



avant-garde echo chamber  
by  
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## **avant-garde echo chamber**

**cayden johnson, IAMD MFA, 2020**

### **abstract**

Avant-garde poetry looks dynamically at the world through anarchic approaches to language. With the knowledge that implicit linguistic structures shape ontology and epistemology, the contemporary avant-garde experiment inherently concerns itself with the political. My own poetry investigates various avant-garde methods of challenging the status quo. Such crimes against poetry allow us to rethink and recalculate our relationship to language's organizing principles and its rippling impact within aesthetic and socio-political spheres. Where the avant-garde project once saw strong collective-based organization, locating these poetry groups today poses a challenge. This research explores the loss of collective presence in a decentralized avant-garde, the movement's relationship to today's crisis of subjectivity, as well as the viability of a contemporary avant-garde in consideration of neoliberalism's impact on the individual as creator.

## **acknowledgements**

I recognize the brutality of my ancestors and my government, as well as my complicated position as a nomadic and privileged settler on Turtle Island. I come from British Columbia, where almost all of its vast land is unceded Indigenous territory. While I wrote this thesis, the Canadian government enacted and continues to enact blatant militaristic attacks on Indigenous communities. What is taking place in unceded Wet'suwet'en territory regarding the Coastal GasLink pipeline is unacceptable, and I wholeheartedly thank those on the front lines of these dangerous fights. With a heavy heart, I send gratitude and appreciation to Indigenous communities all over this country. I encourage readers of this thesis to educate themselves on Canada's many contemporary and historical injustices, and to speak up against acts of racism, and governmental coercion and broken promises.

I am privileged to stand, study, and create on the ancestral and traditional territories of the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas of the Credit, the Haudenosaunee, and the Huron-Wendat whose immense histories are inscribed in every inch of this place, and who are the original owners and true care-takers of the land. In order to get here, I studied my undergraduate degree at the University of Victoria, BC, and I also acknowledge the Lekwungen peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands.

Thank you to OCAD University for providing me with the President's Scholarship, as well as the province for the Ontario Government Scholarship. I also extend much appreciation to the Charles Pachter Bursary donors.

I owe infinite thank-yous and appreciation to my supervisory committee, Dr. Catherine Black and Dr. Ashok Mathur, who carry exemplary poetry knowledge and rebellious tastes. Additionally, this thesis would not have been possible without the guidance, dedication, and commitment of Dr. Julian Jason Haladyn.

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### **statement of contribution**

Thank you to Dora Prieto for working with my ideas about colour and movement in creating the marbling artwork for my poetry book's cover. She dipped the cover on February 26, 2020, and asked me to send energy to BC from Toronto.

I sought marbling as a way to consciously utilize techniques that have an historical relationship with the book form. Like my title's opposite treatment of hierarchy, I am also turning the book's traditional relationship with marbling inside-out. Rather than have paper inside marbled, I showcase its intricacy on the front and without words obstructing the image. The title appears only on the spine. I also use marbled images to separate sections of poetry in the book.

## avant-garde echo chamber

### labouring in obscurity

*choose your player*

where mostpeople buy mind claim out  
and clothes for mostpeoples' style  
gassed up mostpeople know the exact  
time of mostpeoples' video  
mostpeople model witness

sum go through a ground in exposed stitch a round and round the moment  
loose ends at cafe forget tied symbols tried together in a court of lawlessness  
again andagainand a gain

What is your relationship to your player? Do they only go where mostpeople go? Have they been to cafe forget?—asking for a friend (poem). Is your player inclined to head away from or toward a repeating song?

Labour, breath, and fragmentation are words associated with the poetic act. These terms also help Franco Berardi attempt to reconcile with algorithms of domination sewn into the frantic landscape of the present. *Breathing: Chaos and Poetry* (2019) is an abstract thought experiment and invitation. When sociological terror, crises of information and knowledge, environmental degradation, and the apocalyptic energy of capitalism degrade our stamina, Berardi asks that we remember to breathe: “only in social solidarity can we find any shelter.”<sup>1</sup> In the return to breath, we open to cadence, utterance, and silence; we can utilize fragmentation and approach chaos with collective rhythm.

I place a great deal of weight on the things people say and write. This obsession with words comes with intense frustration, including a disappointment in language as a medium, an acknowledgement of its limitations, demarcations, and oppressive potential, and a recognition of

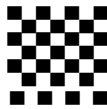
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<sup>1</sup> Berardi, Franco. *Breathing: Chaos and Poetry*. Semiotext(e), 2018, 46.

language's undeniable relationship to both surreal and grounded reality. In response, I am drawn to a type of poetry-based subversion exploring the minutia within and malleability of meaning-making. In thinking through this dynamically, I reject rigid categories of creation and look to the ways art and poetry intersect. Avant-garde practices open the door to this potential. My work and research seek poetic operations that subvert the complex nuances of language as a delimitation of power, and to examine the use and privilege of "anti-product[ive]"<sup>2</sup> language as a means of assertion—exemplified in my poem, "a day."

*a day*

a day spent doing nothing is never wasted unless done so nervously  
spent a day nervously never doing is nothing wasted unless done so  
doing so is a day spent never unless wasted nervously nothing done  
nothing is spent a day doing done nervously never so wasted unless  
is nothing nervously a day unless done so spent doing never wasted  
never spent done unless a day nervously wasted nothing never  
wasted doing nothing nervously so a day spent never unless done is  
unless spent wasted so doing done never a day nervously is nothing  
done spent nervously nothing is never so wasted a day unless doing  
so nothing unless wasted never doing nervously done a day is spent  
nervously done wasted never so spent unless doing nothing is a d a y



This piece clearly utilizes repetition, but perhaps more than discerned at first blush. Acrostics allow the poem to be read down to up on the left side, and up to down on the right. From the righthand top corner to the lefthand bottom corner, a diagonal repetition of the words, "a day," appears. The poem is meant to encapsulate both the reader and writer in a meticulous wasting of

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<sup>2</sup> Christove-Bakargiev, Carolyn Ed. *Arte Povera*. Phaidon Press Inc., New York. 1999, 30.



time. A checkerboard pattern appears with the poem as a way to evoke a sense of play and its many directions of being read.

I investigate and create poetry that complicates the urge toward traditional mastery, and rather participates in a series of experiential invitations to question the terms in which we exist. The core of my work questions what we are not *allowed* to think. Such resistance comes rife with issues at the core of avant-garde poetry: vanguardism versus conversation and opacity versus accessibility. These poets are often accused of creating impenetrable works only available to a specific class of literati.<sup>3</sup> An echo chamber occurs, whereby avant-gardes arguably write solely for one another. I seek to pry open the chamber doors, focusing on and creating anarchistic, self-interrogative avant-garde energy uninterested in its stereotypical elitism and vanguardism. To catalyze these doors ajar, I propose the need for presence and inclusive collectivity.

My thesis defines an economy of ideas and practices that has, fortunately or unfortunately, been given the term avant-garde. The movement proposed alternative logic—one of repudiation—that was not the function of capital and one that utilized different rules and modes of achievement. Art historians and literary critics have tried to fix this aesthetic experience as a historical category. After noticing a contemporary dislike for the word avant-garde, I seek to break from these cataloguing attempts in order to explore the continued viability of this practice. I am interested in what this term means to contemporary communities and why certain questions are being asked, or not being asked; I am not trying to solve them. This is not a resurrection—the movement did not die, but transformed. I see something in the contemporary day that resembles and represents this, as well as serious lacks that need to be addressed. Collectivity is one of them.

A lack of avant-garde poetry collectives connects to something not simply aesthetic or cultural. I am concerned with individual subjectivity under the neoliberal project of identity. I see a crack through which the subjective prevails, and this fissure is the the avant-garde. I am arguing for a poetry that resists given terms on the level of subjectivity. How can the quality of the avant-garde be maintained under neoliberalism? The neoliberal individual accepts a dominant system of valuation in order to live in perceived liberty, offering themselves to the system as human capital,

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to remember the difference between specialization and elitism; oftentimes, specialization appears elitist in the arts—and unlike other fields, we make the mistake of requesting that art forces itself into access-based submission.

and enhancing their cultural and financial capacities by consuming whatever they need to get ahead. The current system seeks to equate human worth with the ability to live in a constant state of self-interested productivity. We come relate to one another, not through connective principles like compassion, but through unrelenting competition that supports the atomizing neoliberal agenda.

I am unsure of the dissenting poet's place in society today. I come from a circle of musicians and artists in British Columbia who can separate art from capital. We spend our springs and summers piece-working in the woods, planting tree seedlings up rugged mountains. We spend the rest of the year doing what we love. As I get older and feel my body's urge for less physical torture, I am becoming increasingly unsure of how to function as creator viewed as human capital. I have witnessed the evolution and conformity of artists entering our culture's definition of success. The latter is highly understandable but also deeply concerning. I value the avant-garde project because it makes sense to me. It makes sense on a conscious level to separate marketization from the sacred and psychic parts of life, such as love, curiosity, and expressions of subjective will. It makes sense that everyone (not only artists) should have the time, resources, and distance to think critically about normalized knowledges and ways of knowing—especially in the face of domination now leaking apocalyptic tones. This logic dissolves in today's competitively supercharged sell-or-be-sold reality.

Even with the means to mass produce and distribute content, inheritable stratification principles, economic demands, and information overloads drown out and sever motivation for acting in opposition to the neoliberal achievement subject—that is, outside endless individual optimization and capital accrual.<sup>4</sup> I do see aspects of the avant-garde project in various artistic communities,<sup>5</sup> but this now decentralized movement likely cannot survive tunnel-vision ecstatic striving. Indeed, Earth itself struggles to breathe. How do I continue to work within the avant-garde project today, accepting the fact its drowning? How do I reconcile this with my work?

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<sup>4</sup> The definition of capital expands far beyond finance. For example, cultural capital is the currency of social mobility today—and knowledge is a product we can buy.

<sup>5</sup> For example, this energy exists in various BIPOC poetry groups, in dub poetry collectives, and in slam poetry communities; the prevalence of these groups sets an example. This energy also lives in Toronto's single-day Indie Literary Market, organized by Meet the Presses, and in the city's experimental venues like knife | fork | book and the Secret Handshake; however, greater interest in poetry and small presses would generate more events—the latter venues could appeal more to youth, perhaps combining poetry readings with music shows in collaboration with venues like the Baby G, for example.

## defining the overly defined undefinable

“[T]here exist no objective criteria for what constitutes a ‘real’ avant-garde and what doesn’t [but,] imagining or articulating the possibilities of a movement, be it artistic or political, often goes a long way toward consolidating one.”<sup>6</sup>

- Maggie Nelson

Here lies an attempt to redefine a repeatedly defined undefinable subject. Avant-garde poetry invites dynamic facets of viewing the world through anarchic approaches to language. With the knowledge that implicit linguistic structures shape ontology and epistemology, the contemporary avant-garde experiment inherently concerns itself with the political. I refer to the political in a Rancièrian sense, not as a matter of choosing specific stances, but as enveloping the entire sphere of what is available to be chosen or believed. In *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004), Jacques Rancière describes this sphere as containing “a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution.”<sup>7</sup> The avant-garde allows us to rethink and recalculate our relationship to language’s organizing principles and its rippling impact within this sphere. Throughout this chapter, I take advantage of my position between the realms of art and literature to explore my perception of oxygen filling the lungs of avant-gardism in general, as a means of discerning the practice’s current viability. Although my goal is not to purvey each drop of spilled ink on the avant-garde, I also briefly address the movement’s history and criticisms. I characterize avant-garde poets as those who carry forward the rhizomatic lineage of hybrid, anti-art, anti-capitalist, anti-authorship, postanarchist, and outsider traditions.<sup>8</sup>

I define the avant-garde as an impetus toward non-linear expansion of thought working to question and challenge epistemological and ontological norms. I consider this impulse toward dissent, which appears most constant across the spectrum of avant-garde practices, more

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<sup>6</sup> Nelson, Maggie. *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions*. University of Iowa Press, 2007, 204.

