single style with its departure in Pound's *Cantos* and its arrival in language poetry; it is, rather, an ongoing resistance to and comment upon dominant practices" (xxv). Given his claim that the dominance of the lyric mode ended in 1990,

this appears as a contradictory point, and it is repeated in slightly different fashion near the end of the second edition: “We should not imagine that a single style rules the period, such as language poetry, conceptual poetry, or the postlanguage lyric. It is all of the above” (lvi). Here, Hoover’s struggle to historicize and to map is apparent, as confusion and contradiction result from the fact that he attempts to have it both ways, conflating postmodernism as a style with postmodernism as an era. As with others, Hoover’s focus on style, on aesthetics, limits and confines, prohibiting a broader view and understanding of the poetry of the era.

Obviously, Hoover is not alone in his insistence that postmodern American poetry is defined and constituted by experimentation. In fact, this aesthetic-based interpretation has its own specific history in formulations and overviews of postmodern American poetry. In short, this history might be characterized as a reaction by both critics and poets to the continued aesthetic dominance of early critiques of New Critical modes of literary production in the form of the first-person lyric, an aesthetic that, at the time, attempted to remove itself from modernist propositions of artistic autonomy and monumentalism. To be sure, Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* and W.D. Snodgrass’ *Heart’s Needle*, both published in 1959, became the foundation for a larger and more directed attack on the aesthetics of literary modernism. Although later considered part of a mid-century closed-verse tradition, as critics such as David Antin have claimed², Lowell and Snodgrass’ confessional aesthetics, often based in the personal, intimate, and autobiographical, were targeted at disrupting, as David Perkins relates, New Critical values of “impersonality,

² See David Antin, "Modernism and Postmodernism: Approaching the Present in American Poetry," *boundary 2: a journal of postmodern literature* 1.1 (1972): 98-133.

formality, intellectuality, and self-conscious control” (*A History of Modern Poetry* 382). In other words, although these assaults on an essentially institutionalized modernism were often more formal than the breath-based utterances advocated by Charles Olson or the seemingly direct, natural, and spontaneous quality of Beat poetry, for example, their expressive, personal, and experiential qualities have nonetheless served as an aesthetic standard for much postmodern poetic practice. Rising to a position of dominance, inherited and institutionalized, this practice has come under assault on a variety of fronts, and the critique of its ostensibly passive mode has remained relatively constant since the 1980s.

In 1984, for example, in an essay entitled “The Academy in Peril: William Carlos Williams Meets the MLA,” Charles Bernstein insisted that the “officially sanctioned verse” of the time was characterized by a “restricted vocabulary, neutral and univocal tone in the guise of voice or persona, grammar-book syntax, received conceits, static and unitary form” (*Content’s Dream* 245). This practice, which Bernstein regarded as part of an uninspired and uninspiring homogenous and hegemonic “official verse culture,” relied on the policies and practices of reviewing and publishing institutions and the influence of university-aligned poets and critics to sanction and legitimate its “official” aesthetic:

Let me be specific as to what I mean by “official verse culture”—I am referring to the poetry publishing and reviewing practices of *The New York Times*, *The Nation*, *American Poetry Review*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The New Yorker*, *Poetry* (Chicago), *Antaeus*, *Parnassus*, Atheneum Press, all the major trade publishers, the poetry series of almost all of the major university presses (the University of California Press

being a significant exception at present). Add to this the ideologically motivated selection of the vast majority of poets teaching in university writing and literature programs and of poets taught in such programs as well as the interlocking accreditation of these selections through prizes and awards judged by these same individuals. Finally, there are the self-appointed keepers of the gate who actively put forward biased, narrowly focused and frequently shrill accounts of American poetry, while claiming, like all disinformation propaganda, to be giving historical or nonpartisan views. (247-48)

Bernstein's analysis of the poetry industry is now a relatively familiar line of attack in institutional-based histories, accounts, and constructions of postmodern American poetry. Like Bernstein, these critics and historians consider the role and influence of high-profile individuals and institutions—critics, reviewers, universities, writing programs, academic and creative associations, trade and academic presses, journals, and newspapers—in the manufacturing of an officially sanctioned aesthetic, namely the first-person lyric, although different names have been assigned along the way.

In *The American Poetry Wax Museum*, for instance, published in 1996, Jed Rasula interrogates the “canonizing assumptions” that have “fabricated an image of American poetry since World War II,” isolating the “self-expressive subject” (4) as the dominant and institutionally validated aesthetic mode. Hyperbolizing the notion of enshrinement, Rasula envisions American poetry as a wax museum “operated by the MLA and subsidized by the nationwide consortium of Associated Writing Programs” with “special galleries” dedicated to such “corporate benefactors” as the “*New York Times Book*

Review, The New Yorker, Poetry and American Poetry Review" (1). According to Rasula, these institutions, and no doubt the bulk of poetry anthologies, have "worn a trench around the first person singular in [their] ritual peregrinations" (26) as well as "surreptitiously turned down the volume on certain voices and simulated a voice-over for certain others" (33). For Rasula, there is little doubt about the exclusionary nature of this subsidized "voice-over:" "[P]ostmodern heterogeneity, semiotic slippage, decentering and reinvention of identity are emphatically not among those features which typify the poetry that is critically certified and anthologized today. The anthologies remain hierarchically motivated, dedicated to preserving the dream of autonomous agency and experiential authenticity" (26). For Rasula, the institutional authorization of a specific definition of American poetry is a form of collusion, what he elsewhere calls "Poetry Systems Incorporated, a subsidiary to data management systems" ("Literary Effects in the Wad" 78). This exclusionary definition, in other words, minimizes the potential influence and ultimate validation of aesthetic modes of writing that challenge, for example, traditional notions of subjectivity, agency, coherency, authenticity, language, logic, experience, order, stability, transparency, meaning, and expression. As such, Rasula, as well as a number of other writers and critics, especially those associated with the Language School, have been openly hostile to this poetic mode—a mode historically sanctioned by creative writing programs and numerous poetry anthologies, especially

those published in the 1980s and 1990s.³ As Marjorie Perloff notes, despite the “enormous political, demographic, and cultural changes of the post-World War II era,” for the “mainstream poetry press,” the “lyric paradigm has remained remarkably constant” (*21st-Century Modernism* 155).

In more specific terms, this aesthetic mode is dominated, according to Hank Lazer, by a “simple declarative syntax; the illusion of a craftless transparent language; [and] a simple speechlike singular voice in the service of a poem that ends with a moment of epiphanic wonder and/or closure where all parts of the poem relate to a common theme” (*Opposing Poetries* 131). Marjorie Perloff, as well, insists that the majority of contemporary American poetry follows the same set of basic aesthetic assumptions: “A generic ‘sensitive’ lyric speaker contemplates a facet of his or her world and makes observations about it, compares present to past, divulges some hidden emotion, or comes to a new understanding of the situation. The language is usually concrete and colloquial, the ironies and metaphors multiple, the syntax straightforward, the rhythms muted and

³ Although the list of anthologies that sanction this specific poetic mode is large, the most frequently criticized include the following: Paul Lauter, ed., *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* (Lexington, Mass.: Heath, 1994); J.D. McClatchy, ed., *Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry* (New York: Random House: 1990); Dave Smith and David Bottoms, eds., *The Morrow Anthology of Younger American Poets* (New York: Quill, 1985); Helen Vendler, ed., *The Harvard Book of Contemporary American Poetry* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985); Jack Myers and Robert Weingarten, eds., *New American Poets of the Eighties* (Green Harbor, Mass.: Wampeter Press, 1984).

low-key” (*21st-Century Modernism* 161-2). For Perloff, this aesthetics of self-expression, predicated on a “topical ‘subjective’ realism” (163), yields an unoriginal poetry that approaches “the condition . . . of journalism” (164). And Vincent Leitch, in a chapter entitled “Late Contemporary US Poetry,” notes that the “confessional lyric of 20-40 free-verse lines” has been a “longtime favorite of classroom teachers and magazine editors, who particularly appreciate its brevity, approachability, sincerity, and epiphanic wisdom” (*Living With Theory* 103).

In fact, if there is a defining feature to the history of institutional-based analyses of American poetry, it is most certainly an emphasis on the dichotomy between two broadly construed aesthetic modes—“mainstream” (the first-person, post-confessional, or self-expressive lyric) and “experimental”—engendered by the struggle for academic and cultural recognition and priority. Twenty years out, this opposition is perhaps still best represented in a section from Hank Lazer’s 1996 text, *Opposing Poetries*:

Today’s crisis in American poetry, marked by a broad sense of segregation and growing critical discomfort, consists of the collision between two incompatible notions of verse practice: one characterized by a plainspoken sincerity, a focus on apotheosis, a single organizing self and/or voice, lyrical brevity, carefully crafted vowel and consonant music, a kind of representational realism, and liberal politics; the other characterized by stylistic innovation, increased attention to the operations of language, enactment rather than re-presentation or summary, a poetry infused with the thinking of modernist and contemporary theory, philosophy, and

speculative prose, a more intensely collaborative concept of the reader, and neo-Marxist politics. (34)

Of course, while Lazer's institutional-based historical analysis of postmodern American poetry usefully outlines some of the distinctive features and overall differences between two seemingly "incompatible notions of verse practice," it also fosters, like the critical perspectives of Charles Bernstein, Jed Rasula, Christopher Beach, and Marjorie Perloff, a binary logic in its categorical opposition between "experimental" and "mainstream" modes of poetic writing while surreptitiously positing experimental poetry as quintessentially postmodern. This theoretical position is also evident in another important conception of postmodern poetry, Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris' second volume of *Poems for the Millenium: The University of California Book of Modern and Postmodern Poetry*.

Rothenberg and Joris' anthology, in other words, is a productive but still somewhat troubling historical construction of postmodern poetry. In short, Rothenberg and Joris are aware of the exclusionary nature of the anthology and the role it often plays in the canon-making process and the official sanctioning of specific aesthetic modes. As such, they position themselves as "participants, not just observers" (12) and draw attention to the fact that their role as chroniclers "colors" (13) not only their historical overview but also their inclusion of poets. And although it extends beyond the American instance, the descriptive elements of their anthology provide a useful summary of some of the aesthetic *and* political elements evident in a number of strains of postmodern American poetry. These elements include "an exploration of new forms of language, consciousness, and social/biological relationships," "poetry-art intersections," a "return to

the concept of poetry as a performance genre,” “language experiments,” a “renewed privileging of the demotic language,” “ethnopoetics,” “an ongoing if shifting connection to related political and social movements,” a “widely held belief that poetry is part of a struggle to save the wild places,” and a “sense of excitement and play” (11-12). Needless to say, Rothenberg and Joris’ anthology is much more inclusive, making room for poetries that respond to the profound changes in the culture since the 1950s, including globalization. At the same time, the large selection of poets in their anthology, from John Cage and Ed Sanders to Steve McCaffery and Jackson Mac Low, who operate on the basis of an “experimental” aesthetics, serves to implicitly manufacture innovation as the distinguishing feature of postmodern poetry. Why, for example, are poets such as A.R. Ammons, Wendell Berry, or Simon Ortiz not included, especially given their direct and indirect participation in the “struggle to save the wild places”? Their exclusion likely has to do with style, with the operational logic of the text that equates postmodernism with experimentation. As Christopher Nealon argues in *The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century*, “The enduring persistence of problems of historical consciousness for literature is not only a question of how literary writing has developed understandings of periods and of the meanings of periodization; it has also attached itself to questions of literary style” (17).

Despite these equations of postmodern American poetry with formal experimentation, Maria Damon offers an alternative to the construction of postmodern American poetry as a purely aesthetic phenomenon. In *The Dark End of the Street*, she argues for a definition of the “avant-garde as writing that pushes at the limits of experience as well as at the limits of conventional form” (ix). In a kind of reversal, she

insists that vanguard literature is largely the domain of the socially and culturally marginalized:

Their often neglected work becomes canon-fodder in the construction of a respectable façade of American letters that would erase the indigence and illegitimacy of its vital sources. The avant-garde . . . can include work that may or may not be formally experimental but breaks new social taboos and formalist rules in its attempt to create a new consciousness borne of heretofore inexpressible experience. (xi)

Here, Damon rewrites traditional definitions of the poetic avant-garde and offers a more flexible conception of literary value. In short, her idea of literary value, as well as its implied historiographic stance, equally weighs the importance of social and cultural politics along with textual and aesthetic evaluation. Damon's definition of postmodernism reflects this idea, evident in her discussion of a group of young and untrained poets from South Boston:

For instance, the South Boston poems, though they conform to very clear, arguably outdated, precepts of what poetry is, are avant-garde, marginal, experimental, both in their challenge of middle-class readers' assumptions about who gets to write what about whom, and in their deconstruction and reassemblage of other dominant discourses, a practice currently labeled "postmodern" but observable in any culture that has relations with other cultures. All writing is experimental, especially for people whose status as writers has traditionally been challenged: women, children, people of color, and members of the working classes. (xv)

Here, Damon questions the assumption that postmodern American poetry can be adequately analyzed through the application of a specific set of established formal standards. For Damon, postmodern poetic forms of experimentation are less the products of innovative aesthetics than of the social, political, and cultural expressions of marginalization, subjugation, and oppression. Relying on the notion that “difference” (alterity, marginality, sub, other) is one of the constitutive features of postmodern culture, Damon fashions poetic production in the postmodern era as not only a differential response to prevailing aesthetic standards but as social, political, and cultural engagement with the dominant late-capitalist culture. In other terms, Damon’s implied contention is that the standards by which literary critics and literary historians evaluate poetic texts too often precludes investigation of social, political, and cultural value. In short, her critical model provides a starting point for the articulation of an alternative to the understanding of postmodern American poetry as a purely aesthetic practice. It is imperative, she implies, to defeat the notion that postmodern American poetry is, *in exclusive terms*, a highly specialized and a highly experimental work intended to foreground, among a host of other things, the decentered subject, the unstable and inescapable function of language, or the dubious nature of reality. This is true in many instances, of course, but the definition denies a multitude of other equally postmodern poetic modes, all of which exist in a culturally dominated system.

According to Fredric Jameson, the current global and consumer-based capitalism of postmodern culture, a transition from the modern system of monopoly capitalism, represents, as Vincent Leitch relates, a “new and distinct historical stage in the development of Western culture” (*Postmodernism* 117). Generally speaking, this “new

and distinct historical stage,” characterized, as Jameson suggests, by a “prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm” to the extent that “everything in our social life—from economic value to state practices and to the very sphere of the psyche itself—can be said to have become ‘cultural’” (*Postmodernism* 48), signifies not only a dramatic break with modernist notions of social and cultural autonomy but a dizzying and explosive acculturation of reality itself—an acculturation that no doubt serves such capitalist values as profit, consumption, and exchange. To be certain, this proliferation of capital into all aspects of experience is the dominant and inescapable “cultural logic of late capitalism,” and it explains why Jameson claims that “every position on postmodernism in culture—whether apologia or stigmatization—is also at one and the same time, and necessarily, an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today” (3). Again, it should come as no surprise that a mutation in the nature of capitalism itself should symptomatically produce an array of social and cultural modifications with concomitant social and cultural consequences.

Consistent with such theorists as Guy DeBord and Jean Baudrillard, Jameson suggests that cultural production in the postmodern era is not “a matter of content any longer but of some fundamental mutation both in the object world itself—now become a set of texts or simulacra—and in the disposition of the subject” (9). Modernist attacks on realistic representation and mimesis give way to a postmodern era of simulacra, an endless dissemination and recirculation of texts, a system of floating signifiers without stable signifieds, a “transformation,” as Jameson argues, of “older realities into television images” which “does more than merely replicate the logic of late capitalism; it reinforces and intensifies it” (46). The consequence, of course, and in contradistinction to such

modernist values as originality, authenticity, depth, and quality, is that postmodern cultural production, as Jameson notes, is rooted in a new kind of “flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense” (9). The flat and depthless nature of postmodern art is also a hallmark demonstration of a culturally widespread “waning of affect” (10) and a “society bereft of all historicity” whose “putative past is little more than a set of dusty spectacles” (18). Modernist expressions of “alienation, anomie, solitude, social fragmentation, and isolation” (11) are “no longer appropriate in the world of the postmodern” (14) since postmodernism signals the “end of the bourgeois ego, or monad” and “with it the end of the psychopathologies of that ego” (15). Of course, the end of the “bourgeois ego” represents “the end of much more—the end, for example, of style, in the sense of the unique and the personal, the end of the distinctive individual brush stroke” (15). Surface replaces depth, greatness and complexity give way to pop, kitsch, and camp, and high and low culture collude and collide in an intermixing of formerly distinct aesthetic categories, all of which originate the “well-nigh universal practice today of what may be called pastiche” (16), an “imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture” (18).

Clearly, Jameson formulates the cultural productions of the postmodern era in specific fashion, isolating and concatenating aesthetic tendencies in light of larger cultural modifications. Here, the theoretical temptation is to equate these tendencies with the concept of postmodernism as an era. It is important, in other words, to remember that Jameson’s conception of such *cultural* elements as the acculturation of reality, simulacra, pastiche, depthlessness, and the waning of affect reflect an attempt to achieve “some

conception of a dominant cultural logic” (6). These tendencies, in other terms, do not exclude the synchronic existence of other distinct cultural elements, many of which operate outside of or in opposition to both the dominant culture and dominant aesthetic tendencies. To frame this in a slightly different fashion, and to repeat an earlier point, postmodernism is not simply a style or an aesthetic. Instead, postmodernism is an historical formation, an era, a mutation in the nature of capitalism itself replete with dominant, residual, and emergent cultural elements. In terms of understanding the variety and complexity of postmodern American poetry, this conception of postmodernism has important implications.

As an alternative to an exclusively aesthetic-based conception of postmodern American poetry, the idea of postmodernism as an era and not simply as a style engenders a critical and historical perspective that engages cultural and social politics *and* aesthetics in its attempt to account for the broad range of postmodern American poetry. As Jameson notes, there is a “radical distinction between a view for which the postmodern is one (optional) style among many others available and one which seeks to grasp it as the dominant logic of late capitalism,” as the “two approaches” engender “different ways of conceptualizing the phenomenon as a whole: one the one hand, moral judgments . . . and, on the other, a genuinely dialectical attempt to think our present of time in History” (*Postmodernism* 45-46). As such, and as noted earlier, this conception of literary history advances a postmodern historiography in favor of traditional historiographic models based exclusively in textual and formal methods of analysis. Suspicious of the putatively objective “view from nowhere” offered in many constructions of American literary history, the American poetic canon, and, in particular,

postmodern American poetry, postmodern historiography provides a negotiable and flexible model of literary history, one rooted in the lessons of the postmodern era. As such, it employs a mix of theory, cultural criticism, history writing, and traditional literary analysis. In addition, this model of historiography offers a view of history and literature that is open to multiple perspectives, challenges its own historiographic methods, and, finally, offers a more open and flexible conception of literary value through its consideration of various kinds of politics along with aesthetics. Raymond Williams' notion of cultural structure and process—the dominant, the residual, and the emergent—provides a framework by which to engage in this discourse.

In *Marxism and Literature*, Raymond Williams insists that the “complexity of a culture is to be found not only in its variable processes and their social definitions—traditions, institutions, and formations—but also in the dynamic interrelations, at every point in the process, of historically varied and variable elements” (121). Therefore, an “authentic” historical analysis must recognize “the complex interrelations between movements and tendencies both within and beyond a specific and effective dominance” (121). In other words, any examination of an effectively dominant or hegemonic system—cultural, historical, or institutional—must also account for both “residual” and “emergent” cultural elements as “significant both in themselves and in what they reveal of the characteristics of the dominant” (122). This, of course, is another way of suggesting that the dominant is “never either total or exclusive. At any time, forms of alternative or directly oppositional politics and culture exist as significant elements in the society” (113). What's more, these forms have “significant effect on the hegemonic process itself” since the “hegemonic function is to control or transform or even

incorporate them” (113). Dominance, in this sense, requires opposition, although it must be “especially alert and responsive to the alternatives and opposition which question or threaten its dominance” (113). Hegemony is therefore an “active process” in its constant negotiation and maintenance of various cultural elements, as opposed to its more common definition as “a complex of dominant features and elements” (115). This does not, of course, negate the necessity of recognizing and describing dominant features, which Jameson makes clear in his benchmark text.

Williams defines the “residual” as that which “has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present” (122). Distinguishable from the archaic, which exists in the observable past, the residual is both present and active, functioning, often, outside of or as an alternative to the dominant: “Thus certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis of the residue—cultural as well as social—of some previous social and cultural institution or formation” (122). These elements of the cultural process are often recognized and acknowledged for their alternative function because they were “created in actual societies and actual situations in the past” and “because they represent areas of human experience, aspiration, and achievement which the dominant culture neglects, undervalues, opposes, represses, or even cannot recognize” (123-124). At the same time, despite being “at some distance from the effective dominant culture,” a residual cultural element, or at least “some part of it,” will “in most cases have had to be incorporated if the effective dominant culture is to make sense in these areas” (123). Again, incorporation, a form of

regulation, restriction, and limitation, is one of the main strategies of the hegemonic process.

Williams' definition of "emergent" draws attention to the fact "that new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationships are continually being created" (123). Of course, he insists, it is "exceptionally difficult to distinguish between those which are really elements of some new phase of the dominant culture . . . and those which are substantially alternative or oppositional to it: emergent in the strict sense, rather than merely novel" (123). Nonetheless, the emergent, effectively speaking, is "radically different" (124) from the residual, as emergent cultural elements often exist in strict opposition to the dominant culture and therefore require attentive supervision and management: "For new practice is not, of course, an isolated process. To the degree that it emerges, and especially to the degree that it is oppositional rather than alternative, the process of attempted incorporation significantly begins" (124). Or, as Williams notes in "Base and Superstructure," "In capitalist practice, if the thing is not making a profit, or if it is not being widely circulated, then it can for some time be overlooked, at least while it remains alternative. When it becomes oppositional in an explicit way, it does, of course, get approached or attacked" (173). Practically speaking, then, emergent cultural elements are in constant battle against incorporation, which, insidiously, often "looks like recognition, acknowledgement, and thus a form of acceptance" (*Marxism and Literature* 125). Nonetheless, in their opposition to the dominant, emergent elements of the culture rely "crucially on finding new forms or adaptations of form" (126).

Williams' theory of cultural structure and process is applicable not only to the larger postmodern culture but to the symptomatic function of its institutions. In other

words, at any moment in any culture or institution, there is always something dominant or hegemonic, something that looks to the past as an alternative to that dominance, and, finally, something that directly opposes the seemingly exclusive and limiting nature of that dominance. However, in standard postmodern fashion, this is not a singular or consistently discrete process. These elements and the categories in which they function—the dominant, the residual, and the emergent—are not mutually exclusive, as *both* dissolution and disaggregation are typical of the era. As Vincent Leitch relates in *Literary Criticism in the 21st Century*, “What characterizes postmodernism yesterday and today is a persistent disorganization of culture into separate spheres and the ubiquitous interaction, sometimes convergence, of the fields” (129). Singularities and multiplicities of all kinds exist side by side; contradiction is common and acceptable. As Leitch notes, “On the one hand, we experience the mishmash of world music and cuisines and, on the other, uniformities of globalization and Empire popping up everywhere like Coca-Cola and reality TV subgenres” (129). Or, to appropriate a claim by Linda Hutcheon in a recent essay on postmodernism, “‘both/and’ is more appropriate than ‘either/or’ in addressing the issue” (17). In terms of understanding postmodern American poetry, a flexible both/and version of Williams’ model allows for mapping and historicizing—one way of thinking about the current proliferation of diverse styles and tendencies, politics, institutions, and poetry’s relationship to the larger dominant culture.

Again, intensification, proliferation, concentration, disaggregation, dissolution, and inundation are terms that not only describe the larger culture but also the current field of postmodern American poetry. Within the span of approximately 70 years, the number of actively publishing poets in the United States has gone from reasonably small, 100 to

500, to unquestionably large, greater than 10,000, a number no doubt fueled by the rise and popularity of creative writing programs beginning in the 1970s and the ubiquitous use of various forms of technology at the start of the new century. As Ron Silliman notes on his blog, “It is all but impossible to even characterize the map of poetry today. If this were the 1950s, a quarter of America’s poets would be producing flarf, another quarter conceptual poetry. What we have is a much bigger pie, and one sliced into many more fairly narrow slices. And it’s up for grabs as to the order in which they fit.” Similarly, in *Living With Theory*, Vincent Leitch relates that the current field of postmodern American poetry “strikes many critics as increasingly carnivalesque and chaotic” (103). For example, Dana Gioia and others, the editors of a 2004 anthology entitled *Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, insist that the current state of poetry is “highly factionalized and combative,” that “numerous aesthetic, ideological, professional, and regional camps busily make a case for their own creative enterprise,” and, in a more basic sense, that “American poetry is so vast and diverse as to be virtually unknowable” (664). In *Lyric Postmodernisms: An Anthology of Contemporary Innovative Poetries*, published in 2008, editor Reginald Shepherd notes, “Ours is a decentered contemporary American literary and artistic world in which there is no agreement even on what practitioners of ostensibly the same art form are doing or trying to do, let alone on those efforts’ means or aims or how they could be evaluated” (xiii). And Cole Swenson, in the introduction to *American Hybrid: A Norton Anthology of New Poetry*, published in 2009, argues, in a slight turn, that “while extremes remain, and everywhere we find complex aesthetic and ideological differences, the contemporary moment is dominated by rich writing that cannot be categorized and that hybridize core attitudes of previous ‘camps’ in diverse and

unprecedented ways” (xvii). Further, she insists, “The product of contradictory traditions, today’s writers often take aspects from two or more to create poetry that is truly postmodern in that it’s an unpredictable and unprecedented mix” (xxi). Swenson proposes, in fact, that the current state of poetry is “rhizomatic,” as binaries and hierarchies give way to “a more laterally ordered network composed of nodes that branch outward toward smaller nodes, which themselves branch outward in an intricate and ever-changing structure of exchange and influence” (xxv). Inundation abounds. Assemblage is routine. Heterogeneity, a situation of apparent chaos, rules the era. Clearly, as with other cultural productions, maps are needed.

Since the 1950s, the proliferation of diverse styles and movements typical of the field is one of relationship with the dominant culture, symptomatically modeling itself on larger cultural processes, including changes and intensifications in the capitalist system. Struggling for dominance, creating opposition, or resisting incorporation, many of the large-scale movements in the history of American poetry—Objectivism, Beat, Confessionalism, San Francisco Renaissance, The Black Arts, The New York School, Language Poetry, Dark Room Collective, Concrete Poetry, Slam, New Formalism, Cowboy Poetry, Slow Poetry, Cyberpoetry, Newlipo, Flarf, and Conceptual Poetry—can be understood in terms of both institutional and cultural function. Relationship requires interaction with both the past and the present. As for the current moment, Vincent Leitch offers the following sketch: “The situation of poetry today has a great deal to say about the status of literature in early twenty-first century US society, concerning not only its vitality and abundance, but also its disarray and confusion as well as ongoing transformation into entertainment and marketable product” (*Living With Theory* 104).

However, despite the chaotic, disorganized, and currently shifting nature of the field, including the collapse and combination of formerly distinct styles, a form of dominance, a “center or axis,” as Leitch calls it, might still fairly be located in the “University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop poem” (103), although its hold is in the process of loosening. In the past few years, for example, as former members of the avant-garde have become elite members of the academy and as formerly emergent and oppositional aesthetics continue to be incorporated through the hegemonic process, an increasing amount of attention has been paid to the exclusivity and potentially anti-progressive claims of the American avant-garde tradition. In “There’s a New Movement in American Poetry and It’s Not Kenneth Goldsmith,” Cathy Park Hong notes, “Poets are challenging the structural inequities within literature.” Sounding a similar note, Amy King, in “Beauty and the Beastly Po-Biz, Part 1,” remarks, “I didn’t understand how intentional groups premised on exploring poetics intent on engaging politically as the ‘avant-garde,’ presumably to destabilize power, might also be complicit in reifying the overall capitalist structure in the process of their empire building, er, institutionalization.” Further, she notes, “For all of the claims to avant-garde gestures, including ‘institutional critique from within the institution,’ these institutions are the opposite of threatened, proceeding with business-as-usual and rewarding Conceptual group members in the process.” Tan Lin, Ken Chin, Jenny Zhang, and Dorothy J. Wang are important voices on this front as well. For the moment, however, the lyric, in large part, remains a kind of axis, as the list of poets awarded the Pulitzer over the past 20 years indicates. With two signal exceptions, Kay Ryan and Rae Armantrout, and some slight alterations and disruptions to the form, C.K. Williams, Natasha Trethewey, and Peter Balakian, the list reveals that the lyric and its

attendant self-expressive voice is a mainstay, providing, as Leitch relates, “a sense of coherence to the otherwise disorganized field of late contemporary US poetry” (*Living With Theory* 103).

As noted earlier, this currently dominant and institutionally validated aesthetic grew out of mid-century rejections of modernist assumptions, including its claims to impersonality, formality, and individual genius. By the 1980s, however, these once-emergent and oppositional aesthetics were significantly incorporated into an institutionally dominant poetic mode. In 1984, for example, in an essay entitled “Poetry and Ambition,” Donald Hall ridiculed the commercialization, commodification, and assembly-line production and reproduction of the self-expressive lyric: “We write and publish the McPoem—*ten billion served*—which becomes our contribution to the history of literature. . . . Pull in any time day or night, park by the busload, and the McPoem waits on the steam shelf for us, wrapped and protected, indistinguishable, undistinguished, and reliable” (235). What’s more, Hall insisted, “To produce the McPoem, institutions must enforce patterns, institutions within institutions, all subject to the same glorious dominance of unconscious economic determinism, template and formula of consumerism” (235). Presumably, Hall was thinking, for example, of such poets as Donald Justice, Mark Strand, or Charles Wright. Donald Justice, for example, in a thirteen-line poem entitled “Absences,” writes the following:

And I, who have listened for a step
 All afternoon, hear it now, but already falling away,
 Already in memory. And the terrible scales descending
 On the silent piano; the snow; and the absent flowers abounding. (115)

Here, the “I” is the controlling figure of the poem, a stable subject who offers readers a path to the reality of an experience. The experience itself is grounded in a private emotion and expressed through direct, concise, and accessible language. Predictably, the poem ends with a moment of keen insight, of emotional awareness. In presentation, the stable, sincere, expressive, and solitary speaker of the poem allows nothing, including the language itself, to get in the way. In fact, according to the dominant logic of the poem, language directly corresponds to reality, and the poem, in this sense, offers an unequivocal expression of authentic experience. Maybe needless to say, this notion of subjectivity or self, symptomatic of postmodern culture, is, as Vincent Leitch relates, perfectly “fit for the possessive individualism of contemporary consumer society, often narcissistic, emotive, sentimental, privatized in the extreme” (*Living With Theory* 120). Here, in other terms, is an aesthetic neatly tied to the values of the dominant culture, especially the consumer-based imperatives of accessibility and passive consumption.

The work of other poets could be examined here as well, including Sharon Olds, Billy Collins, Louise Glück, Jorie Graham, Mark Strand, Carolyn Kizer, Philip Levine, Dave Etter, or Ted Kooser, to highlight a few examples. Like items at a grocery store, these are numerous brands of more or less the same product, which are placed at eye level and in plain sight. Not surprisingly, some taste very good. Still, alternatives, other options, are placed on the lower shelves outside of immediate view. And, of course, many alternatives never make it to the shelves at all. The dominant mode, in other words, excludes other forms of literary production. This strategy of maintenance and control, a clear function of the hegemonic process, as outlined by Williams and others, helps to explain the continued popularity and dominance of this specific aesthetic mode.