<sup>7</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics: the Distribution of the Sensible*. Trans Gabriel Rockhill. Bloomsbury Academic, 2013, 12.

<sup>8</sup> I define outsider literature as motivated by the sake of writing rather than publishing. These poets operate outside the mainstream market.

integral than its oft-accentuated novelty. One reason I lean on expansion of thought over formal innovation in my understanding is that avant-gardes often borrow from old technology and preexisting poetic methods to stretch original contexts, representations, and meanings. Jordan Abel's *Injun* (2016), for example, utilizes the established avant-garde technique of erasure, adaptation, and cutting-and-pasting found poetry. The long poem borrows from nineteenth-century western novels to produce a timely and potent statement about colonialism and racism. Another reason I favour an opening or expanding of possibilities over formal novelty in defining this practice is due the latter's reliance on perceived notions of linear time.<sup>9</sup> While I am aware that discussions around avant-garde movements often utilize the hierarchy of past, present, and future, my interpretation suggests that the project remain as open to alternative forms of knowing as possible. This is not to say that I do not subscribe to linear notions of time: I live within and acknowledge its relationship to my research. Rather, I argue that considering the radical nature of avant-gardism, the movement's definition should not be limited to an arguably oppressive structure of conception.

Contemporary avant-garde poetry exists along a spectrum of "difference," according to Majorie Perloff, which applies to poetic methods, but more so to the engagements that works inspire.<sup>10</sup> This spectrum ranges from a conversational, "ethical-political imperative," in the words of Gregory Betts and Christian Bök, (associated with accountability, the commons, and exposure of artifice) to a more individualistic, innovative drive (typically associated with a masculine, euro-centric drive toward vanguardism).<sup>11</sup> Most criticism of the practice targets the individualistic side of the spectrum as paralleling the neophilic behaviours of capitalism avant-gardes historically and actively oppose. Even poets who identify as avant-garde openly critique the practice. Dub poet Lillian Allen both criticizes avant-gardism and illustrates her own position along the movement's spectrum in her song, "Revolutionary Tea Party." Lyrics from the piece read, "You who see through to the future/ Come mek wi work together. . . a mek wi talk/ A mek wi analyze/ You who have been burnt by vanguardism/ come mek wi give yu little nurturing."<sup>12</sup> Here, Allen speaks from

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<sup>9</sup> The argument toward Indigenous ways of knowing would take an entire thesis to responsibly unpack. For further reading, please refer to N. Scott Momaday's "extended present" in *House Made of Dawn* (1989).

<sup>10</sup> Perloff, Marjorie. "After Language Poetry: Innovation and Its Theoretical Discontents." In *Contemporary Poetics*, Ed. Louis Armand, (15–38). Northwestern University Press, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Betts, Gregory B., and Christian Bök. *Avant Canada: Poets, Prophets, Revolutionaries*. Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018, 125.

<sup>12</sup> Lyrics upon request sent from Lillian Allen in Word document, 2020.

within and to the avant-garde community, simultaneously encouraging a conversational approach to its momentum. This thesis grapples with the continued oppressive history of the avant-garde by recognizing its challengers—inside and out the avant-garde community. I learn to reconcile with nuanced contradiction as I redefine the avant-garde, looking to types of self-critical celebration, rejection, and transformation. For the purpose of this project, and as a poet participating in avant-garde traditions, I focus on the communal side of avant-gardism which encourages a collectivity of diverse subjectivity that leaves room for disagreement and self-reproach.

To think through my position, I experiment with considering the avant-garde's relationship to will, ethics, risk, and optimism; the first concept sets groundwork for the rest of this discussion. In treating text as a communal space of labour, my own laconic poetry relies heavily on the will of the reader. The work feels risky, maybe because I tend to avoid envisioning an ideal reader. Perhaps this seems counterintuitive to almost all writing advice, but for me such avoidance serves a purpose of opening the text during its creation. My goal in writing these poems is to provide constellations outside the realm of experience that, when met with the reader's facilities, can become reintegrated into the realm of experience. I am devoted to leaving space for external agency in order to elicit the subjective will of the reader.

For example, the piece on the following page thinks about the categorization of humans as targets for others, our desensitization to this, and potential ways to cope by returning to the real—to the body—although equipped with a warning that even the real is not constant. The beginning of the poem situates this problem in an obscured narrative, and by the line “withstand like eggs,” the addressee shifts. Here, I am speaking directly to those impacted and offering solutions. Other ways this poem has been interpreted suggests that people relentlessly aim for targets, and that they place grave importance on their pursuits. I am more than open to any sort of interpretation of this work. Forks of meaning encourage this poem—but this piece has been particularly difficult for some readers who have even asked me to include words they suspect are missing. I view this as a quite traditional method of reading.

*under the heating lamp*

many stories exist and cause us worry  
targets are  
some people's ideas of everything  
some people  
place weight on everything  
withstand like eggs  
in curled positions to feel the body  
like certainty  
conclusion is ..  
static  
in weather  
warm and hatched again  
crack  
stretch  
go

Sitting with this kind of poetry requires some comfortability with the unknown. Not only in leaving space, but by eschewing syntax to encourage multiple forks within the poem's direction, I invite the reader to collaborate in the experience.

Julian Jason Haladyn's *Boredom and Art: Passions Of The Will To Boredom* (2014) articulates avant-gardism as a willingness to bring meaning to an otherwise meaningless world. Haladyn separates avant-garde and mainstream aesthetics by understanding their treatment of the question of meaning as an "inward *need* or *lack* through the subjective nature of art—as experience" or as treating aesthetics as a representation of objectified meaning based on "externalized *want*."<sup>13</sup> In other words, the avant-garde entices a creative drive for subjective meaning while mainstream aesthetics promotes cohesion within an already constructed paradigm. The avant-garde utilizes a highly subjective view of the creation of meaning, asking of itself (and of you) why and why not. The work calls upon the subject, often through a lack of visual and conceptual information, and presents the problem of "determining the experience."<sup>14</sup> This

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<sup>13</sup> Haladyn, Julian Jason. *Boredom and Art: Passions of the Will to Boredom*. Zero Books, 2015, 88.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

interpretation allows for a collaborative process between the spectator and creator, as noted in Marcel Duchamp's *The Creative Act* (1957), which underscores the audience's role in the production of art as a dialogical process.<sup>15</sup>

One could argue that the avant-garde itself becomes a set paradigm with which to adhere. Multiple theorists use this reasoning for claiming the death of avant-gardism; however, at the centre of this practice will always exist a vibration for change. At its core, the avant-garde's fluidity lacks the stability necessary to form said foundation. Haladyn illustrates a desire for certainty or foundation in mainstream aesthetics and thought, as opposed to a comfortability with uncertainty in the dynamic practice of avant-gardism:

[M]ainstream aesthetics aims at a willful conformity with social norms, based within the desire of the subject to be recognized as part of *the people* and therefore see its experiences reflected back as a shared or common (external) meaning; the avant-garde aesthetic is a recognition of the creative potential of subjective will as the power of the subject to produce its own meaning within an infinite and indefinable world with intrinsic meaning.<sup>16</sup>

The avant-garde provides an active alternative to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's status quo in "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" (1947), whereby conformity "replace[s] consciousness."<sup>17</sup> Today, the very idea of consciousness has been coopted and sold back to us by the neoliberal regime. Rather than strengthen "blind, opaque authority" through adherence to prepackaged notions of being, knowing, and believing, the avant-garde investigates potency in the subject's own will to create meaning.<sup>18</sup> This can represent a challenge to think beyond the neoliberal value system. In its desire to leave space for dynamic subjective will, the specific goals of the avant-garde movement continually alter and transform. Understanding

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<sup>15</sup> This idea helps my next chapter's articulation of how the avant-garde poem treats text as a communal space of labour, levelling the space between author and reader.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>17</sup> Adorno, Theodor W. *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. Ed. J. M. Bernstein. Routledge, 2001, 104.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

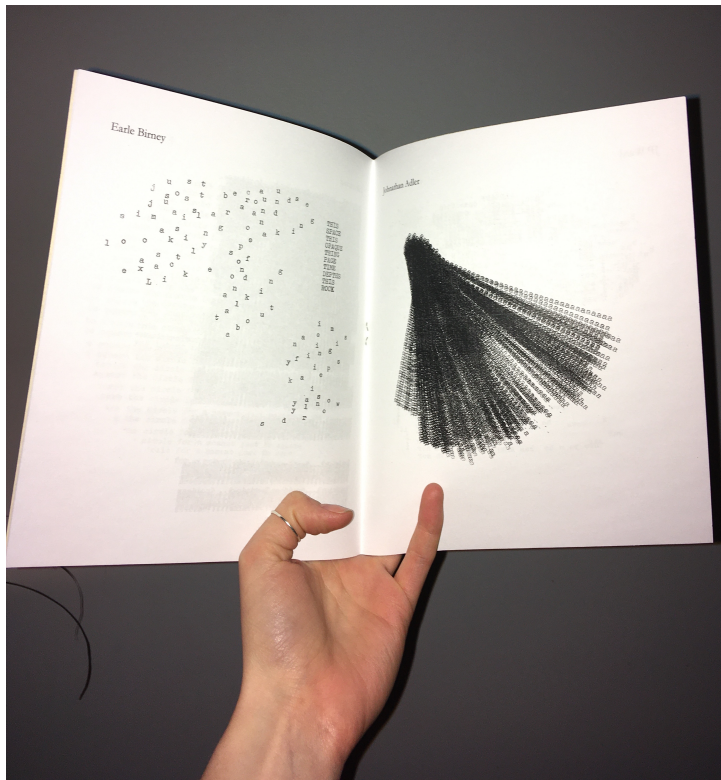
avant-gardism as engagement with a mysterious plethora of subjective meaning allows for its apparent ethical position presented by Betts and Bök's *Avant-Canada: Poets, Prophets, and Revolutionaries* (2019). A moral responsibility exists in willfully questioning the nature of perception and creation throughout history, especially considering the present's overwhelming, digital, and globalized nature. Expanding thought through the bending of linguistic functions, with the foundation of Rancière's assertion of an apriori equality among humanity, encourages conversation that spills from aesthetics into the realm of the political.<sup>19</sup> I best understand the avant-garde's ethical claims as belonging to the conversational side of the practice's spectrum, concerned with the commonality of language. This means some avant-gardes display more ethical concerns, relating to the open access of information and communal engagement, than others. I suggest that poets operating predominantly on the basis of innovation for individualized gain, tracing the footsteps of neoliberal capitalism, show less ethical concerns than those who commit to a revolution of will that actively refuses integration into hegemonic ideology.

Risk orbits the connection between avant-gardism and will. Artists employing incoherency and informational lack gamble with whether or not their audience accepts the challenge to their willingness. These artists often evoke deliberate provocativeness in a conscious effort to play with such risks—associated with stepping outside accepted notions of behaviour, creation, and perception. For example, Dani Spinosa's poetry in *Glosas for Tired Eyes Volume 2* (2018), completely departs from narrative or syntactical sense and appears as complex typewriter errata. Spinosa's pieces investigate the visual space between the communicative impulse and mark-making, questioning the traditional poetic desire to master language. Her work investigates a commons by inviting a collaborative attention to the material of language, almost rendering the works visual rather than linguistic stimuli. Spinosa focuses on the blank space that allows concepts to appear and morph. Each discernible word within her poetry becomes an incantation equipped with a specific subversive energy. Predetermined meanings, compulsively strengthened by the status quo's numbers, requires less subjective exercise than that which avant-garde works elicit. Artistic risk circles the avant-garde, linguistic or otherwise, posing a challenge toward dissociation and reformation that ultimately depends on the subject.

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<sup>19</sup> See Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics: the Distribution of the Sensible*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2013, 12.





Dani Spinosa poems, “Earl Birney” and “Johnathan Adler,” in *Glosas for Tired Eyes Volume 2* (2018), photo by cayden johnson

The field of avant-garde literary practice stems from a long tradition of crossover between art and poetry, primarily set forth by one of poetry’s early risk-takers, Stéphane Mallarmé. Working in France in the late nineteenth century, Mallarmé published a long poem called *A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance* (1897) that radically altered poetry and art by suggesting that signs sooner or later become, in the eyes of spectators, the objects signified. Allowing space on the page to add to expression, Mallarmé set the poet free from imposing voice in the transmission of work. As Richard Candida Smith writes, “The experiment in form forced attention onto the blank space around and between the lines and turned the very form of the book into a physical symbol of the contingency surrounding all expression. . . Recognition that all thought rests upon hypothesis. . . makes visible the temporality of the perceptions within which gregarious beings

live.”<sup>20</sup> Mallarmé investigated linguistic abstraction by removing the poet and enticing a subjectivity akin to observing a sculpture or painting. He was highly involved in artistic scenes, close friends with avant-garde painter Edouard Manet, and was a precursor to Cubism, Dadaism, Surrealism.

Finally, a discussion of optimism factors in my understanding of this practice. In an interview with avant-garde poet and theorist Gregory Betts, he claimed the project’s most fundamental characteristic is optimism. This particular point induced both sense and shock, so I immediately attempted to find positivity in some of my favourite works. One example of an avant-garde poet operating without clear optimism is Adam Verde, formerly Eva Collé. The Italian Berlin-based poet writes an elliptical and vernacular account of abuse as a child raised by addicts called *1997.5* (2016). While Betts would likely not deem Verde’s work avant-garde due to its implicit nihilism, I classify the poetry as avant-garde due to its authentic recognition and distrust of artifice, and because it refuses mainstream publication and marketization. I realize Bett’s statement does not mean all avant-gardism reeks of happiness and glee. Rather, through a perceptive pessimism lies a striving for the breakage of current ontological systems in favour of something unidentifiable, yet more refined and diverse. Betts makes a distinction between poets who get lost in the perceivable gloom that comes with the consciousness to critique and poets who possess a desire to see themselves and others through the night. In a separate interview with Lillian Allen, she expanded on this suggestion from Betts and got closer to my understanding of positivity’s place in this discussion. Allen explained how optimism may not offer a nuanced enough explanation of how avant-gardism functions. As Allen suggests, “one can rail against something without thinking about being optimistic.”<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, she recognizes that a hint of said optimism, or a type of progressiveness, exists in any attempts to create and bring forth. Therefore, simply on the basis of its fruition, even the overtly rough or ugly avant-garde work does involve a complex, multi-faceted notion of optimism.

As someone subject to moments of all-encompassing negativity, the topic of optimism hindered my early expressions as a writer. I found myself desperately searching my mind for something constructive rather than being consumed by uncomfortable ruminations. The times I was able to

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<sup>20</sup> Smith, Richard C. *Mallarmé’s Children: Symbolism and the Renewal of Experience*. University of California Press, 1999, 240–42.

<sup>21</sup> Lillian Allen interview, 2020.

create work became extremely limited by my mood and outlook. The poetry I once produced carried a self-narrative maudlin tone that I desired to escape. Perplexed by how, I devoted myself to avant-garde experiments. In this poem, I am channeling stream-of-consciousness writing and consciously grabbing onto the outlines of my mental faculties. These methods allow me to express something that feels authentic, yet without forced or shiny utopianism.

*freak days*

in between live and die  
                  is you   walk   railroad  
tracks with dim light  
                  dice  
roll unseen at  
                  night is open  
          the number           for problems is  
1-800 called or counted

          if you see  
a dim light  
          tell all

we will!

          all right

While this poem may entice discomfort in its ominous imagery, mysterious dialogue, dead-ends, and casual nature, I do not feel personally exploited by its direction. This piece engages a certain self-effacing coverage that allows me to speak from the place where memories and experiences are nearly forgotten. I fall away as the conveyer of the message, and I ask you to manifest the rest—knowing the poem’s perception is highly dependant on your personal experiences, feelings, and ethos.

The history of avant-gardism, as well as its etymology, connects directly to its common critiques. A hierarchical linearity exists in the term itself, which originates from a French military metaphor. An avant-garde describes a vanguard (advanced guard) that enters battle before the full armed

force. Haladyn explains that this title came to describe a group of artists operating after the French Revolution who “perceived themselves as operating in advance of the mass culture of *the people*.”<sup>22</sup> I observe the separation between these specific artists and *the people* as less of a rating system and more of an invitation. This invitation extends to anyone willing to complicate or reject prescribed notions of doing, creating, and meaning. Although the metaphor suggests a distinct ahead-ness that also implies striving toward a idealistic future, like Haladyn, I conceive of this forerunning related more to a progressive (or active) will, rather than a literal or temporal expression of order. Willingness to offer or create space for subjective meaning is in itself progressive, or could be viewed as *ahead* of (or external to) normalized epistemologies and ontologies. In thinking through avant-gardism as subjective will to create alternative meaning in the face of a culture of conformity, we move away from the term’s suggested temporal race, and operating *ahead* of society becomes a more nuanced phenomenon.

Similar to much postmodern rhetoric, many avant-garde writers eschew the term altogether. Spinosa, whose stance I further explicate in the next chapter, chooses the term experimental rather than avant-garde. John Cage famously harkens back to Norman O. Brown’s statement that “syntax is the arrangement of the army.”<sup>23</sup> That the word originates from the military should not threaten us to discard the movement’s potent lineage. As Maggie Nelson writes in *Women, the New York School an Other True Abstractions* (2007), “it is worth remembering “that ‘life’ and ‘art’ are just words, and that one’s sense of their independence or interdependence is essentially mutable, both over a lifetime and from moment to moment.”<sup>24</sup> The consequence of poststructuralist thought makes language’s pacification at the forefront of contemporary thinking. In my understanding, an avant-garde approach utilizes the power and futility of language by facing the tangible. Why should outsiders attempting to confront mainstream thinking and oppressive systems pacify their activist vocabulary, which under neoliberal discourse threatens to be lost to problematic associations. During my interview with Allen, she called art avant-garde when “the work do[es] battle.”<sup>25</sup> This remark reveals a comfortability with reclaiming the

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<sup>22</sup> Haladyn. *Boredom and Art*. 87.

<sup>23</sup> Spinosa, Dani. *Anarchists in the Academy: Machines and Free Readers in Experimental Poetry*. The University of Alberta Press, 2018, xxi.

<sup>24</sup> Nelson. *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions*. 91.

<sup>25</sup> Allen interview, 2020.

vocabulary around the contentious term as a way of extending its value, and as a way of subverting its violent origins. The word avant-garde remains productive, not simply to call upon its historical significance, but to encourage resistance in the face of a hollow dominant vocabulary disguised as inclusive, connective plurality.

## hard to kill

Many scholars and critics have sought to claim the death of the avant-garde. The popular notion is displayed in the widely cited text by Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974). The text presents difference between the historical or radical avant-garde (such as Dada and Surrealism) and the doomed “neo” avant-garde projects of the 1950s through to the 70s. The historical avant-garde sought to separate art from commodification and eradicate the institution of art. For Bürger, the avant-garde “failed” insofar as radical artworks critiquing the market became institutionalized and sold, which sealed the fate of all avant-garde-seeming groups to come.<sup>26</sup> This demonstrates the rationale previously mentioned that suggests the avant-garde is stagnant enough to become a prescribed paradigm. Bürger notes, however, that the avant-garde project accomplished solidifying a certain autonomy for art in a bourgeois society.

While a core of dissent exists, avant-garde goals change throughout history. When the mid-century welcomed Tom Wolfe’s idea of “radical chic”<sup>27</sup> and revolutionary became the fashionable norm in America, the New York School of poetry openly critiqued the historical avant-garde’s intensity toward seeking sociological and political change. The New York School, which David Lehman argues was the last authentic poetic avant-garde,<sup>28</sup> responded by taking a privileged stance of indifference. This echoes Duchamp’s quote, “[t]he only way to be really anti-art is to be indifferent.”<sup>29</sup> It is important to note and critically engage with the different level of privilege operating within this field and to question who has the privilege of being indifferent, even when used as a mode of resistance. Bürger would suggest the true avant-garde project died long before Frank O’Hara’s release of “Personism: A Manifesto” in 1961. In disagreement, and in observing the malleability of avant-garde activity since its birth, I suggest the goal of contemporary avant-gardes was and continues to be part of a larger discourse than the institutionalization of art. We can see from the perceivably opposite treatment of socio-political impulses from the radical avant-garde to passive New York School, for example, that the project which began as an economic critique can morph into a multitudes of critical thought from

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<sup>26</sup> Bürger, Peter. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. University of Minnesota Press, 1984, 57.

<sup>27</sup> Wolfe, Tom. *Radical Chic; & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers*. Picador, 2009, 1.

<sup>28</sup> Lehman, David. *The Last Avant-Garde: the Making of the New York School of Poets*. Anchor Books, 1999.

<sup>29</sup> Marcel Duchamp, quoted in Silverberg, Mark. "Ashbery, O'Hara, and the Neo-Avant-Garde Manifesto." *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*, vol. 59, no. 1, 2003, 137–165.

institutional critique to self-critique. As Marc James Léger writes in *A Brave New Avant-Garde* (2012), “the critique of the ‘institution art’ was developed as part of a critique of class society and is not perfectly synonymous with the critique of institutions.”<sup>30</sup> Worth remembering is that avant-garde movement shape-shifts in response to context, but maintains a relationship to economic critique. Avant-gardism did not fail. Certain groups of avant-gardes attempted a task that turned out differently than desired, but the practice continues to search for other fissures in our marketized realities.

Nonetheless, other scholars also describe the avant-garde as a doomed project. Matei Calinescu claims, “Each vanguard movement in art constitutes an elite group that aspires to abolish the elitism of the arts, rendering them democratic for all—but by doing so, the avant-garde embarks upon a suicidal campaign, in which the avant-garde, if successful, eliminates the necessity for its own existence.”<sup>31</sup> This statement speaks only to a certain type of avant-garde idealism, does not account for its malleability, and does not allow *trying* to exist as an end in and of itself. In Calinescu’s and many other critics’ sense, the future-oriented avant-garde project dies when history catches up. Since the movement is capable of altering its goals, even if an avant-garde group was successful in abolishing the elitism of the arts, the movement would not die so much as transform. As Nelson writes, “it’s so much easier to lament the nonexistence or inefficiency of a movement (be it an avant-garde art movement, an anti-war movement, etc.) than it is to create or articulate one.”<sup>32</sup> While I recognize the trials facing contemporary avant-gardism that I discuss in-depth in chapter six, I believe that the avant-garde impulse remains alive today, and that this collective can strengthen through a processes of relearning.

In her previously mentioned book, Nelson critiques David Lehman’s *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets* (1998), which claims the New York School was the last authentic avant-garde. Nelson questions, “why such a bell tolls for the American avant-garde precisely at the cultural moment of the triple ‘liberations’ of the civil rights movement, the women’s

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<sup>30</sup> Léger Marc James. *Brave New Avant Garde: Essays on Contemporary Art and Politics*. Zero Books, 2012, 9.