Perhaps needless to say, critics of the first-person, self-expressive, post-confessional lyric frame a vast amount of postmodern poetry as little more than a collection of aesthetically outmoded and largely trite poetic observations legitimated by anthologies, reviews, universities, and other institutional forces. However, while there is clearly an insistence on the self-expressive lyric in much of the poetry that is officially and institutionally sanctioned, this does little to explain the potential cultural, political, and historical necessity of this poetic mode, especially as it articulates a viable notion of subjectivity in light of the apparent collapse and seeming absence of fixed notions of both language and identity. In other words, there needs to be a clear distinction between poets who rest on the laurels of an institutionally mandated aesthetic and poets who use or adopt elements of a dominant aesthetic to larger ends, perhaps in an effort to challenge the erasure, excision, occlusion, and territorialization of their histories and identities by the forces of postmodern culture. The personal, in this sense, is political. To be certain, many poets are deemed guilty by association and therefore summarily dismissed. The reality is that the work of many lyric poets is challenging and worthy of serious consideration, a fact that becomes even more apparent in the absence of the poetry wars of the 1980s and 1990s and through a turn away from an exclusive focus on the politics of style. In Cole Swenson's *American Hybrid*, for example, she includes such poets as Etel Adnan, Joshua Beckman, Fanny Howe, Molly Bendall, Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge, Katheleen Fraser, Myung Mi Kim, Harryette Mullen, and John Yau. And although not included, Sherman Alexie, one of the "dominant" poets whose work is examined here, might also be considered in relation to the "unprecedented mix" of styles, tendencies, and politics found in Swenson's collection. In short, these are poets whose work both utilize

and challenge the institutionally dominant aesthetic. As Cathy Park Hong notes, there is a “new movement in American poetry, a movement galvanized by the activism of Black Lives Matter, spearheaded by writers of color who are at home in social media activism and print magazines; some poets are redefining the avant-garde while others are fueling a raw politics into the personal lyric.”

Of course, the notion of dominance is not confined to its function within specific institutions, as Jameson’s elaboration of a postmodern cultural dominant makes clear. In this sense, other postmodern poetic modes might be considered part of the dominant, including Conceptual Poetry, Flarf, and, more generally, Cyberpoetry, especially in their simulation and reproduction of systematic cultural norms tied to the consumer-based values and politics of late capitalism. In the case of Cyberpoetry, for example, the operative aesthetic strategy, as Paul Hoover relates, is the “cutting and pasting of texts and/or images located on the Web onto a page where you have determined to construct a poem. Sampling begins with the use of an online search engine” (*Postmodern American Poetry* li). A section from Brian Kim Stefans’ “Bishop Bedlam’s Entreaties” is telling:

Please reject me after plagiarizing this.

Please turn me over if you think you can.

Please rewrite me if you know a bad joke.

Please seduce me if you want to touch me. (819)

Absent of a unique style, devoid of individual subjectivity, flattened of affect, these repetitions appear empty and random, free-floating, almost purely cybernetic, the product of a web-based cannibalism plugged in to the present moment. The style, in fact, adds new although perhaps inexplicable meaning to the notion of collage, intertextuality,

pastiche, assemblage, a style Jameson characterizes as “speech in a dead language” (17), though, here, his description might be slightly reformulated as “speech in an android language.” Such recycling and repetition mirrors the process of reproduction in consumer culture, mimetically turning its aesthetics and implied politics into a form of literary spectacle. This act, of course, is not bereft of opposition, though it does seem to choose play over resistance. As Paul Hoover argues in his author note on Stefans, “Cyberpoetry should seek noise rather than silence, interference and discontinuity rather than a smooth, unimpeded progress” (815). Method may, in fact, yield, disruption, as a section from Stefans’ poem “Searchbot” reveals:

I have eaten the dumdums
 that were in the coalition,
 forbid me,
 they were free, and old, sold
 to me.

Sort of resemble me. (818)

This less-than-subtle allusion to the tradition of modernism calls forth the history of poetic writing and its contemporary iterations, simultaneously framing voice and subjectivity as dominant markers of a restrictive aesthetic tradition and drawing attention to the commodification and fetishization of individual identity in consumer culture, despite its own complicity. Such, of course, is the nature of postmodernism. As Linda Hutcheon argues, “Complicity always attends its critique” (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 99). Rather than strictly dominant, then, Stefans’ poetry exists as a kind of hybrid of dominant and emergent postmodern poetic modes. A similar argument could

be made about the work of Tan Lin, Flarf poet K. Silem Mohammad, and, in some instances, the work of Conceptual poet Kenneth Goldsmith, the subject, in part, of the last chapter.

Careful consideration of both aesthetics and politics indicates that poets rarely fall squarely into one category, with some notable exceptions. Dana Gioia, for instance, a staunch advocate of New Formalism, engages, along with poets like Timothy Steele and Marilyn Hacker, in a decidedly and openly residual practice, one formulated in opposition to the self-expressive lyric and its entrenchment in various institutions, including the academy. A former businessman, Gioia, oddly, fashions himself as a kind of bohemian, a rebel poet writing poems that adhere to the restrictions of form and meter. In a poem called “Insomnia,” for example, he writes, “Pipes clanking, water running in the dark / the mortgaged walls shifting in discomfort / and voices mounting in an endless drone . . .” (4). Interestingly, Gioia’s criticism, especially *Can Poetry Matter? Essays on Poetry and American Culture* and *Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture*, has garnered more attention than his verse, confirming, in one sense, Williams’ contention that residual elements are easy to ignore when their alternative function is not a threat to the dominant system. And, of course, other postmodern residual elements exist, such as the Cowboy poetry of Larry McWhorter, Chris Isaacs, or Tim Jobe.

At the same time, this kind of strict classification is rare. John Ashbery’s “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” for example, is undeniably less experimental than his earlier work, and it signals his movement toward the “mainstream,” but its ekphrastic interrogation of subjectivity is clearly at odds with the unquestioned assumptions of authenticity, originality, and poetic voice evident in much lyric poetry. Ashbery’s work,

in other words, does not neatly or tightly fit into a single definition of postmodernism, such as the stylistic claim that it is synonymous with experimentation. The same holds true for much Language Poetry, including the work of Susan Howe and Robert Grenier, the subject of the second chapter, which is emergent in its aesthetic and political opposition but also symptomatic of the dominant in its expressions of fragmentation and the collapse of stable subjectivity. Other flexible categorizations of postmodern poetic practice are needed, such as with the work of Gary Snyder, A.R. Ammons, Sherman Alexie, and Kenneth Goldsmith, the subjects of the last two chapters, as the work of these poets exists in the connective spaces of dominant, residual, and emergent postmodern poetic modes.

CHAPTER 2. THE POLITICS OF PLAY IN THE POETRY OF ROBERT GRENIER AND SUSAN HOWE

Language Poetry, according to Michael Greer, “encourages us to reconsider the institutional and historical determinations of our notions of poetry, and to recognize our own implication in the ideological struggles to define ‘poetry’ and ‘the poetic’” (335). As a literary movement and a poetic mode, in other words, Language Poetry, or Language Writing, might be seen as a symptomatic representation of a large-scale cultural battle for academic and institutional legitimation. Relegated, for much of its history, to small presses, magazines, readings, and other group-based writing networks, Language Poetry existed at the margins, functioning outside of or exterior to an official network of academic and mainstream publications. This is not, of course, inexplicable. Opposition requires dominance, and, according to a number of critics, literary historians, and proponents of Language Poetry, early critiques of New Critical modes of literary production in the form of the first-person lyric—an aesthetic that, at the time, attempted to remove itself from modernist propositions of artistic autonomy and monumentalism—continue to dominate postmodern poetic production. As Hank Lazer relates, Language Poetry is an “oppositional literary practice” that “questions the tendencies of mainstream poetry, including its evasion of modernism’s formal challenges, its resultant devotion to the plainspoken lyric, and its correlative hostility to philosophy and critical theory” (37). Lazer is not alone in his assessment. In *The American Poetry Wax Museum*, Jed Rasula characterizes the bulk of contemporary poetry as a museum “operated by the MLA and subsidized by the nationwide consortium of Associated Writing Programs” (1). Taking

issue with the institutional framework in which poetry is produced, Rasula further insists that the majority of poetry anthologies “remain hierarchically motivated, dedicated to preserving the dream of autonomous agency and experiential authenticity” (26). Similarly, Marjorie Perloff, in *21st-Century Modernism*, argues that, in much mainstream poetry, a “topical ‘subjective’ realism always reasserts itself as the path of the least resistance” (163)—a poetry, for her, that approaches “the condition, not of music, as Walter Pater famously held, but of journalism—a form of writing as harmless as it is ephemeral” (164). And, finally, Vincent Leitch insists that while contemporary poetry is a highly chaotic and disorganized field of competing modes and tendencies, if “there is a center or axis, it is probably represented by the University of Iowa Writer’s Workshop poem. This is the self-consciously prosaic confessional lyric of 20-40 free-verse lines, a longtime favorite of classroom teachers and magazine editors, who appreciate its brevity, approachability, sincerity, and epiphanic wisdom” (*Living with Theory* 103). For many, then, the first-person lyric is indicative of an “official verse culture,” to use Charles Bernstein’s popular term, an institutionally and aesthetically dominant mode against which much of what is designated as Language Poetry implicitly or explicitly operates.

At the same time, Language Poetry, as Romana Huk relates, is an “amorphous field of writing for which the term is now internationally if loosely used to join together poets working in interaction with postmodern or poststructuralist theories of language” (1). Language Poetry, in other terms, is more of a loose constellation than an organized grouping. Important differences among individual poets, then, are significant; nonetheless, similarities emerge. Douglas Messerli, for example, in the introduction to his anthology of Language poets, notes that “language itself” is a common and arguably unifying factor:

For these poets, language is not something that *explains* or *translates* experience, but is the source of that experience. Language is perception, thought itself; and in that context the poems of these writers do not function as ‘frames’ of experience or brief narrative summaries of ideas and emotions as they do for many current poets. (*“Language” Poetries 2*)

Operating within, as Huk indicates and Messerli implies, poststructuralist and postmodern conceptions of language, Language Poetry, generally speaking, tends to emphasize both the materiality and the production of language. Along the way, order, coherence, stability, meaning, and truth tend to give way to chaos, disorder, instability, play, system, and function. Reality is text; text is reality. Consequently, passive consumption, one of the ways in which mainstream poetry participates in the logic of late capitalism, is rarely, if ever, an option. As Hank Lazer notes, Language Writing “resists habitual reading and in that resistance invites the reader to become a producer of the text rather than remain its consumer” (40). Similarly, Jeff Derksen argues that Language Poetry does not “aim exclusively at academic reception and canon revision, but rather at the transformation of a social subject through language and through a model of productive consumption for reading” (43). Boundaries collapse; writer and reader are of a piece. These similarities, as well as others, will become apparent throughout the course of this chapter.

To be sure, then, Robert Grenier and Susan Howe are important representations of these general tendencies. At the same time, to say that the poetry of Grenier and Howe is emblematic of all Language Poetry would, of course, be a mistake. In addition, Grenier and Howe are inescapably different poets. Howe’s poetry is frequently complex and

elusively palimpsestic, and her work has generated a wealth of critical scholarship. Grenier's poetry, on the other hand, is often deceptively simple and decidedly minimalistic, and his work has garnered virtually no critical attention. Nonetheless, their shared concerns, as indicated in the first chapter, are indicative of a primarily emergent mode in postmodern American poetry.

Language Writing and the Poetry of Robert Grenier

To eject, that is, the idea that there is something
containable to say: completed saying.

--Charles Bernstein, *A Poetics*

I'll stir.

--Robert Grenier, *Sentences*

Origins, especially literary origins, are often ideological shelters. Nonetheless, the 1971 publication of Robert Grenier and Barret Watten's *This* magazine is often isolated as a fountainhead for the widely variegated movement known as Language Writing or Language Poetry.⁴ Notably, the inaugural issue of the magazine contained Grenier's now-famous pronouncement: "I HATE SPEECH." More than a decade later, Ron Silliman, in "Language, Poetry, Realism," the introduction to his anthology of Language Writing entitled *In the American Tree*, insisted that Grenier's denouncement of speech-based poetics "announced a breach--and a new moment in American writing" (xvii). One way of charting that "breach" and the subsequent development of a "new" American writing,

⁴ See, for example, Bob Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996) 38.

Language Poetry, is to trace and chart the development of individual writers. It is, in other words, a method of identifying individual production and development as an aesthetic and ideological representation of a larger, often group-based, critique of postmodern American poetry and poetics. To be certain, Robert Grenier is an emblematic case. This choice, of course, requires explanation.

That Grenier's utterance provided a basis on which a new and decidedly radical movement in American poetry would form seems appropriate. Over the course of his career, Grenier's poetry has undergone, in often self-conscious fashion, what I would characterize as cataclysmic changes. However, the changes are not entirely, if at all, idiosyncratic. In many ways, in fact, Grenier's poetry is symptomatic and representative of larger cultural, philosophical, ideological, institutional, and aesthetic changes and challenges in both American culture and American poetic history. In short, and on this last front, Grenier's poetry has moved from a Modernist aesthetics in line with William Carlos Williams to a decidedly more "open form" and speech-based poetics along the lines of Charles Olson or Robert Creeley, and, finally, to a radical and arguably emergent postmodern mode, generally classified as Language Poetry. To the extent that these changes exemplify larger movements within American culture, poetry, and poetic history, the advent and existence of Language Poetry can be seen as both inevitable and necessary.

Grenier's first book of poems, *Dusk Road Games*, published in 1967, is written in the tradition of the earlier poetics of William Carlos Williams. In fact, the first poem of the book, "Slum Spring," immediately recalls Williams' "Spring and All." The language is terse, simple, and unsophisticated, a "common" speech. The form, like its content, is suggestive but nonetheless gracefully unadorned. And, like "Spring and All," Grenier's

“Slum Spring” chronicles a transformation in seasons, the emergence of spring, in an environment where poverty and suffering is despairingly recognizable. In Williams, it is near “a road to the contagious hospital” (1); in Grenier, it is, simply, a “slum.” In this particular slum, the neighbor’s dog is a mutt, a “cur,” and the tenement women shop laboriously “in the slush” (11). Yet, as in Williams’ poem, spring offers the possibility of (re)birth, renewal, and rejuvenation. “Slum Spring” ends with this recognition:

Their shopping bags in their pull carts--
 coming home in their greatcoats--
 pull perceptibly lighter

As in “Spring and All,” however, the recognition of birth and renewal must also be weighed against the overwhelming sense of uncertainty and despair. In other terms, even though the carts “pull perceptibly lighter,” it is unclear whether the slush is absent, the shopping bags are less in number, or the adopted strategy of transportation has been altered, from push to pull. Regardless, the act or action is less arduous; at the same time, the sense of social despair persists. Thematic congruities among the poems of Williams and Grenier surface time and again throughout *Dusk Road Games*.⁵ In fact, this kind of mirroring effect, the repetition of Williams-based insights, approaches the level of diminution.⁶

⁵ See, for instance, “Song,” a contemporary version of “Danne Russe,” or “Leaf,” a thematic play on “The Young Housewife.”

⁶ The epiphany of the title poem of the collection, “Dusk Road Game,” is “a thing is a pure wonder” (28). The epistemological stance of this poem, and this statement, is in no small part a reformulation of Williams’ “No ideas but in things.”

Thematic affinities are not, of course, the only way in which Grenier's early poetry participates in the aesthetics of modernism. Among the many tenets of Modernist aesthetics, the poetry of *Dusk Road Games* most clearly demonstrates an adherence to F.S. Flint and Ezra Pound's insistence on "direct treatment of the thing" (142). With little question, the poems of *Dusk Road Games* use no "superfluous word, no adjective, which does not reveal something" (143), they refuse to treat images "as *ornaments*" (149), and they are composed "in sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome" (142). In "Slum Spring," to reiterate, the images are clear and concise; the language is straightforward and exact. At the same time, as "Slum Spring" also demonstrates, Grenier's poetry is more closely aligned with Williams in its treatment of "local conditions" (*The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* 146). The poetry of *Dusk Road Games* is not, in other terms, the poetry of an expatriate. It is, rather, an American poetry decidedly situated in a specific social, cultural, and historical context.

The Modernist aesthetics of objectivity and impersonality, a kind of view from nowhere, are also apparent in Grenier's early poetry. A poem like "Slum Spring" is telling in this respect as well. The poem is predicated on the notion of the poet, the "I," who stands at the center of the experience, perception, and poem. In turn, the poem is dependent upon the poet's ability to organize both poetic reality and the reality to which the poem refers. This principle of the unique self, the autonomous and monumental "I" of poetic modernism who organizes reality, transforms and transmits tradition, and offers an often final truth, however tenuously suggested, runs throughout all of the poems of *Dusk Road Games*. Of course, Williams, late into his career, insisted that the poet thinks *with*

the poem, but the early Williams undoubtedly insists on the central position of the poetic “I.”⁷ Grenier, no doubt, inherited this earlier aesthetic.

Grenier’s next collection of poems, *Series*, published in 1978, illustrates a radical shift in poetic style. While it is certain that the importance of a “common speech” stressed by Williams has not been totally abandoned, only modified, the poems of *Series* suggest a degree of formal and linguistic complexity more along the lines of a Charles Olson or Robert Creeley. In fact, Olson and Creeley seem to be primary influences on the poetry of *Series*. Robert Creeley’s *Pieces*, for example, published in 1968, is constructed so that a dot, or period, half-separates a “piece” or poem, and three dots are used to designate the end of a piece. However, as Bob Perelman notes, in *The Marginalization of Poetry*, “The three-dot ‘endings’ are often only slightly stronger versions of the single dot ‘connections’” (44). The three dots, in other terms, often function as ellipses; in the end, it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine where one poem ends and the next begins. Grenier, in *Series*, more or less adopts this method. At the same time, Grenier’s dots are occasionally placed in seemingly random spots on the page, and approximately halfway through the text they disappear completely. Here, an element of Language Poetry is beginning to come to the surface: the materiality of grammatical markers can no longer be taken at face value. More to the point, however, the use of space in these poems demonstrates an opening of the field and a break, as Charles Olson puts it, in his manifesto “Projective Verse,” with the “inherited line, stanza, over-all form, what is the ‘old’ base of the non-projective” (614).

⁷ See David Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1976) 550.

Olson's comments on "breath" in "Projective Verse" are also relevant to the poems of *Series*. For Olson, "Verse now, 1950, if it is to go ahead, if it is to be of *essential* use, must, I take it, catch up and put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings" (613). The specific way in which this enters the poetic line is defined shortly after:

the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE

the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE (616)

Olson's manifesto is intended, in one sense, to mark a break with the Modernist insistence on "common speech," the "American" idioms of Williams Carlos Williams or Robert Frost. At the same time, speech is not left behind, but its normative function is, often at least, transformed into deeply personal utterance and open-form textual performance. Needless to say, this transformation in speech also signifies and entails a transformation in subject matter. The poem, in other terms, is no longer simply a space for commonly designated poetic utterance; on the contrary, openness reigns. All experience, no matter how trivial, personal, or even misunderstood, is relevant.

The combination of Olson and Creeley in Grenier's *Series* manifests in the following manner:

no time

like the present

there's the road

curving away

I'm suffering
 from the
 humidity (21)

The poem, or piece, in this instance, is indefinitely open--“no time,” slight pause, “like the present.” Temporality is experienced both on the page and in the mind; space and composition open. Moreover, the sense of the “present” drives the logic of individual breath and utterance. The result is the possibility of a line like “I’m suffering.” The line as breath unit allows, in other terms, the short line. In fact, in a poem such as this, the line as breath is absolutely necessary. The position of the suffering subject can now be emphasized and undercut. This is not the Modern or existential subject who suffers from an abundance of freedom or an anxiety about being-towards-death. Rather, suffering results “from the humidity.” Subject matter now incorporates the banal. Cliché, “no time / like the present,” is fair game. Personal observation and subjective emotion, as in another early poem from this collection, replaces impersonality and objectivity: “farmers / fishing” (38).

Leaving behind Creeley’s dots and Olson’s breath, the latter poems of *Series* seem to represent another distinct alteration in poetic style, almost as if, for Grenier, “Projective Verse” goes out as quickly as it comes in. The “style” of these later poems, however, ultimately remains more fixed. For the next fifteen years or so, the poetic line for Grenier remains fairly constant. In other words, the majority of the latter poems of *Series* are often short one-to-ten word poems. Just as likely, two poems normally appear per page, placed fairly consistently with one at the top and one at the bottom, and a large white space separates the ostensibly discrete texts. In addition, the latter poems of *Series* represent a profound turn toward textuality, toward the materiality of the word itself. In

fact, these poems evidence the kind of skepticism toward the word, or the word's ability to represent things, that characterize much Language Poetry. One of the last poems of *Series* reads:

no signs
of things (128)

This poem, in short, seems to signal the death of the referent or, in the least, expresses an inherent uncertainty about the ability of language to adequately represent reality. The proposition *nomina sunt numina* seems stripped of all reasonable plausibility. Moreover, the poem is framed in specifically linguistic terms, and the insight is in some senses comparable to the critique of language in poststructuralist and postmodern theory: everything and every thing tends increasingly toward the sign. At the same time, while the context in which this poem takes place is at once philosophical, a point I will return to, it is also and at the same time literary.

For Grenier, this poem seems to mark an end to assumptions about the adequacy of language to represent reality and experience, assumptions undoubtedly informing American poetry and poetics. Even as late as 1965, for example, Denise Levertov is calling for an organic poetry—a poetry that recognizes “a form beyond forms, in which forms partake” (629). Levertov's assumption is not, of course, without precedent. The adequacy of language is one of the essential presuppositions of both Modernist and Projectivist verse, a presupposition, for Grenier, in the early 1970s, which had run its course. As George Hartley relates, “Language poetry continues that opening of the possibilities of verse at a point when Projectivist assumptions themselves in turn appear

to have reached a dead end” (21). Indeed, this sense of a poetic cul-de-sac led Grenier to claim, in a 1971 manifesto entitled “On Speech” in *This* magazine, “I HATE SPEECH.”

To be sure, Grenier’s proclamation calls for an end to the Olsonian conception of the poetic line as a unit of breath. What’s more, it directly attacks the various poetic movements of the 1950s and 1960s—Confessionalism, the San Francisco Renaissance, Organic Poetry—for an aesthetics rooted in direct and personal utterance, the obvious progression from Olson. Grenier writes that it “isn’t the spoken any more than the written, now, that’s the progression from Williams” (496). Something of Williams’ avant-garde tendencies persists, for, a few lines later, he proclaims:

Why imitate ‘speech’? Various vehicle that American speech is in the different mouths of any of us, possessed of particular powers of colloquial usage, rhythmic pressure, etc., it is *only* such. *To me, all speeches say the same thing*, or: why not exaggerate, as Williams did, for our time proclaim an abhorrence of ‘speech’ designed as was his castigation of ‘the sonnet’ to rid us, as creators of the world, from reiteration of the past dragged on in formal habit. I HATE SPEECH. (496)

Grenier’s position is immediately literary and historical. His proclamation calls into question the repetition, seemingly any repetition, of the poetic line since Williams. Moreover, Grenier’s own poetry surrounding this comment allows it to be read as a call to textuality and a turning away from the self-expressive poetic “I.” This, to be sure, is the light Silliman would later read it in:

[N]either speech nor reference were ever, in any real sense, the ‘enemy.’
But, because the ‘naturalness’ of each, the simple, seemingly obvious

concept that words should derive from speech and refer to things, was inscribed within all of the assumptions behind normative writing, the challenge posed by *This* was to open a broad territory of possibility where very different kinds of poets might explore and execute a wide range of projects. (xviii)

Despite Silliman's slightly apologetic tone, and his apparent refusal to acknowledge the full implications of Grenier's statement, the critique of speech-based poetics in Grenier's "On Speech" is rooted in a poststructuralist critique of language and presence along the lines of Derrida. As Derrida notes in *Writing and Difference*, "It could be shown that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always been designated an invariable presence—*eidos*, *archē*, *telos*, *energeia*, *ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject) *alētheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth" (279-80). And, of course, Derrida's critique of presence in the logocentric tradition often rests on his reversal of speech over writing, a reversal which, in many ways, gave rise to numerous postmodern theories of language which insist, in one form or another, that the text is reality, an assumption that in large part drives the production of Language Poetry. In short, then, Grenier's announcement and denouncement, however exaggerated, set the tone for the promulgation of a whole poetic movement. Of course, the concerns of Language Poetry are diverse and complex. In many ways, in fact, Language Poetry is an individual movement.⁸ In other ways, it is a collective movement

⁸ See Lee Bartlett, "What is 'Language Poetry'?" *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1984): 741-752.

and struggle with literary, historical, and theoretical precedence.⁹ In either case, the designation is not gratuitous: there are a mass of common assumptions and oppositions that warrant the name.

To begin, Language Poetry posits skepticism about the “I” as the organizing principle of the poem. The reasons for this are manifold. In one way, the critique of the “I” is a critique of the workshop aesthetic as it evolved out of the subjective or expressive poetics of the 1950s, Confessionalism, et cetera, and is now at or near the center of the poetry produced by writers in creative writing programs across the country. Ron Silliman, et. al, in “Aesthetic Tendency And The Politics of Poetry: A Manifesto” argue on these terms specifically. Silliman, et. al, characterize the workshop aesthetic as dominated by the expressive lyric, which, they insist, is a form of “fetishized personal ‘experience’” (262). To place the “I,” the individual, at the center of the poem, they argue, is to posit an “authorial ‘voice’” (264). Moreover, they contend the kind of experience that gets carried through this particular “I” is often “posited as an heroic and transcendent project” (264). With little question, much of the poetic theory offered by Language poets is profoundly informed by poststructuralist and postmodern theory. Here, for instance, is something of Jean-Francois Lyotard’s “incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv), a continuation in the critique of Enlightenment values. In the least, the Language poets are skeptical about the possibility of a view from nowhere, of a poetry or poetics, as Charles Bernstein writes,

⁹ See Walter Kalaidjian, “Transpersonal Poetics: Language Writing and the Historical Avant-Gardes in Postmodern Culture,” *American Literary History* 18 (1991): 64-75.

that “seems too final or preemptively restrictive” (*A Poetics* 150). As a consequence, much Language Poetry rejects the idea of closed texts.¹⁰

In contradistinction to the workshop aesthetic and the values that go along with it, Silliman, et. al, insist on an “I” that is open to the “implications of experience,” to the “I” that is “more generative of insight than the transcendent elevation of carefully scripted incidents” (266). To open up the “I” in this way is to open up the self. For these writers, that means viewing language and text not “as simply transparent and instrumental but as a necessity of the world at large--an obstacle as well as an advantage” (266). The turn toward textuality and the word itself is an obvious extension of this argument.

The critique of the “I” has come on other fronts as well. Most importantly, the Language Poets argue that a self-centered or expressive poetics positions the subject as outside of language, an assumption Marjorie Perloff, in “The Word as Such: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry in the Eighties,” deems “invalid” (15) and predicated on an “authenticity of feeling or memory being guaranteed by the poet’s ability to specify, to match image to idea” (15). Rather, the Language Poets insist, via poststructuralist and postmodern theory, that the self is a construction of language. Charles Bernstein, in “The Objects of Meaning: Reading Cavell Reading Wittengstein,” writes:

The distortion is to imagine that knowledge has an “object” outside of the “language games” of which it is a part. . . . Learning a language is not learning the names of things outside language, as if it were a matter of

¹⁰ See, for instance, Lyn Hejinian, “The Rejection of Closure,” *Writing Talks*, ed. Bob Perelman (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1985): 270-291.

matching up signifier with signifieds. . . . Rather, we are initiated by language into a *socius*, which is for us the world. (171-172)

Thus, language and text are inherently social, and, moreover, inherently political.

It comes as no surprise then that many of the Language poets are concerned with the political dimensions of language. That concern comes on many levels, but most commonly it is in the form of a Marxist critique of late capitalism. Ron Silliman, for instance, in “Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World,” asks whether capitalism has “a specific ‘reality’ which is passed through the language and imposed on its speakers” (123). If so, language, like the proletariat, becomes commodified; both, in turn, are reified. However, this does not abolish struggle. Much to the contrary, the Language poets place language on the battleground itself. Silliman writes, in classical Marxist terms:

By recognizing itself as the philosophy of practice in language, poetry can work to search out the preconditions of post-referential language within the existing social fact. This requires (1) recognition of the historic nature and structure of referentiality, (2) placing the issue of language, the repressed element, at the center of the program, and (3) placing the program into the context of conscious class struggle. (131)

Language, then, becomes a site of contestation, a site at which to question and challenge the assumptions of capitalism in its many guises.¹¹ For the language poets, this means

¹¹ For a discussion of language poetry as a site of resistance to the encroachments of mass media, see Marjorie Perloff’s *Radical Artifice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

placing *all* elements of language at the center of the poetic project. For Grenier, specifically, his poetry has tended to privilege the non-referential aspect of language as a way of resisting capitalist ideologies.

While Grenier has insisted his project is not related to the Marxist critique of capitalism,¹² the poetry tells another story. In particular, Grenier's 1986 collection of poems, *Phantom Anthems*, calls into question the nature of (capitalist) values inscribed in referentiality. The title itself, in fact, is reminiscent of Lukács' definition of reification: "Its basis is that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a 'phantom objectivity'" (83). This is perhaps an over-characterization or over-determination of this collection of poems, but many of the poems are concerned specifically with the idea of work. The poem "BLUE SKY BATHING JANUARY 2ND" is an apt exemplification:

sunset / quiet under Capitalism
 uninterrupted hour that you have sought
 what thing free from mitigation wearing
 by the elements oh aether love
 on a windless day by the shore a
bath in that water air my element
 it's the no moon sun & moon together
 at horizon to the west to suck out the tide (n.p.)

¹² See George Hartley, *Textual Politics and the Language Poets* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992) 34.

The familiar duality of work and play or work and repose is immediately apparent. The speaker, insofar as there is one, is “quiet,” yet even then he or she is “under Capitalism”-- a subjugated subject. But “under Capitalism” also signifies the landscape; even the sun and the moon are reified objects: “what thing free from mitigation.” The answer to this implicit question is, of course, nothing. Even the act of taking a bath is not free from such “mitigation.” This, to be sure, is the commodified body going into orbit. The recourse, here, is apparently to a Platonic state of pre-industrialism, to a time when “aether love” is possible, a day “without wind,” a day without “wearing / by the elements.” This primordial state, of course, does not exist. The “real” site of resistance is the poem itself, or, rather, its non-referentiality. If referentiality leads to reification, so the argument goes, then a line like “it’s the no moon sun & moon together,” in its syntactical complexity and general indecipherability, becomes a point of resistance. Moreover, the extent to which the only point of reference in the poem is in the relationship between signifiers, the words tend to lose all value. This, in and of itself, is an important recognition, for if words function in an interminable play of signification, their market value, their ability to be commodified, becomes inherently suspect.

Grenier’s privileging of the non-referential has not come without criticism, even within the circle of poets writing under the rubric Language Poetry. Ron Silliman, for instance, argues in “Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World” that while Grenier “frontally attacks referentiality,” the extent to which non-referentiality is predicated on negation places Grenier as operand in the “referential fetish” (131). And for poets like Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein, reference is only “one of the horizons of language, whose value is to be found in the writing...before which we find ourselves

at any moment” (“Repossessing the Word” ix). The argument is slippery but the point is clear: referentiality is only part of the project of poetry as politics, and, moreover, its tendency to be fetishized makes it susceptible as a site of contestation, a point David Marriott makes undeniably clear: “Language Writing, in its systematic attempt to empty the linguistic sign of its referential function, replaces representation with a fetishistic substitute, that of the signifier” (338).

The range and implications of *Phantom Anthems* is not, however, so easily defined. Also inherent in the title is the idea of multiple subjectivities, of a poetry that at once emanates not from a unified subject, but, rather, at and in the intersection of various cultural and societal influences. The subject is now fragmented, and the text acts accordingly; pastiche, even phonemic pastiche, is the only possible mode:

VOICE SAYS

v o i c e s (n.p.)

Here, voice gives way to a polyphony of voices, words give way to a polyphony of phonemes, and the subject gives way to a polyphony of influences. The subject, the voice, is fragmented. There is, to be sure, an anxiety of influence here, but it is almost exclusively a point for celebration. As in much Language Poetry, heteroglossia reigns supreme.

For Grenier, the inevitable fragmentation of language and (hence) subjectivity is not to be mourned. Nor does it, necessarily, mean the death of the author or the subject. Rather, these notions get reinscribed. The author or poet becomes (sometimes happily, sometimes not) the point at which multiple influences intersect. And this means the end, as Fredric Jameson insists, to the “unique and personal,” to the “distinctive individual

brush stroke” (15). But it does not, as Jameson despairs, necessarily entail the death of the individual subject. For Grenier, as for many Language Poets, pastiche, as both an aesthetic and a way of life, is not “blank parody” (17). On the contrary, many of these poets bask in the non-authoritarian stance of the poet and human being. The individual subject can both be and not be; otherness can persist without the eradication of self or agency.

This is certainly one of the implications Grenier makes in his 1984 collection *A Day at the Beach*. In *A Day at the Beach*, postmodern pastiche is hallmark, things are transformed into signs, and multiple subjectivities collide and emerge. Yet, within the heap of fragments, something of the author or poet persists:

IRENE

one “I” stress on the first syllable (n.p.)

This is not, however, the objective “I” of modernism, the self-expressive “I” of Confessionalist poetry, or of the experiential and scenic-driven “I” of the workshop aesthetic. The “I,” here and now, is a “stress on the first syllable,” a one among a multiplicity (of phonemes). Differentially defined, constituted wholly in relation to that which is and is not present, the poet is a text, a syllable among syllables. Of course, the self maintains in other ways as well. Many of the poems in *A Day at the Beach* are dedicated to and written about the poet’s dog. The influence of wife and daughter are also readily apparent. And while these “influences” are measured contributions in an overall effect, what issues forth is a picture of the postmodern poet standing on the beach, and, in a rare moment of clarity, thinking of the sea, “the shore / primitive / home of man” (n.p.). Of course, this all plays out very differently in the work of Susan Howe.

The Poetics and Politics of Fracture in Susan Howe's *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*

To write means to graft. It's the same word.

--Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*

Everything graft, everything grafted.

--Susan Howe, *Thorow*

Similar, in some respects, to the early experimental work of Jacques Derrida and his textual disruptions and double readings of philosophical and literary discourse, Susan Howe's *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* deconstructs and destabilizes the production of knowledge and meaning. Through a series of textual (poetic) assaults on historical narrative—particularly early Euro-American colonial narrative—and lyric subjectivity, Howe's *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*, like other generally emergent postmodern texts, is aimed at rupture and disorder, at exposing the systemic, the structural, and, importantly, the ideological. Steeped in a politics of deconstruction, Howe's textual project, despite the intention of critics such as Marjorie Perloff to attempt to manage the unmanageable aspects of her work through "close reading," is to register contradictions, inconsistencies, ambiguities, implosions, exclusions, differences, deferrals, gaps, lags, traces, etc. In fact, the deconstructive elements of Howe's *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* are highly reminiscent of Derridean poststructuralism and, at moments, a Caputo-like radical hermeneutics in which the combination of discourses results in a "productive double cross, a palimp-estuous, cross-semination . . ." (Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics* 155). Howe, however, extends, politicizes, and transforms these complex deconstructive enterprises into an occasionally inscrutable but nonetheless

liberating poetic form. Visual and textual boundaries cross and recross. Language, in the course of Howe's text, all the way down to the phoneme and grapheme, is a site of cultural, political, and aesthetic challenge and provocation.

Like a number of her other texts, including *Frame Structures*, an expansive collection of her earliest poems, and *Europe of Trusts*, a volume which assembles three texts first published in the early 1980s, as well as two challenging pieces of postmodern literary criticism, *My Emily Dickinson* and *The Birth-mark: unsettling the wilderness in American literary history*, Howe's *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* is undeniably rooted in history. As Megan Simpson relates, without, however, adequate elaboration, "Howe writes a poetry that is at once a critique of conventional historiography and a mode of historical inquiry" (164). Evident in her text are the traces, revenants, specters, phantoms of Euro-American colonial discourse—a discourse she attacks, in the syntax and "style" of her writing, as an embodiment/representation of a totalizing (or totalized) system of knowledge—a narrative of legitimation, to adapt Jean Francois Lyotard's well-known formulation¹³—that seeks to interpellate, dominate, control, and fix. Since poetry, for Howe, "brings similitude and representation to configurations waiting from forever to be spoken" and, logically, embodies her desire to "tenderly lift from the dark side of history voices that are anonymous, slighted—inarticulate" (*The Europe of Trusts* 14), *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* can be situated within a radical poststructural/postmodern politics that endeavors to challenge and deconstruct the imperatives of (Euro-American) colonial history and historiographical writing, namely

¹³ See Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

objectivity, truth, closure, coherency, and containment. As Howe relates in an interview, a point worth quoting at length, even the title of the collection in which this text appears, *Singularities*, a term taken from a lecture by mathematician René Thom, is as an indication of this deconstructive project:

It was because of Thom that I named my Wesleyan book *Singularities*. . . . In algebra a singularity is the point where plus becomes minus. On a line, if you start at x point, there is +1, +2, etc. But at the other side of the point is -1, -2, etc. The singularity . . . is the point where there is a sudden change to something else. It's a chaotic point. It's the point chaos enters cosmos, the instant articulation. . . . *Predation* and *capture* are terms he uses constantly. I thought this was both a metaphor for Europeans arriving on this continent, where a catastrophic change then had to happen—a new sense of things on the part of the original inhabitants and the emigrants, and to the land as well. And it seemed to me a way of describing these poems of mine. They are singular works on pages, and grouped together, they fracture language; they are charged. “Singularity” was a word dear to the Puritans for other reasons. (*The Birth-mark* 173)

Singularity connotes control, order, center, origin, truth, hierarchy, and homogeneity, concepts obviously essential to a wealth of early Euro-American, especially Puritan, ideologies. Howe's reversal of this term, however, via Thom, puts into play, opens up, to put it in Derridean terms, a series of absences, differences, supplements, and traces: disorder, disorganization, undecidability, margin, fracture, falsehood, heterogeneity. Differentially inscribed in the very notion of the term, in other words, is the possibility of

its undoing, the “point where plus becomes minus,” the “sudden change into something else.” Articulation is also silence; the “truth” of historiography, in other words, is predicated on predation and capture, colonization and control, order and coherency. As Howe remarks in an interview, stories, and hence histories, are “in danger of being lost the minute someone opens one’s mouth to speak” (“An Interview” 31). This conception of literature, history, history writing, and, by extension, language itself, including, of course, poetic language, is central to Howe’s *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*, and it clearly informs the structural organization of the text.

Originally published as an unpaginated chapbook in 1987, *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*, the inaugural section of *Singularities*, is, like the collection itself, divided into three sections. The first section, “The Falls Fight,” is composed, importantly, in prose form. It offers, among other things, a cursory but nonetheless complex historical reconstruction—replete with quotations from a number of unspecified historical sources—of a May 1676 raid by a small group of European colonial troops on an “unguarded Nipmunk, Squakeg, Pokomtuck, or Mahican camp” (3) in the Connecticut River Valley. Howe notes that the raid was led by “Captain Turner of Boston,” and, according to one of her generic but clearly Euro-American historical sources, ““The Reverend Hope Atherton, minister of the gospel, at Hatfield, a gentleman of publick spirit, accompanied the army”” (3).¹⁴ From here, Howe describes the progression of the colonial

¹⁴ Although unnamed in Howe’s text, the source of the quotation, a “well known classic of New England” (ix), according to its introduction, is from the appendix of an edition of *The Redeemed Captive Returning to Zion: or, The Captivity and Deliverance of Rev. John Williams of Deerfield* (Springfield, Mass: The H.R. Hunting Company, 1908) 199.

troops from Hatfield to the (historically ambiguous) Native American camp, remarking, along the way, that the colonial militia “happened upon” the camp after missing a fording spot along a nearby river and that the “frightened inhabitants thought they were being raided by Mohawks” (3). Other details follow. Howe provides, for instance, a quotation from a European “chronicler,” an unnamed historian, who aseptically describes the violence and tallies the dead:

“They soon discovered their mistake but being in no position to make an immediate defense were slain on the spot, some in their surprise ran directly to the river, and were drowned; others betook themselves to their bark canoes, and having in their confusion forgot their paddles, were hurried down the falls and dashed against the rocks. In this action the enemy by their own confession, lost 300, women and children included.”

(3)

Momentarily interrupting her historical reconstruction, Howe intervenes to call this narrative into question and, tacitly at least, to reveal her poetic project: “What the historian doesn’t say is that most of the dead were women and children” (3). The incision complete, the cicatrix initiated, Howe’s assemblage continues to offer elements of the story. She notes, in particular, the disorganization of the colonial militia’s retreat—which “soon became a rout” (4)—as a consequence of neighboring bands of Native Americans being alerted to the militia’s presence, the wanderings of several “Christian soldiers” (4) who were separated from the retreat in the confusion, including Hope Atherton, and the eventual violent death of many of these lost “soldiers” at the hands of the local tribes

after offering surrender “on the condition their lives would be spared” (4). Hope Atherton, however, is not among them.

From this point forward, Howe’s reconstruction recedes, mostly, into deconstructive play and aphoristic wandering, a kind of tracing and retracing, a figuring and refiguring, of the word and name “Hope.” The focus of the text, in other words, turns on and to Hope Atherton, the minister of the militia, who, according to an “EXTRACT from a LETTER (dated June 8, 1781) of Stephen Williams to President Styles” which appears on the following page, was ““unhorsed and separated from the company, wandered in the woods some days and then got into Hadley, which is on the east side of the Connecticut River”” (5). The fight, however, took place on the opposite side near an apparently impassable section of the Connecticut River, and so Atherton’s claim that ““he had offered to surrender himself to the enemy, but they would not receive him”” (5) was met with disbelief and generally unqualified contempt. Slighted, ostracized, and driven into anonymity and marginality, Hope, according to Howe, became a “stranger to his community and died soon after the traumatic exposure that has earned him poor mention in a seldom opened book” (4). His story, in other words, is a dark and largely neglected aspect of the historical record, a symptom of and an apparent supplement to a larger politics of erasure and exclusion; the margin, for Howe, is the center. Hope, therefore, or, rather, his “epicene name,” which “draws its predetermined poem in,” and “excursion,” is an “emblem foreshadowing a Poet’s abolished limitations in our demythologized fantasy of Manifest Destiny” (4).

An excursion is a partial escape. Confinement, limits, borders, and boundaries inspire its initiation; the expedition, however, often, or least in intention, returns home.

Howe's text, in other terms, in the process of deconstructing history and history writing, is never fully away from home: it moves, finally and importantly, within the boundaries of the historical discourse it deconstructs. Even "abolished limitations" contain traces (and traces of traces): predefinition, predetermination, and containment. Nonetheless, play, wandering, disruption, and fracture necessarily ensue. For Howe, therefore, Hope, whose "epicene" name, she conjectures, may "prophetically engender pacification of the feminine" (4), is simultaneously a possibility and a trap, a point of opening and a moment of enclosure, for both the (female) historian and the (female) poet. As she notes in an interview, "If you are a woman, archives hold perpetual ironies. Because the gaps and silences are where you find yourself" (*The Birth-mark* 158). His story, or, more accurately, the possibility of his story, is nonetheless essential, emblematic, and supplemental. Howe's prose reconstruction and deconstruction of "The Falls Fight," in other words, is the first and less radical phase of a larger *deconstructive* project--a project writ large in the complex and radical *poetic* deconstructions of the remaining sections of *Singularities*, particularly the two remaining sections of *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*. This point requires explanation.

In *Deconstructive Criticism*, Vincent Leitch notes that deconstruction "practices two interpretations of interpretation. It aims to decipher the stable truths of a work, employing conventional 'passive' tactics of reading; and it seeks to question and subvert such truths in an active production of enigmatic undecidables" (175-76). One of the strategies of deconstruction, in other terms, is a process of doubling, or double reading; differences and deferrals (*différance*), traces and supplements, undecidables, are inevitable effects of meaning. In *Positions*, Derrida outlines this primordial process:

The play of differences supposes, in effect, syntheses and referrals which forbid at any moment, or in any sense, that a simple element be *present* in and of itself, referring only to itself. Whether in the order of spoken or written discourse, no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present. This interweaving results in each “element”—phoneme or grapheme—being constituted on the basis of the trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system. This interweaving, this textile, is the *text* produced only in the transformation of another text. Nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system, is anywhere ever simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces. (26)

Derrida’s definition of *différance* here—as well as the recognizable critique of the Western logocentric tradition, the metaphysics of presence, especially the privileging of speech over writing—also offers an implied definition of writing, of *écriture*. To write is to mean. And, as Barbara Johnson relates, as “soon as there is meaning, there is difference” (ix). In other words, a “deconstructive reading does not point out the flaws or weaknesses or stupidities of an author, but the *necessity* with which what he *does* see is systematically related to what he does *not* see” (xv). Absolute truth is a fiction. Contamination, the production of differences, traces, supplements, and other undecidables, is the condition of knowing, of meaning, and of writing. In this process, the author, as Vincent Leitch notes, “is a name” (*Deconstructive Criticism* 177).

Writing, *écriture*, therefore, to add on to this list of Derridean effects, is a (primordial) process of grafting. In fact, as Derrida argues in *Dissemination*, “To write

means to graft. It's the same word.... Each grafted text continues to radiate back toward the site of its removal, transforming that, too, as it affects the new territory" (355). So, in the split writing of Derrida's *Glas*, for example, an early experimental text, he divides the page between Hegel and Genet, invariably allowing each to contaminate the other: Hegel is grafted onto Genet; Genet is grafted onto Hegel. Needless to say, this conception of writing, of textual grafting, as Jonathan Culler relates, views discourse "as the product of various sorts of combinations or insertions" (*On Deconstruction* 135). Along the way, of course, critiques occur, reinscriptions emerge, new territories are staked out, and new effects of meaning are produced. The process of undoing looms large.

The deconstructive strategy of Howe's "The Falls Fight," therefore, is more than mere quotation or an instance of historical collage. As with Derrida, Howe's excisions, grafts, and incisions are critiques, expositions, and reinscriptions that give rise to new effects of meaning, engender differences and deferrals, reveal blind spots, and, generally speaking, undermine the stability of (historical) truth. The simultaneous reconstruction and deconstruction of a specific historical event, particularly the extractions from unnamed and suggestively unreliable and ideologically driven historical texts, the occasional interruptions and incisions, the etymological play, and the overall sense of ambiguity, in other terms, is, to reiterate, the first phase of a larger project aimed at fracture and disorder, at demonstrating, as Howe notes in another context, that culture "representing form and order will always demand sacrifice and subjugation of one group by another" (*My Emily Dickinson* 93). Coherency, form, and order require oppression and exclusion. In more explicit and specific terms, then, "The Falls Fight" is aimed at exposing and deconstructing historiography's claim to truth, especially the systemic and

ideological function of this claim in histories of European colonization. It is, in the end, and in no small part, an initial cut in a larger and highly politicized deconstructive project.

The next section, “Hope Atherton’s Wanderings,” is composed in serial form, a trademark of Howe’s style, consists of sixteen poems, and clearly continues, in significantly more radical fashion, the deconstructive and highly political project established in the first section of the text. In fact, the form itself is offered as an element of Howe’s critique of historiography’s claim to truth. As Kathleen Crown relates, “Howe’s turn to serial form is motivated by gender-based critiques—not only of the lyric’s presupposition of a unified (male) speaking subject but also of historiography’s claim to incorporate memories, narratives, and anecdotes (recorded for the most part by male editors) within a progressively larger historical narrative that is coherent and continuous” (486). Howe’s poems, therefore, Crown later notes, operate as “textual archaeologies that question source documents and explore the material resistance of language (its complex etymologies and shifting orthographies) to the social vision it inscribes” (488). The first two poems of this section are felicitous representations:

Prest try to set after grandmother
 revived by and laid down left ly
 little distant each other and fro
 Saw digression hobbling driftwood
 forage two rotted beans & etc.
 Redy to faint slaughter story so
 Gone and signal through deep water
 Mr. Atherton’s story Hope Atherton

Clog nutmeg abt noon
 scraping cano muzzell
 foot path sand and so
 gravel rubbish vandal
 horse flesh ryal tabl
 sand enemys flood sun
 Danielle Warnare Servt
 Turner Falls Fight us
 Next wearer April One (6)

In an interview with Lynn Keller, Howe remarks, “I believe there are stories that need to be told again differently” (“An Interview” 31). Whether or not Howe’s use of the term “differently” is intended to function as a reference to Derridean deconstruction is a matter for debate, but this initial poem of *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* clearly enacts and monumentalizes *différance*. Even the first word of the poem is a lesson in signification. The word “prest,” if it functions as a noun, is defined, according to the *OED*, as “a payment made in advance;” as an adjective, it can mean “ready for action or use; at hand; prepared; in proper order,” “alert, active, sprightly,” “clear to the understanding,” or “close at hand;” as a verb, it signifies “to make haste.” Given the inability to determine the term’s syntactical function, all of these definitions appear relevant. At the same time, the word is no longer in use; it is a linguistic relic, an odd specter, a trace, and, as such, an embodiment of that which is not present but also

necessarily not absent. What's more, it is a representation of a historically specific orthographic system, to use Crown's formulation, linked to ideologies of domination and control. A turn to the historical text from which Howe excises this term, as well as others, a text that she hints at in "The Falls Fight," specifically in the extract from a letter written by Stephen Williams, reveals the complexity of Howe's poetic deconstruction.

Appearing in George Sheldon's *A History of Deerfield, Massachusetts*, and apparently written by Stephen Williams, son of the Reverend John Williams, and initially published in an appendix to the 1793 edition of *The Redeemed Captive Returning to Zion: or, The Captivity and Deliverance of Rev. John Williams of Deerfield*, the text documents, in clearly romantic and undeniably Puritan fashion, the "heroic" escape of the "boy hero" Jonathan Wells, a member of the colonial militia who, like Hope Atherton, evaded death during the rout following the "Falls Fight."¹⁵ Given the importance of this text not only to the present discussion but to Howe's text as a whole, I offer an extended excerpt of Williams' account of Wells' experience:

"I shall give an account of the remarkable providences of God towards Jonathan Wells Esq then aged 16 years and 2 or 3 months who was in the action [at the Falls Fight, May 19th]. . . . Upon receiving his wound he was in danger of falling from his horse, but catching hold of ye horse's maine he recovered himself. . . . He had now got about 2 miles from ye place

¹⁵ Howe acknowledges her use of this text in her 2007 collection, *Souls of the Labadie Tract* (New York: New Directions): "I found their narratives in George Sheldon's *A History of Deerfield, Massachusetts*, published in 1895 by the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association" (13).

where yy did ye exploit in, & now yy had left ye track of ye company & were left both by ye indians yt persued ym & by their own men that should have tarried with ym. These two men were unacquainted wth ye woods, & without anny track or path. . . . J.J. represented ye baldness of his wounds, & made his companion think they were certainly mortall, and therefore when yy separated in order to find the path, J.W. was glad to leave him, lest he shd be a clog or hindrance to him. Mr. W. grew faint, & once ye indians prest him, he was near fainting away, but by eating a nutmeg, (which his grandmother gave him as he was going out) he was revivd. After traveling a while he came upon Green river, and followd it up to ye place calld ye Country farms, & passd over Green river. . . . Abt noon this, & at abt sun an hour high at nt, being disturbed by ye flies, he stopd ye touch hole of his gun & struck fire, & set ye woods on fire. . . . He traveled upon ye plain till he came to a foot path wch led up to ye road he went out in, where he cd see ye tracks of ye horses. He traveled by leaning upon his gun as a staff, & so he came down to Dd river, but did not know how to get over. . . . [H]e got over, but filled the muzzell of his gun with gravel & sand. . . . Mr. W., suspecting the indians wd come to search for him, went away into a swamp . . . and finding two great trees yt had been left by ye flood lying at a little distance from each other & covered over wth rubbish, he crept in betwixt them & within a little while heard a running to & fro in ye swamp, but saw nothing; within a little while all was still, and he ventured to proceed on his journey.” (162-164)

In *Positions*, Derrida notes that *différance* is the “systematic play of differences, of the traces of differences, of the spacing by means of which elements are related to each other. This *spacing* is the simultaneously active and passive . . . production of the intervals without which the ‘full’ terms would not signify, would not function” (27). No instance of language is ever fully absent or present; differences and deferrals persist. As such, Howe’s use of the term “prest,” excised from its historical and cultural context and put into a kind of free-floating play without syntactical coherence, simultaneously calls attention to and undermines its significance and function. Stripped of its singularity, in other words, the term is no longer capable of transmitting a historically stable meaning; contiguity, coherence, form, and order give way to play, fracture, difference, and deferral. In its current context, in other terms, the word, or, perhaps more appropriately, sound form, inspires linguistic uncertainty and phonetic play, as others have noted¹⁶: press, pressed, impressed, oppressed, present, priest, et cetera. Needless to say, many of these phonetically similar terms are historically relevant: Hope Atherton, for instance, was a priest; the terms “press” and oppressed” bear an obvious significance in their relationship to European colonization. More significantly, of course, this play of differences defers and upsets the supposedly stable historical meaning of the term “prest.” Its meaning, finally, is undecidable. To be sure, this undecidability calls into question the “truth” of both the historical record and historiography itself.

This deconstructive notion of undecidability is achieved in other instances as well. A comparison of Howe’s first two poems with the narrative of Jonathan Wells’ escape

¹⁶ See, for example, Marjorie Perloff’s “‘Collision or Collusion With History’: The Narrative Lyric of Susan Howe,” *Contemporary Literature* 30.4 (1989): 518-33.

reveals that Howe's choice of words—"grandmother," "distant," "faint," "clog," "muzzell," "sand," and "gravel" for instance—is in large part constituted by excisions from the historical record. At the same time, in the absence of this source material, Howe's poem does not, in any real sense, offer an historical or thematic reconstruction of Wells' escape. Instead, Howe's text deconstructs, decomposes, shatters, and fractures the veracity of the historical narrative, and, as such, opens it up to scrutiny, questioning, and possibility. In fact, in typically deconstructive fashion, Howe's active asyntactical combinations, or interweavings, to resurrect Derrida's term, of words from the historical record threaten the order and consistency of a supposedly stable historical truth; turning the language of Wells' story back on itself, Howe exposes premises, gaps, and silences; new, unexpected, and, importantly, unintended meanings emerge (which, of course, are subject to further deconstruction).

In the first poem, for example, the line "Redy to faint slaughter story so" both excises and incises. Creating and delaying meaning, the line reassembles a number of terms from Wells' account into an asyntactic collage that simultaneously issues forth a wealth of meaningful possibilities and critical denouncements. According to the historical narrative, Wells was "redy to faint" prior to being revived by a piece of nutmeg given to him by his grandmother. However, in the course of Howe's line, "faint" might also be construed as an adjective; "faint slaughter," then, recalls, in one sense, the cowardly behavior of the colonial militia who slaughtered a number of sleeping Native Americans during the beginning stages of the "Falls Fight." This combination, of course, also calls into question the notion of prudence implied by the use of the term "redy," especially since the "Falls Fight" inspired unity among the normally exclusive bands of Native

Americans in the Connecticut River Valley. In addition, the amalgam “slaughter story” functions antithetically to the colonial intention of Wells’ narrative, namely as a Cooper-like discourse of Puritan Providence. The process of undoing, once again, looms large.

Needless to say, other deconstructions and radical reversals emerge. “Clog nutmeg abt noon” reflects the record of Wells’ damaged appendage and subsequent revival while exposing, especially through the use of the word “Clog,” which, as a verb, denotes restraint and confinement, the violence enacted under the logic of Manifest Destiny. The lines “gravel rubbish vandal / horse flesh ryal tabl” recall Wells’ river fording and desperate foraging. At the same time, terms like “rubbish” and “vandal” intimate destruction and violence, as does “ryal,” which, if pronounced “rial,” signifies “froth or foam” and suggests, among a number of other possibilities, an image of the bottom of a cataract where, in the “Falls Fight,” hundreds of women and children were dashed against the rocks and undoubtedly churned in the waters. Meaning, of course, is never final. Difference and deferral is the fundamental condition of language. Howe’s “ryal” evokes not only “rial” but “rile” and “real;” “tabl” evokes, both visually and phonetically, “tabla,” “tablature,” “table,” “tableaux,” or “topple.” Meaning is also not restricted to phonetic resemblance and denotative suggestion. With its abrupt and often violent pauses and stops, in large measure a consequence of the preponderance of one- and two-syllable words, Howe’s sound forms also mimic the historical violence of the “Falls Fight,” of Native Americans clamoring toward the river and struggling through the gravel and sand, of hard splashes and strokes in a fight against the rapids, of guns being loaded and unloaded, of bodies falling to the ground. History opens: the past is present; the present is past. This is not, however, a Modernist gesture.

In Howe, Pound's Modernist directive to "make it new" is transformed and transcribed into something like "undo it." Postmodern innovation is not, however, as with the Modernists, an aesthetic end; instead, it is a foregrounding and interrogation of the processes by, through, and in which innovation occurs. As Peter Nicholls relates, Howe's mode of composition produces "constellations of words which combine in a way that forces prosody against syntax" and consequently moves "beyond the more familiar, modernist forms of fragmentation which tend to break discourse into phrases to recombine their elements into new wholes" (596). In other words, according to Nicholls, Howe's attention to "sound" and "individual words" flouts "syntactical logic" (596). In perhaps somewhat typically poststructuralist fashion, then, language in Howe's poetry is cast as unstable and unreliable but simultaneously inescapable; language is both captor and captive. At the same time, the textually deconstructive nature of her texts is more than mere aesthetic effect. To be sure, Howe's textual interrogations, like much postmodern art, are inescapably political. For Howe, the instability of language throws into question the legitimacy of historical (colonial) narrative. As Peter Nicholls argues, Howe's work proposes an "association between 'history' and an idea of narrative as a form premised on exclusion and erasure" (588), a sentiment echoed in Rachel Blau DuPlessis' analysis of Howe's work: "[H]er poems are repositories of the language shards left in a battlefield over cultural power" (123).

In addition to the deconstructive reversals outlined above, Howe's use and deconstruction of Stephen Williams' account of Jonathan Wells' escape, wander, and return home is also, then, an indication of a larger politics of erasure and exclusion. Like Derrida in *Glas*, Howe actively grafts (as the condition of language). Hope Atherton is

grafted onto Jonathan Wells; Wells is grafted onto Atherton. The result, at moments, is something like a lineated version of Derrida's *Glas* or of John Caputo's *Radical Hermeneutics*, an undecidable that "produces not a definite effect but one which keeps shifting, ambiguous, impossible to decipher, unyielding to a *hermeneuein* which wants to fix its essence" (188). Strictly speaking, then, these poems are not, as the title suggests, "Hope Atherton's Wanderings." Clearly, however, Howe identifies with Atherton. His "epicene name," to reiterate, is an "emblem foreshadowing a poet's abolished limitations." Hope is both a point of opening and a moment of enclosure. Like Daniel Warner, a member of the colonial militia feminized as "Danielle Warnare" in the second poem¹⁷, Hope, for Howe, serves two functions. First, as a point of opening, Hope's rejected story—inscribed, for Howe, in his name—is a representation of that which history and history writing excludes and marginalizes; women and Native Americans are obvious instances. As Fiona Green notes, "Attending particularly to the mechanics of textual transmission, Howe scrutinizes those editorial and institutional frameworks that come between her and the vestigial presences she wants to recover" (80). Reinscription and reappropriation, then, must occur, or, as Howe writes in *The Birth-mark*, "If history is a record of survivors, Poetry shelters other voices" (47). However, and second, as a moment of enclosure, the story of the "Falls Fight" no more belongs to Wells than it does to Atherton; both are instances of a larger historical and historiographical politics of domination, control, form, order, and, significantly, exclusion. Their stories are, in short,

¹⁷ For evidence of Warner's participation in the "Falls Fight," see George Madison Bodge's *Soldiers in King Philip's War* (Boston, Mass., 1906) 242.

examples of a colonial discourse that rests on a violent and antithetical conception of otherness. This point requires elaboration.

In “The Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson,” Howe writes, “Avatar of the only literary-mythological form indigenous to North America, this captivity narrative is both a microcosm of colonial imperialist history and a prophecy of our contemporary repudiation of alterity, anonymity, darkness” (89). She draws attention to the fact that, as in much colonial discourse, Rowlandson’s narrative, written “ostensibly to serve as a reminder of God’s Providence,” refers to Native Americans as “murtherous wretches, ‘bloody heathen,’ ‘hell-hounds,’ ‘ravenous bears,’ ‘wolves’” (95). At the same time, she notes that many critics “skirt the presence in this genre of an equally insulting stereotype, that of a white woman as a passive cipher in a controlled and circulated idea of Progress at whose zenith rides the hero-hunter (Indian or white) who will always rescue her” (96). Here, as in her poetry, Howe bears the mark of not only a poststructuralist but of a feminist and postcolonial critic. In framing Rowlandson’s narrative and, by extension, the narratives of Atherton and Wells, Howe exposes one of the imperatives of colonialism—to manage the unmanageable. This imperative, especially as a function of discourse, has been theorized in several different forms. Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture*, however, provides the most relevant articulation of the point.

Colonial discourse, Bhabha insists, is an “apparatus of power” which turns on the “recognition and disavowal of racial/cultural/historical differences”—strategic functions which create a space for “‘subject peoples’” (70). What’s more, it finds authorization for these strategies in the production “of knowledges of colonizer and colonized which are

stereotypical but antithetically valued” (70). In other words, it finds authorization differentially. The objective of colonial discourse, then, consists in construing the colonized “as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest” (70). Further, “[C]olonial discourse produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an ‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible” (70-1). To put it another way, colonial discourse produces the colonized subject through and by its own terms, producing a “social reality” which forever bends back upon itself. Such rhetoric, built on notions of a dissipated populace in need of disciplinary control from without, recalls the founding principals of Western Imperial domination. And it clearly describes at least one of the historical functions of Rowlandson’s, Atherton’s, and Wells’ narratives—narratives Howe seeks to deconstruct, destabilize, and fracture. It is of little wonder, then, that the siglums, the extracted letters, “M” and “R,” appear, respectively, in the third and fourth poems of this section, grafted into Howe’s existing grafts and deconstructions of Wells and Atherton: “who was lapd M as big as any kerchief,” “Who was lapt R & soe grew bone & bullet” (7).