<sup>31</sup> Betts and Bök. *Avant Canada: Poets, Prophets, Revolutionaries*. 5.

<sup>32</sup> Nelson. *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions*. 254.

movement, and the gay/ lesbian rights movement, and the consequent rise to prominence of art from these corners.”<sup>33</sup> She describes the deeply troubling tendency for men to declare the death of an art or art form just as the demographics undergo diversification and further explains her concern for this continuing masculine tradition:

Lehman and others are right to diagnose the disturbing and daunting impediments facing the avant-garde impulse today—the ever-increasing commodification of literary production; the absorption of so many writers and intellectuals into the academy, coupled the increasing corporatization of the academy itself; a widespread loss of faith in personal and/ or collective potency in the face of a homogenizing, globalizing capitalism; and so on. But I would also ask hard questions of any nostalgia for a time. . . when the so-called avant-garde was safely dominated by white men (many of whom, in the case of the New York School of poets, came to New York straight out of Harvard.<sup>34</sup>

By fighting for the life of this vital project, we build a more diverse, critical, self-interrogative, multi-dimensional avant-garde, as opposed to safely packaging up its neat male-dominated history into a box. I argue that by insisting this project continue openly and inclusively, we not only establish the importance of releasing subjectivity from the capitalist-informed self-inflicted ties that bind, but we assert within this project’s potency the presence and range of voices most impacted by implicit and explicit systems of domination.

Reclaiming a contested term that once stood outside of capital purpose stands contrast to the neoliberal agenda, including its blanketing of positivity and pacification of language. We are asked, in varying degrees, to eschew critical thought in replace of glossy positivity. Here (still) to scratch that smooth surface is the avant-garde. Hated or loved, its presence elicits discussion. The existence of an avant-garde gives me context. I connect my work with a centuries-long ongoing conversation and critique of conformist domination and economic corruption. My poetry does not seek to be the next big thing—it seeks to question and converse: to look back to once radical poetic styles in order to look forward, to see what these stylistic choices mean to the present and future, and to participate critically in a communal experience with reality’s relationship to language.

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiii.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiii.



## **literary criminals**

“[S]urely the cultural artifact, the literary artifact especially, must come into play as an element of activist practice.”<sup>35</sup>

- Dani Spinosa

Throughout this chapter, I articulate an idea previously brought forward of an avant-garde spectrum between two poles: conversational and individual. I choose to discuss the pole most underrepresented or detached from avant-garde critiques, the conversational and community-oriented side, as opposed to the individualistic alternative. I explain this pole (where I place my own poetry) using Kandis Williams’s rebellious small press *Cassandra* and Spinosa’s *Anarchists in the Academy* (2018). I continue this explication in the next chapter using Bill Bissett’s radical poetry. I should preface by accentuating the spectrum component of this discussion and be clear that these two poles are not mutually exclusive. Due to its focus on radical participation over formal innovation, I view the conversational pole as representing the “ethical-political imperative” Betts and Bök bring forward in their understanding of avant-gardism.<sup>36</sup>

A compelling example of a conversational avant-garde appears in the work of interdisciplinary LA and Berlin-based artist Kandis Williams. As a self-educated intellectual and creative force, she draws heavily from critical theory and Greek mythology. Williams interrogates modern presumptions, stereotypes, and stigmas that derive from ancient mythological storytelling. Williams pries apart permeations of ancient myths in contemporary popular culture and holds us accountable for implicitly leaning on constructed paradigms in the processes of conception, perception, and judgement. While these concepts clearly appear in her visual art, I am deeply interested in the ways she disseminates related text-based information, alongside Taylor Doran and Jordan Nassar, through their small press called *Cassandra*.

*Cassandra* represents a quintessential avant-garde publishing spirit, printing themed snippets of poetry, prose, and various passages of writing from influential and significant thinkers. The publishers access the latter information through various friends’ university passwords to online

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<sup>35</sup> Spinosa. *Anarchists in the Academy: Machines and Free Readers in Experimental Poetry*. xiii.

<sup>36</sup> Betts and Bök. *Avant Canada: Poets, Prophets, Revolutionaries*. 125.

libraries. Cassandra's website describes the project as producing "lo-fi activist and academic texts, flyers, posters, pamphlets, and readers, in hopes of spreading ideas and sharing perspectives, promoting dialogue, and inspiring further and wider-spread political and social activism."<sup>37</sup> The books-not-books appear democratic and approachable, bound in elastic bands, printed on standard letter paper, and sold for anywhere from five to fifty dollars (usually landing closer to twenty). During an artist talk, Williams described a fearless awareness about potential lawsuits following such rebellious reprinting. She emphasized the need for accessible information and claimed that if universities seek legal action, she will only extrapolate the unnecessary elitism surrounding this issue, thus exposing academic institutions as corporations.

Cassandra's hybrid methodology exemplifies a timely, tech-focused, yet intimate combination of physical and digital forms. Utilizing both the web and material poetics in the form zines, Cassandra create a complex dissemination process that both benefits from and questions our relationship to technology and its gatekeepers. Brian M. Reed's *Nobody's Business: Twenty-First Century Avant-Garde Poetics* (2013) comments on the poet's usage of outdated technology, such as Cassandra's rubber-banded pamphlets, as a radical gesture: [B]y insisting on its status as a print- and book-based discourse, poetry can gain critical purchase on the push toward mass digitalization, the compulsion to reduce all communication to intangible, infinitely portable ones and zeroes. Poetry is dead, print is dead, long live both."<sup>38</sup> These deaths only apply to a relationship to capital production. At stake for the poet and small press operator is time, which becomes a problem for those without the means to take time. As Han notes, neoliberal techniques of domination "aim to capitalize not just on working time but on the person him or herself: all the attention the individual commands and, indeed, his or her very life."<sup>39</sup> To step outside dominant forms of aesthetics and production and neoliberalism's demands for endless personal achievement, we embody the act of anti-production for progression's sake. This fundamentally questions the unsustainable quality of the all-consuming neoliberal value system. Cassandra successfully draws beneficial aspects of a globalized database, transforms information into knowledge, collaborates with artists and writers, and brings the entire process back to Earth by

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<sup>37</sup> Williams, Kandis. "About." *Cassandra*, [www.cassandrapress.org/about](http://www.cassandrapress.org/about).

<sup>38</sup> Reed, Brian M. *Nobody's Business: Twenty-First Century Avant-Garde Poetics*. Cornell University Press, 2013, 2–3.

<sup>39</sup> Han, Byung-Chul. *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*. Verso Books, 2017, 29.

conveying its outlaw-printing message in printed text. Concerned with dialogue and revolution, Cassandra operates like a truly ethical, conversational, and community-concerned avant-garde project.

Central to my unpacking of this conversational pole where I have placed Williams's work is Spinosa: theorist, poet, and founder of another small press called Gap Riot. Her unique book, *Anarchists in the Academy: Machines and Free Readers in Experimental Poetry* (2018), explores experimental—recall that Spinosa consciously avoids the term avant-garde—poetry's relationship with the political. She describes an ethical impulse at the core certain poet-reader relationships by incorporating a lens of postanarchy.<sup>40</sup> Briefly, postanarchy fuses anarchy's desire for individual autonomy with poststructuralist thought, including critiques of the movement's historical reliance on essentialism. For Spinosa, the merging of experimental writing techniques and postanarchist literary theory “shows us not only how to create texts that are crimes against poetry (texts that defamiliarize the modes of poetry production, in other words) but also how to make the reading and writing of these poems activism on the level of ontological anarchy.”<sup>41</sup> I utilize Spinosa's description of the axis between experimental poetry and postanarchy to explicate my understanding of an ethical avant-gardism.

Based on its concern with individual agency and radical reformation, it is not difficult to associate avant-gardism with political movements like anarchy. Nevertheless, anarchists historically distanced themselves from avant-gardes, whose work they saw as “willfully obscure at best, more suited to the narcissistic enjoyment of self-appointed elite than to the needs to working class people in struggle.”<sup>42</sup> While I am heavily invested in Spinosa's inclusion of postanarchy, for the purpose of this project I use postanarchy to describe a type of avant-garde contribution to a non-hierarchical and shared linguistic commons. Perhaps this seems oppositional to stereotypical avant-garde, seeking to distance themselves from *the people*. In contrast, I hope to create space for contributors to the commons on the conversational side of the avant-garde spectrum. I argue

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<sup>40</sup> The topic of postanarchy as a literary theory would take another thesis to explicate. For detailed information, please refer to Jesse Cohn's “What Is Anarchist Literary Theory?” (2007) and “What is ‘Postanarchism’ Post?” (2002); David Graeber's “Anarchism, Academia, and the Avant-Garde” (2009); and Murray Bookchin's *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (1971).

<sup>41</sup> Spinosa. *Anarchists in the Academy: Machines and Free Readers in Experimental Poetry*. xvi.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

that what Spinosa and other anarchists actually seek distance from is not the avant-garde practice as a whole, but from the elitist vanguardism on the individualistic side of the spectrum.

Echoing Lyn Hejinian, Spinosa reads political statements into the experimental stretching and expanding of poetic form.<sup>43</sup> She circumvents innovation's capitalist rhetoric by focusing on poetry that, for her, resists vanguardist hierarchy "in favour of a more egalitarian relationship between reader and writer—and between texts themselves."<sup>44</sup> These texts accomplish such a levelling using various copyleft techniques discussed in the next paragraphs. Spinosa's understanding of innovation does not demand formal or technical newness so much as it demands a dismantling of traditional literary hierarchy, thus "demonstrat[ing] an interest in the commonality of language."<sup>45</sup> As mentioned, for Spinosa, the process of examining poetry with these specific functions involves creating an axis between postanarchy and formal experiment. This axis illustrates the conversational pole of avant-gardism, championing a type of reading and writing that encourages a communal, participatory, and jarring approach to language. Spinosa offers four essential criteria of experimental texts:

- 1) the experimental text must show concern with exposing artifice; in experimental poetry, artifice negates, complicates, or undermines semantic meaning

On the following page is an example of artifice exposing in my own poetry. I use repetition to draw attention to our perceptions' reliance on syntax in the creation of narrative reality. This piece challenges authority of narration and coherency less than it draws attention to our discomfort with fragmentation and our tendency to, in the absence of religion and truth, lean through postmodernism and new sincerity into self-narrative.

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<sup>43</sup> See Hejinian, Lyn. *The Language of Inquiry*. University of California Press, 2000, 2.

<sup>44</sup> Spinosa. *Anarchists in the Academy: Machines and Free Readers in Experimental Poetry*. xix.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, xx.

*mythos*

coherent not what we cohere we  
want a coherent story little narrative this is the  
beginning the end the start of something coherent  
something so narratively coherent a story is  
started born beginning preface with coherency  
co-narrative can be believed  
can be prayed  
on at night we need story fable lesson is  
made of narrative coherence such coherent coherency and  
the song will be as coherently narrative as the  
end this a narrative so coherently easy to believe

I am interested in opening space for alternative forms of coherency within the overwhelming voices of a globally informed world.

- 2) the experimental text is open, in constant revision, and is never exhaustive or exhausted
- 3) the experimental text utilizes chance in terms of machines, code, or methodological constraints
- 4) the experimental text explores the political through form and manipulation; Spinoza writes, “the experimental text is a way not to resist, but to refuse”<sup>46</sup>

These criteria provide the backbone of specific techniques or methods to challenge normalized epistemologies and ontologies, which I personally use as my definition of avant-gardism in the previous chapter. Spinoza lays out a desire to expose artifice as the first criteria of an experimental text. In my understanding of the avant-garde as a whole this exposure is key, as demonstrated in my discussion of Cassandra press. The openness Spinoza presents also echoes the avant-garde’s use of obscurity found across many poetic modes such as Language and elliptical writing. The chance operations Spinoza favours also finds its roots in Dada avant-garde movements. And finally, an interest in the political aspects of formal manipulation applies to a multitude of avant-garde literary movements from erasure to visual poetry.