Many of the remaining poems of “Hope Atherton’s Wanderings,” as well as a number of the poems in the final section, “Taking the Forest,” continue the deconstructive strategy outlined above, tracing and retracing, grafting and undermining, supplementing and interrogating colonial history and historiography’s claim to order, coherency, and truth. Some, however, break out of this mode and offer relatively clear indications of Howe’s conception of colonial history and history writing as well as her deconstructive approach. In the twelfth poem of the second section, for example, Howe writes, “Knowledge narrowly fixed knowledge / Whose bounds in theories slay” (12).

Unlike the historian, the purveyor of truth, Howe's textual constructions and deconstructions constantly call into question the author's role, the poet's role, in the production of (historical) meaning: "Collision or collusion with history" (33). Colonial discourse, if it is to serve its intended social, political, and cultural function, demands "narrowly fixed" accounts that constrain and limit; stability and truth, "fixed knowledge," is essential to its repudiation of alterity and social and political imperatives of domination. Its limitations and order, in other terms, its "bounds," are extensions of its violence: "in theories slay." At the same time, its desire for coherency exposes it as a system subject to interruption, interrogation, and deconstruction. Its limitations and systems of "fixed knowledge" are subject to textual violence, a kind of theoretical slaying. As Howe writes in one of the poems of the last section, "Taking the Forest," "total systemic circular knowledge / System impossible in time" (28).

Other announcements and denouncements emerge. In an early poem from "Taking the Forest," Howe writes:

Double penetrable foreign sequel

By face to know helm

Prey to destroy in dark theme

Emblem of fictitious narrative

Step and system

Collision and impulsion

Asides and reminders to myself

Lives to be seen pressing and alien

Fix fleeting communication

Carried away before a pursuer

Demonstration in a string of definitions (19)

Clearly less opaque than the early poems of the second section but nonetheless complex, the language here inspires a kind of politics of readerly consumption. “Double penetrable” describes, among other things, Howe’s deconstructive practice and the back and forth movement of Native Americans outlined in the search for Jonathan Wells. The phrases “foreign sequel” and “Emblem of fictitious narrative” seem to provide an allusion to the rejected narrative of Hope Atherton and the celebrated narrative of Jonathan Wells. “Fix fleeting communication” seems, in part, a denouncement similar in fashion to Howe’s earlier scrutiny of the imperative of colonial discourse to dominate, control, and fix. Of course, “Demonstration in a string of definitions” seems to undermine any attempt to offer even a casual suggestion of stable meaning. Definitions initiate limitation and control, both forms of demonstration; concurrently, however, definitions inspire an interminable process of differentiation and deconstruction. Meaning, as in other sections of Howe’s text, is never complete.

Despite the relative syntactical clarity of some poems in these last two sections, other poems recede into nearly inscrutable deconstructive play and linguistic fracture. Here, for example, are a few lines from one of the last poems of the second section:

Posit gaze level diminish lamp and asleep(selv)cannot see
 MoheganToForceImmanenceShotStepSeeShowerFiftyTree
 UpConcatenationLessonLittleAKantianEmpiricalMaoris (15)

Kathleen Fraser argues that Howe “takes a whole page as a canvas (she began as a painter) and positions words as in a field . . . in which the line does not present itself as continuous flow but pinpoints, frames, or locates one vulnerable word at a time for its

own resonance, time value, visual texture, and meaning, apart from its connection to what precedes and follows it” (161). Given Howe’s monumentalizing of difference and deferral, this, however, seems not always to be the case, if ever. In fact, as in the lines above, isolating terms for individual scrutiny seems largely beside the point, as each word, each sound, is marked by a series of differences. No element, to put it in Derridean terms, is present in and of itself. Specific deconstructions, plays, or neologisms appear inscrutable, fail to yield truth or meaning, and, as such, are typically impervious to New Critical standards of reading. Howe’s textual experimentations, like Derrida’s attacks on the institution of philosophy and philosophical writing, are aimed at questioning traditional methods of writing and reading and traditional conceptions of making meaning. Contamination is inevitable; knowledge is never fixed. As Michael Greer argues, close reading, in and of itself, “dismantles the discourse of language poetry; it separates the aesthetic component of the writing from its political contexts and impulses, and isolates its forms from its history” (339). This is not to suggest, of course, that specific terms are without specific meaning or that any kind of reading or act of interpretation should not take place. Rather, Howe’s suggestion is that the impulse to control a text is the same impulse that inspires violence in the name of coherency and order. The alternative, of course, as demonstrated by Howe’s deconstructive practices, is an active reading in which production is never final. Although subject to further deconstruction and new erasure, the act of revision and reinscription is both necessary and possible. The last line of *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* suggestively reads, “Crumbled masonry windswept hickory” (38).

In addition to Howe's deconstruction of Euro-American colonial history and historiography, the poems of *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*, without ever saying so, also seem to call into question the legitimacy of the contemporary lyric. In its interrogation of voice, lyric, and subjectivity, Howe's text, in other terms, implicitly challenges the workshop aesthetic. Kathleen Crown, for instance, argues on these terms specifically: "Shattering dominant ideologies of the contemporary lyric—its privatized subjectivity, scenic-derived emotion, gendered agency, and image-based epiphanies—Howe's serial lyrics testify not to the solitary speaker's inward eye but to a painfully public, dissociated, and multiple sensibility" (483-4). Although offering a more general assessment, Michael Greer argues along similar lines:

By problematizing poetic language along the two fundamental axes of communication and referentiality, "language poetry" effects a shift in the relationship of the (writing) subject to poetic discourse, from a notion of the self as a speaker or voice located outside the text, to a notion of the subject as a constructed moment or effect within various intersecting discourses. The radical potential of poetry, in this argument, lies in its ability to make available new modes of subjectivity and communication by reworking the fabric of relations among writer, text, and reader. (343)

The self, in the course of Howe's poems, is a fractured construct, an intersection, a point of reference, a repetition, a doubling, a graft, and an effect of discourse. Like Robert Grenier, her work, especially in its construction of polyvalent subjectivity, indirectly challenges the order, coherency, and dominative control of late-capitalist culture.

**CHAPTER 3. NATURE AND THE POLITICS OF INTERDEPENDENCE IN
GARY SNYDER'S *MOUNTAINS AND RIVERS WITHOUT END* AND A.R.
AMMONS'S *GARBAGE***

In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson insists that postmodernism “is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good” (ix). For Jameson, of course, the death of “nature” signifies much more than just an end to an experience of natural environments. For him, as for many postmodern theorists and critics, nature, or Nature, or the natural, is nothing more than an inscription, a culturally mediated text. As Jameson makes clear in his discussion of a Robert Gober installation, which displays the work of several other visual artists (Webster, Bierstadt, and Prince) within its highly aestheticized “natural” home space, postmodernism and postmodern art constitute “something like the grave of Nature, as the latter has systematically been eclipsed from the object world and the social relations of a society whose tendential domination over its Other (the nonhuman or the formerly natural) is more complete than at any other moment in human history” (170). In this scenario, nature, and no doubt human subjectivity and reality itself, is a fiction, an interminable play of free-floating signifiers without stable/fixed signifieds. Like Jean Baudrillard, Jameson, as Vincent Leitch relates, historicizes postmodernism as an “age of simulacra addicted to images, stereotypes, pseudoevents, and spectacles. It is not a question here of preferring representations to realities but of the transformation of ‘reality’ into representations: there is no independent reality, only discourses about it” (*Postmodernism* 118-119). Life in the postmodern era, according to Jameson and

Baudrillard, is no longer lived or experienced directly. Representation, now largely the domain of profit-driven and debt-laden transnational corporations and conglomerates, is reality. Nature is dead.

Needless to say, Jameson and Baudrillard's characterizations of the postmodern era have profound social, political, cultural, and, importantly, ecological implications. If postmodernism constitutes the death of nature, if reality is only representation, if subjectivity is a by-product of corporate hegemony, if passive and carefree consumption constitute the essence of human life, if watersheds, forests, and ecosystems are only viewed as sources of profit and human resource, if, as Vincent Leitch relates, *both* postmodernism *and* capitalism demand "atomizing, dehistoricizing, commodifying, and desacrilizing" (*Postmodernism* 119), then the manner and content of responses to these conditions is not only of fundamental importance but undeniably and unavoidably political. Contemplating an apparent revival of literary interest in writing about nature in the early 1990s, Gary Snyder notes, "The subject matter 'nature,' and the concern for it (and us humans in it), have come—it is gratifying to note—to engage artists and writers. This interest may be another strand of postmodernism, since the modernist avant-garde was strikingly urban-centered" ("Unnatural Writing" 163). What Snyder suggests, at least in part, is that to write about (or for) nature in the postmodern era invariably involves taking into consideration the ecological impact of human civilization and culture, which includes of course the cultural and political system of values, ideas, and ideals upon which that impact is predicated. In an age of ecological/environmental crisis, in other words, the concept that humans exist separate from or outside of nature, for example, is not only outmoded but dangerous. To be sure, then, while Jameson and Baudrillard view

the largely destructive and deconstructive nature of postmodernism as simply replicating the logic of late capitalism, others see postmodernism, not uncritically of course, as an era of potential, possibility, and renewal, particularly in its ongoing scrutiny of modernist ideologies. Getting back to nature just might, in fact, be a postmodern gesture.

In *The Postmodern Turn*, for instance, Steven Best and Douglas Kellner insist that although postmodern social theory rarely deals directly with ecological issues, it is a “short step to an ecological perspective in which postmodern ‘incredulity’ realizes the bankruptcy of modern views of progress and understands that the modern age of cheap, nonrenewable resources is ending” (265). In other terms, the “shift from the modern belief in inexhaustible resources...to the postmodern realization of scarcity and finitude allows for a new ethic of conservation, a new appreciation of ecology, a critique of consumerism, and a new vision of ‘sustainable’ societies and consumption habits that are ecologically sound” (265). Since the early 1970s, born in large measure out of circumstance and necessity, various strands of environmental thought—informed by the ecological consequences of modern *and* postmodern science, theory, and culture—have emerged, sometimes in competing and combative fashion. Among the list of these emergent disciplines and movements are various theories of environmental and economic entropy, chaos theory, social ecology, ecopsychology, ecometaphysics, ecofeminism, and deep ecology. While both direct and indirect traces of these disciplines, as well as others, are evident in the work of both Gary Snyder and A.R. Ammons, and while strict categorization unfairly limits the breadth and scope of their work, the deep ecology movement nonetheless provides a relatively consistent basis on which to discuss the

ecological perspective of both writers, as well as their responses to the issues outlined above.

A product, in large part, of the counterculture of the 1960s, both residual *and* emergent in its opposition to the values and ideologies of the dominant culture, deep ecology offers a fundamentally radical view of nature, natural systems, and, more generally, the place of humans in the biosphere, generally rooted in a logic of both science and spirituality. Defined, initially, by Arne Naess, in 1973, deep ecology rejects the “human-in-environment image in favor of *the relational, total-field image*. Organisms as knots in the biospherical net or field of intrinsic relations” (“The Shallow and the Deep” 3). To be distinguished from what Naess calls “shallow ecology,” a short-range, shortsighted, and often technologically driven movement intended to fight “against pollution and resource depletion” and secure the “health and affluence of people in the developed countries” (3), deep ecology expresses a “value priority system only in part based on results . . . of scientific research” (7). In other terms, as Alan Drengson and Yuichi Inoue note in *The Deep Ecology Movement*, shallow ecology must be “clearly distinguished from the deep approach, which in contrast examines the roots of our environmental/social problems. The deep approach aims to achieve a fundamental ecological transformation of our sociocultural systems, collective actions, and lifestyles” (xix). At its source, then, deep ecology is a scientifically grounded philosophical movement. It is, as Naess contends, “*ecophilosophical* rather than ecological” since ecology is a “*limited* science which makes *use* of scientific methods” while philosophy is “the most general forum of debate on fundamentals, descriptive as well as prescriptive, and political philosophy is one of its subsections” (“The Shallow and the Deep” 8). Given

Naess' conception of the movement, it should, therefore, come as no surprise that deep ecology is grounded, both theoretically and practically, in a political philosophy of social change that, as he relates, insists on "a geographical sense of belonging" (*Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle* 61) and an understanding that experience of "an environment happens by doing something in it, living in it, meditating and acting" (63). This is, fundamentally, a bioregionalist ethic. According to its terms, the "local community is the starting point for political deliberation" (63) on a range of social and ecological issues: act locally; think globally. Like other forms of postmodern thought, deep ecology necessarily provides a systemic analysis of social, political, and cultural transformation through an examination of dominant and often long-standing conceptions of place and world, retaining and discarding along the way. Unlike many strands of postmodern theory, however, it does not view postmodernism as an era of fatalistic capitulation to finally unknowable sources of power. For deep ecologists, change is both necessary and possible. Its analysis and conception of nature is a case in point.

In *Contesting Earth's Future: Radical Ecology and Postmodernity*, Michael Zimmerman notes that "deep ecologists call for a shift away from anthropocentric humanism toward an ecocentrism guided by the norm of self-realization of all beings" (2). Drawing upon, as Zimmerman also relates, "the science of ecology, Asian religions, the perennial philosophy, leading Western philosophers . . . Norwegian and American naturalism and pastoralism, countercultural ideals, creation-centered spirituality, and the practices and attitudes of primal peoples (especially Native Americans)" (19), deep ecologists view all species as ontological equals, as nodes, or "knots," to return to Naess' formulation, in a non-privileged, non-dualistic, and non-hierarchical "biospherical net."

Everything, and every thing, is connected. Choices, therefore, matter. As Gary Snyder relates, “Deep Ecology thinkers insist that the natural world has value in its own right, that the health of natural systems should be our first concern, and that this best serves the interests of humans as well” (“Survival and Sacrament” 180). In other terms, difference, diversity, is essential to a sustainable and fully functioning ecosystem. Domination, colonization, subjugation, and neglect, the driving forces of modernism, which have no doubt been inherited by important aspects of late-capitalist culture as well as certain strands of postmodern theory, damage its overall health. In addition, deep ecologists insist that nature and natural systems are real, whether we accord to them a reality outside of human understanding or not. Of course, failure to acknowledge the reality of nature—seeing it, for instance, as a massive storehouse for human consumption or viewing it as nothing more than a social, political, or cultural construction—threatens the survival of all species, including humans. On the unfortunate implications of nature as a purely social construction, Snyder, for example, is direct:

The idea of Nature as being a "social construction"—a shared cultural projection seen and shaped in the light of social values and priorities—if carried out to the full bright light of philosophy, would look like a subset of the world view best developed in Mahayana Buddhism or Advaita Vedanta, which declares (as just one part of its strategy) the universe to be *maya*, or illusion. In doing so the Asian philosophers are not saying that the universe is ontologically without some kind of reality. They are arguing that, across the board, our seeing of the world is a biological (based on the particular qualities of our species' body-mind),

psychological (reflecting subjective projections), and cultural construction. . . . The current use of the "social construction" terminology, however, cannot go deeper, because it is based on the logic of European science and the "enlightenment." This thought-pod, in pursuing some new kind of meta-narrative, has failed to cop to its own story—which is the same old occidental view of Nature as a realm of resources that has been handed over to humanity for its own use. . . . This is indeed the ultimate commodification of Nature, done by supposedly advanced theorists, who prove to be simply the high end of the "wise use" movement. ("Nature as Seen from Kitkitdizze is No 'Social Construction'" 22)

Here, Snyder suggests that theorists like Jameson and Baudrillard are modern wolves in postmodern clothing, transforming but unwittingly extending modernist grand narratives, including the conception of nature as a limitless resource for human "use."

This is not to say, of course, that the postmodern critique of modern ideologies is wholly misdirected or theoretically useless. In fact, as a form of postmodern thought itself, deep ecology proposes an alternative mode of being in the world that is radically and antithetically opposed to the one supplied throughout the history of modern thought. To be certain, this is one of the reasons Robert Frodeman, in "Radical Environmentalism and the Political Roots of Postmodernism: Differences That Make a Difference," claims that postmodernism "shares radical environmentalism's sense of the oppressive and truncated nature of modern rationality, but it carries the critique of modernism much further by uncovering and attacking the hidden premises of modernism" (122). Among the list of postmodern attacks on the "premises of modernism" Frodeman outlines are

“the individual as the source of meaning,” the “belief in quantification as the defining character of the real,” and the “acceptance of oppositional and exclusionary hierarchies” (122). What’s more, he suggests, “radical environmentalists and postmodernists both see a connection between the domination of others and the domination of nature” (122). For Frodeman, essential and clearly essentialized beliefs in the absolute legitimacy of science, rationality, and progress are relics, specious artifacts of a bygone era. At the same time, Frodeman is not suggesting that these “grand narratives” have been completely flushed from the system. On the contrary, the policies inspired by their logic endure, even as the recognition of their destructive influence is brought to the surface. Nonetheless, as Sueellen Campbell argues, there is a definable logic in the fact that both postmodern theorists and deep ecologists begin by “criticizing the dominant structures of Western culture and the vast abuses they have spawned” (127). Multidisciplinary, heteroglossic, emergent, residual, and, in this obvious sense, postmodern in nature, deep ecology, in a fashion similar to social ecology, ecofeminism, and much postmodern theory, seeks to “take value from the once dominant and give it to the weak” (127). Hail to the edges! In the postmodern era, however, this politics of social redress, this desire for social and political parity, has generally excluded the nonhuman. As Susan Kalter notes, “one major priority of humanism, a knowledge of the nonhuman, is virtually lost on many postmodern thinkers” (16). To be sure, deep ecology’s inclusion of the nonhuman, as well as its use of Eastern philosophy and spirituality, in its overall conception of the world has attracted a number of dismissive labels, including “idealists,” “mystics,” and “anti-humanists.”

In *The Postmodern Turn*, for example, Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, after outlining a number of theories that trace the causes of and present solutions to the current ecological crisis, including deep ecology, suggest that the majority of these theories rely on a “quietism inherent in many forms of Eastern philosophy, which encourages us to merge with the undifferentiated whole, a potentially dangerous idea that could stifle individuality and critical reason” (267-268). Their position, as well as the nature of their response, is not uncommon, and it is disappointing, to say the least. While Best and Kellner readily acknowledge globalization and heteroglot mixing as defining features of postmodernism, they imply that ecological solutions must, finally, come from the West, and presumably and preferably from postmodern social theory. What’s worse, while they are careful to make distinctions among theories of postmodern culture generated by Western thinkers, they crudely essentialize the East and Eastern philosophy, as well as present, against their own assumptions about the nature of postmodernism, a binary conception of whole and part, one and many, self and other. Nonetheless, evident in the work of both Gary Snyder and A.R. Ammons is an ethic of deep ecological commitment and etiquette—generally grounded in an emergent scientific and social politics and a primarily residual (and Eastern) understanding of self and nature—which demonstrates, as Leonard Scigaj relates, “sensitivity to ecological thinking, cyclic renewal, bioregionalism, and the interdependency of all organisms within an ecosystem” (*Sustainable Poetry* 11). Gary Snyder’s *Mountains and Rivers Without End* and A.R. Ammons’s *Garbage* are important poetic instances of these deep postmodern ecological concerns and tendencies.

Gary Snyder

The idea of Zen is to catch life as it flows.

--D.T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen*

Buddhism

Water is water's complete virtue; it is not
flowing.

--Dōgen, "Mountains and Waters Sūtra"

Published in complete form in 1996, Gary Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers Without End* is an expansive long-poem sequence of thirty-nine interconnected poems written over a period of forty years. Broken into four sections and conceived, as Tim Dean notes, "on a planetary scale" (462), the sequence is simultaneously chaotic and organized, regional and global, and it freely moves in and out of various physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual landscapes, continuously forming and reforming as it unfolds. This, of course, is an intentional element of the text's overall design, gracefully reflected in its title. As Snyder notes in a highly suggestive autobiographical essay—"The Making of *Mountains and Rivers Without End*"—that follows the sequence, the title of the text is, most directly, an allusion to East Asian landscape painting:

In museums and through books I became aware of how the energies of mist, white water, rock formations, air swirls—a chaotic universe where everything is in place—are so much a part of the East Asian painter's world. In one book, I came upon a reference to a hand scroll (*shou-chuan*) called *Mountains and Rivers Without End*. The name stuck in my mind.

(153)

Snyder's identification with and understanding of East Asian landscapes and landscape painting is a product of both proximity and experience, and it bears a large degree of significance to *Mountains and Rivers Without End* as a long-poem sequence as well as to his ecological vision, often articulated in the form of deep ecology.

A child of the maritime Pacific Northwest, a member of the Pacific Rim, Snyder grew up on a small dairy farm north of Seattle in the "cutover countryside" ("Ancient Forests of the Far West" 116)—a landscape of stumps and second-growth forest, with a few surviving old trees, including one, a Western Red Cedar, Snyder "fancied" as his "advisor" (117). From his home, he could see, in various directions, Mount Baker, Glacier Peak, Mount Rainier, and the Olympics. At the age of thirteen, he began snow peak mountaineering, and by the age of twenty, he had reached a number of summits, including several in the Olympics and the Cascades. He was, as he notes, "forever changed by that place of rock and sky" ("The Making of *Mountains and Rivers Without End*" 153). In college, he studied anthropology, literature, and East Asian culture, interests that led to a short period of graduate study in anthropological linguistics at Indiana University before he returned to the West Coast to take graduate classes in Oriental languages and East Asian brush painting at Berkeley. During his years at Berkeley, he "spent summers working in the mountains, in National Parks or Forests" (153-154), including two seasons as a fire lookout at Crater and Sourdough Mountains in the North Cascades, periods of prolonged solitude which gave him his "first opportunity to seriously sit cross-legged, in the practical and traditional posture of Buddhist meditation" (154). In addition to practicing *zazen*, or seated meditation, he studied the peaks and drainages, practiced calligraphy, wrote in his journal, and digested a number of

difficult Zen texts. Snyder's summers, however, were not confined to the North Cascades. In 1955, he spent a summer in Yosemite "building trail and blasting huge granite boulders the size of small houses" (Suiter 158). During this summer of working, meditating, and writing, Snyder, as he relates, gained his "first glimpse of the image of the whole universe as interconnected, interpenetrating, mutually reflecting, and mutually embracing" (*Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems* 65-66). In 1956, he boarded a passenger-freighter bound for Japan, and he spent the majority of the next twelve years in Zen training in and around a Rinzai Zen compound in Kyoto. He officially returned to the United States in 1968, where he set up an off-the-grid residence in the San Juan Ridge of the Sierra Nevada Mountains of Northern California.

These details, which, incidentally, represent a mere a scratch on the biographical surface, are not inconsequential. Snyder's range of experiences, academic interests, spiritual training, aesthetic tendencies, and walked-in landscapes, both East and West, are, to reiterate, part of the larger aesthetic, philosophical, and ecological argument of *Mountains and Rivers Without End*. In this sense, while the title of the text provides a direct reference to East Asian landscape painting, it also suggests a wider relationship and identification between East and West, local and global, self and other, mountain and river, something impressed upon Snyder as a young boy:

When I was a boy of nine or ten I was taken to the Seattle Art Museum, and was struck more by Chinese landscape paintings than anything I'd seen before, or maybe since. I saw first that they looked like real mountains, and mountains of an order close to my heart; second that they were different mountains of another place and true to those mountains as

well; and third that they were mountains of the spirit and that these paintings pierced into another reality which both was and was not the same reality as “the mountains.” (“The Great Clod: China and Nature” 19-20)

A number of important terms and concepts appear in this description of Snyder’s first encounter with East Asian landscape painting. First, Snyder suggests that there is an epistemological and ontological equivalence between the mountains of Washington—the mountains “close” to his “heart”—and the mountains of China. At the same time, and second, he recognizes that the mountains of the painting also belong to a specific “place.” They are rooted in a specific bioregion, and thus they are, in epistemological and ontological terms, both independent and interdependent. Finally, Snyder implies that the mountains of the painting, indeed, painter and painted, are simultaneously self and other. As he writes in an essay on Dōgen’s “Mountains and Waters Sutra,” “If a scroll is taken as a kind of Chinese mandala, then all the characters in it are our various little selves, and the cliffs, trees, waterfalls, and clouds are our own changes and stations” (“Blue Mountains Constantly Walking” 107). East Asian landscape painting, in other terms, one of the primary organizing principles of the long-poem sequence, provides what are, fundamentally, Buddhist conceptions of self, nature, and reality--conceptions with profound ecological implications. As George Sessions argues, in “Gary Snyder: Post-Modern Man,” Snyder has

steadfastly worked toward the fusion, in theory and practice, of the most positive cultural developments of the latter half of the twentieth century: (1) the introduction of Eastern religious thought and

spiritual/psychological techniques to the Western world, (2) the reevaluation and understanding of primal cultures and the “old ways” of living on the planet, and (3) the rise of the science of ecology and an ecological understanding of humanity’s place in nature. (365)

Sessions’ title is revealing. Recognizing that postmodernism is an era in which competing values and ideologies are generally recognized and valued, Snyder’s pastiche-like combination of “Eastern religious thought,” return to the “old ways,” and use of the “science of ecology” is, to be sure, the postmodern situation par excellence, a heteroglossic mixing of residual and emergent cultural and social ideas, ideals, and values. As Julia Martin relates, in “Speaking for the Green of the Leaf: Gary Snyder Writes Nature’s Literature,” Snyder’s “long-time opposition to repressive structures is informed by a radical interpretation of Buddhism, ecology, and anthropology” (100). It is of no little consequence, then, that *Mountains and Rivers Without End* is preceded by two epigraphs from two well-known figures in the history of Buddhism, Milarepa and Dōgen, the former of which I will discuss at length here, which establish a basis for the text’s larger ecological argument.

The first epigraph, by Milarepa, a Tibetan Buddhist ascetic and mountain hermit who famously lived and meditated in the ice caves of the Himalayas wearing nothing but a cloth, provides a principle of Buddhist thought: “The notion of Emptiness engenders Compassion” (ix). Both capitalized, “emptiness” and “compassion” are presented as equivalent and inseparable. As Eric Todd Smith relates,

Mahayana, and more specifically Zen, holds that all beings are “empty” of individual self-nature, but are interconnected as an expression of “Buddha-

nature.” All things, moreover, are transient, without any enduring form or individuality. Emptiness thus refers to a principle of “nonduality”: there is no separation between beings, only an ongoing process of interdependent co-creation. . . . According to Buddhist teachings, suffering comes from the deluded conclusion that we possess a stable self, distinct from other beings. Emptiness, on the other hand, describes the world as seen from an enlightened perspective, free from illusions of permanence. (113)

In an important sense, then, emptiness, *shūnyatā*, means that reality is not the exclusive domain of humans or human perception. Reality is not, in other terms, a purely social or cultural construction. Stepping outside of human-centered awareness—seeing life as a complex and constant flow and process, engaging and understanding bear, tree, mountain, and stream, seeing, finally, the nature of reality and the reality of nature—engenders compassion. Moreover, compassion is rooted in an understanding of emptiness that annuls dualistic conceptions of subject and object, self and other, reality and representation, body and mind. As Julia Martin argues, in “The Pattern Which Connects: Metaphor in Gary Snyder’s Later Poetry,” Snyder “recognizes in the epistemological error which opposes ‘self’ and ‘other’ an implicit hierarchy with ‘us’ at top” (101). Human and nonhuman, for example, exist not in opposition but as ontological and epistemological equals. In other words, the Buddhist notions of emptiness and compassion form the basis of Snyder’s poetic critique of modernism and certain features of postmodernism, as well as his view of reality, understanding of self and nature, and, more generally, his poetic and ecological vision. As he argues in “Writers and the War Against Nature,” “Poems, novels, plays, with their great deep minds of story, awaken the

Heart of Compassion. And so they confound the economic markets, rattle the empires, and open us up to the actually existing human and non-human world. Performance is art in motion; in the moment; both enactment and embodiment. This is exactly what nature herself is” (71). Certainly, then, Snyder’s “first glimpse of the whole universe as interconnected, interpenetrating, mutually reflecting, and mutually embracing”—a variation of what Snyder calls the “Avatamsaka (‘Flower Wreath’) jeweled-net-interpenetration-ecological-systems-emptiness-consciousness” (“Reinhabitation” 189)—is relevant here.

A strain of Mahayana Buddhism, Hua-yen (Kegon) Buddhism upholds the principles of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, a sutra D.T. Suzuki calls the “consummation of Buddhist thought, Buddhist sentiment, and Buddhist experience” (*On Indian Mahayana Buddhism* 122). As Snyder suggests above, the primary theme of the *Avatamsaka* is the notion of the interpenetration of all things. In the text, this concept is represented, in one instance, by the jeweled net of Indra, a vast network of mutually reflecting pearls. In other words, a reflection of all pearls in the system can be seen in each individual gem: part is whole; whole is part. This image bears an extremely close resemblance to Arne Naess’ “knots in the biospherical net,” and, as with Naess, it has important spiritual and ecological implications. In “Reinhabitation,” for example, an early manifesto promoting bioregionalism, Snyder insists, like Naess, that there is “no self-realization without the whole self” and that “knowing who we are and knowing where we are are intimately linked” (189). Knowledge of place, in other words, is knowledge of self, and vice versa. The implications, inspired by an understanding of emptiness, compassion, and interdependence, are both direct and profound: “The expression of it is simple: feeling

gratitude to it all; taking responsibility for your own acts; keeping contact with the sources of the energy that flow into your own life (namely dirt, water, flesh)” (188). Commitment to and knowledge of place, as well as place within place, is both ecological and spiritual. Snyder’s notion of bioregionalism—which advocates an “old way” of sustainable living within naturally defined regions, a profound knowledge of place, and a mix of old and new conceptions of nature—is no doubt representative of an opposition to the remnants of modernist ideologies and the unfortunate ecological and spiritual consequences of late-capitalist culture. His writing, therefore, as Julia Martin contends, offers “a profound rejection of the process by which ‘other’ races and classes, women, nature, and animals have been marginalized, exploited, and most particularly silenced by the dominant culture” (“Speaking for the Green of the Leaf” 100). Grounded, no doubt, in the residue, to use Raymond Williams’s formulation, of a “previous social and cultural institution or formation” (*Marxism and Literature* 122), as well as an emergent view of science, this is one of the key postmodern ecological objectives of *Mountains and Rivers Without End*.