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<sup>46</sup> Spinoza. *Anarchists in the Academy: Machines and Free Readers in Experimental Poetry*. xxi.

Spinosa attempts to apply a postanarchic reading to her above criteria in order to distance her research from avant-gardism; however, her list actually represents my understanding of an ethically concerned, or conversational avant-garde.

The pillars through which Spinosa defines her experimental texts as intersecting with postanarchy also umbrellas the four dominant modes of avant-garde production provided in Betts and Bök's *Avant-Canada: Poets, Prophets, and Revolutionaries* (2019). Comparing these pillars contributes to my suggestion that Spinosa's axis not only articulates my own understanding of an ethical avant-gardism, but also blankets Betts and Bök's dominant modes of avant-garde production:

- 1) concrete poetics explores material and visual elements of language
- 2) language writing confronts the connotations, denotations, and interconnection between words and the physical realm
- 3) identity writing interrogates the socio-political position of the self
- 4) copyleft poetics complicates notions of intellectual and creative ownership

This copyleft poem on the following page originated as a piece of art by Giovanni Anselmo, a self-portrait photograph of the artist standing on Mount Stromboli, Sicily, in 1965. I adapted this poem from a caption in a book by Carolyn Christovè-Bakargiev detailing the Italian avant-garde group called *Arte Povera* (1999).

*an individual at mount stromboli*

the artist is seen alone  
 surrounded by the four elements:  
 a slope of volcanic earth,  
 s m o k e ,  
 t h e s e a ,  
 and the dawn sky  
 the sun barely peaks  
 above the horizon, no physical screen  
 no grounds for projection  
 just air (background of infinity)  
 the artist is the individual is the artist is the individual is  
 -----mere detail  
 i n a v a s t  
 c o n t i n u u m  
 m  
 m  
 m  
 m  
 m  
 m  
 m  
 m  
 o f  
 u n i v e r s a l  
 e n e r g y

I am interested in the transmission of lived experience, labour, and meaning in this poem. The moment originated from a person’s experience standing on a mountain, which became arguably reduced to a photograph, then to a caption, and finally to this poem—investigating the idea that nature subverts language and vice versa. This is expressed through the freedom of incantatory letters referring to the land. Kerning claustrophobia occurs in certain lines where identity and logic block our connection to the universal energy Anselmo attempts to explore. The stream from this poem’s origin challenges authorship and both undermines and expands on its discussion of “universal energy.”

Each of these literary techniques help poets achieve the various aims outlined above by Spinoza. Concrete poetics complicates traditional elitism of the written word through the use of the

arguably more democratic visual realm; Language writing seeks to expose artifice in the connotations, denotations, and general use of language in a poem's creation of meaning; identity writing connects the poet to communities and sociological concerns; and copyleft poetics engages in a collaborative process between texts, readers, and creators, that recognizes the communal aspects of language. As far away from the avant-garde tradition as Spinoza attempts to stand, her theory utilizes an avant-garde vocabulary and exemplifies my understanding of its goals and purpose.



## inkorrekct thots

Canadian iconoclast poet bill bissett is someone integral to my relationship to poetry and the avant-garde. Stretching almost every literary boundary and pouring into various realms of art, his radical sound poetry, phonetic spelling, collage techniques, and concrete and visual style once faced the type of rejection typical to avant-garde risk-taking.<sup>47</sup> He is associated with Vancouver's and Toronto's 1960s radical poetry scenes, involving names such as Margaret Atwood and bpNichol. The term anarchy becomes associated with bissett due to his rejection of institutions, poetry's traditional elitism, language's hierarchical categorizations, and general critiques of domination, exploitation, inequality, and hegemony. Spinosa would likely proclaim bissett's work as fitting with the "crimes against poetry"<sup>48</sup> she champions in her research. In a proper avant-garde spirit and in response to early difficulties of having his work published, bissett founded his own publication in 1964 called *blewointment press*, "2 rage out in nu direksyuns in writing painting n living."<sup>49</sup> Since then, bissett has published over seventy books of poetry.

bissett represents a difficult balancing act at the heart of contemporary avant-garde practice: life experience with art-making and writing. This means that bissett's personal understanding of class injustice contributes to the success of his social critiques rather than him speaking from a comfortable liberal academic voice. However many lectures, workshops, readings, and speeches bissett has delivered to this day, he still worked as a record-store clerk, gas station attendant, and spent time in prison on drug possession charges during the creation of his poetry.<sup>12</sup> I attended bissett's "breth day" (one of the many events held in celebration of his 80th birthday) in November 2019. As the MC recounted the guest of honour's literary biography, bissett proudly shouted out that he has never graduated from anything. His admirable rejection of tradition and institutions and eventual inclusion in the the academic program articulates the avant-garde's sublimation into capital production. Despite this, bissett's life reflects the working-class values of the traditional avant-garde. Through creating his own phonetic style, he rebels against the oppressive power systems inherent in the function of language, yet garners respect from the

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47 Jennings, Chris. "bill bissett". The Canadian Encyclopedia, 19 January 2017, Historica Canada. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/bill-bissett>.

48 Dani Spinosa interview, 2020.

49 "bill bissett : Biography." Canadian Poetry Online | University of Toronto Libraries | bill bissett, <https://canpoetry.library.utoronto.ca/bissett/index.htm>.

academic and capitalist spheres by so cleverly exposing the power systems controlling the utilitarian function of syntax, capitalization, and linguistic structure.

bissett connects to a lineage of poetic voices essential to the formation of my own writing style. Gertrude Stein's influence appears in bissett's poetry. Both Stein and bissett seek a frankness in their unpretentious use of language, describing experiences as they are experienced. A similar cadence appears in the angular rhythms of both poets' syntactically-obscured prepositional words and repetitions. A few lines from stanza one in Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation* (1957) read, "That it is now that is there/ That rain is there and it is here/ They have been here to leave it now." Lines 9 from Bissett's "a violent prson" (1999) read, "him her self is alredee enuff/ is alredee fine is alredee all there/ can go now can b now she he is."<sup>10</sup> This oft-misunderstood method and resistance toward syntactical structure represents a larger sociological resistance, meaning that the work subverts language's utilitarian power dynamics. A surrealist influence also lingers in bissett's work, not only due to accusations toward the poet of writing from a libidinal surrender to imagination washed "in th ambr waves,"<sup>11</sup> but due to his manipulation of structure, depth in obscurity, and potent stream-of-consciousness imagery. bissett's legacy lacks pretension or contributions to social hierarchy, and his work transcends a previously mentioned major criticism and issue of avant-garde writing: penetrability versus opacity.

I struggle with the perceivable dichotomy between these concepts in my own work. I have learned that access does not mean complete comprehension. A reader never has complete access to a text. The more I embrace this, the more I embrace my own distance from my work. I am able to remove aspects of myself by removing the pressure to provide neatly packaged meaning for the reader. A poem of mine called "feeding time," appearing on the following page, begins with an uncanny image of another Anselmo art piece, "Untitled" (Sculpture That Eats) (1968). I use common interpretations of this work, which suggest the stones represent universal powers and pressures surrounding the frail human. I envision my mind requiring sustenance the way Anselmo's sculpture needs—by the end of the poem, the image of the stone becomes undefined external pressures that require tending to. The poem speaks both to interior and exterior demands.

*feeding time*

my mind is a stone  
that eats lettuce  
pour  
coffee in a home  
with heat in the red  
sunglasses and someone else's coat  
  
i wonder if we will  
  
always compare  
clothes hearts talks days arms and legs  
  
if there is  
help  
  
with friction  
outside  
is the stone that eats  
we greens wilt without  
regular attention  
to matter  
is an energetic and spiritual  
  
endeavour

Challenging syntax in this way is important to my work because it draws attention to the poem as a poem. As Spinosa pointed out in our interview, we cannot pretend that texts exist as transparent portals of connection between author and reader; the more we draw attention to the fact the text is something standing between us, the more we can meet in that space.<sup>50</sup> A poem is not a site where meaning exists; a poem a site of invitation to create meaning. I am interested in the experience: how words travel from visual cues to mental stimuli and land, remain, and disappear in the psyche, memory, and body.

bissett escapes the dichotomy by adding layers upon layers of intensive accessibility to the point of obfuscation. In some ways, my own poetry parallels this method by employing vernacular while complicating syntax. bissett's layers of ultimately crystal clear fog allow him to employ pastoral and spiritual language and poetic tropes without becoming trite (or cringey). To analyze a piece

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<sup>50</sup> Spinosa interview, 2020

of his work, I usually have to rewrite his pseudo-phonetic spelling into English. Even then, bissett's syntactical arrangement of words such as sky, clouds, and cum sprawl and braid together in strange connections that never tire my imagination. I consider this a prime example of text as a communal space of labour. bissett asks that we bring eyes, mind, and soul to every experience of his otherworldly language.

Douglas Barbour calls bissett "a romantic visionary and political anarchist," claiming that these aspects of the poet present themselves in everything bissett draws and writes. For Barbour, "all [bissett's] art is dedicated to celebrating that freedom and attacking all social, political, and artistic strictures and structures which deny it."<sup>51</sup> Barbour explains that bissett associates the rules of grammar and spelling with class oppression that restricts freedom of expression and imagination, and attempts to connect art and politics through the expansion of these literary traditions. bissett's recent work, *breth: th treez uv lunaria: selektid rare n nu pomes n drawings, 1957–2019* (2019) resembled the volume of a Tolstoy novel. Opening the book reveals massively oversized font and bissett's desire to play around with conventional literary tradition. The poet succeeds in mocking the authority of massive canonical texts, while simultaneously asserting himself and others a conversational space within the cracks of this elitist history.

An important aspect of bissett's legacy is that he never capitalizes his own name. I also apply this tactic to my poetry and my name, as I agree with the challenge to authority that lowercase hints toward. This self-abolitionary practice recalls Berardi's *Breathing: Chaos and Poetry* (2018), in which Berardi is "trying to displace the field of the vibrational search from social conspiracy to cosmic expiration, to the dissolution of the individual (me) into the cosmic dimension of nothingness."<sup>52</sup> A cosmic dimension could define the world created by the body of bissett's work. During his "breth day," a fellow poet honouring bissett asked the audience to "get back to the group energy of the '60s" and collectively perform one of bissett's chants. As the large crowd repeated the lines, "if we are here for anything at all, it's to take care of the earth," despite my postmodern cynicism, the present moment became a more interconnected, compassionate

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<sup>51</sup> Barbour, Douglas. "bill bissett." *Canadian Writers Since 1960: First Series*, edited by William H. New, Gale, 1986. *Dictionary of Literary Biography* Vol. 53.

<sup>52</sup> Berardi. *Breathing*. 139–40.

space. I sense that collectivity stands paramount as a goal for bissett, and he always invites us to join him as he disappears into a bizarre, uninhabited atmosphere of non-hierarchical language.