Snyder’s long-poem sequence begins with a highly meditative poem, “Endless Streams and Mountains,” that explores, among other things, the relationship between reality and representation, particularly artistic representation. Ekphrastic and colophonic, its evocative title makes direct reference to a Chinese landscape handscroll from the Jin dynasty (1115-1234), currently housed in the Cleveland Museum of Art. This scroll contains the landscape painting *Ch’i Shan Wu Chin* (“Streams and Mountains Without End”) that Snyder reproduces in his book, before the frontispiece. It also includes nine substantial colophons dating from 1205 to 1380 as well as 48 seals, appended by owners

and connoisseurs between the early 14th and the 20th centuries. The resulting scroll is 13.8 inches by 12 yards. Infused with a Zen aesthetic, a poetics of observation and suggestion, a deep lurking, the opening lines of the poem are especially complex:

Clearing the mind and sliding in
to that created space,
a web of waters streaming over rocks,
air misty but not raining,
seeing this land from a boat on a lake
or a broad slow river,
coasting by. (5)

Here, the act of “clearing,” or emptying, “the mind” is undoubtedly a reference to the practice of *zazen*. At the same time, *zazen* is not offered as a mere solitary technique or approach, a useful method by which the speaker, or viewer, for example, enters the landscape of the painting (or the poem). Instead, the reference to *zazen*, in combination with the other lines of the poem, is a practice of recognizing and engaging with the world, including its representations, as a “web” of coextensive, non-hierarchical interrelations. The “created space” of the second line, then, is simultaneously the space of body-mind, painting, poem, and literal landscape, all of which are equal and equally “created.” Body-mind is recognized through the practice of *zazen*, art is created through the act of aesthetic representation, and landscapes are created by geologic forces. All exist independently and dependently; all rise up into their own shape and “space” while at the same time reflecting and interacting with the whole. The viewer, in this sense, is both viewer and landscape; the landscape is both landscape and viewer. Poem and painting,

water and mountain, are reality *and* representation, representation *and* reality, and all exist in an unending state of dynamic flux. As a section from the epigraph from Dōgen insists, ““Unsurpassed enlightenment is a painting. The entire phenomenal universe and the empty sky are nothing but a painting”” (ix). In koan-like fashion, Dōgen, like Snyder, argues that reality is always reality, both empty and full, as it endlessly shifts.

The sense of non-dualistic interrelation, of mutual interdependence, is emphasized again in the third line. Here, the term “web,” an allusion to the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, provides an important ecological argument about nature and natural processes: the mutual interplay of mountains and streams. A “web of waters streaming over rocks” describes, in other terms, the process of water giving form to rock and rock giving form to water. These processes, an endless shaping, describe, in even larger terms, the interrelationship of hydrologic and rock cycles with nitrogen and carbon cycles, as well as with such surface processes as wind and erosion. All things, like all thoughts, are in a constant state of interdependent cyclical change. Of course, the term “web” also describes the sequence and organization of the text as well. Each section, each poem, and each word is a jewel, a reflection of the whole. Simultaneously independent and interdependent, insight into a specific line necessarily generates a more complete understanding of the entire sequence. This is not, of course, simply an argument for thematic coherence. In fact, it suggests a larger complementary relationship between all things: air, water, rock, and living matter. All are equally and perfectly impermanent, in an endless state of change.

Sensing that endless impermanence, and riding along with it, is indicated in the remaining lines of the opening stanza, which also gracefully supplies a detailed description of the painting. The “boat” in these lines is a reference to Dōgen’s boat,

which, as Kazuaki Tanahashi relates, suggests that “one who can ‘locate’ himself in the timelessness of all moments will also discover the stillness of all movements” and, consequently, will become “free of viewpoints,” no longer experience life “in terms of comparisons,” and realize, finally, that there “is no concept of whole or part” (15). This is the state of emptiness, impermanence, presence, and compassion, a realm of interpenetration and nonduality in which “the birth of a person at each moment is the birth of all phenomenal objects at each moment” (15). The past is past, and the future is future: reality is always shifting. To catch life as it flows, to participate in its flowing, is the essence of this practice. As the relationship between mountains and rivers, the main advisors of the poem, suggests, nature is not separate from the experience of life, and, moreover, human representation of nature is but merely one aspect of this experience. This, to be sure, is as much an ecological argument as it is philosophical and spiritual.

It is also important to note, in this sense, that there is no “I” in these lines. Certainly, then, this is not a modernist poem in which the speaker serves as its organizing principle. At the same time, it is also not a poem written in the dominant self-expressive, neo-confessional style of much postmodern American poetry. Who, for example, is “clearing the mind” in the opening line of the poem? This is typical of Snyder’s poetics: ego is transformed into “eco.” As Robert Kern relates, Snyder writes in an “ecocentric mode, a minutely detailed, outer-directed style virtually free of subjective reference” (129). To put this in slightly different fashion, and to tease out the implications, the lack of subjective reference, as Tim Dean notes, suggests that it is only “through a fully impersonal voice can art apprehend the otherness of nonhuman nature without transforming nature into something that merely serves human ends. Snyder’s ethical

commitment to beneficently engaging the natural world draws on the resources that poetry offers for generating and accessing impersonal voice” (463). With little question, this is a response to the notion of simulation, of nature as purely social construction, as purely human reality. As Snyder writes in “Unnatural Writing,” “Is art an imposition of order on chaotic nature, or is art (also read ‘language’) a matter of discovering the grain of things, of uncovering the measured chaos that structures the natural world?

Observation, reflection, and practice show artistic process to be the latter” (168). This is what it means to participate in life as it flows; this is practice. As Leonard Scigaj argues, in a more obvious indication of how Snyder’s poetics challenge postmodern conceptions of nature and representation, “Text and practice are inseparable, and Snyder’s ‘moist black line’ dispels the late capitalist illusion that signifiers are unattached commodities, Baudrillardian simulacras, mechanically reproduced for middle-class consumption in ways that insulate us within language games of aesthetic appreciation” (“Dōgen’s Boat, Fan, and Rice Cake” 127).

Snyder’s eco-poetic style, or, to use Kern’s phrasing, “ecocentric mode,” is undeniably evident in the remaining portions of the poem as well, which, like the first stanza, freely move between observation and suggestion as they follow trails and streams and meander through the painted mountain landscape. Along the way, humans appear, merging seamlessly with the environment:

The trail goes far inland,
 somewhere back around a bay,
lost in distant foothill slopes
 & back again

at a village on the beach, and someone's fishing. (5-6)

These moments of observation, of catching life catching life, of following trails through the landscape, have serious implications, especially in their suggestion that humans are capable of living coextensively with, as Snyder would frame it, the actually existing nonhuman world, the "frothy braided torrent," the "jumble of cliffs," the "cascading streambed," "chinquapin or liquidambar" (6).

Of course, Snyder's conception of nature, human interaction with nature, and overall ecological message is not reducible to harmonious interaction, to eating wild berries in the sunshine. Snyder is careful to document the long course of destructive human habits and their ecological impact. The third poem in the sequence, "Night Highway 99," is an important instance. Structured, in many ways, like "Endless Streams and Mountains," "Night Highway 99" is a travel poem, a hitchhiking poem, which meanders from place to place via a trail, Highway 99, and, like "Endless Streams and Mountains," merges reality with aesthetic representation. However, whereas "Endless Streams and Mountains" takes on the painted landscapes of China, "Night Highway 99" takes on, in a similar philosophical fashion, the literal landscapes of late-capitalist U.S. Pacific Coast culture. Throughout the course of this travel, which begins in northern Washington and extends south into portions of California, "hacksaw gothic homes / Shingle mills and stump farms" exist alongside "packstrings brought / down to the valleys: / set loose to graze" (12). The implication of this juxtaposition of urban and rural is apparent. As Snyder relates in an interview with Anne Greenfield, "Seattle, Los Angeles, San Francisco, all the cities up and down the west coast were built with Pacific Northwest Douglas fir" ("Grasping the Natural" 56). Other examples come in and out of

focus. Turing off 99 at Mt. Vernon, for instance, the speaker, presumably somewhere along Route 20, observes “under apple trees by the river / banks of junked cars” (13). Riparian life, the poem suggests, must contend and compete with the swell and sweat of steel and rust; pollution is inevitable. And so, as the poem moves through Seattle, where minds are “blunt” and talk is “twisted” (13), and into Tacoma, a kind of continuity begins to emerge: “Night rain wet concrete headlights blind / salt air / bulk cargo / steam cycle / AIR REDUCTION” (14). The sense of cultural blindness to the ecological impact of American consumerism is palpable; clean air, a place to breathe, is hard to find. By the time the speaker arrives in San Francisco, s/he is “sick of car exhaust” (23) and realizes “NO / body / gives a shit” (23-24). This, of course, is a biological (ecological) statement as much as it is a form of cultural criticism.

Similar ecological lessons, following a similar structure, appear throughout the course of the long-poem sequence. “Three Worlds, Three Realms, Six Roads” begins in Seattle, moves through Portland, the mountains of the North Cascades, down into San Francisco, extends out to Kyoto, and ends, in a kind of return, with the following lines: “Throwing away the things you’ll never need / Stripping down / Going home” (30). Needless consumption is not a sustainable value. “Night Song of the Los Angeles Basin” studies the “calligraphy of cars” (62). “Covers the Ground” provides, in almost Whitman-like fashion, a catalog of human encroachments on once-pristine wilderness (weighed against an epigraph and a sizable quotation from John Muir’s *The Mountains of California*): “mobile homes, pint-size portable housing, johnny-on-the-spots, / concrete freeway, overpass, underpass / exit floreal, entrance curtsies, railroad bridge. . .” (65). “Old Woodrat’s Stinky House,” the inaugural poem of the final section, suggestively

compares the age and longevity of written and spoken languages to the lifespan of specific species of trees:

& four thousand years of using writing equals
the life of a bristlecone pine

A spoken language works
for about five centuries,
lifespan of a Douglas fir; (119)

Late-capitalist policies of planned obsolescence, and, more generally, human consumption, Snyder suggests, have little or no respect for history or time. Historically clueless, policy makers and whole governments give an unfortunate and decidedly negative ring to the phrase “the present moment.” The short-lived experience of humans on the planet is too often matched by a shortsighted understanding of use and resource. As Anthony Hunt relates, “The poem is unquestionably a criticism of the way humans have ‘fouled’ their nest” (220). Of course, *Mountains and Rivers Without End* is not, in any sense, a text that merely outlines the damage. Its ecological lessons are rooted in a complex interplay between attention to destructive tendencies and to possibilities of renewal, both of which require an understanding of human limits.

Appropriately, then, sentient nonhuman beings—vole, hare, mouse, dolphin, hawk, coyote, salmon, raven, sheep, bear—figure prominently in the text alongside human interactions with nature and larger geomorphic actions: wind and erosion, mountain uplift and subduction. Like mountains and rivers, they act as advisors, spirits

and physical beings whose presence is instructive. Near the middle of the first section, for instance, a jackrabbit appears:

Jackrabbit,
black-tailed Hare
by the side of the road,
hop, stop.

Great ears shining,
you know me
a little. A lot more than I
know you. (31)

Short and concentrated lyric pieces such as this are rare occurrences in *Mountains and Rivers Without End*. Encountering them is akin to homing in on a detail—a small outcropping, a swirl in a river, a man holding a staff—in the larger flow of a vast landscape scroll. Recognition of their significance is a matter of seeing and understanding the mutual, interdependent, non-hierarchical, and coextensive relationship of stroke and scroll, poem and sequence, mountain and river, human and hare. Focused meditation, a method and practice of mindful observation, an art of seeing, is capable of generating this awareness. “Jackrabbit,” then, offers an aesthetic, spiritual, and ecological lesson.

In the first case, the hare determines the shape and the sound of the poem. Small and quick, attentive and cautious, and always seemingly on the verge of breaking out into an evasive run, a pausing hare moves in short hops and stops, a movement indicated in the fourth line as well as in the largely monosyllabic language of the poem. In addition,

its two “Great shining ears,” which initiate the lesson of the poem, demand the use of two stanzas. Advisor and guide, the hare, through the form and content of its movement, speaks. The role of the poet, in this instance, is to watch, listen, and record; the poem will rise up into its own shape. The hare, here, is no mere totem, no mere instance of symbolic or textual inscription. The lesson of the poem is the lesson of the hare: seeing, listening, and understanding are not only inextricable but also essential to survival. Humans, of course, rarely see or listen, especially to the nonhuman: “you know me / a little / A lot more than I / know you;” spiritual and ecological lessons are therefore often missed. Appearing again, in the second section of the sequence, in a poem entitled “The Black-tailed Hare,” Snyder writes, in much more direct fashion, “A grizzled black-eyed jackrabbit showed me / irrigation ditches, open paved highway, / white line / to the hill...” (73). According reality and spiritual wisdom to nonhuman species is an ancient practice. In “Writers and the War Against Nature,” Snyder writes, in a section worth quoting at length:

How can artists and writers manage to join in the defense of the planet and wild nature? Writers and artists by their very work “bear witness.” They don’t wield financial, governmental, or military power. However, at the outset they were given, as in fairy tales, two “magic gifts”: One is “The mirror of truth.” Whatever they hold this mirror up to is shown in its actual form, and the truth must come out. . . . The second is a “heart of compassion,” which is to say the ability to feel and know the pains and delights of other people, and to weave that feeling into their art. For some this compassion can extend to all creatures and to the earth itself. . . .

Anciently this was a shamanistic role. . . . Today, such a role is played by the writer who finds herself a spokesperson for nonhuman entities communicating to the human realm through dance or song. This could be called “speaking on behalf of nature” in the ancient way. (63)

The appearance of the nonhuman in *Mountains and Rivers*, as in all of Snyder’s texts, is part of this residual practice.

A short and focused lyric poem from the third section of the sequence, “The Bear Mother,” a significant detail in the larger flow, is another apt exemplification:

She veils herself
 to speak of eating salmon
 Teases me with
 “What do you know of my ways”
 And kisses me through the mountain.

Through and under its layers, its
 gullies, its folds;
 Her mouth full of blueberries,
 We share. (113)

References to bears, to bear scat, and to interaction and union, including marriage, between bears and humans are common in many of Snyder’s texts. “A Berry Feast” from *The Back Country*, “this poem is for bear” from *Myths & Texts*, and the well-known “Smokey the Bear Sutra” are important instances. Like the hares in “Jackrabbit” and “The Black-tailed Hare,” the bear in “The Bear Mother” is an advisor and guide. As she

playfully “teases” the speaker with spiritual insight—“What do you know of my ways”—into her nature, she also offers instruction on the proper course of mountain etiquette: “And kisses me through the mountain.” Connected by the landscape, the “layers,” “gullies,” and “folds” of the mountain, human and bear graciously and compassionately “share” the same region. As Snyder notes in an essay entitled “The Woman Who Married a Bear,” bears “like human beings, and they decided long ago to let the humans join them at the salmon-running rivers and the berryfields” (164). In this communal act, then, both are provided with necessary sustenance, namely space, food, and spiritual insight and training in good manners. Bear is not privileged over human; human is not privileged over bear. Such a conception of the relationship between bears and humans, as Anthony Hunt argues, is Snyder’s “way of shifting our perspective toward what he regards as a more enlightened—and sacred—view of animal-human interaction” (215).

Of course, this sense of sharing and interdependence is a far cry from long-standing popular conceptions of bears as vicious, human-hungry predators—conceptions that generate fear, inspire hunting, and, on a larger scale, help to explain, along with deforestation and massive increases in human population, the loss of habitat for both brown and black bear populations. The long-term damage this loss of habitat will have on the stability of local ecosystems, and hence on the long-term survival of all species, is not yet fully understood. The cascading ecological benefit initiated by the reintroduction of wolves into Yellowstone National Park in the mid-1990s, however, provides an indication. According to a recent study, which measured the impact of wolf/ungulate interactions on willow growth, the return of wolves to the northern Yellowstone

ecosystem points “toward improved riparian plant communities as well as improved habitats and sustainability of numerous species of riparian-dependent wildlife” (Ripple and Beschta 105). Once again, everything, and every thing, is connected, mutually reflecting jewels in the net. Killing off top predators, driving entire species to extinction, altering, in short, the natural flow of ecosystems has obvious deleterious and readily observable consequences, for humans and non-humans alike. Life and nature are far from a mere accumulation of spectacles; the survival of our species depends on this recognition.

In the last poem of the sequence, “Finding the Space in the Heart,” Snyder returns, in more direct fashion, to East Asian landscape painting, as well as to the coextensive notions that, as the argument of the long-poem sequence goes, inspire deep ecological responsibility: emptiness, impermanence, interdependence, and compassion. The poem captures, with obvious shades of nostalgia, forty years of visiting and revisiting the Great Basin: “I first saw it in the sixties / driving a Volkswagen camper / with a fierce gay poet and a / lovely but dangerous girl with a husky voice” (149). The term “it,” of course, refers to both the Great Basin as well to the spiritual insight inspired by its vast openness and presence, which appears as the path along a canyon “suddenly” opens onto “silvery flats that curved over the edge:” “*O, ah! The / awareness of emptiness / brings forth a heart of compassion!*” (149). The Great Basin, as Barbara Paparazzo insists, “is a mirror of the poet-narrator’s true nature. Emptiness suddenly arises in his heart, bringing a direct recognition of something familiar, a coming home. This emptiness is full of potentiality—energy—and gives rise to compassion” (115). Empty, open, present, and compassionate, the narrator returns to the basin again and again, after the initial trip in the

1960s, “when it seemed / the world might head a new way” (149). In the 1970s, the narrator gets “stuck” (150), and in the 1980s he discovers “a path / of carved stone inscriptions tucked into the sagebrush.”

“Stomp out greed”

“The best things in life are not things” (150)

Passive consumption and the ideologies of late-capitalist culture are brought into focus and weighed against a heart of compassion inspired by openness, awareness, ghost lakes, and spirit fish: “Faint shorelines seen high on these slopes, / long gone Lake Lahontan, / cutthroat trout spirit in silt” (150). These remnants of the ice age serve as embodiments of emptiness, traces of an endless process of birth and death. Time passes, and, in the 1990s, the narrator returns with his wife, children, and friends to sing “sūtras for the insects in the wilderness, / —the wideness, the / foolish loving spaces / full of heart” (152).

Emptiness and impermanence inspire a sad and tender heart of compassion:

Walking on walking,

Under foot earth turns

Streams and mountains never stay the same.

The space goes on.

But the wet black brush

tip drawn to a point,

lifts away. (152)

Waters flow; mountains flow. Nothing stays the same. All is fleeting and impermanent; change is endless.

In cyclical fashion, *Mountains and Rivers Without End* ends where it begins: enlightenment is a painting. Of course, enlightenment is also not a painting. As the last lines suggest, reality, the “space,” continues on after aesthetic representation, after the brush “lifts away.” Representation is not the end of reality, and nature is not merely a social construction. Finding a place within the system, finding a space in the heart, finding, finally, a heart of compassion, an ethic of ecological responsibility and commitment, is Snyder’s response and solution to the problems and complexities of postmodern culture.

A.R. Ammons

The philosophical basis of this rigorous determinism was the fundamental division between the I and the world introduced by Descartes.

--Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics*

Study how a society uses its land, and you can come to pretty reliable conclusions as to what its future will be.

--E.F. Schumacher, *Small is*

Beautiful

Like Gary Snyder’s *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, A.R. Ammons’s *Garbage* is an ecological long-poem about mountains. The mountains of *Garbage*, however, are not formed by orogenic or epeirogenic movements. The mountains in

Ammons's poem are formed by the push and pull of machines, the process of piling trash. To be sure, this is an uncommon but nonetheless compelling and exigent poetic subject, one that understandably earned the text a National Book Award. Despite this critical recognition, the poem, strangely, has prompted only a small amount of serious critical scholarship, and within this work, there is limited examination and acknowledgement of the poem's deep postmodern ecological vision--a philosophical, spiritual, and political vision that is in many ways comparable to Snyder. In fact, like Snyder, Ammons's ecological vision, his postmodern politics of nature, is situated in a heteroglossic mixing of residual and emergent cultural and social ideas, ideals, and values—in a politics, in other words, which at once accepts and rejects postmodernism. At the same time, while Snyder and Ammons arrive at a strikingly similar ecological position, their poetic paths are unquestionably different.

In "The Titles," Helen Vendler insists that *Garbage* is a "great book-length poem about death" (222). She is right, of course. It is a book-length poem, spanning 121 pages and written, mostly, as Vendler relates in another essay, in "loose-pentameter blank-verse couplets, which are separated by stanza-breaks that aerate the page" ("A.R. Ammons' *The Snow Poems* and *Garbage*" 28). And it is a poem about death. It is also, however, a poem about garbage, as well as decay, debris, disease, detritus, decomposition, desire, chaos, consumption, contamination, composting, age, aging, waste, excrement, energy, ecology, poetry, nature, science, religion, spirit, matter, motion, regeneration, transfiguration, incineration, suffering, love, compassion, language, self, body, mind, body-mind, eternity, infinity, process, product, simplicity, sublimity, provisionality, profligacy, pollution, economy, elegance. . .the list could go on and on and on. *Garbage*

resists both simplification and essentialization. This, to be sure, an engaged politics and poetics of mutability or provisionality, informs the broader ecological argument of the text.

In the postmodern era, to write about garbage is to write about nature. And, conversely, to write about nature is, as in Snyder, to offer an invariably political response to and against a kind of ecological genocide, a process of progress and modernization which produces, as Ammons writes near the beginning of his text, a flood of garbage “getting in the way, piling / up, stinking, turning brooks brownish” (18). For Ammons, garbage “has to be the poem of our time because / garbage is spiritual, believable enough” (18). In Florida, then, “down by I-95” where “flatland’s ocean- and gulf-flat, / mounds of disposal rise” like Sumerian “ziggurats” (18). Erected out of refuse, garbage heaps-- mountains of trash--are postmodern temples, emblems of a terrifyingly rapid (and rabid) pace of consumption. As Gyorgyi Voros relates, trash “connotes rank excess of production” and “takes on special significance for post-World War II American consumer culture, whose garbage, both because of sheer volume and because of its unbiodegradability, threatens to clog both the physical and metaphysical cycles of degeneration and renewal” (162-163). Indeed, garbage, in all its forms, is particularly symbolic and symptomatic of late-capitalist consumer culture; it, therefore, has to be the “poem our time.”

Garbage, however, begins before it begins, in a moment of epigraphic dedication: “to the bacteria, tumblebugs, scavengers, / wordsmiths—the transfigurers, restorers” (7). Poetry, the epigraph suggests, lies in the restoration and transfiguration of the dead and discarded. Language, like matter, must be broken down, deconstructed, and built back up,

transfigured and restored. To be sure, there is more than a hint here of artistic production as a method and process immersed in the politics and aesthetics of cultural pastiche. As Fredric Jameson argues, “For with the collapse of the high-modernist ideology of style . . . the producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past: the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture” (*Postmodernism* 18). For Jameson, then, pastiche is “speech in a dead language” and “blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs” (17). At the same time, *Garbage*, as a whole, seems unwilling to concede that Jameson’s conception of postmodern cultural production as “speech in a dead language” is correct; it especially seems to disagree with Jameson about the political impotency of this process. In fact, as Ammons implicitly argues early on in the poem, the apparent postmodern death of the unified and stable subject—the “bourgeois ego” or “monad” (*Postmodernism* 15) as Jameson frames it—that demands the work of pastiche is a compelling but nonetheless convenient fiction. The role of the poet, the poem suggests, is to transfigure and restore “values thought lost”—values that “lie around demolished / and centerless” (13). Poetry, then, for Ammons, is more like postmodern parody and less like a de-historicized and apolitical form of cultural pastiche. As Linda Hutcheon argues in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, “As a form of ironic representation, parody is doubly coded in political terms: it both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies” (101). In addition, this practice is not, as Hutcheon relates, “simply academic play or some infinite regress into textuality” (95). There is more at stake. Like bacteria, tumblebugs, and scavengers, wordsmiths transform and restore, returning the old in a creation of the new. Postmodern parody, then, it turns out, especially as Ammons frames it, is an ecological practice, a

complex *process* of decomposition and regeneration. To no surprise, then, Ammons, as early as 1965, in *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, proclaims ecology as a kind of signature for his work:

ecology is my word: tag
 me with that: come
 in there:
 you will find yourself
 in a firmless country:
 centers & peripheries
 in motion,
 organic,
 interrelations! (112)

Garbage is an important and complex instance of the ecological poetics and politics hinted at both in the epigraph as well as here.

Using ecology as a “tag,” it is clear that lost values, along with other forms of cultural and linguistic detritus, must be taken apart and reconstructed. In *Garbage*, among the list of these “values thought lost” are love, compassion, responsibility, social change, and self-realization—values largely engendered by an awareness of suffering, impermanence, and the limits of language. Of course, the deconstruction and transfiguration of these values is, in somewhat typically postmodern fashion, a responsibility the poet-narrator of *Garbage* adopts with a definable sense of unease. The responsibility, in other words, is framed as a kind of artistic privilege and curse, a position and imposition that is both embraced and despised, and it is a

position/imposition embedded in the structure and content of the poem. To frame it in slightly different fashion, the poem must simultaneously be garbage and make something out of garbage; this includes, of course, its own excesses and refuse.

If the content and structure of *Garbage* is to model its subject, as it does, then it must, in one sense, adopt a measure of randomness—mistakes, odd mixings, absurd concurrences, meaningful coincidences, bizarre regenerations. What, for example, emerges when excrement from a diaper leaks onto the pages of a discarded religious text? The text must, in other terms, provide a mixture, however unbalanced, of the sacred and profane, the abstruse and the everyday, the grand and the banal, the high and the low, and everything in the middle. What's more, the poem, if it is to be of use, if it is to have value, will have to be broken down, recycled, and brought back, or, alternatively, it must resign itself to spending centuries just taking up space. Certainly, the former is Ammons's sense of the poem:

My hope was to see the resemblances between high and low of the secular and the sacred. The garbage-heap of used-up language is thrown at the feet of poets, and it is their job to make or revamp a language that will fly again. We are brought low through sin and death, and hope that religion can make us new. I used garbage as the material submitted to such transformations, and I wanted to play out the interrelationships of the high and the low. (*Set in Motion* 102)

The process of the poem's making, then, as with its interpretation, involves sifting and sorting, constructing meaning out of the decay and debris, including the offensive, putrid, rancid, and rank along with the sacred and sublime. As Willard Spiegelman notes, the

“poetics of accretion and development has been supplemented, if not entirely replaced, by a poetics of excretion” (63). The poem, therefore, provides, as Ammons writes in section seven, a “clear space and pure / freedom to dump whatever” (49). The poem, to repeat, and to put it in plain terms, is not just “about” garbage; it is a form of garbage itself. As Ammons writes in section 12, “poetry to no purpose! all this garbage! all / these words” (75).

This, to be certain, raises a number of interesting if not troubling questions. For example, how can a poem about garbage which considers itself a form of garbage—a “space” in which there is “freedom to dump whatever” and “poetry to no purpose”—offer a progressive, radical, and ecologically based politics opposed to the excesses of consumption and waste? In *Writing for an Endangered World*, Lawrence Buell insists that the poem “gathers its energy from angry-bemused nonstop oscillation between the image of garbage as recyclable and garbage as shameful refuse” (53). What Buell unfortunately misses, to return to an earlier point, is that Ammons’s conception of the poem, particularly its function, ultimately differs from his conception of the literal garbage that symbolically gives birth to the poem. Since garbage is only partially recyclable, one of the cruxes of Ammons’s ecological argument lies in the notion of unimpeded natural cycles, including, of course, the cycles of degeneration and renewal. This accounts, of course, for a limited amount of excess and waste, but what cannot be broken down and returned piles up, contaminates, inhibits, and, finally, arrests these various processes of decomposition and regeneration. According to H. Y. Tammemagi in *The Waste Crisis*, “Some archaeological digs have found that after 2,000 years much garbage has not fully decomposed” (104). Much garbage, in other words, gives nothing

back. This is not the case with Ammons's poem. While the poem may be a form of garbage, constructed out of linguistic and cultural debris, given to flights of excess and waste, it is also responsible enough to insist that within its own processes of decomposition there is restoration and transfiguration. Recycled and renewed, the poem then serves as a source of instruction. Like Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, it provides an argument on the nature of mutability as well as good old-fashioned guidance on matters of etiquette and ecological responsibility. This, too, is built into the structure and content of the poem.

Structurally, the postmodern long poem, according to James McCorkle, is "recast as an accumulation of lyric moments rather than as a narrative moving toward a culminating closure," and, as such, "discontinuity and recombinatory properties of language are in constant play" (48). This, to be sure, is the sense in which Brian McHale argues that postmodern poetry "entails the effacement or occlusion or dispersal of the traditional 'lyric I'" (256). These related definitions undoubtedly hold true for Ammons (although less so for Snyder). In *Garbage*, Ammons invites, if not demands, a reading of lyric subjectivity—what Kevin McGuirk describes as his "continuing advertisement of presence when postmodernism elsewhere celebrates surface, difference, and alterity" ("A.R. Ammons and 'the only terrible health' of Poetics")—in that it bears relevance to a politics of nature and natural systems. Ammons writes, near the beginning of the poem:

so, these little messengers say, what do you
mean teaching school (teaching *poetry* and

poetry writing and wasting your time painting

little organic, meaningful pictures)... (3)

In short, Ammons calls attention to both his status and profession in a poem that is seemingly absent of a fixed or stable subject, in a poem that often seems to elide subjectivity. Ammons seems to argue, then, that the self-expressive lyric, the overwhelming presence of the lyric “I” manifest most significantly in 1950’s and 1960’s “subjective” poetics and the “workshop aesthetic” of much contemporary poetic practice, with its implications of constituting or establishing identity/subjectivity, is an unacceptable postmodern mode—a mode he eschews and accepts in parodic fashion. The poet-narrator of *Garbage*, therefore, is both comically and tragically self-conscious, self-referential, self-aggrandizing, and self-effacing. He is both sincere and insincere, both reliable and unreliable, both conclusive and indefinite.

In section two, the poet-narrator wonders “how to write this / poem, should it be short, a small popping of / duplexes, or long, hunting wide, coming home / late, losing the trail and recovering it” (19). The struggle is whether to write a modernist epic—a long-poem with weight, meaning, and, importantly, coherence that would “act itself out” and “intensify / reductively into statement” (19)—or to amass a series of small and relatively insulated but nonetheless look-alike lyrics. The poem, as it turns out, is neither and both. Consistent with its elision of stable poetic subjectivity and its postmodern ecological politics, it simultaneously aims for and undermines coherence, delighting in both digression—acts of “losing the trail,” moments of wasted space —and small resurrections—acts of returning and “recovering”—of a consistent theme. It is, after all, “just a poem with a job to do: and that / is to declare, however roundabout, sideways, / or meanderingly (or in those ways) the perfect / scientific and materialistic notion of the

spindle of energy” (24-25). At the same time, proclamations of consistency and order, declarations of thematic unity within the disorder and chaos, including the poem’s structural neatness, must be measured against the poem’s continual effacement of its project and the questionable reliability of its poet-narrator who is always “trying to get in position to be serious” (54) but is “afraid of convincingness” and a “little uncertain on purpose” (56). Meaning, in other words, is temporary and tentative, and so extracting purpose and supplying coherence seems, at least partially, to miss the point. As Helen Vendler notes, “Accustomed as we are to a narrative thread . . . we are surprised to find no such auxiliary pointers in Ammons. Indeed, we find ourselves in the midden-heap of language and literature, comparable to the Florida pit with its life-detritus” (“A.R. Ammons’ *The Snow Poems and Garbage*” 46). Nonetheless, the poem does have a point, in fact several points, to make, including, as with Snyder, important philosophical and ecological lessons on the nature of impermanence and compassion. As Vendler also notes, the poem “gathers itself into interior smaller lyrics, disperses itself into bits and pieces, and becomes a sustained tragic and comic meditation on the Heraclitean conversion of matter into energy” (“The Titles” 222).

Vendler’s desire for coherence aside, her reference to Heraclitus, and, by way of implication, to the pre-Socratics, is warranted. Early on, the poet-narrator proclaims that “the poem / which is about the pre-socratic idea of the / dispositional axis from stone to wind, wind / to stone (with my elaborations, if any) / is complete before it begins” (20). The immediate reference, of course, is to Anaximenes, who argued “primordial unity is to be treated as a stuff, a matter out of which things are made” (Allen 4). For Anaximenes, the source of primordial unity was air, which when “rarified became fire and when

condensed, wind, then cloud, then water, then earth, then stone” (4). Everything, and every thing, is connected. These cycles of change, of beginnings and endings, are both natural and endless, and they show up time and again throughout the course of Ammons’s poem—a poem that the narrator insists is a “scientific poem, / asserting that nature models values, that we / have invented little (copied) reflections of / possibilities already here” (20) and that we are “natural: nature, not / we, gave rise to us: we are not, though, though / natural, divorced from higher, finer configurations” (21).

In section three of the poem, Ammons writes that “when energy is gross, / rocklike, it resembles the gross, and when / fine it mists away into mystical refinements” (25). To be sure, Anaximenes’ conception of primordial unity functions as an allusion here, as do contemporary geological conceptions of rock cycles, which are importantly part of larger geocycles. This is not, of course, the only reference in the text. In section six, the narrator exclaims, “things are sustained by interrelations” (40). These ideas are beautifully and somewhat playfully blended at the beginning of the tenth section:

in your end is my beginning, I repeat; also,
my end is, in fact, your end, in a way:

are we not bound together by our ends: and when,
end to end, our ends meet, then we begin to

see the end of disturbing endlessness: unity
does what unity can: while preserving two

it accords in mutuality a mist wonderfully and
 onefully coming together.... (63)

T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is no doubt part of the aesthetic and philosophical heap here, as are the notions of impermanence, non-duality, and interdependence. In fact, the "end of disturbing endlessness," the "unity" that preserves "two" and "accords mutuality," is as thoroughly steeped in Taoist and Buddhist notions of emptiness and impermanence as it is in pre-Socratic notions of primordial unity and change. And, so, in the last section of the poem, the narrator asserts that "forms / are never permanent form, change, the permanence, so / that one thing one day is something else another / day, and the energy that informs all forms just / breezes right through filth as clean as a whistle" (115). Notions of emptiness and impermanence are not, therefore, exclusive to the sections or even smaller lyrics that take up the cyclical processes of the creation and destruction of rock. As James McConkey notes, in a descriptive overview of Ammons's long poems, it is "life itself, life in all of its changes—that is, life as *process*—that is his subject, and it is a falsification of whatever constitutes 'truth' or 'reality' to freeze into ideal form any segment of it" (285). All matter, including human matter, is subject to the processes of decomposition and regeneration. All life is change, and all matter, in this sense, is garbage.

It is in this capacity, consequently, that the poem concerns itself with various kinds of ends. Section one includes an overgrown maple whose trunk is "split down from a high fork: wind has / twisted off the biggest, bottom branch" and "disease may find it" (16). Near the end of section two, the poet-narrator ponders "old trees, I remember some of them, where they / used to stand: pictures taken by some of them: / and old dogs,

specially one imperial black one” (22). Section six begins with the symptoms of deterioration and the pains of aging—“a pain in the knee or hipjoint or warps and / knots in the leg muscles, even strange, binding” (40)—and stretches out to include the physical and emotional ravages of disease: “and I said, terminal cancer of the brain, and / she said, I found out a week ago, but don’t say / anything to him” (41). In section eight, “sometimes old people snap back into life for a / streak and start making plans, ridiculous, you know, / when they will suddenly think of death again / and they will see their coffins plunge upward” (53). Life is death; death is life. It is “ridiculous” to see them as separate, especially as they give rise to one another.

Other, less literal ends, as well as the lessons they initiate, are included in the poem as well. In section two, for example, the poet-narrator insists that love and compassion is necessitated by both death *and* suffering:

where but in the very asshole of comedown is
redemption: as to where but brought low, where

but in the grief of failure, loss, error do we
discern the savage afflictions that turn us around:

where but in the arrangements love crawls us
through, not a thing left in our self-display

unhumiliated, do we find the sweet seed of
new routes.... (21)

The first noble truth of Buddhist thought is that “life is suffering.” Recognition of this truth is the first step to awakening. Zen, as D.T. Suzuki relates, frames it like this: “Zen in its essence is the art of seeing into the nature of one’s own being, and it points the way from bondage to freedom” (*Essays in Zen Buddhism: First Series* 13). True self is no-self, or, as *Garbage* suggests, true self is the *end* of self—“not a thing left in our self-display.” Emptiness, in other words, as Ammons frames it, engenders “the sweet seed of / new routes,” love and compassion, which “crawls us / through.” Ends are beginnings; beginnings are ends. In section three, then, the narrator asserts that “only born die, and if something is / born or new, then that is not it, that is not / the it” (27). The “it,” instead, “is the indifference of all the / differences, the nothingness of all the poised / somethings, the finest issue of energy in which / boulders and dead stars float” (27). Differences retain their differences while reflecting the whole, the “nothingness of all the poised / somethings.” There is no birth and no death, or, as Ammons writes at the end of section four, “all is one, one all” (34). This sense of the mutual, the interconnected, and the non-hierarchical no doubt brings to mind Snyder, Naess, and deep ecology. As Steven Schneider argues, in the course of discussing Ammons’s long-poems of the mid-1970s, Ammons’s “sense of the earth and its living matter—air, ocean, and land surfaces—as a complex interconnected system anticipates the idea of the Gaia theory...” (149).

Notions of impermanence, to finally, or at least partially, return to the initial point, are embodied in the provisional nature of the poem—its structure and content—as well as in the provisional nature of its self-conscious and self-reflexive poet-narrator. In the introductory text to *Ommateum with Doxology*, Ammons notes that his poems “suggest a many-sided view of reality; an adoption of tentative, provisional attitudes, replacing the

partial, unified, prejudicial, and rigid” (qtd. in *Set in Motion* 5). The argument undoubtedly holds true for *Garbage* as well. Ammons, through a series of provisional assertions, constructions and deconstructions, favors small narratives over grand narratives. As such, and as Kevin McGuirk relates, “In his skepticism toward metanarratives, totalizations that give no purchase on the particulars of the world, Ammons invites the label ‘postmodern.’” (“A.R. Ammons and the Whole Earth” 144). His poetic advertisement of the self as provisional and temporary instead of stable and unified also seems to invite the use of the term “postmodern.” In fact, as Frederick Buell insists, Ammons’s ecological vision is imbued with postmodern notions of the dispersal and fragmentation of poetic subjectivity:

As inhabitant of the edge of chaos, as one who conceived of lifeform, institution, psyche, idea, and poem as constructions of and from process, as an imaginative ecocentrist who continually displaced centrality in the web of natural relationships, Ammons always was one to whom the postmodern notion of decentering the self was not alien; this awareness has increased in *Garbage*, where the speaker’s self-conscious marginality has fewer consolations. (228)

At the same time, postmodern conceptions of self and subjectivity begin and end in language, and they are dependent, as Vincent Leitch relates, on “particular kinds of social arrangements” (*Postmodernism* 120). To be sure, this is at odds with the conception of language and, consequently, the conception of reality Ammons offers in the poem and elsewhere.

In a section from *Set in Motion*, for example, Ammons writes:

It seems obvious to me that things and the world came first. In spite of all philosophical sophistry and negativism and subjectivism, I believe what's "written" in the rocks. I believe this planet is ancient, that it preceded man or manlike creatures by billions of years and preceded words and languages by at least an equal time. The center of consciousness for me is not verbal. I live in a world of things, not texts, not written texts. ("On 'The Damned'" 123)

Ammons does not, of course, reject the significance or importance of language, as *Garbage* attests. At the beginning of section 12, for instance, the poet-narrator homologizes linguistic and literal garbage: "a waste of words, a flattened-down, smoothed- / over mesa of styrofoam verbiage; since words were / introduced here things have gone poorly for the planet: it's been between words and rivers" (74). Later in the section, and in similar fashion, Ammons writes, "words have / driven the sludge in billows higher than our / heads" (75-76). And, finally, the concluding couplet of the section, imagining the near future, angrily asserts that "we'll kick the / out of the world and cuddle / up with the avenues and byways of the word" (77). The ecological consequences of language are clear. Removed from a direct experience of the world, humans, Ammons suggests, invariably choose language. Humans, in other words, invariably side with representation over reality, regardless of the impact these representations have on the nonhuman world. A world driven *only* by language spawns abuse. As Gyorgyi Vorgos insists, Ammons "meditates on all manner of excess and redundancy, from the natural to the social to the linguistic, and concludes that, indeed, the world and language are separate, and not equal, entities and that language is extra, not a

critical part of any ecosystem” (170). Of course, to insist that language is not a “critical part of any ecosystem” is to deny the impact of ideas, ideals, and values, an impact Ammons clearly acknowledges throughout the course of *Garbage*.

Ammons uses language, poetic language in fact, to decry the importance of language; the irony does not go unnoticed, by either reader or writer. This, however, is part of the larger ecological argument the poem makes about the provisional nature of language (reflected, of course, in the provisional nature of the poem and its speaker). Even postmodern parody, Ammons insists, has its limits. The poem, to put it another way, is provisional because language is provisional; nothing is absolute. Ammons, therefore, rejects the fetishization and essentialization of language characteristic of much poststructuralist and postmodern theory. Jameson’s notion of pastiche, for example, is a process and function of language. In fact, even the mind, for Jameson, as for many poststructuralists and postmodernists, including, importantly, Jacques Lacan, is structured like a language. For Ammons, however, language is not the end. Like Snyder, like the Taoists and the Buddhists, like the deep ecologists, he insists that “forms are never / permanent form, change the permanence” (115). Conceding, of course, the importance of language, Ammons nonetheless and finally argues for a more fundamental, and no doubt residual, understanding of self and reality, an understanding that exists inside and, importantly, outside of language, an understanding that acknowledges human reality is not the only reality. As the poet-narrator writes in section seven, “have some respect for other speakers of being and / for god’s sake drop all this crap about words, / singularity, and dominion: it is so boring” (50). This is language as waste, as “crap,” that needs to be, in another reference to waste, dropped. After all, “whole languages, like species, can /

disappear without dropping a gram of earth's / weight, and symbolic systems to a fare you well / can be added without filling a ditch or thimble" (51).

To reiterate, Ammons does not deny that language is fundamental to human reality. Language can destroy and create, and, as the poem suggests, transfigure and restore, but, again, it is not the end. In other terms, Ammons suggests that there is something more important, as Marianne Moore once said, "beyond all this fiddle." As his poet-narrator writes at the end of section seven, "our language is something to write home about: / but it is not the world: grooming does for / baboons most of what words do for us" (52). And, in section 18, he writes, "words, which attach to edges, cannot / represent wholeness, so if all is all, the it / just is" (114). Laotzu's *Tao Te Ching* or *Way of Life*, one of the acknowledged sources essential to Ammons's conceptions of language and change, immediately comes to mind. Laotzu's text begins with the following lines: "Existence is beyond the power of words / To define: / Terms may be used / But none of them are absolute" (31). And, of course, Laotzu's *tao*, or "way," has a parallel in Zen, which D.T. Suzuki frames in the following way:

A special transmission outside the Scriptures;
No dependence upon words and letters;
Direct pointing to the soul of man;
Seeing into one's nature and the attainment of Buddhahood.

(Essays in Zen Buddhism: First Series 20)

Or, as Suzuki relates elsewhere, "No real value is attached to such words as God, Buddha, the soul, the Infinite, the One, and suchlike words. They are, after all, only words and ideas, and as such are not conducive to the real understanding of Zen" (*An Introduction to*

Zen Buddhism 76). Here, the space separating A.R. Ammons's *Garbage* and Gary Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers Without End* begins to close. Like Snyder, Ammons insists that language, including aesthetic representation, is not the whole "world," not the "it." Human representation is not the whole of reality, and nature is not merely a social or cultural construction. After all, what could be more postmodern than avoiding totalizations and recognizing limits, including, in an obvious but nonetheless often neglected sense, the limits of language-based systems of knowledge?

To be certain, here is the postmodern poet as postmodern deep ecologist, steeped in a simultaneously residual (spiritual) and emergent (scientific) ecological poetics and politics of "self-realization," to resurrect Naess's term. In section seven, Ammons writes, "have / you stopped to think what existence is, to be here / now where so much has been or is yet to come and / where isness itself is just the name of a segment / of flow" (48). The present is the present, a "segment / of flow." Every moment is both birth and death, past and future, and therefore not birth and not death, not past and not future. The present is endless: empty, impermanent, and interpenetrating. As D.T. Suzuki notes, "When the mind, now abiding in its isness—which, to use Zen verbalism, is not isness—and thus free from intellectual complexities and moralistic attachments of every description, surveys the world of the senses in all its multiplicities, it discovers in it all sorts of values hitherto hidden from sight" (*Zen and Japanese Culture* 17). A section from section 17 of *Garbage* offers an indication of these "values hitherto hidden from sight." In short, Ammons provides an indication of what it means to be present:

...and to pay attention is to behold the

wonder, and the rights, of things, so just as
 the fear of losing something (or someone) increases

 its value enormously, so wariness of vipers and
 other maelstroms of panic give us the brilliant

 morning, the sun brittle on the hill-line before
 it pops an arc-glob.... (114-115)

The present moment is not mysterious: the “sun brittle on the hill-line” rises. Nonetheless, the present ceaselessly exists as a form of “wonder,” as a non-dualistic recognition of interpenetration that has obvious and self-evident ecological implications. Awareness, paying attention, is not, then, just to behold “wonder” but also the “rights” of “things.”

This profound ecological sentiment, this politics of justice for both human and nonhuman, is offered again, in slightly transfigured fashion of course, near the end of the closing section of the poem. Here, in fact, is perhaps Ammons’s most direct proclamation of interrelation and ecological responsibility:

...if there is to be any regard for

 human life, it will have to be ours, right regard
 for human life including all other forms of life,

 including plant life: when we eat the body of
 another animal, we must undergo the sacrifice

of noticing that life has been spent into our
 life, and we must care, then, for the life we
 have and for the life our life has cost, and we
 must make proper acknowledgments and sway some
 with reverence for the cruel and splendid tissue
 biospheric... (118)

Here, Ammons presents the biosphere as a “tissue,” a term that both literally and figuratively bears significant resemblance to Naess’s organisms “as knots in the biospherical net or field of intrinsic relations” as well as the jeweled net of Indra in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. These lines also bring back, of course, as do nearly all of the sections of the poem, the endless processes of destruction and creation, decomposition and renewal: “life has been spent into our / life.” The ecological imperative here is apparent: life is process and flow; self-realization is the recognition that nothing functions independently. True self is empty self, no-self. And emptiness, to return directly to Snyder as well, engenders connection and compassion, “reverence” and “proper acknowledgements.”

**CHAPTER 4. FROM PARODY, PASTICHE, AND THE POLITICS OF (FUNNY)
GRIEF IN SHERMAN ALEXIE'S *FACE* TO PLAGIARISM AND PRIVILEGE IN
THE CONCEPTUAL WRITING OF KENNETH GOLDSMITH**

It is difficult to forgive the poem
That spends its time in search of the next
joke.

--Sherman Alexie, *Face*

I loved it all, so I guess I'm trying to
combine it all, the white classicism with the
dark-skinned rebellion.

--Sherman Alexie, *Ten Little Indians*

For the natives, they are near all dead of the
smallpox, so the Lord hath cleared our title
to what we possess.

--John Winthrop, 1634, Boston

On the surface, Sherman Alexie's poetry and poetic voice is perfectly suited for late-capitalist consumer culture: approachable, accessible, clever, amusing, entertaining, self-expressive, self-effacing, self-referential, irreverent, ironic, parodic, etc. This, of course, is intentional, an imitative device by which he captivates, castigates, and derides. In fact, the notion of parody, even Linda Hutcheon's notion of postmodern parody, a form that both "legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies" (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 101), does not, despite its precision, seem to entirely capture the depth of

Alexie's subversive poetic mode. As Kenneth Lincoln insists, Alexie is a "surreal trickster savage in two-dimensional poetic cartoon" whose work "elicits charged reaction, critical gut response, positive or negative argument" (*Sing with the Heart of a Bear* 269). His poetry, therefore, is "more performance than poem, more attitude than art, more schtick than aesthetic," a kind of "Indi'n vaudeville," a "stand-up comedy at the edge of despair" (271). At the same time, Lincoln insists, Alexie "pushes against formalist assumptions of what poetry ought to be, knocks down aesthetic barriers set up in xenophobic academic corridors, and rebounds as cultural performance" (273). Alexie's work is not, in other terms, entirely absent of an aesthetic. In fact, Alexie tends to adopt a Warhol-like aesthetic, a postmodern poetic mode in which the "high" art of poetry is fused with the "low" of late-capitalist consumer culture: Shakespeare meets Hallmark. As in Warhol, the elevated, the serious, the ordinary, the profane, the commodified, the circulated and the recirculated, are simultaneously charged with and stripped of meaning: style replaces history; surface replaces depth. However, despite its stylized, surface-level, and seemingly apolitical and ahistorical appearance, his postmodern poetics is a highly political and deeply entrenched historical enterprise firmly rooted in the deconstructive. To put it another way, Alexie's Warhol-like aesthetic is aimed at disruption, subversion, reinscription, and reterritorialization. It is an aesthetic that challenges—by way of parody and/or politicized pastiche—both dominant and residual modes of postmodern American poetic practice as well as the historical, social, and cultural conditions of Native Americans, an often collusive and increasingly media-dominated terrain in which erroneous assumptions and false representations perpetuate an historical pattern of anger, abuse, colonization, subjugation, and neglect. These points require explanation.

In *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon insists that it is “not that modernism was serious and significant and postmodernism is ironic and parodic, as some have claimed; it is more that postmodernism’s irony is one that rejects the resolving urge of modernism toward closure or at least distance. Complicity always attends its critique” (99). Postmodern parody, therefore, according to Hutcheon, is “doubly coded,” “inescapably bound to its aesthetic and even social past,” and “offers an internalized sign of a certain self-consciousness about our culture’s means of ideological legitimation” (101). It is an aesthetic of contact and by its very nature political. Hutcheon’s conception and definition of postmodern parody stands, of course, in radical opposition to Fredric Jameson’s frequently referenced notion of postmodern pastiche, a “situation,” Jameson insists, in which “parody finds itself without a vocation” (*Postmodernism* 17). For Jameson, pastiche, like parody, is the “imitation of a peculiar or unique idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language” (17). Unlike parody, however, pastiche, he argues, functions “without any of parody’s ulterior motives” (17). Postmodern buildings, for example, “celebrate their insertion into the heterogeneous fabric of the commercial strip and fast-food landscape of the postsuperhighway American city,” and through a “play of allusion and formal echoes (‘historicism’),” these buildings blend with “the surrounding commercial icons and spaces, thereby renouncing the high-modernist claim to radical difference and innovation” (63). The “newer artists,” as it is, “no longer ‘quote’ the materials, the fragments and motifs, of a mass and popular culture, as Flaubert began to do; they somehow incorporate them to the point where many of our older critical and evaluative categories (founded precisely on the radical differentiation of modernist and mass culture) no longer seem functional” (64). Perhaps needless to say,

Jameson's understanding of the function of parody in the postmodern era—wholly and fully transformed into the “well-nigh universal practice” (16) of pastiche—seems to exempt both artistic (poetic) practice and artistic (poetic) content of a definable, viable, and sustainable politics. In fact, for Jameson, in an era of pastiche, simulacrum, and pseudoevents bound to the social, cultural, and economic imperatives of late capitalism, real politics, real resistance, and real collective struggle are reduced to “fantasies of sheer catastrophe and inexplicable cataclysm” (46). Everything is contaminated; everything is commodified. In this environment, critical distance and political intervention, the hallmarks of parody, are phantoms; opposition is futile.

While Jameson's depressing conception of the impotency of art and politics in the postmodern era—along with its formal consequences, the “end of the distinctive individual brush stroke” (15) and the “disappearance of the individual subject” (16)—is a relatively sagacious characterization of a wealth of postmodern cultural production, especially in the areas of film and television, it does not, however, seem to fairly or accurately account for work in which pastiche, parody, or, more generally, co-optation and incorporation—“complicity,” to return to Hutcheon's term—function as a means of artistic, institutional, and, broadly speaking, political/cultural resistance. As it is, Jameson acknowledges that these forms of postmodern resistance exist, but he insists that they are “all somehow secretly disarmed and reabsorbed by a system of which they themselves might well be considered a part, since they can achieve no distance from it” (49). Again, for Jameson, critique and resistance require distantiation, a historical position that interestingly ignores its own manner of complicity and contamination while simultaneously relegating postmodern art and postmodern aesthetics to the vagaries of

late-capitalist simulation. What Jameson fails to acknowledge is that such combinatory postmodern practices as parody and pastiche are not, in and of themselves, simply blind cannibals of the past, uniformly and naively succumbing to a dominant aesthetic that replaces real history with an endless series of signs and codes—the precession of simulacra. As Vincent Leitch relates, postmodern pastiche “revivifies the past and questions it, uses and revalues hallowed intertexts, acknowledges and contests historical contexts” (*Postmodernism* 107). In other terms, there is “more critique than capitulation in such postmodern pastiche and more liberation than resignation in the transformation of traditions” (107). Postmodernism *is* an era dominated by spectacle and simulation, and long-standing notions of originality and artistic monumentalism have largely evaporated, but the author and the work are not dead, even if they have been reconfigured into something like the decentered self and the (inter)text. Postmodern parody and pastiche, then, are not purely naïve or indoctrinated celebrations of heterogeneity, and opposition is *not* futile.

This is not to suggest that the practices of postmodern pastiche and parody are not, in an obvious sense, defined, bound, and consequentially limited by social, historical, and cultural circumstances/conditions; they are. In fact, in the postmodern era, implied in the use of pastiche and parody is an acknowledgment that, to appropriate Raymond Williams, “all initiatives and contributions, even when they take on manifestly alternative or oppositional forms, are in practice tied to the hegemonic: that the dominant culture, so to say, at once produces and limits its own form of counter-culture” (*Marxism and Literature* 114). Dissent, like everything else in postmodern culture, is always already for

sale; this is the condition of our times.¹⁸ However, Williams' notion of the hegemonic and the aesthetic and institutional "limits" it places on resistance and opposition is not a consistent matter for despair, as it is for Jameson and other critics. Contact and contamination produce limits but also create an open (and sometimes emergent) space for opposition and critique. Williams, for instance, insists that it would be "wrong to overlook the importance of works and ideas which, while clearly affected by hegemonic limits and pressures, are at least in part significant breaks beyond them . . ." (114). To put this in slightly different terms, postmodern parody, as Linda Hutcheon relates, "may indeed be complicitous with the values it inscribes as well as subverts, but the subversion is still there: the politics of postmodern parodic representation is not the same as that of most rock videos' use of allusions to standard film genres or texts" (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 106-07). What's more, she contends, the "doubleness of the politics of authorized transgression remains intact: there is no dialectic resolution or recuperative evasion of contradiction in narrative fiction, painting, photography, or film" (107). To this list, I would add certain modes of postmodern American poetry, specifically those that self-consciously employ parody and/or politicized pastiche as aesthetic methods of deconstruction, subversion, and, in this sense, political/cultural resistance. *Face*, Sherman Alexie's sprawling and somewhat loose conglomeration of poetic artifacts published in 2009, is an apt exemplification of this postmodern political project.

Simultaneously symptomatic and subversive, existing largely in the connective spaces between dominant, emergent, and residual postmodern poetic modes, *Face*, as a

¹⁸ See, for example, Thomas Frank's *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*.

whole, is a series of textual soup cans whose repetitive label reads “Postmodern American Poetry.” As a further indication of irony, irreverence, and critique, all of these terms should be imagined inside individual quotation marks: “Postmodern” “American” “Poetry.” A patchwork of New Formalism, neo-confessionalism, performance poetry¹⁹, prose poetry, and straight-up prose, Alexie’s hybrid aesthetic resists strict categorization. At the same time, this somewhat bizarre intersection of ostensibly incompatible poetic modes feels strangely homogeneous, due, in large part, to the collection’s ironic, comedic, parodic, and yet, interestingly, seemingly sincere and serious poetic voice; of course, comedy, Alexie claims in the title to one of the poems in the collection, is “simply a funny way of being serious” (73). As it is, Alexie, in more or less mechanical fashion, churns out sonnets, villanelles, free verse, and prose, as well as numerous intermixings and parodies of these forms. What’s more, many of the poems in the collection are punctuated by trite, if not downright corny, end and internal rhymes; the concluding couplet to the first poem in a sequence entitled “The Blood Sonnets,” for example, reads, “Years later, in Seattle, my nose bled / When my mom called and said, ‘Your father is dead’” (48). The result is a series of poems that embody what Alexie, in a typical tongue-in-cheek manner, calls a “ragged and rugged formalism” (128). Of course, Alexie’s “ragged and rugged formalism,” most clearly evidenced in his use, combination,

¹⁹ Alexie is a four-time winner of the World Heavyweight Championship Poetry Bout, a spoken-word competition modeled after a boxing match held in New Mexico from 1982 to 2003. Other champions of the competition include Anne Waldman, Ntozake Shange, Simon Ortiz, Quincy Troupe, and Jimmy Santiago Baca. Undefeated, Alexie retired from the competition in 2001.

deconstruction, and reinscription of traditional forms, is likely what Dana Gioia—an acerbic critic of the “workshop aesthetic” and a vocal proponent of New Formalist poetics—would refer to as “pseudo-formal verse.” In other terms, to appropriate Gioia, while many of Alexie’s poems employ “neat visual patterns, the words jump between incompatible rhythmic systems from line to line” and the “rhythms lack the spontaneity of free verse without ever achieving the focused energy of formal poetry” (“Notes on the New Formalism” 404). For Alexie, however, unlike Gioia, the recuperation and reinscription of poetic tradition—an adherence to the residual, to use Raymond Williams’ terminology—is not an end in itself. In fact, adherence to the rigid standards of traditional form and meter—playing tennis with the net *up*, as Robert Frost might have framed it—is in many ways beside the point. Indeed, as the poems of *Face* suggest, New Formalism is little more than one of a number of available aesthetic trends—a trend, to return to Linda Hutcheon’s formulation, that Alexie both legitimizes and subverts in service of a larger ideological end: Alexie’s parody-based aesthetic implicitly foregrounds and then calls into question the historical, cultural, and political values inscribed in the use of traditional poetic forms—values that are inescapably tied to a history of colonization, subjugation, violence, marginalization, and exclusion. As Alexie writes in “Tuxedo with Eagle Feathers,” a poem I will return to shortly, “If I find it pleasurable / To (imperfectly) mimic white masters, / Then what tribal elders have I betrayed?” (82). The answer is far from simple.²⁰ Regardless, the form(al) is never innocent: Alexie’s aesthetic is imbued

²⁰ Some critics insist that Alexie’s work reaffirms all-too-common Native stereotypes and is constructed for a largely white audience. See, for example, Gloria Bird, “The Exaggeration of Despair in Sherman Alexie’s *Reservation Blues*,” *Wicazo Sa Review*

with a deconstructive politics, a politically subversive strategy, and one, importantly, that is not exclusive to *Face*.

With little question, *Face* is both an extension of and a departure from Alexie's earlier collections of poetry. In *The Summer of Black Widows* (1996), for example, Alexie plays loose and fast with the sonnet. For instance, "Sonnet: Tattoo Tears" is comprised of fourteen interrelated sections of short prose in which the connective order of alternating rhyme characteristic of the English sonnet is loosely simulated through thematic association: the last term or idea of one section becomes the foundation of the succeeding section. Another multi-part piece from the collection, "Totem Sonnets," offers a radical and often comedic coalescence/pastiche of the Native artistic tradition of totem carving found among a number of tribes of the Pacific Northwest and the European literary tradition of the sonnet, a kind of "creative bricolage," to appropriate Nancy Peterson's term, that blends "Indian realities and traditional Western poetic forms" (135). Divided into seven individual "totem sonnets," each poem in the series adheres to the structural divisions of either the Italian or the English sonnet. However, the lines of these poems are composed almost entirely of names and titles—lists that visually and symbolically resemble the shape of a totem pole. The first stanza of the fourth "sonnet," for instance, reads as follows: "The Exorcist / Manhunter / Alien / Halloween" (35). For readers, formal confusion abounds. The use of a quatrain suggests that this is an English sonnet,

(1995): 47-52. In addition, see Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, "American Indian Intellectualism and the New Indian Story," *Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing about American Indians*, ed. Devon A. Mihesuah (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998): 111-138.

but, very obviously, meter and rhyme have been thrown out the window. Interpretive confusion also ensues, as the vertical structure implicit in the totem design is weighed against the alternating rhyme scheme of the English sonnet. Is *The Exorcist* to be considered in conjunction with *Alien*, or is *The Exorcist* simply being placed at the top of this list of well-known horror and suspense films? Is there a relationship between this stanza and the other stanzas of the poem? Does the concluding couplet provide resolution to an established problem? Is there a problem at all? More questions could be posed. Nonetheless, any interpretive position must consider that all of the films in the stanza either directly or indirectly take on the concepts of evil and violence, both literal and abstract. In this sense, they are of the same general class, and since totemism, as Marjorie Halpin relates, is “essentially a system of classification” (16), Alexie’s poem, as well as this stanza, might be read as a series of related categorical definitions, or, more appropriately, as cultural totems—film-based, media-generated representations of evil and violence.

Embedded, of course, in this hybrid form, in the interaction between Native art and English literary tradition, is the actual and still largely dismissed history of interaction between Native peoples and Europeans, a history of violence, murder, and subjugation, a history of domination and colonization that is easily linked to the deplorable economic and social conditions currently endured by many Native Americans, especially those living on reservations. As Kenneth Lincoln relates, Native peoples are “still caught between cultures, living the worst conditions of both” (*Native American Renaissance* 20). Despite, for example, occupying land with rich natural resources, including uranium and coal, “some reservations suffer the worst hardship in America—

incomes at half the poverty level, five years average schooling, the highest national alcoholism and suicide rates, substandard housing and social services, infant mortality, tuberculosis, and diabetes in multiples beyond any other minority in the country, resulting in an average lifespan of forty-four years” (20). Such horrifying inequity, such “endemic disadvantage rooted firmly in the history of colonialism” (39), as Joy Porter frames it, has done little to engender a national sense of accountability; policies of social redress have been few. In fact, in much the opposite fashion, basic issues of sovereignty and civil rights are under constant attack. Mere survival is often a way of life, and, as such, it has become a key concept in much Native literature, theory, and scholarship. As Kenneth Roemer notes, “The secular post-apocalyptic senses of loss, survival, and sovereignty remind non-Indian readers that there is a group of Americans for whom near extinction is an historical reality, not a hypothetical worry for the future or an event that happened elsewhere” (18). Of course, the poem suggests that the history upon which these conditions are predicated is not confined to historically literal instances of assault, displacement, or social neglect.