## crimes against purpose

“[C]reativity, immaterial and communicative labour are held to be key components of the biopolitical engineering of subjectivity, a voluntary mechanical enslavement within a bureaucratically regulated process of continuous evaluation.”<sup>53</sup>

- Marc James Léger

“[Classical neoliberals] believed that all political impulses, cultural impulses, togetherness impulses, and social bonding needed to be busted up. We needed to be made into market creatures, market individuals. . . They all shared a belief that democracy was dangerous because the masses always end up demanding more from the state and from society.”<sup>54</sup>

- Wendy Brown

“When lots of artists had lofts in the '70s there were big parties where people of different gangs danced and drank together. And they turned up in each other's magazines. The fact that people stopped seeing each other socially when all those lofts got sold meant, on a certain level, that we stopped trying to understand each other's work.”<sup>55</sup>

- Eileen Myles

Chiefly, I am concerned with a dissipation of presence. While it is possible to imagine ourselves everywhere through technologies of globalization, our physical realities can simultaneously end up nowhere at all. Byung-Chul Han writes of this strange evacuation from human life into the ether of achievement-based optimization in his book *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power* (2017): “We are being expelled from the sphere of lived immanence—where life relates to life instead of subjugating itself to external ends.”<sup>56</sup> And to what end? The concept of presence, like “the sphere of lived immanence,” is gravely challenged by a series of interrelated factors including globalization, digital technology, and engraining neoliberal

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<sup>53</sup> Léger Marc James. *Brave New Avant Garde: Essays on Contemporary Art and Politics*. Zero Books, 2012, 1.

<sup>54</sup> Klein, Ezra. “Neoliberalism and Its Discontents,” interview of Wendy Brown. the Ezra Klein Show podcast, 2019.

<sup>55</sup> Richard, Frances. “Never Real, Always True: An Interview with Eileen Myles.” Provincetown Arts, 2000: 24–29.

<sup>56</sup> Han, Byung-Chul. *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*. Verso Books, 2017, 7.

mentality.<sup>57</sup> Even when bodies exist in a space, atoms of presence can simultaneously exist in multiple online dimensions, just as distracted minds dart from one state of achievement and personal gain to the next. How *can* one experience true presence when everything once belonging to this simple yet sacred realm of being “is made comparable and measurable and subjected to the logic of the market.”<sup>58</sup> The very way neoliberal subjects relate to one another and their realities as humans, as Han explains, is driven by self-optimization, which “follows from systemic constraints—from the logic of quantifying success on the market.”<sup>59</sup> Today’s nebulous definition of spatial presence no longer depends upon location alone, but also deals with the focus and intentions of individuals. Throughout my research, I have encountered challenges to presence in a group atmosphere. This hinders collective poetic activities the sake of anything disconnected from the enhancement of the individual.

The present collectivity to which I refer stands in contrast not only to the digital mass but, to the competitive and conforming individual under the domination of neoliberalism.<sup>60</sup> For Han, “the neoliberal subject has no capacity for relationships with others that might be *free of purpose*.”<sup>61</sup> In other words, free of mutual exploitation for individual capital gain—inclusive of the communicative and immaterial. Han writes, “everything that belongs to practices and expressive forms of liberty—emotion, play, and communication—comes to be exploited.”<sup>62</sup> Disturbingly, these exploited and infiltrated concepts are essential aspects of poetry. I am skeptical of a poetry that benefits from and recognizes a system with such threats to the very ingredients of art. Neoliberalism “has

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> The purpose of this chapter is not to catalogue a history of neoliberalism. Many expert voices have already done this work. I recommend David Harvey’s oft-cited *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005), insisting that the political project most significantly includes solidarity of the corporate class following threats to its power and market crash during the revolutionary spirit of the 1960–80s. In addition, Michel Foucault’s published lectures “The Birth of Biopolitics” (1978–9), examines government involvement in every aspect of human life as related to neoliberalism as an ideology, and is often recounted and reimagined in critical thought around the topic.

<sup>61</sup> Han. *Psychopolitics*. 2.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 3.

discovered the psyche as a productive force,” and Han claims that we offer our psyches willingly and passionately.<sup>63</sup> Subjects engage in competitive rivalry with anything that threatens to interrupt their unsustainable accrual of wealth.<sup>64</sup> Neoliberalism “ensures that individuals act on themselves so that power relations are interiorized—and then interpreted as freedom.”<sup>65</sup> The will behind our sense of self and our desire becomes difficult to distinguish from the will of this system. In this sense, submission and self-optimization and exploitation and freedom compress into one.<sup>66</sup>

One correlation between neoliberalism and the avant-garde is a decentralization that happens at a similar moment in history. Multiple scholars claim the death of the avant-garde occurred between 1950 and 1970. Bürger declares its end along with Surrealism’s; Lehman insists that it died with New York School of poets, operating around the 1950s and ‘60s; and Camille Paglia views Andy Warhol as responsible for destroying the avant-garde with pop art in the 1960s (the list goes on). The timing of these reported deaths coincides with the rise of free market capitalism and hyper-privatization mentality in the 1970s. The type of dissenting groups that once comprised the avant-garde tradition are antithetical to the Byung-Chul Han’s “auto-exploit[ing]”<sup>67</sup> individual fostered by neoliberalism. I propose a correlation between the inclining impact of neoliberal capitalism and the erosion of avant-garde poetry collectives.

When I use the term collective, I am thinking of a group or community that gathers on the basis of a school of thought. As a poet who has predominantly spent time with collaborative and experimental musicians, I moved to Toronto with the intention of associating myself with a similar poetry community. The group of peers I seek has severely dwindled since the idealistic Kootenay School of Writing days in the 1980s, recounted by Lisa Robertson in the aptly named essay, “The Collective” (2018).<sup>68</sup> As an integral part of my own striving for connection and discussion, I made human interaction a key component of this research by meeting with various avant-garde poets and theorists in the city. I interviewed five people for the purpose of this study. Almost all of them,

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>64</sup> Wealth here refers to anything that increases cultural capital, such as knowledge, and does not solely refer to financial wealth.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>68</sup> Betts and Bök. *Avant Canada*. 19.



including Lillian Allen, Gregory Betts, John Nyman, and Dani Spinosa (with the exception of Gary Barwin, who I neglected to ask this question to) said that aside from small presses, dub poetry, and slam poetry groups, they could not name any other active avant-garde poetry collectives akin to a school of poetry. Betts mentioned that the Kootenay School dissipated in the last few years. Spinosa celebrated the fact I sought in-person conversations and said this type of conversation and face-to-face interaction is missing from the scene today. We then planned to attend literary events in the city together (and we did). Allen expressed that she shares my questions around what community means to this poetry in our neoliberal atomized society: “there are cliques but not collectives or movements.”<sup>69</sup> In fact, poetry-based collectivity is “one of the things [she is] trying to revive,” along with “rehabilitat[ing]” the term avant-garde.<sup>70</sup> For Allen, the avant-garde is about community, opening space, and asserting possibilities. These types of essential aspects of the avant-garde project threaten an all-consuming market that champions conformity, competitiveness, automated individualism. What I gather from these conversations and from visiting local poetry readings is a general lack of avant-garde collectivity, especially with regard to young generations of poets.<sup>71</sup> This could be attributed to a series of intertwined factors including text-based poetry’s general societal marginalization in a visually dominant culture, a disdain for the term and postmodernism’s rejection of the kind of teleology associated with the avant-garde, and the influence of neoliberal valuation.<sup>72</sup>

Kit Dobson points to the contradiction between avant-gardism and a neoliberal agenda in *A Poetics of Neoliberalism* (2019). Dobson asks hard questions of the purpose and function of the poet, a culturally established voice in the domain of artifice-exposing, today: “How can a poet dissent and continue to work? Can the poet have the line ‘fuck capitalism’ in her work and still have it be displayed on a bus ad?”<sup>73</sup> Regardless of poetry’s perceivable distance from financial capitalism’s stream (it is difficult to imagine someone attempting to support themselves solely from a poetry career today), poets become siphoned into participating in problematic rating

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<sup>69</sup> Allen interview, 2020.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> While I am arguing for a general lack of collectives, this is not meant as an absolute statement. Lillian Allen recently began a poetry group called Groundings, supporting BIPOC poets of various genres. The strong communities that do build in the difficult contemporary moment offer a model for change.

<sup>72</sup> Léger. *Brave New Avant Garde*. 2.

<sup>73</sup> Betts and Bök. *Avant Canada*. 146.

systems that parallel financial capitalism. Poets are asked “either implicitly or explicitly, to become drivers of economic growth and development. Neoliberalism asks that poets not only make a buck. . . but that this buck be part of some sort of Bourdieu-esque accrual of cultural capital.”<sup>74</sup> As competitiveness within the economic system spills into all realms of human existence in support of a service industry, poets participating in the distribution of aesthetics become ushered into positions of complacency within hegemonic demands. The insidious facets of individual gain thus supersede critical engagement and critique. The risk of becoming less likely to challenge dominant modes—something done successfully by radical groups throughout history—for the sake of something external to one’s personal advancement, severely increases.

Wendy Brown’s *Undoing the Demos* (2015) speaks of neoliberalism as no longer a government project, but a mode of reason and “scheme of valuation” that leaks into all aspects of human life, diminishes democracy, and dramatically increases inequality.<sup>75</sup> Under neoliberal capitalism, the status of the individual becomes that of “human capital,” which is both our “is” and our “ought,” according to Brown.<sup>76</sup> Neoliberalism understands human beings *themselves* as capital, focusing solely on their own capacities, consuming private goods for private use. This intense focus on self-interest vehemently increases inequality and ultimately extinguishes the social good. The governing body to which our culture serves is capital. The purpose of the state, which arguably once showed some stakes in the socio-political betterment of its citizens, now functions chiefly with the intent to increase jobs and financial resources. For Brown, “Neoliberalism is the rationality through which capitalism finally swallows humanity.”<sup>77</sup> Capitalist reason has come to replace sacred interpersonal value systems, and people in power use this reason to determine the allocation of resources in our society. Thinking of ourselves as assets corrupts the way relate to one another and the now economized parts of life once thought to be outside of the market and shared—things like love, knowledge, and the environment. Individuals end up in a constant enslavement to the self, to corporations, and to government.<sup>78</sup> As Dobson also claims of the dissenting poet, Brown warns, “any individual who veers into other pursuits risks

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>75</sup> Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalisms Stealth Revolution*. Zone Books, 2017, 21.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 37.

impoverishment and a loss of esteemed and creditworthiness at the least, survival at the extreme.”<sup>79</sup> While immense competition and social inequality rises as a consequence, an apriori equality diminishes. Brown writes, “The economization of everything and every sphere, including political life, desensitizes us to the bold contradiction between an allegedly free-market economy and a state now wholly in service to and controlled by it.”<sup>80</sup> This claim also echoes Han’s understanding of contemporary freedom as a form of invisible constraint.

Other theorists see to the deterioration of avant-garde poetry collectives as corresponding to the escalation of free market capitalism. In a 2010 article titled “The Radical Avant-Garde and the Contemporary Avant-Garde,” Philippe Sers and Jonathan P. Eburne discuss the differences between historical or avant-gardism and the contemporary avant-garde. Like myself, Sers and Eburne make a distinction between a radical, community-driven practice and a strive for personal achievement through innovation. The authors explain that today, the notion of avant-gardism “takes on a different meaning than it had originally: it has come to signify a mindset of formal innovation, rather than a dedication to exploration and radial creativity that clashes with convention. Thus, the positions of an entire range of so-called avant-garde can be accommodated within an economic consensus that values formal innovation for reasons of competitiveness and profitability.”<sup>81</sup> This range of what Sers and Eburne describe as so-called avant-garde could be traced to vanguard-oriented artists and writers on the individualistic side of the avant-garde spectrum. The quote continues with a point toward consequences of neoliberal individualization: “At the same time, competitive rivalry leads to the disappearance of the collective dimension of innovative creativity which had been, no doubt, a fundamental characteristic of the avant-garde.”<sup>82</sup> Here, Sers and Eburne suspect a infiltration of economic self-interest at the heart of contemporary avant-garde practices, as opposed to the historical avant-garde that placed group function, external to capital production, at the core of its purpose.