To put it plainly, the totemic/cinematic representations of evil and violence in the first stanza of the fourth sonnet indirectly recall the history of cinematic violence enacted against Native Americans, a violence conducted through stereotype and caricature, a spectacle of gross cinematic misrepresentation. As Vine Deloria, Jr. argues in *Custer Died for Your Sins*, a manifesto first published in 1969, “Because people can see right through us, it becomes impossible to tell truth from fiction or fact from mythology. Experts paint us as they would like us to be” (2-3). It is of little wonder, then, that the third stanza of this totem sonnet—“Little Big Man / Enter the Dragon / The Searchers /

The Wild Bunch” (35)—makes reference to three popular films that provide in both implicit and explicit fashion destructive stereotypes of Native Americans and brazenly sympathetic depictions of Euro-Americans and Euro-American conquest and Westward expansion. As John Newton relates, Native American identity is reduced, essentialized, put on cinematic and televisual display, and, more generally, “spectacularized on a global scale” (415). Alexie, therefore, Newton insists, must make “his stand in the struggle for subjective agency not in some autochthonous interiority but on the flat, open-ground of the invader’s image-repertoire . . .” (415). The history of this “image-repertoire” includes, of course, more than 4,000 movies and television shows that are, as Ward Churchill notes in *Fantasies of the Master Race*, “objectively racist at all levels” (167). “Nothing,” Churchill insists, “is more emblematic of Hollywood’s visual pageantry than scenes of Plains Indian warriors astride their galloping ponies, many of them trailing a flowing headdress in the wind, thundering into battle against the blue-coated troops of the United States” (168). Sadly, these gross misrepresentations “have been served” along with the “tipi and the buffalo hunt, the attack upon the wagon train and the ambush of the stagecoach until they have become so indelibly imprinted upon the American consciousness as to be synonymous with Indians as a whole . . .” (168). Reality dissolves, individual identity is subsumed, and the spectacle reigns supreme: real Indians become *reel* Indians. As Alexie writes in the second section of “My Heroes Have Never Been Cowboys,” one of a number of prose-poems from an early collection entitled *First Indian on the Moon* (1993), and a poem, interestingly, also written in mock-sonnet form, “Did you know that in 1492 every Indian instantly became an extra in the Great American Western?” (102). “Sonnet: Tattoo Tears,” in other words, to return squarely to the point,

provides not only a deconstruction and reconstitution of the sonnet form but also implicitly ties its values of order and hierarchy to the history of Euro-American conquest, a history of violence that extends into the representational spaces of postmodern American popular culture. As Susan Berry Brill de Ramirez relates, Alexie “transforms the classic lyric of Britain and Shakespeare into a vehicle that . . . speaks the history of atrocity” (110). In a media-dominated, image-saturated, Xerox-based culture, the poem suggests, style replaces history and surface replaces depth. As a consequence, genocide is ignored, conquest is justified, and the true conditions of contemporary Native existence continue to go largely ignored. Resistance, however, is not futile. As Dean Rader relates, since the “site of cultural colonialism and erasure has shifted from the empty expanse of the West to the empty expanses of television and movie screens,” Alexie’s poems “resist the imperial colonizing thrust of contemporary culture through participation in it” (149). Kenneth Lincoln, in a similar fashion, contends that Alexie’s poetry functions as “revisionist history from an insurgent Indian perspective, reimagining Native devastation, deconstructing tribal heroism, reversing good guy/bad guy paradigms, cowboys and Indians, the Lone Ranger and Tonto” (*Speak Like Singing* 284). Though plain, the politics here deserve consideration.

In a section worth quoting at length, John Newton argues that “contact” with American popular culture—a kind of border-space—serves as the basis for Alexie’s radical postmodern aesthetic:

Alexie detaches himself from a complex of neighboring assumptions: that an appeal to indigenous metaphysical systems will take precedence over self-reflexive textuality; that a contestation of imperial agency will

supplant a critique of the humanist subject; that the urgency of active resistance will prohibit the sportive indulgences of postmodernism. In Alexie's poetics of the contemporary reservation, history is neither metaphysical nor even tribal, but always emphatically a history of contact. Indigenous mythology and figurative systems give way to the Esperanto of American mass culture, the "narrative primacy" of oral tradition to the cartoon dramaturgy of the reservation drive-in. Swaying between flippancy and the most acute seriousness . . . Alexie's work employs a cheerful pop-cultural globalism in negotiating a history which is drastically specific. The result is a "postcolonialism" that makes no claim to disentangle itself from either the colonial past or the postmodern present. (415)

To be sure, this border-space, this liminal space, is suffused with the complex relationship between heritage and tradition and the continued influence, impact, and force of late-capitalist American culture, a culture that continues its long history of colonization not only in the literal space of the reservation and its attendant politics but through spectacle and simulation—the tyranny of the image. Newton's quotations around the term "postcolonialism" are therefore warranted. As Alexie notes in an interview with Gretchen Giles, "The United States is a colony, and I'm always going to write like one who is colonized . . ." ("Seeing Red"). At bottom, then, such writing, in its refusal to take a side, in its rejection of closure and its celebration of contradiction and contamination, amounts to an autochthonous aesthetic of resistance, an employment of the language, imagery, and forms of the dominant culture—both historical and contemporary—as

necessary tools for Alexie's larger project, one invested in the art and politics of deconstruction and reinscription.

To no surprise, this simultaneous participation and resistance is evident in a number of other poems in *The Summer of Black Widows*, including the remainder of the "Totem Sonnets" series, which offer, generally speaking, similarly politicized deconstructions of Americana, including actors, authors, athletes, musicians, historical figures, religious icons, and products: "Steamed Rice / Whole Wheat Bagel / Egg White / Baked Chicken" (33). In typical postmodern fashion, the past and the present collude and collide, and, as the series attests, tradition amounts to little more than an aesthetic code. This conception of tradition as mere aesthetic code also explains Alexie's liberal use of other forms in this relatively early collection, including the inaugural poem of the second section, "Haibun," which makes less than artful use of the disciplined Japanese poetic tradition of prose and haiku, and "Elegies," which transforms a typically mournful and contemplative lyric form into a self-reflexive series of running jokes: "This is a poem for people who died in stupid ways" (49). Of course, the transformation, deconstruction, and reinscription of poetic tradition evident in Alexie's earlier work, the "politics of authorized transgression," to return to Hutcheon's phrase, is fully realized in the poems of *Face*.

In *Face*, the space between high and low, the sacred and the profane, the private and the public, dissolves into bricolage, collage, parody, pastiche. References to movies, television shows, actors, athletes, comedians, companies, and commercial products, from high-definition televisions to Google and iTunes, appear alongside a host of mostly white and largely canonized literary figures, including Emily Dickinson, F. Scott Fitzgerald,

Gertrude Stein, Edith Wharton, John Donne, and, perhaps most significantly, Shakespeare. Boundaries of all kinds collapse, and nothing, it seems, is off limits. “Thrash,” for example, a twenty-one section piece that spans sixteen pages and contains an inscrutable mix of poetic and non-poetic forms, including a mid-section reading quiz, is devoted, in large part, to genitalia, sex, and various forms of bodily secretion; the poem openly challenges all manner of propriety and taste as it takes on urination, defecation, masturbation, foreplay, copulation, vasectomy, and circumcision, often in verse form. Self-reflexive interruptions, meta-commentary, and other postmodern clichés are common. In “Wrist,” Alexie claims, “I want to write ‘adulterous carriage,’ / But that seems pretentious and clunky to the ear” (53). Later in the poem, he writes, “My lame poetry suffers when compared to Edith Wharton’s description of the adulterous Archer and Olenska” (54). In “Inappropriate,” a four-page pastiche of poetry and prose that examines F. Scott Fitzgerald, alcoholism, and public speaking, Alexie breaks in to note, “Fitzgerald had given me the vocabulary to describe my own Native American identity. Oh, yes, I am the genocided Indian who is also the dream-filled refugee! Oh, yes, I am indigenous to the land but an immigrant to the culture! I am the ironic indigenous immigrant” (27). The history of Native devastation is openly declared, and, as such, Alexie leaves little space for passive readerly consumption.

Here, as in other places, Native history and reservation life intersect with references to and anecdotes of Alexie’s current personal and professional life, a life lived off the reservation and one enmeshed in and devoted to marriage, parenthood, career, and the complicated politics of border-crossing and assimilation. In fact, to be fair, the vast majority of the poems in the collection deal with post-reservation life, an apparently

conscious choice, since most “Native literature,” Alexie contends in an interview with Ase Nygren, “is about the reservation” (145). At the same time, for Alexie, who now lives, as Duncan Campbell relates, “in Madrona Valley in Seattle, a gentrified area in what was once a mainly black neighborhood known as the Central District” (117), disconnection from tribe and tribal traditions is a source of both comedy and despair. In a poem called “Gentrification,” for example, which, on the surface, appears to be about a neighbor’s home in Alexie’s residential Seattle neighborhood, the past functions as a specter, recalling the country’s history of racial violence, colonization, and cultural erasure: “Let us remember the wasps / That hibernated in the walls / Of the house next door . . .” (68). This poem, like so many others in the collection, is packed in ice and then thrown into the fire. And the sonnet, more than any other form, is the preferred poetic package. In fact, there are more than twenty poems from the collection that might be fairly categorized as sonnets, not to mention that the standard line for the majority of the poems in the collection, sonnet or not, consists of ten syllables. Of course, Alexie recycles some of the tricks of his earlier work, such as making muted reference to the sonnet by writing poems with fourteen stanzas, but *Face*, on the whole, takes up the form in a much more direct manner.

“Volcano,” a multi-poem piece—interspersed with a section of prose—on the eruption of Mount St. Helen’s, ends with a Shakespearean sonnet, although the closest the poem comes to alternating rhyme is “blood” and “tomb” (15). A series called “The Blood Sonnets” contains five poems in which the form is used to examine alcoholic fathers, menstruation, rats, ghosts, virginity, sex, and death; though apparently serious, the gravity of these subjects is typically belied by the content. In the first piece, the

speaker claims, “Drunk daddy only hit the road / And I’d become the rez Hamlet who missed / His father so much that he bled red ghosts” (48). The ending couplet of the fourth poem in the series reads, “And we watched *LA Law* with her parents, / Who ignored the bloodstains on her gray pants” (50). Later in the collection, “The Fight or Flight Response” uses an English sonnet to conclude, “Like us, swans can be jealous and dangerous, / And, oh, so lovely, sure, and monogamous” (62). Other instances, like “Song Son Blue” or “Comedy is Simply a Funny Way of Being Serious,” both of which contain footnote-based sonnets, help to expose the purpose of Alexie’s aesthetic. At the end of the latter poem, he writes, “It is difficult to forgive the poem / That spends its time in search of the next joke” (73). That joke, of course, is already there, in Alexie’s parodic deconstruction of the form.

In a sequence entitled “The Seven Deadly Sins of Marriage,” a male speaker, presumably Alexie, catalogs various types of marriage-related sin through the use of a poetic form that very closely resembles the English sonnet. Each of the seven poems in the series contains three quatrains and a concluding couplet, most of the lines are comprised of ten syllables, the principal poetic foot is the iamb, and there is often an alternating rhyme scheme. And unlike the poems from Alexie’s earlier collections, the formal quality of these poems seems to blur the line between parody and fidelity to formal poetic tradition. As it turns out, however, that line is observable. In more or less anticipated fashion, the earnest title of the series, “The Seven Deadly Sins of Marriage,” serves as little more than a front for the less-than-serious content. In fact, on the whole, the poems in the sequence are frivolous, absurd, incidental, banal, trite. The concluding lines of the first sonnet, “Envy,” a poem devoted to jealousy and past lovers, read, “I

celebrate the men who preceded me— / Just as the bank celebrates each debtor— /
 Because they make me look so much better” (56). The concluding couplet to another
 sonnet from the series, entitled “Wrath,” a poem that chronicles the revenge of a speaker
 who has been kept awake by a group of women in a nearby hotel room, ends with the
 following lines: “When I tell my wife about my adolescent rage / She shrugs, rolls her
 eyes, and turns the page” (59). And, finally, the opening lines of “Pride” proclaim, “A
 female fan, upon meeting my wife, / Said, ‘Oh, wow, you must have a wonderful life’ . . .”
 (56). Trivial, silly, unapologetically common, the poems rarely adhere to the sentiment of
 the form, as if to suggest a flaw in its historical use.

Of course, Alexie’s parodic deconstruction is felt not only in the irony of the
 content but also in the seemingly random rhyming patterns, the inconsistent meter, and
 the shamelessly predictable end rhymes: “Envy” is missing an alternating rhyme scheme;
 the concluding couplet of “Wrath” contains one line comprised of thirteen syllables and
 the other of nine, and both make almost inexplicable use of the iamb. A poem called
 “Pride” rhymes “wife” and “life,” “poems” and “homes,” “wood” and “could.”
 Rhythmically, metrically, and despite their (extremely) loose iambic structure and
 alternating rhyme, these poems pretty much read like prose. Here, for instance, is the
 opening quatrain of “Greed:”

Every summer, my wife travels to France
 To spend a week or two with her good friend.
 Of course, my sons and I welcome the chance
 To de-evolve and cave it up, and yet . . . (57)

There is only one instance of alternating rhyme here, “France” and “chance,” and though each line contains ten syllables, the rhythmic structure, an odd mix of trochees and iambs, creates a feeling less of poetry and more of prose. What’s more, it reveals that the poem’s formal appearance, like most of the poems in the collection, functions as little more than camouflage—a tuxedo with eagle feathers. This, interestingly, is a strategy common to a number of Native writers.

In “As if an Indian Were Really an Indian,” Louis Owens, using the popular acceptance of M. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* as authentication, contends that the success of colonized Native writers is often predicated on the adoption of culturally and institutionally mandated aesthetic standards: “The most prosperous of such texts are both accessible to the aesthetic and political tastes of the metropolitan center and, perhaps more significantly, present to such readers a carefully managed exoticism that is entertaining but not discomfiting to the non-Native reader” (22). At the same time, Owens continues, lurking under the surface of *House Made of Dawn* is a highly subversive politics of appropriation. In short, Momaday self-consciously adopts the “aesthetics of the center” (22) in order to see the text “past the palace guards into the royal Pulitzer chambers” (23). For Momaday, then, as for Alexie, colonization and co-optation engender a textual practice that at once both legitimates and questions the forms and aesthetic standards that their work takes up. Linguistic and aesthetic appropriation—the “wearing of a linguistic mask,” as Jameson derisively frames it—is therefore a means of both survival and subversion. As Alexie writes in “Tuxedo with Eagle Feathers,” “It was all those goddamn texts / By all those damn dead white male and female writers / That first taught me how to be a fighter” (42-45).

Perhaps more clearly than any other poem in the collection, “Tuxedo with Eagle Feathers” openly and defiantly clarifies Alexie’s aesthetic and political project. An outright attack on Elizabeth Cook Lynn’s conception of sovereignty, which Alexie brands as essentialist, separatist, an “ugly fundamentalism” (80), the piece moves between prose and poem—a sort of postmodern haibun in which Alexie replaces a concentrated poetic form, the haiku, with a loose and largely parodic version of the English sonnet. In the final prose section of the piece, which, incidentally, reads much like autobiographical metafiction, Alexie caustically and self-reflexively offers his own definition of the piece:

As I changed back into my street clothes, I told Dorothy that I was going to write a poem about her. ‘What kind of poem?’ she asked. ‘A hybrid sonnet sequence,’ I said. ‘An indigenous celebration of colonialism or maybe a colonial celebration of the indigenous. O, Dorothy, it’s going to be a hand-sewn sonnet! You’ll be able to count the stitches!’ (81)

Alexie, of course, is fond of the irony and apparent contradiction embedded in both the title and the explanation of the piece. An attack on tribalism, a defense of Alexie’s aesthetic, the piece exposes his desire to have it all, without apology. As he writes in the third prose section of the piece, “I wasn’t saved by the separation of cultures; I was *reborn* inside the collision of cultures” (80). This liminal space, the space of collision, is fraught with grief and loss, but it is also open to discontinuities, gaps, lags, and contradictions. In short, Alexie gets to stand on both sides, simultaneously engaging and denying, accepting and rejecting, and, finally, liberating both Native identity and aesthetics from a lack of choice and the essentialism implied in being forced to pick a side. Alexie writes, “But colonialism’s influence / Is fluid and solid, measurable / And

mad . . .” (81-82). The way in is also the way out, though it might not be immediately recognizable. Or, as Alexie writes at the end of the poem, “I claim all of it; Hunger is my crime” (82).

The sonnet, of course, is not the only traditional form that Alexie parodies in the collection. In “Villify,” a poem from the first section of *Face*, Alexie provides a comedic and parodic deconstruction and reinscription of the villanelle. In what is now virtually a cliché of postmodern artistic production, the poem begins with a reference to itself: the title of the poem is followed by a reference to a footnote in which Alexie provides a “history” of the villanelle. In this footnote, the first of fourteen throughout the course of the poem, a number Alexie chooses in less-than-subtle reference to the sonnet form, readers learn not only that the “poem is a villanelle” but that “the modern villanelle with its two alternating refrain lines took shape only with Jean Passerat’s sixteenth-century villanelle, ‘J’ai Perdu Ma Tourtorelle’ (‘I Have Lost My Turtledove’)” (30), a point Alexie, the poet turned stand-up comic, apparently picks up while conducting a Google search on the history of the form. Alexie goes on to call Passerat’s well-known villanelle a “sentimental piece of crap,” makes reference to other poets who have worked with the form, insists that the villanelle is “best used to express the painful and powerful repetitions of grief,” notes that the current poem is a “grief-filled villanelle that is also funny,” and, in more or less expected self-deprecating fashion, acknowledges the generally poor quality of his poem: “[W]hile I don’t think it’s a great poem, or maybe not even a good one, I do enjoy the punning title. Yes, a villanelle called ‘Vilify.’ I tried to title it ‘Villanelle-i-fication,’ but I just couldn’t live with that monstrosity . . .” (30). Finally, as an aside, Alexie maintains that “‘Funny grief’” is the “best answer to the

question: ‘What is Native American poetry?’” (30), a point that further clarifies Alexie’s aesthetic method.

The length and particularly the content of this first footnote make it fairly clear that the poem itself, including its use of a traditional form, is largely and self-consciously irrelevant, a notion implicitly reiterated through the deficient quality of the poem. The opening tercet should serve as ample proof: “I’ve never been to Mount Rushmore. It’s just too silly. Even now, as I write this, I’m thinking / About the T-shirt that has four presidential faces on the front and four bare asses on the back. / Who’s on that damn T-shirt anyway? Is it both Roosevelts, Jefferson, and Lincoln?” (29). Is the near rhyme and lineation the criteria by which these lines qualify as poetry? There is, with little question, a temptation to argue, as Marjorie Perloff does in her castigation of many of the post-World War II poets included in Cary Nelson’s *Oxford Anthology of Modern American Poetry*, that this is “sloppy, badly written, sentimental, overtly and annoyingly ideological, and excessively shrill and/or bathetic” (“Janus-Faced Blockbuster” 209). To say so, however, would be missing the point. This is “bad” poetry, and Alexie knows it. Prose-like, conversational, a mere a hint of poetic approximation in the slant rhyme of “thinking” and “Lincoln,” Alexie’s journal-like villanelle devoted to Mount Rushmore is little more than a comedic front for a series of footnotes that, in one form or another, reveal the irony and hypocrisy carved into the rocks of South Dakota. The tail end of the sixth footnote should provide ample proof:

Andrew Jackson was also the architect of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which gave the president power to negotiate the removal of Indian tribes living east of the Mississippi. Among other thefts, blackmails, and broken

treaties, the most tragic result of this legislation was the Trail of Tears, in which 7,000 U.S. troops forced 16,000 Cherokee Indians to march west to new lands. Over 4,000 Indians died of cold, hunger, and disease during the march. (34)

A kind of Trojan horse, Alexie's villanelle, like his sonnet, imitates and lures, begging readers to assume a position of false complacency in the poem's external and formal appearance. Once inside, however, the guts are revealed, and the work plainly and unapologetically tells it as it is.

New Formalism is not, of course, the only aesthetic standard Alexie simultaneously champions and subverts in the collection. According to Hank Lazer, the "standardized American poem of the past twenty-five years" adheres to a specific set of criteria: "simple declarative syntax; the illusion of a craftless transparent language; a simple speechlike singular voice in the service of a poem that ends with a moment of epiphanic wonder and/or closure where all parts of the poem relate to a common theme" (*Opposing Poetries* 131). As noted in previous chapters, Lazer is not alone in insisting that American poetry is currently dominated by an institutionally validated and largely homogenous poetic mode, and there is little question that Alexie's poetry is often replete with the hallmarks of this dominant tradition. Seemingly built for a readership raised on television and movies, many of his poems, steeped in special effects and heavy on punch-line entertainment, have the feel and fugacious quality of a big-budget summer film. Easily digested, the poems culminate in a final line (or stanza) that provides summation and closure, much like the final scene of a blockbuster film or the tail end of a (dirty) joke. In "In the Matter of Human v. Bee," a piece that takes on the consequences of

colony collapse, Alexie concludes: “The bees are gone. / We need new bees / Or we are fucked” (24). Of course, Alexie’s poetry has rarely conformed to an academic standard of poetry. Instead, it has favored, like the majority of poetry written in the dominant mode, the colloquial, the conversational, the personal, the syntactical, and the ostensibly natural. At the same time, *Face* provides an opportunity to examine how poetry written in an aesthetically dominant mode can be used to simultaneously challenge that mode, especially since Alexie’s poetry epitomizes the convergence of dominant aesthetic standards with an emergent politics committed to the subversion of those standards and their related values, a common theme in both postmodern poetry and postmodern theory. As Vincent Leitch relates, “[T]heory is mired in commodified, coopted, cooperative moments; however, it regularly presents contestatory discourses” (*Theory Matters* x). Or, as Alexie puts it: “[I]n more literary terms, the poet, feeling far too assimilated while writing a semi-formal poem that features Western civilized rhyme, syllabics, and meter, tried to ‘Indian up’ the damn thing by bringing his mother into it” (154).

From Content to Context: Kenneth Goldsmith and the Politics of Plagiarism and Privilege

It’s a choice of object. Instead of making it,
it is a ready-made.

--Marcel Duchamp

Where technology leads, art follows.

--Kenneth Goldsmith

In 1915, Marcel Duchamp moved from Paris to New York, in part to escape the increasingly repressive and exclusionary politics of Paris' avant-garde. Approximately three years prior, Duchamp had been pressured to withdraw what would become his most celebrated painting, *Nude Descending a Staircase*, for an opening hosted by the Salon des Indépendants, the organization founded in the early 1880s to challenge government-sponsored art and to promote artistic autonomy. Duchamp later explained that the members of the group, including Albert Gleizes and Henri Le Fauconnier, "found that the *Nude* wasn't in the line that they had predicted" (*Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* 17). Such rejection helped to initiate Duchamp's abandonment of conventional painting. By 1913, he was focused on creating conceptual art—art that is not merely retinal but, as Duchamp explained, in the "service of the mind" (*The Writings of Marcel Duchamp* 125). *Three Standard Stoppages*, for example, a wood box that contains three pieces of thread glued to three painted canvas strips mounted on glass panels and three pieces of wood that match the curve of the threads, questions the absolutism of scientific knowledge by exposing assumed mathematical certainties to the effects of chance. Ironically, in this same year, *Nude Descending a Staircase* was exhibited at the Armory Show in New York. The work met considerable resistance and generated national controversy, but it also provided Duchamp with a degree of commercial success and assisted in establishing him in the United States prior to his arrival in New York in 1915.

In New York, supported by the patronage of Walter C. Arensberg, who had learned of him through the Armory Show, Duchamp socialized with a number of avant-garde artists and writers, some of whom were proponents of Dada. In 1916, he became a founding member of the Society of Independent Artists, along with such members as

Man Ray, John Marin, and Albert Gleizes, and they began to plan an exhibition for the spring of 1917 in the spirit of Paris' Salon, a point made apparent by the exhibition's motto: "No Jury. No prizes. Hung in alphabetical order." Perhaps as a consequence of his exclusion from the 1912 show in Paris, or perhaps simply as a lark designed to challenge the members of the committee, Duchamp submitted a porcelain urinal, entitled *Fountain*, under the pseudonym "R. Mutt," a likely allusion to the popular comic strip *Mutt and Jeff*. At some point prior to the exhibition, the piece was removed and placed behind a partition. Duchamp found the work after the show had ended, and when he learned that members of the committee had agreed to have it removed, he, along with Arensberg, resigned from the Society in protest.

Fountain, of course, is now considered a landmark work in the history of twentieth-century art. One of Duchamp's infamous Readymades, *Fountain*, according to Peter Bürger, "radically questions the very principle of art in bourgeois society according to which the individual is considered the creator of the work of art" (52). Concept, according to this aesthetic, determines content, and selection (choice of object) replaces individual artistic process and material production; in fact, content may be theoretically arbitrary or even unnecessary, except, perhaps, as material fact. A pre-existing object, an already made and commercially fashioned artifact, Duchamp's selection and (intended) display of a porcelain urinal, in other words, contested prevailing assumptions about artistic production and denounced the museum gallery as an artificially constructed space that simultaneously elevates and degrades art. An act of provocation, *Fountain* not only unmasked the hypocrisy of the art market and the progressive claims of the avant-garde but exposed the crisis of authenticity latent in Modernist aesthetics, especially its claims

to genius, originality, and artistic monumentalism. No longer can art *or* artist, the work maintained, be divided from the larger culture of commercial production, a concept resurrected if not fetishized in the mid-century mechanical Pop Art of Andy Warhol, who, in an interview with G.R. Swenson, famously declared that he wanted “to be a machine” (18). And, of course, Duchamp is apparent in Warhol’s contemporary heir, Jeff Koons, the former stockbroker, who, sometimes entirely removed from the process of production, replicates Warhol’s factory-based aesthetic in his flat but nonetheless lucrative display of kitsch and other symbolic representations of America’s materially obsessed and consumer-based culture.

A self-styled postmodern variant of Marcel Duchamp, an Andy Warhol on steroids, a Jeff Koons without the plexiglass, Kenneth Goldsmith, sculptor turned poet and self-proclaimed as the “most boring writer that has ever lived” (“Being Boring”), abandons the concept of parody and its attendant oppositional politics as seen in the work of a writer like Sherman Alexie for a far-off logical extension: plagiarism. “Because words today are cheap and infinitely produced,” Goldsmith claims, “they are detritus, signifying little, meaning less” (*Uncreative Writing* 218). For Goldsmith, language, as a consequence of its large-scale digitization, is in an unstable state of excess—overloaded, piled up, a kind of “junk” (“Conceptual Poetics”). Production has exceeded use. As such, his poetic project demands reuse and recycling, a sort of ecology of language, a politics of management and restoration: “Regurgitation is the new uncreativity; instead of creation, we honor, cherish, and embrace manipulation and repurposing” (*Uncreative Writing* 219). Such writing—typically called “Conceptual writing” (originally Craig Dworkin’s term), “Uncreative writing” (Kenneth Goldsmith’s moniker), and/or

“Unoriginal Genius” (Marjorie Perloff’s honorific title)—proclaims “context” as “the new content” (3) and takes “inspiration from radical modernist ideas” and infuses them with “twenty-first century technology” (4).

Insisting that he is “not doing much more than trying to catch literature up with appropriate fads the art world moved past decades ago” (120), Goldsmith situates his own work, and the work of other Conceptual writers, including Vanessa Place, Craig Dworkin, Robert Fitterman, Caroline Bergvall, and Christian Bök, with direct reference to Duchamp and other visual (though often non-retinal) artists. In “Uncreativity as a Creative Practice,” for example, Goldsmith asks, “One hundred years after Duchamp, why hasn’t straight appropriation become a valid, sustained or even tested literary practice?” For Goldsmith, this is the unavoidable implication of Duchamp’s work, especially of a piece like *Fountain*. Duchamp, according to Goldsmith, “eschewed the retinal qualities to create an object that doesn’t require a *viewership* as much as it does a *thinkership*; no one has ever stood wide-eyed before Duchamp’s urinal admiring the quality and application of the glaze” (*Uncreative Writing* 111). Of course, work in the spirit of Duchamp’s Readymades is well established in the visual arts, a fact Goldsmith acknowledges when he notes that artists like “Elaine Sturtevant, Louise Lawler, Mike Bidlo, or Richard Pettibon” have “recreated the works of other artists, claiming them as their own, and they have long been absorbed into a legitimized practice” (*Uncreative Writing* 120-121). Surprisingly, he leaves out the appropriation work of Cindy Sherman and Sherrie Levine. Levine, for instance, famously photographed Walker Evans’ iconic Depression-era photos and then displayed them as her own, a series that not only questions the reification of art but openly challenges the idea of individual authorship as

well as larger notions of ownership and copyright. Nonetheless, the line is clear, and it explains why Goldsmith's theoretical manifesto, *Uncreative Writing*, begins with Douglas Huebler's famous defense of the appropriation-based aesthetics of Conceptual art: "The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more" (1). It also explains Goldsmith's unambiguous admiration for the work of Sol LeWitt, who "echoed Duchamp's claim that art need not be exclusively retinal and goes further by stating that a work of art should be made with the minimum of decisions, choices, and whimsy" (130). In fact, in LeWitt's "recipe-based art," Goldsmith finds "a model for uncreative writing all the way through, from its inception to execution, right up to its distribution and reception" (128).

Like Duchamp, Lawler, Levine, Huebler, LeWitt, and others, Goldsmith denies the primacy of the individual artist, scoffing at concepts of originality, authorship, and authenticity. In fact, Goldsmith insists that authenticity is little more than "another form of artifice" ("I Look to Theory"). Subjectivity and singularity, according to this logic, give way to heterogeneity and multiplicity, and the "fabled Death of the Author," Marjorie Perloff contends, in the work of Goldsmith and other Conceptual writers, "finally" becomes a "fait accompli" (*Unoriginal Genius* 18). In the absence of a traditional author, the work of Conceptual writing consists, Goldsmith argues, of "intentionally self and ego effacing tactics using uncreativity, unoriginality, illegibility, appropriation, plagiarism, fraud, theft, and falsification as its precepts; information management, word processing, databasing, and extreme process as its methodologies; and boredom, valuelessness, and nutritionlessness as its ethos" ("Conceptual Poetics"). For Goldsmith, in other words, there are no lines. Everything—the everyday, the

common, the banal, the empty, the commodified, the popular, the profane, the sacred, the circulated, the recirculated—is poetry. And writing, according to this model, requires little more than selection: plagiarism, appropriation, transcription, excision, reframing, recontextualization. Here, in other words, is an aesthetics grounded in the act of mirroring, recycling, echo, return. As Craig Dworkin suggests in “The Fate of the Echo,” the introduction to an anthology of Conceptual writing he co-edited with Goldsmith, entitled *Against Expression*, “The great break with even the most artificial, ironic, or asemantic work of other avant-gardes is the realization that one does not need to generate new material to be a poet: the intelligent organization or reframing of already extant text is enough” (xliv).

Like Dworkin, Paul Stephens insists that Conceptual writing operates by “restructuring and reframing aggregate data” (154). To be sure, much of Goldsmith’s work bears out this premise. In 2003, for example, he published *Day*, a laboriously constructed word-for-word transcription of the September 1, 2000 edition of *The New York Times*. Disregarding the boundaries that divide and define editorial and advertising, Goldsmith meticulously typed out each page, from left to right, top to bottom, creating a largely unreadable and theoretically superfluous 836-page text: “All this week Mr. Bush has criti- Continued on Page A22 PRESIDENT VETOES EFFORT TO REPEAL TAXES ON ESTATES REPUBLICANS VOW A FIGHT” (13). In 2005, Goldsmith published *The Weather*, a textual appropriation of the one-minute weather reports of 1010 WINS, an all-news radio station based in New York. Transcribed over the course of a year, 2002-2003, and thematically organized by season, the text divides the weather reports into single paragraphs, complete with the informal stutters and hesitations that

characterize radio-based speech. Offered in a new context and put on textual display, the temporary, mundane, and commercial nature of these reports takes on a symbolic if not artistic quality, like a basketball suddenly and strangely suspended in a plexiglass case. A report from the spring of 2003, presumably in late March, is telling: “Oh, we are looking at, uh, weather, uh, across, uh, Iraq obviously here for the next several days, uh, we have, uh, actually some good, good weather is expected. They did have a sandstorm here earlier, uh, over the last twelve to twenty-four hours those winds have subsided and will actually continue to subside” (39). A mere compiler, a sorter, a selector, or, perhaps, a collector, the individual author recedes, as the text communicates with a voice that is oddly familiar but eerily unidentifiable. As Judith Goldman argues, “Like a photograph of language in language, the readymade text does not circulate among contexts promiscuously and anew, but takes its world with it. And yet the textual readymade, over against this would be self-effacing documentary effect, also draws attention to its work of mediation, its re-siting and medium translation of the text it captures” (“Re-thinking ‘Non-retinal Literature’”). In his repetitions of the language of the dominant culture, in other words, Goldsmith positions himself as a kind of mirror. The language simultaneously belongs to him and yet exists outside of him. The space, however, is not divided. This lack of distance, this fundamentally interior position, this reflection through repetition and reproduction, lacks opposition. In fact, if it is critical or subversive at all, it is because the material itself is antithetical to long-standing assumptions about what constitutes poetic form and poetic subject matter. The connection to Duchamp, in this sense, is rather obvious; return, or echo, theoretically speaking, redefines, reinvigorates, and reinscribes the quotidian, the mundane, the commodified, and the transient as art.

Goldsmith followed *The Weather* with two similarly constructed texts, *Traffic* (2007) and *Sports* (2008), also transcribed from New York radio. Comprised “entirely” of “New York material,” Marjorie Perloff insists that the texts “should properly be called *The New York Trilogy*” (*Unoriginal Genius* 151). True to Goldsmith’s aesthetic claims, these texts are not only boring, but they do not need to be read, at least in any traditional sense, as he notes in an interview with *The Believer*:

My books are better thought about than read. They’re insanely dull and unreadable; I mean, do you really want to sit down and read a year’s worth of weather reports or a transcription of the 1010 WINS traffic reports 'on the ones' (every ten minutes) over the course of a twenty-four-hour period? I don’t. But they’re wonderful to talk about and think about, to dip in and out of, to hold, to have on your shelf. In fact, I say that I don’t have a readership. I have a thinkership. I guess this is why what I do is called “conceptual writing.” The idea is much more important than the product. (“Kenneth Goldsmith”)

Despite its appearance, this is not hyperbole. The texts are genuinely flat, featureless, stale, and tired. A section from *Sports* adequately demonstrates the point: “During Ford’s model year clearance, the possibilities are endless. Right now at your Tri-State Ford dealer, lease a 2006 Explorer Eddie Bauer Edition 4x4 for \$279 a month. That’s just \$279 a month for 24 months, red carpet lease on the best selling SUV in America for 14 years straight. Security deposit waved” (82). Clearly, concept and context replace content; these are merely objects (ideas) on display. However, as Fredric Jameson might argue, “parody finds itself without a vocation” (*Postmodernism* 17). Further, while the texts

represent “speech in a dead language” (17), they cannot be labeled as pastiche. Wholly impersonal, there is no imitation, no affect, no allusion, no alterity, no author, and, importantly, no intervention. There is, to appropriate Jameson, little more than the transcription and display of a “neutral and reified media speech” (17), a copy of a copy of a copy, an odd and somewhat troubling postmodern simulation bereft of all subversion and opposition. *The Weather, Sports, and Traffic*, in fact, are the very kinds of texts that Fredric Jameson insists are “secretly disarmed and reabsorbed by a system of which they themselves might well be considered a part, since they can achieve no distance from it” (*Postmodernism* 49). In fact, these series of texts might fairly be categorized as an aesthetic representation of the intensification and concentration of the postmodern condition, a sort of Baudrillardian hyperreality, a hyperpostmodernism, in which even the practices of simulation, appropriation, and replication give way to absolute emptiness. As Goldsmith notes, “The future of writing is the managing of emptiness” (“I Look to Theory”).

This lack of opposition begs the question of Conceptual writing’s progressive function. Historically, the avant-garde, the “emergent,” to return to Raymond Williams’ formulation, has positioned itself antithetically, as “substantially alternative or oppositional” (*Marxism and Literature* 123), to the dominant, the hegemonic, in terms of both smaller institutions and the larger dominant culture. In the case of texts like *The Weather, Traffic, or Sports*, however, the issue of distance without contamination is framed as irrelevant, as an always already and therefore accepted condition. Again, this is Jameson’s concern with much of the art and literature created during postmodern times. Andy Warhol’s commodity-based works, for example, as Jameson notes, “which

explicitly foreground the commodity fetishism of a transition to late capital, ought to be powerful and critical political statements. If they are not that, then one would surely want to know about the possibilities of political or critical art in the postmodern period of late capital” (*Postmodernism* 9). To put it another way, and to come back to Linda Hutcheon’s description of postmodern parody, this is “complicity,” but unlike the work of Sherman Alexie, it is complicity without opposition or critique. Largely uncritical, Goldsmith’s work is fundamentally different than the work of Duchamp (or perhaps even Warhol). In other words, if “context” is “the new content,” as Goldsmith insists, then the distinction between the social, historical, and cultural context in which Duchamp produced *Fountain* and in which Goldsmith produced *The New York Trilogy* is undeniably essential.

In many ways, the current postmodern culture might be characterized as a culture of inundation, deluge, excess, surplus, or overabundance. As Goldsmith argues, writing is “faced with an unprecedented amount of available text” and “we must learn to negotiate the vast quantity that exists” (*Uncreative Writing* 1). The same, of course, could be said of other kinds of information. Now largely digital, the landscape is confusing if not plain bewildering; maps and guides are unquestionably needed. This condition of inundation creates collapse, disintegration, disorganization, and, importantly, contamination. As Jacques Derrida insists in another context, “What happens is always some *contamination*” (“This Strange Institution” 68). And, of course, contamination, as Goldsmith readily acknowledges, creates a crisis of authenticity, although he sees the issue as unimportant, as “another form of artifice.” However, in an environment of inundation and contamination, what constitutes necessary or even reliable information? How, for

example, does one distinguish between what is relevant and irrelevant, important and unimportant, credible and not credible? The democratization of information has created an open environment of incredulity, one that is simultaneously democratic and oppressive. The postmodern era acknowledges the illusion of objectivity in favor of multiple and often competing narratives, all seemingly contaminated by each other and all disseminated within a dominant (hegemonic) consumer-based culture. Goldsmith's aesthetics, in other words, are built on both contamination and complicity, and, therefore, his selections and repetitions are patently distinct from Duchamp's interrogative questioning of the institutions of art. They may, in fact, be distinct from Warhol's consumer-based selections and repetitions. As Christopher Schmidt relates, "Like Warhol, Goldsmith chooses ephemeral, well-circulated, often banal texts as source material; periodicals, radio reports, and his own mundane chatter are some chosen objects of *détournement*" (25). Unlike Warhol, however, Goldsmith's work is "less transformative" in his faithful reproduction of the "detritus of mass culture" (25). Again, the risk of an aesthetic model founded on simple reproduction is the possibility of complicity without critique, mere capitulation to the consumer-driven logic of late-capitalist culture. Moreover, if Goldsmith's aesthetics involve the wholesale movement of information from one context to another, then it would reasonably follow that he would provide reproductions of poetry, plays, novels, songs, short stories, films, television shows, polemics, etc. Strangely, however, this has not been the case, as Goldsmith has chosen to work almost exclusively within the domain of popular culture.

Nonetheless, *The New York Trilogy* places America's postmodern culture of banality, complicity, inundation, contamination, commodification, and consumer

fetishism on full display, and it functions, at least in part, as an homage to the conceptual work conducted by Andy Warhol, who Goldsmith claims is “perhaps the single most important figure for uncreative writing” (*Uncreative Writing* 139). The text of *Traffic*, in fact, is preceded by a well-known quote from an interview with Warhol, in which he offers a description of the origins of his *Death and Disaster* series: “I realized that everything I was doing must have been Death. It was Christmas or Labor Day, a holiday, and every time you turned on the radio they said something like, ‘Four million are going to die.’ That started it. But when you see a gruesome picture over and over again, it doesn't really have any effect” (*Traffic* 2). Critical of the use of morbidity in commercial culture, particularly as a means of generating profit, Warhol, beginning in the early 1960s, famously appropriated photos from tabloid newspapers and police archives. Mirroring consumer processes of production and repetition, Warhol, in mechanical fashion, reproduced and recontextualized images of car crashes, race riots, suicides, electric chairs, and tainted tuna cans. These images, as Arthur Danto relates, are “like illustrations to Marcel Duchamp’s mock epitaph—*D’ailleurs, c’est toujours les autres qui meurent*—‘Anyway, it’s always the others who die’” (44). *Traffic*, to be sure, has an obvious relation to this series, especially in its reproduction of car crashes. At the same time, Goldsmith’s reproductions lack the repulsion and horror of Warhol’s silk-screen images: “This is all because of an, uh, accident on the other side, on the Gowanus, right at Fort Hamilton Parkway, so that traffic is really crowded indeed” (*Traffic* 17).

A sort of extension of *The New York Trilogy* and a more obvious tribute to Warhol’s series, Goldsmith, in 2013, published *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*, a text that transcribes and appropriates radio and television broadcasts of national tragedies,

beginning with the assassination of JFK and ending with the death of Michael Jackson. In between, Goldsmith appropriates coverage of the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy, the murder of John Lennon, the Space Shuttle Challenger explosion, the mass shooting at Columbine, and the fall of the World Trade Center towers. Unlike *The New York Trilogy*, this text contains profound traces of authorial direction; it is more selective, more assembled, more grafted, and more clearly driven by a desire to unmask and challenge the compulsions of commercial media. The section entitled “World Trade Center,” for example, as Goldsmith notes in the afterword, is “culled from a variety of sources, which comprise its seven parts. Beginning with an initial CNN television report, the bulk of it is taken from New York City radio stations including WABC, WOR, WFAN, and WNYC” (175). Far from empty or flat, nutritionless or boring, there is an identifiable politics here, as well as an aesthetic that is not far from the postmodern practice of pastiche. The writer, in this sense, to use Best and Kellner, is “no longer the originary and unique self who produces the new in an authentic vision, but, rather, a *bricoleur* who just rearranges the debris of the cultural past” (133). More intimate and perhaps even less conceptual in its purest sense, the text, in many instances, invites and encourages close reading.

The first lines of “World Trade Center” are instructive: “This just in. You are looking at obviously a very disturbing live shot here. That is the World Trade Center, and we have unconfirmed reports this morning that a plane has crashed into one of the towers of the World Trade Center” (127). For those who recall the coverage, this is a disturbing reminder, an emotional trigger that returns feelings of sadness, confusion, and dismay. Real feeling is evident, though it is, in an obvious sense, concealed in the pre-made, limited, and repetitive speech of American corporate media. Like Warhol’s *Death and*

Disaster series, Goldsmith's text exposes control, compulsion, repetition, and, implicitly, the profit-driven demands of the 24-hour news cycle: "And as we can see in these pictures, obviously something devastating that has happened. And again, there are unconfirmed reports that a plane has crashed into one of the towers there. We are efforting more information on the subject as it becomes available to you" (127). Though unnerved and unsettled, the speaker's language habitually returns to the linguistic, or, as Daniel Morris frames it, "discursive," conventions of the trade, a common trait among most of the transcriptions in the collection. In the section devoted to JFK, the broadcast veers back and forth between music, commercials, and news bulletins as hosts struggle to negotiate the demands of the situation with the demands of the industry: "KLIF news. On at Parkland Hospital to confirm the reports that someone had been wounded in the firing of shots in the Kennedy motorcade at downtown Dallas. Stay tuned for more news" (13). Then, oddly, the broadcast returns to playing "Everybody" by Tommy Roe, a moment of strange but unacknowledged synchronicity: "One time or other everybody listen to me, / you lose somebody you love / But that's no reason for you to break down and cry . . ." (13). In the chapter devoted to John Lennon, a portion of the transcription reads, "John Lennon was shot tonight and, uh, he is dead. And I think if you're looking for a radio station tonight that's not playing Beatles music, you will have a long hunt. Stereo 101 doing a complete hour of Beatles songs, some written by Lennon, some written by Lennon and McCartney, but John Lennon was a part of them all" (75). The line between advertisement, news, and tribute is never clear; dissolution and contamination are hallmark.

In some instances, though, especially in Goldsmith's transcriptions of the radio coverage of the fall of the World Trade Center towers, the veneer begins to come off, as broadcasters struggle to offer any description at all: "There's almost no textbook for any of us here on the radio to figure out just what to say. There are no words at all to express this" (141). Interestingly, even lack of expression does not escape the language of cliché. However, more than the mere struggle for expression, other moments from this portion of the text reveal deep political bias. In the absence of factual information, for example, an unidentified radio host demands retribution, couched in the now familiar language of preemptive war: "So, Lawrence Eagleburger said that George Bush needs to respond quickly and go after terrorism wherever terrorism exists, indicating that even if we don't know for sure that they were the people directly responsible, we must go after those who support Osama bin Laden and who have done so in the past" (150). What's worse, these reactive demands are informed and directed by fundamentally racist claims and assumptions: "Ron, as you know, in radical Muslim literature, they refer to New York City as sort of the Jewish capital of the world, even larger in scope than Tel Aviv" (149). In fact, the final lines of this section, which are also the final lines of the text as a whole, function in the same manner, namely to expose the insidious nature of xenophobic and racist assumptions: "And just below me is a park right near the edge of Chinatown. And while's there's some curiosity among these people, they continue to play their card games. They continue to chat as if nothing is going on. Their markets are open. They're shopping, they're...they're...they're buying their fish" (154). Then, as if there is an acknowledgement that the broadcast is live, the speaker continues, slowly and only slightly backing away from his previous claims: "Uh, it's...it's as if this little corner of

New York City was totally unaffected, but you know it's at the top of their minds. They're talking about it. They're pointing up in the air periodically and they're continuing with their card games. So it's, uh, just a little snapshot of, uh, a piece of New York as they deal with this immense tragedy" (154). The excision done, the coda complete, and the politics made plain, Goldsmith's *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* offers an echo, a return, a pastiche-like reflection on the role of the mass media and consumer culture in the social construction of reality, including the conception of race. The text also anticipates and prefigures Goldsmith's most controversial piece.

In March of 2015, at Brown University, Goldsmith read what was then a new piece, entitled "The Body of Michael Brown." Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old African American man, was shot and killed by a white police officer, Darren Wilson, in Ferguson, Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis, on August 9, 2014. Brown's death and the questionable use of deadly force sparked a prolonged period of protests as well as other forms of civil disobedience, many of which were violently suppressed by local law enforcement. The event became the focus of a national conversation about race and its function in various institutions, including law enforcement. Standing under a projected image of Brown, Goldsmith read, word for word, in an approximately 30-minute performance, a reordered and slightly altered version of Brown's autopsy report. The last line of Goldsmith's performance read, "The remaining male genitalia system is unremarkable." This was not, however, the last line of the official autopsy report.

News of Goldsmith's performance spread quickly through various forms of social media, prompting almost instantaneous disapproval. On Twitter, for example, Cathy Park Hong wrote, "Kenneth Goldsmith has reached new racist lows yet elite institutions

continue to pay him guest speaker fees.” Saeed Jones, also on Twitter, insisted, “It's WILD how many poets get a pass on the blatant racism / misogyny in their work because of poetry's relative obscurity.” Many similar comments followed. On March 16, three days after Goldsmith's performance, in a blog entry entitled “The Body of Kenneth Goldsmith,” PE Garcia argued that “for Kenneth Goldsmith to stand on stage, and not be aware that his body—his white male body, a body that is a symbol loaded with a history of oppression, of literal dominance and ownership of black bodies—is a part of the performance, then he has failed to notice something drastically important about the ‘contextualization’ of this work.” On this same day, Goldsmith wrote the following on Facebook: “I am requesting that Brown University not make public the recording of my performance of ‘The Body of Michael Brown.’ There's been too much pain for many people around this and I do not wish to cause any more. My speaker's fee from the Interrupt 3 event will be donated to the family of Michael Brown.”

Goldsmith's request to have the performance removed and his decision to donate his proceeds from the event to the family of Michael Brown is fraught with contradictions. For example, in the initial hours and days after the performance, Goldsmith, as if to express dismay and disagreement, republished some of the comments of those who had found it offensive, on both Facebook and Twitter. More significantly, and as a direct response to the expressions of pain and indignation that the performance generated, Goldsmith posted a public defense of the work on Facebook, claiming that the text and his performance of it had been offered in the tradition of *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*:

I took a publicly available document from an American tragedy that was witnessed first-hand (in this case by the doctor performing the autopsy) and simply read it. Like *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*, I did not editorialize; I simply read it without commentary or additional editorializing. The document I read from is powerful. My reading of it was powerful. How could it be otherwise? Such is my long-standing practice of conceptual writing: like *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*, the document speaks for itself in ways that an interpretation cannot. It is a horrific American document, but then again it was a horrific American death.

Goldsmith also acknowledged that he had “altered the text for poetic effect,” translating “into plain English many obscure medical terms that would have stopped the flow of the text.” In a revealing gesture, Goldsmith has since deleted his defense of the performance. Nonetheless, it is still easily located at various places on the web. Needless to say, this gesture, along with his decision to remove the performance from public view, raises a number of serious questions and concerns.

Leaving aside, initially, the fact of the performance itself, there is the real question of whether “The Body of Michael Brown” is, in fact, a work, as Goldsmith claims, in the tradition of *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*. On the surface, this might appear to be the case. Categorically speaking, all of the sections of the text explore and consider death, or, more specifically, to use Goldsmith’s terms, “horrific American death.” And, of course, there is no argument that Brown’s death was horrific. At the same time, the text of “The Body of Michael Brown,” an autopsy report, is significantly

different from the other appropriated material in *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*. Why, for example, did Goldsmith not appropriate media coverage of the event, which would have been easily locatable and more clearly in line with the existing material? For him, however, as noted earlier, he “took a publicly available document from an American tragedy that was witnessed first-hand (in this case by the doctor performing the autopsy) and simply read it.” At bottom, both of the claims made in this statement are false.

Prior to the Michael Brown performance, when asked about his exclusion of other American tragedies from *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*, particularly those involving African Americans, including the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, Goldsmith offered a claim that stands in direct opposition to his assertions about the Brown piece: “I wish there were air checks available from Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, but in those cases, the media doesn’t show up until well after the assassination and the reporting is pretty slick stuff, lacking the struggle to find words to express the horrors that they were witnessing” (“You Take Your Love”). Here, there are two very obvious logical inconsistencies. First, he claims to have excluded these events because the coverage takes place “after.” Needless to say, the autopsy of Michael Brown is not a text that deals in the present moment of the event, as it was unfolding; it was conducted *postmortem*. In fact, the pathologist’s examination took place on the day *after* Brown was shot and killed by Wilson.

Goldsmith also claims that his exclusion was based on the fact that the coverage of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X lacked “the struggle to find words to express the horrors that they were witnessing.” The words “struggle,” “express,” “horrors,” and “witnessing” suggest uncertainty and distress. In an essay entitled ““The wound track

shows deeper hemorrhage': Kenneth Goldsmith's 'The Body of Michael Brown' as The Eighth American Disaster," Daniel Morris offers a close reading of the autopsy in order to outline the "meanings that the reporter cannot staunch." Morris, in other words, argues that the surface text of the autopsy reveals a "gruesome reality the official story cannot hold at bay, regardless of how strenuously the storyteller works the language, narrative point of view, and sentence construction to deflect responsibility for Brown's death from Officer Wilson and from the racist national imaginary made manifest by Wilson's actions against Brown's body." While there is little question that the autopsy, as with any text, is open to gaps, lags, traces, differences, and deferrals, or, as Morris frames it, "paradoxes, inconsistencies," the purpose of an official autopsy report is to formulate and fix, within an existing and restricted nomenclature. Its language, in other words, is not one of uncertainty and distress, a "struggle to find words to express the horrors." Rather, it is an expression of horror itself, as Goldsmith acknowledges: "It is a horrific American document, but then again it was a horrific American death."

At issue here, as well, is whether the text invites close reading, as do many of the texts in *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*. On the one hand, Morris is correct, almost definably so. Medical documents require close reading. On the other hand, there is the reality that Goldsmith's version of the text, which, again, he "altered for poetic effect," is unavailable. A close reading and interpretation of the original autopsy report, therefore, is not a close reading and interpretation of Goldsmith's treatment of it as a conceptual text. Further, Goldsmith's use of the report is inconsistent with his previous conceptual work and his claims about Conceptual writing generally. Instead of translating "into plain English many obscure medical terms that would have stopped the flow of the text," the

text should have been presented in unaltered form. Goldsmith did not, in other words, “simply read it.” His alterations and translations, by definition, were interpretive, designed to create a “poetic effect,” which calls attention not only to the problem of close reading but to a general inconsistency between the text and Goldsmith’s stated aesthetic claims. In other terms, Goldsmith insists that his work is conceptual, that he requires a “thinkership” and not a “viewership,” that the “idea is much more important than the product.” If these are serious claims, then the “The Body of Michael Brown” must be treated as a conceptual work, as an idea rather than simply a text. What, then, of the idea itself? What, for example, does it mean for a white male poet to appropriate and perform the autopsy report of a slain African American male? What does it suggest that the report was altered? For example, what conclusions might be drawn from the fact that Goldsmith ended his version of the text with a line about Michael Brown’s genitalia? And what to make of Goldsmith’s declared rationale for removing the performance from public view, namely that it caused “too much pain for many people,” a statement that does not provide direct or perhaps even implied repudiation of his alteration, appropriation, and performance of the text? Many more questions could be posed. In short, however, the conceptual gesture, the performance, and Goldsmith’s comments and behavior after the fact reveal that Goldsmith fails to understand, or, in the very least, to acknowledge, his own level of cultural and institutional privilege.

There is little question that Goldsmith benefits from numerous kinds of cultural and institutional support. For example, one of American poetry’s most prominent critics, Marjorie Perloff, has published multiple essays on his work as well as a book-length defense of Conceptual writing, *Unoriginal Genius*. What’s more, Goldsmith was singled

out for a profile in *The New Yorker*, appointed as the first Poet Laureate of the Museum of Modern Art, provided with a chance to perform at the White House, where he read excerpts from Walt Whitman, Hart Crane, and his own text, *Traffic*, and invited to appear on an episode of Comedy Central's *The Colbert Report*, where he wore a pink suit and mismatched socks and remarked, sneeringly, "I never write any of my books." This says nothing, of course, of the seemingly endless stream of invitations to speak and perform at various colleges and universities, the sustained requests for interviews and article submissions, the spate of reviews about his work, and Goldsmith's overall warm relationship with numerous publishers.

Goldsmith most often appears befuddled by his own success, expressing surprise that elite institutions, from the White House to Columbia to *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *The New Yorker*, support, publish, and praise his work. In an essay entitled "My Career in Poetry or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Institution," Goldsmith remarks, "[W]hat I find remarkable is these institutions' embrace and acceptance of what they're most often accused of dismissing and ignoring." Here, he seems to have an almost absent understanding of his own privilege, which is further evident when he notes that he is "given free reign to teach in unconventional ways" and that the "university supports this agenda, so you see that perhaps the academy is not what it used to be." Significantly, in this same piece, Goldsmith spends four paragraphs describing and defending the Brooks Brothers suit he wore to his White House performance, uncritically establishing a link between poetry, fashion, and commercial culture as well as blurring the line between poet and celebrity: "It was clear that Brooks Brothers needed to revitalize their brand, shake up the staid traditions, hence they called

in Browne to bring Brooks Brothers into the 21st century, replete with self-conscious winks and nods, engaged with remix culture, and to add a big dose of impurity.” Goldsmith’s focus on the style of his dress and his reference to haute couture is not only a reminder of his financial privilege but of the undeniable visual quality of his performances, which also seems to be at odds with an aesthetic that places concept over context. So, in March of 2015, at Brown University, when he read “The Body of Michael Brown” dressed in black boots, black leggings, a black skirt, a black shirt, and a black suit jacket, potentially from Brooks Brothers, while standing in front of a projected image of Michael Brown, who grew up in a suburb of St. Louis and lived with constant reminders of racial and social inequality, Goldsmith offered viewers a visual contrast and a stark reminder of the racial politics embedded in the aesthetics of unequivocal appropriation.

In “Pretending to Disrupt, Merely Distracting: Plundering Privilege in the World of Poetry,” Amy King argues, “Goldsmith is privileged and will have nothing to do with generating a ‘voice’ of his own and acknowledging his own identity and all that gives him access to—such shirking is a privilege white people may enjoy.” She continues by drawing a direct line between institutional support and aesthetic freedom:

Kenneth Goldsmith and Vanessa Place have pronounced their work as anti-lyrical. They both also appropriate voices and experiences that are not their own, excerpting and re-presenting those voices as their own work. Perloff has taken up and validated these “writing acts” as the latest in the line of the avant-garde, the line of poetics that presumably challenges the status quo order as it is perpetuated. However, what Goldsmith and Place

are doing is actually nothing new; white America has a longstanding tradition of appropriating and sanitizing experiences and voices not our own—removing the sting and challenge of those voices—and re-presenting them as something we either own or control.

Imagine, for example, if an African American poet, or, perhaps, a member of Brown's family, had read Brown's autopsy report as "The Body of Michael Brown." Imagine if Goldsmith had read, in pastiche-like fashion, the autopsy report interspersed with quotations from the media coverage, quotations from studies that detail racial discrimination in the treatment of African Americans by law enforcement, and/or quotations from prominent critics and scholars on the politics of racial and cultural privilege. Contextually, visually, and politically, these would have been radically different gestures, ones consistent with the racial politics surrounding Brown's death. Instead, devoid of a rhetorical gesture that suggests opposition, Goldsmith appropriated and exploited the experience and death of Michael Brown for his own aesthetic ends and professional gain. As Sueyeun Juliette Lee relates, "'Whiteness' doesn't have to care—it doesn't have to have a body or a history, etc. Writers of difference ought to care whereas 'conceptual' writers don't have to. They get to remain unaffected. Whiteness allows them to be read as dwelling in abstraction and play which writers of difference aren't typically afforded unless they clamor for it." Goldsmith, in other words, Lee continues, "felt licensed to write about 'American' events, and licensed to claim a Warholian gesture and be acknowledged for it" while "writers of difference" are not allowed to "operate at this level of abstraction. We still predominantly read them from an embodied standpoint." Along similar lines, in "Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde," Cathy Park Hong

contends, “Avant-garde poetry’s attitudes towards race have been no different than that of mainstream institutions.” Further, she insists, “For too long, white poets have claimed ownership and territorialized ‘the new’ as their own and for too long experimental minority poets have been cast aside as being derivative of their white contemporaries.”

Is Goldsmith truly unaware that the vast majority of writers who have comprised various avant-garde movements in the history of American poetry have been male and white? Does Goldsmith not recognize that the primary recipients of support from various institutions, including the university, are largely male and white? Does Goldsmith genuinely not understand that the institutions that grant him “free reign” and support for his “agenda” are the very same institutions that have historically denied access to others and continue to do so in various ways? Is he unaware that a recent survey by the Pew Research Center on race and inequality validates the fact that an “overwhelming majority of blacks (88%) say the country needs to continue making changes for blacks to have equal rights with whites, but 43% are skeptical that such changes will ever occur” (4), and that “black and white adults have widely different perceptions about what life is like for blacks in the U.S.” (5). The study also demonstrates numerous forms of racial discrimination experienced by African Americans and highlights the gross inequalities between blacks and whites in terms of median income, employment opportunities, and, importantly, college completion. To be sure, instead of functioning as a haven, the academy, the university, and the artistic avant-garde has, in many ways, symptomatically replicated the exclusionary politics of the dominant culture. This, of course, is the context in which Goldsmith chose to appropriate and perform the medical autopsy of an African American male as a poem by Kenneth Goldsmith entitled “The Body of Michael Brown.”

In the closing moments of a conference in Denmark, in December of 2015, the poet Jen Hofer transcribed, “verbatim,” Marjorie Perloff’s response to a question about her “uncritical reading of critiques of Kenneth Goldsmith,” particularly his performance of Brown’s autopsy (“If You Hear Something”). Perloff started by saying, “You can’t say this today but they’ll say it a year from now, that Michael Brown was very romanticized, because there also is the video available of him in the convenience store, which is frightening.” She continued,

I think the romanticization, where everybody kept calling him the poor child Michael Brown, and they constantly showed photographs of him in the media when he had been about 12 years old. That’s what they do. Many of the pictures you saw, he looks like a little kid. He was a 300-pound huge man. Scary. He was scary, I’m just saying, that way. So that things then turn out to be much more complicated. And so I don’t know what’s happened to poetry, or to poetic discourse, I shouldn’t say to poetry, but to poetic discourse, when we have all over Facebook these sentimental things about the poor sweet child and his poor family. Michael Brown himself had said, “I wish I had a family.” He didn’t even—he hadn’t seen his father in years, his mother was on crack, he didn’t have much of a family or much of a life.

It would be unfair, of course, to conflate Perloff’s disgustingly racist defense of Brown’s death and by extension Goldsmith’s performance with Goldsmith. However, Perloff’s staunch defense and loyal support for Goldsmith’s previous work begs the question. In the least, Perloff’s comments expose the function of institutional support, which, in its

need for maintenance and control, often creates nearly impervious barriers. It is not surprising, in other words, to learn that Perloff harbors racist views, given her promulgation of various avant-garde movements that have consisted of a largely white and predominantly male constituency, all while derisively castigating numerous poets of color, including Rita Dove, Adrian Louis, and Ana Castillo. “Here,” Perloff writes, describing the poetry of Louis and Castillo, “is poetry approaching the condition, not of music, as Walter Pater famously held, but of journalism—a form of writing as harmless as it is ephemeral” (*21st-Century Modernism* 164).

One of the undeniable lessons of the postmodern era, particularly as a consequence of the rise of new social movements, is that institutions support and maintain various forms of power and privilege. In 1989, in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon insisted that postmodern art “cannot but be political, at least in the sense that its representations—its images and stories—are anything but neutral . . .” (3). In the postmodern period, in other terms, there has been an undeniable focus on the politics of exclusion, marginalization, subjugation, colonization, domination, exploitation, and oppression, especially along the lines of class, race, and gender. The fact that Goldsmith seems to miss some of these lessons is, perhaps, a symptomatic representation of the problem itself, namely that institutions do not encourage individuals in positions of power to develop an awareness of their own privilege. This does not, of course, exempt Goldsmith from any kind of responsibility or stage him as a victim. In fact, it suggests a willing denial of social reality, a luxury not afforded by Michael Brown or Sherman Alexie.

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