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<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>81</sup> Sers, Philippe, and Jonathan P. Eburne. “The Radical Avant-Garde and the Contemporary Avant-Garde.” *New Literary History*, vol. 41, no. 4, 2010, 847–854.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 849.

Furthermore, a recent psychological report by Thomas Curran and Andrew P. Hill supports a connection between a lack of community involvement and engulfment within the neoliberal domain. Their data suggests the contemporary individual experiences a deeper sense of isolation than generations in the past. “Perfectionism Is Increasing Over Time: A Meta-Analysis of Birth Cohort Differences From 1989 to 2016” (2017) explains how the development of neoliberalism in industrialized societies coincides with damaging psychological changes, namely a rise of perfectionism, appearing in young people across America, the UK, and Canada. According to their data, youth seem “to be more self-interested and spend less time doing group activities for fun and more time doing individual activities for instrumental value or sense of personal achievement.”<sup>83</sup> This report’s use of the word fun suggests a conflation with shared enjoyment and anti-productive behaviour in a mainstream sense of production as personal value. What is lost when society forgoes playful exchanges of ideas and energy? Self-imposed exploitation stands in contrast to realms of collaborative creative and mental exercise; it is within these realms that knowledge and anti-exploitative, alternative purpose develops. Curran and Hill state that not only do these young people steer clear of one another due to an internalized, self-imposed perfectionism, they also project this perfectionism outward and become overwhelmed by delusions of peer and self-expectation and retreat inward. Due to our cultural framing that suggests lifestyle perfection is available to anyone who tries hard enough, competition and compulsive comparison thrive. The contemporary environment poses challenges for anti-(economically) productive groups to maintain. I personally notice these effects in my everyday life, habitual patterns, and anxieties. The perceivable pressure facing young adults in such an economy fuels the flames for individualistic striving, separation from community, and self-imposed isolation.

Social media supercharges this isolation and philosophy of productivity: individual gain being the centre of human goals, fulfillment, interaction and relation. Han reminds us, “the neoliberal regime utterly claims the technology of the self for its own purposes: perpetual self-optimization.”<sup>84</sup> The religion of capital productivity has come to replace all other forms of meaning, easily diffused by globalization, social media, and postmodern thought. Han’s *In the Swarm: Digital Prospects* (2014) observes technology’s domination over human values. Han explains that “today, the subject

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<sup>83</sup> Curran, Thomas, and Andrew P. Hill. “Perfectionism Is Increasing over Time: A Meta-Analysis of Birth Cohort Differences from 1989 to 2016.” *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 145, no. 4, 2019, 410–429.

<sup>84</sup> Han. *Psychopolitics*. 28.

achieves liberation by turning itself into a project.”<sup>85</sup> Han’s “achievement subject” views the accrual of others’ success as threatening to their own; individuals engage in online performances of self-exploitation and superficial perfection to remain in the race.<sup>86</sup> In other words, this theory precedes the previously mentioned report, agreeing that the neoliberal individual retreats to self-interested concerns. Today, these individuals spend increased time on their online image, the most readily perfectible and controllable facet of life, as opposed to engaging with their immediately available community. This poses a threat critical thought; without present communities, we are not held accountable. An illusion of collectivity persists<sup>87</sup> online but, as Han writes, “the digital swarm comprises isolated individuals.”<sup>88</sup> Posing threat to human rights and politics, the most poignant impact of digital reliance is the deterioration of the social mass. If economy blankets technology and these powerful systems determine the social mass, in what nuanced ways can an avant-garde poetry collective prevail.

A poetic account of a loss of solidarity within a dominance of neoliberalism also exists in Berardi’s *Breathing: Chaos and Poetry* (2018). For Berardi, a crisis of individuality, and therefore subjectivity, is occurring:

Neoliberal discourse is charged with a rhetoric of the individual, but neoliberal practice actually destroys individual freedom. Competition and conformism are two faces of the same coin in the sphere of the market. Individuals today no longer pursue autonomous life projects. Instead, they are fragments of precarious time, ceaselessly recombined fractals, connective units that must perfectly interface if they want to be effective under the rule of economic rentability.<sup>89</sup>

Berardi claims this fracturing leads to a “lessening the critical ability of the social brain.”<sup>90</sup> As

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<sup>85</sup> Han, Byung-Chul. *In the Swarm: Digital Prospects*. Trans Erik Butler. MIT Press, 2017, 48.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>87</sup> Jean Baudrillard defines the infiltration of simulacra in 1981 as “substituting signs of the real for the real itself.” Baudrillard, Jean. *Selected Writings*. ed. Mark Poster. Stanford; Stanford University Press, 1988, 167.

<sup>88</sup> Han. *In the Swarm*.10.

<sup>89</sup> Berardi, Franco. *Breathing*. 87.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

many of the thinkers already evoked, Berardi describes an “all-encompassing cult of competition” that destroys our ability to socially engage in a present and meaningful way.<sup>91</sup> My favourite line in his book reads, “What is the meaning of individuality if the only evaluative criterion of individual success is conformity to competition?”<sup>92</sup> This quote summarizes the crisis of subjectivity under neoliberalism. While we may feel in control of our own will, I suspect the definition of success in our cultural climate entails a great deal of conformity.

Neoliberalism stole the language of revolutionaries and sold it back to us. This idealist vocabulary disguises the regime’s agenda in words like choice, self-love, and inclusion, and focus on criticism falls away. This works perfectly for a valuation schema that desires to distract people with themselves and to remove their ability to actively critique. The neoliberal individual is encouraged to float between fragmented thought, supercharged by the digital and by globalization, and to strive for unreasonable and unsustainable goals. Neoliberalism teaches its subjects to take responsibility for adapting to its desires—this perceived autonomy essentially acts as a blinder for its overarching coercion. Our pursuits within this system, which we believe or perceive we enact for *good* reasons, result in serious consequences.

So, where is left go from here? Antithetical to neoliberalism is something already existing in our historical toolboxes. The avant-garde has shown an ability to bring people, creativity, and thought together for motivations counter to the dominance of economic systems. While Léger rightly points to the decentralization of this practice, he also notices its continuation today “as the repressed underside the contemporary forms of extradisciplinary practice.”<sup>93</sup> He characterizes genre-spilling, socially and politically engaged art as reflecting the movement. However, without a cultural climate conducive to play, leisure, and anti-production, these groups barely gather, let alone sustain. Such artists operate in atomized pieces across the abyss of cultural production and refuse the term avant-garde. But they share a continual core value of dissent. This thesis does not mean to demand we put all our differences aside and gather holding hands in search for utopia—quite the contrary, as avant-garde groups comprise healthy disagreement between its members and ongoing (sometimes uncomfortable) discussion. Our culture is long passed the

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>93</sup> Léger. *Brave New Avant Garde*. 2.

loss of the ideal. The nihilist communist questions if class consciousness is even a factor in the revolution.<sup>94</sup> Nevertheless, and although it is hard to admit, many people still secretly grasp idealism through the narratives of neoliberal self-betterment. Perhaps energies could be better spent directing this optimization toward recovering subjective will and humanhood—for the sake of solidarity—with one another and with the planet.

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<sup>94</sup> See Dupont, Monsieur. *Nihilist Communism*. Ardent Press, 2009.

***notes from the ether***

“But how then can you really care if anybody gets it, or gets what it means, or if it improves them. Improves them for what? For death? Why hurry them along?”<sup>95</sup>

- Frank O’Hara

“Scholarship and poetry seem like they want different things from you but in the end, I think there’s a wonderful thing that comes with the realization that neither industry cares if you’re there or not. . . Have some fun with it. Get weird with it. Because why else.”<sup>96</sup>

- Dani Spinosa

The poetry book in tandem to this thesis is called *notes from the ether*. My title asks that we forgo hierarchies of above and below—these poems come to you from a messy location more similar to the underground than ethereal connotations. While temptation exists to lean on O’Hara’s “everything is in the poems,”<sup>97</sup> statement, I can say my pieces ask similar questions: what happens when we challenge language to open meaning? How can we create or challenge meaning within invisible and potent chaos? As previously mentioned, my goal in writing these poems is to provide constellations outside the realm of experience that, when met with the reader’s faculties, can become reintegrated into an experience. These poems both live somewhere else, and lay potential directions to that somewhere else. I do not define this place, and rather offer it as site for collaborative mapping with the spectator.

The piece on the following page deals with multiple directions in which to interpret dialogue-style movement, similar to O’Hara’s letter-writing poetic mode. My style functions more syntactically odd than most of O’Hara’s work, but “toil and trouble” does take on a similar screenplay tone—with phrases in conversation appearing from unintroduced and unknown voices.

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<sup>95</sup> O’Hara, Frank. “Personism,” 1961. In Gupta, Suman, and David Johnson. *A Twentieth-Century Literature Reader: Texts and Debates*. Routledge, 2005, 172.

<sup>96</sup> Spinosa interview, 2020.

<sup>97</sup> O’Hara, Frank. “Personism,” 1961.



*toil and trouble*

here we have much too much  
too many look out live out scorched  
in  
your hands is  
a mind with a shovel  
a hole  
is dug the children gather  
branches to hide  
the order of more this time  
none can be  
found follow  
fairies aren't real  
to the meadow to the minefield

This poem spurred from thinking about the wreckage our culture's value system has placed on sincerity, Earth, imagination, play, etc. I seek to create multiple environments, where subversion exists, made from separate connotations.

*notes from the ether* explores the simultaneous power and futility of language through a series of avant-garde experiments. I am interested in the way language fails us, the drive to push against and play with those limitations, and in the way language accidentally or intentionally suggests realities. This book explores the composite function of language and its abstract relationship to the physical world. In this moment, when conditions of the physical are so impacted by misdirected idealism, online abstractions, and pressure to possess the unattainable, I use poetry to tread through daily feelings of fragmentation. Consciously plain as these works appear, they represent my complex and absolutely necessary processing of reality. They embody my reluctance to accept dominant value systems and specific productive behaviours. As someone who often feels at odds with the conditions of our existence, without feverishly composing these

observations, I feel a complete loss of grounding. A poem at least establishes a place: a presence, a focal point, and a communal space of labour. In this space are incomplete tracings outside the realm of syntactical coherency. Once combined with the reader's will and perceptions, the words have a chance to just be, or be meaningful.

This piece is a nice example of how my own awareness of literature and language infiltrates my poetry. Here, I am questioning the specific and implied hierarchy surrounding canonical texts, and what this established mode of understanding lends to daily life: what happens when we include other specific voices, what happens when we complicate our rating systems?

*i'm not down*

climb along the syntax tree  
built from a seed  
pointed up  
    because trees  
    know how to feel  
    grounded  
what  
    do words aim  
for there is not a thing  
    above  
some say it's a sun  
    but today is a  
celebration  
                    is not purgatory  
    old growth will  
learn  
    from seeds'  
                    erratic maps  
and spirals  
    show    stops  
change    jingles  
  
embedded                    yet  
stretched

I describe my ethos as frank or slightly brattish, and I am willing to have my work be perceived as irreverent—all this hopefully balances with my emotional investment in the sociological, psychological, ontological, philosophical, and environmental. While Rimbaudian lingerings always permeate my work, in terms of a drive toward ecstatic rebellion through symbols of water and rejuvenation, I now rely less on symbolism. I most often use Surrealist automatic writing and the day-to-day writing style of O’Hara, and then implement this voice into the forms of bissett and Cummings—and I almost always operate from a place of Stein-like syntax and simplistic vocabulary. Similar to modernist avant-gardes, I collage lines and titles from both popular and underground culture, music, canonical literature, and ideas from philosophy and personal experience. Many of my poems complicate ownership over the psyche and the flow of language around reality.

I wrote this piece using stream-of-consciousness, wordplay, and repetition to communicate the frustration and spiritual and biological challenge of rewiring of the brain. While some of my other pieces leave off in a somewhat bleak or cheeky state, a clear tone of hope finishes this flow.

*3am on the sunken highway*

high grass too high to see machete needed more brain  
more trails blaze soles more pathways more off  
a beaten tracks of highway going too fast  
take a rocky backroad view in blue and white  
and moon and the highway is sunk in fuel  
rust collects in the salt of well-kept paths that’s easier  
you know the highway it’s okay to judge your make and model  
by salt wear on your underbelly you learned to speed too early but  
time extends inside roots of grass on the overgrown path you’ll  
never see the blue moon from a busy intersection trapped  
at 3am sunken too soon so move get sharper get tires  
the cost unfairly compares to effort continues through effort but  
nothing replaces your own owned moment alone

I am less interested in conveying meaning through poetry as I am in capturing an experience with language. *notes from the ether* often highlights the repetition of sounds and letters to focus on both the incantatory psychic elements of language, as well as its stark limitations and unstable expressions. My poetry describes, using this limited vocabulary, thresholds between my introspective and external realities. The rules of syntax and grammar need not apply here. I see these poems holding tightly to opaque concepts and releasing them in willed instances of simplicity that allow their complexity to be understood as ultimately incomprehensible, yet somewhat reconciled. I am interested in how writing that refuses the laws of writing can still manage to serve the original function or go beyond the original function. *notes from the ether* leans heavily on vernacular, monosyllabic vocabulary, and the eschewing or complication of syntax. This works to dim the traditional ornateness (a possible source of contemporary society's hatred) of poetry, instead welcoming an essential and deserved roughness. I enjoy the challenge of ushering ideas that keep me awake at night into obfuscated, common concepts.

These pieces often play with language's relationship to temporality; one way I do this is by investigating language spatially, in a process of moving backward to move forward, diagonally, and sideways. Often my work suggests reading in various directions. This can give the impression we are reading incorrectly, yet our sense-making faculties are allowing these alternative routes. A single word in my poems can fork into multiple denotative and connotative directions. In my devotion to collaboration with the subjective experience of reading, I often adapt free form arrangements that allow me to eschew the imposition of my voice. Doing so allows some form of self-abolitionary gratification that meets the reader somewhere beyond my own identity. I imagine unknown eyes darting across the placement of words, letters, and directional forks as paralleling musical notes. Manipulations of space on a page communicates times of pause, tension, and ease.

In the poem on the next page, I gather the breakage of losing someone into language and memory faculties. I begin with a sentence fragment, almost like beginning closer to physical reality. I then lose touch in a sense and speak of abstract loss and the impermanence of interactions and the physical. I am interested in taking the unexplainable and attempting to outline it with as sparse words as possible to point to language's failure and power.

*another message from the aching sky*

when someone goes they really  
the moved on  
we here  
watch hear an  
ethe real reel crammed  
in the  
hippocampus along with too  
many  
moments  
in sleep we know  
going  
goes  
g on e ternally  
changed  
we all camp inside  
each  
other

Such spatially-concerned methods make visible the precariousness of perception and expression, and have been handed down by poets like Mallarmé, Stein, and Cummings. I not only borrow from avant-garde styles of the past, but further complexify time's relationship to my poetry by employing repetition, interruptions, and loops. This reasoning also explains why I chose to offer these poems in book form; doing so insists on a relationship to perceived unproductive technology, such as the book itself, as a way to resist or slow down unsustainable, future-obsessed innovation.

*notes from the ether* is organized by thematic content. Each theme deals with transformation, unseen value systems, constraints of contemporary life, and their relationships to the written word. This manifests through tension between work and play, between change and stagnancy,

and between the natural and unnatural world, as well as nature and reason. The text traverses a multitude of poetic forms: self-imposed visual constraints, adaptation, erasure, stream-of-consciousness, and skewed syntax free verse—though a chosen style emerges. Similar to Yoko Ono's instruction pieces, the poems in this collection function as pithy yet dense invitations to create subjective meaning. In choosing to show my progression throughout styles, I explicate my significant journey to finding my voice as a poet.

Birthered from a frustration and claustrophobia toward language, I have explored various experimental styles over the last two years: everything from litany to acrostics, machine-writing, structural constraints, fractals and dissections, and rejecting of narrative and syntax—all things associated with the avant-garde's playful treatment of words. For me, these practices result in a less self-indulgent form of expression. Looking back to my older lyrical and narrative poems, I feel an embarrassment that I believe many young people feel toward poetry in general today. Little room for sincerity exists in our culture, especially unaccompanied by self-allocated heroism or martyrdom. As someone interested in ideas not easily translatable to the immediate environment, I constantly felt out of place in my own writing. Today, my work contains a more authentic tone: irreverent, yet playful, and although sometimes cavalier, not without deep investment. *notes from the ether* holds contradiction and frustration in its hand, hopefully squeezing these things together tightly enough that refinement occurs.

For the book's inside cover, I collaborated with an artist friend, Dora Prieto, who I met eight years ago during our first tree planting season. I requested specific colours and movement for the marble piece, but the rest was up to her skill and the fantastic aspect of chance involved in art-making with aqueous paint on the surface of water. This cover represents more than marbling's historical connection to older technologies like the book, and it represents more than nature combined with artistic intent: communicating with my old friend between BC and Toronto connected me back to a time when I first learned how to be an avant-garde (I expand on this notion in the following chapter).

Because I write with others' reading in mind rather than the projection of my own speaking voice, witnessing a reading of my work includes a jarring transference of agency from myself, the poet, to the reader, also the poet. While I sit at the front of the crowd, I remain silent while some audience members read my work for the first time. What happens in these unpredictable moments

of my silence and the reader's stumbling and laughter further undermines my control over reception and insists on the poem as collaboration. In these events, the poems I imagine so dearly coupled to the page become an embodied and shared immaterial experience. I see both the page and the audience's involvement functioning as potential commons, or site for conversation.

In approaching my practice holistically, the literature lover and interdisciplinary creator in me also thinks about the poem and book as objects. In exploration of this notion, and in attempts to both collaborate for the sake of collectivity, I initiated a project called no wave press. This small print-run silkscreen and digital printed anti-book looks similar to a seven inch record. The obvious connection to music represents a world I have yet to experience, but sorely miss: where poets and indie musicians perform in tandem. I worked with my friend and colleague, Inbal Newman, who as a design student, spearheaded print-related processes. This collaboration lent to my learning how to silk-screen, and I plan to utilize this knowledge for similar future projects. A total of six poets including myself participated in the no wave press publication: Florence Yee, Laura Grier, Inbal Newman, Petter Ness, and Jen Dexter. We gave away these strange non-bound books, tucked inside the sturdy silkscreened sleeves, at no cost during an art show.



The making of no wave press, photo by Inbal Newman

A total of 93 selected poems are attached to this thesis document in 'appendix a.' The selection appears in reverse chronological order to give a sense of where I am now and where I came from. Skimming through these poems will make obvious the immense amount of experimenting in form and content I have undertaken throughout the past year. Prior to this, I also went so far as to make video and sculpture works that pertain to my interest in language, but that are not suitable for this project. The appendix functions to showcase my journey, and differs greatly from the final book I designed, *notes from the ether*, which features a little over half the pieces.



## **to what end**

This project represents a philosophy. I am not only discussing art and research—I am speaking to a way of life. I learned at a young age how to exist on the fringe of our strange economic climate. In many ways, tree planters do beat the system. One season can sustain an experienced planter nearly the entire rest of the year, and it only lasts about two to four months. This field seems to attract artists and creatives, not solely due to its promise of long-lasting down time. During these short stints of intense physical piece work, we live in close-knit camps outside of small BC towns. We exchange strange clothing and skills, and build our own tiny art communities and economies within planting camps. In these months of existentially meditative and brutal exercise, we pretend phones and cities do not exist. We sit around fires, eat, play, create, dance, converse, and live in type of manifested past. After the gruelling pain of a day's work, we are too tired to care about digital realms or to map our life plans—we are too tired to self-optimize. In this space, I have witnesses some of the purest intellectual and artistic exchanges.

Poetry is an embodied practice I carry with me wherever I work, play, think, love, sleep, and so on. My interdisciplinary practice is my lived experience—in a culture I mostly cannot fathom and in a value system I still struggle to find my place. I have mentioned my connection with musicians multiple times throughout this document. I am looking for something specific in artistic communities, and musicians seem capable of fostering this energy today. I am not only speaking to live performances, but to collaborative moments in strange unfinished basements when each person who happens to be in the room picks up an instrument—and everyone creates something, from nothing, for no reason. Despite the fact I have shared in these instances and existed in these spaces, I often feel that what I have to creatively contribute lives somewhere else. I am still searching for this place, but can imagine it coinciding here. I envision less genre-spilling (although welcome) and more of a complementary side-by-side tying together of the two worlds—whereby music could possibly offer poetry a somewhat renewed appreciation.

Moving forward with this research and creation, I plan to start a poetry reading group in my community (an idea I began and hoped I could accomplish for this project). From there, this collective could come to formulate a similar type of avant-garde philosophy I have witnessed in musicians. I am looking for moments and spaces where experimental art occurs for purposes of love, communication, and sheer expressions of will to create meaning. In learning about the

creative communities surrounding small presses, and after attempting the prototype of no wave press, I also seek to bring about a subsequent publication that speaks to a school of thought critiquing dominant structures and expectations through formal experiment. My thesis acts as a foundation for the purpose and function of such a project. I also plan to experiment further with genre-spilling into sound art by making and experimenting with recordings of the first time strangers read my poems aloud.

To propel this research into the future, I will begin untangling some of the dense subjects evoked throughout this paper. I will focus on unpacking postanarchist theory in relation to my poetry and reading practices, as well as situating various radical socio-political theories and art practices within the perils of neoliberalism—in hopes to get out. I also plan to tackle a massive question that this research project brought forth for me: in *This is not the end of the book* (2011), Umberto Eco worries about today's "six billion encyclopedias" that comprise our maddening existence.<sup>98</sup> In a world overcome with voice, what is the purpose of a practice like the avant-garde, concerned with enticing diverse ranges of subjectivity? I believe the avant-garde project is more important than ever before—because of its difficulties and challenges, not despite them. When the chattering noise of subjectivity overwhelms us, we can rewire our faculties through literary experimentation. In this way, we become cognizant to artifice, conformity, and potentiality. The genre gives us tools to surf the flood of voices, and to reconfigure their contexts in order to find our own meaning.

Opening up conversation for alternative terms of existence lies at the heart of these undertakings. I chose to discuss the ideas surrounding my work in order to explicate my personal view, which obviously contributes heavily to my poetry. This thesis allows me to actively assert my book, and myself, as avant-garde—not because I am declaring myself at the forefront of poetic thought—but as a way of locating an avant-garde aesthetic in contemporary cultural practices, and as a way of exploring questions contemporary culture does not seem to know how to talk about; excess positivity is meant to keep these gaps in tact and invisible. I could list the many modern and postmodern avant-garde traditions my work draws upon, but I am more interested in the specific type of meaning-making happening in this genre. My work is avant-garde because it is willing to go beyond meaning that has been given and prescribed. The poems in *notes from the ether* ask, in various ways, if you will do the same.

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<sup>98</sup> Eco, Umberto and Carriere, Jean-Claude. *This is not the end of the book*. Vintage Books, London. 2012.

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*nothing to hear, so to speak*

tone or  
tune or  
turn into  
a microphone hangs from the ceiling  
tune out side  
in  
to  
a voice here  
an ear hears signals that feel  
sounds that look  
that watch  
cable t.v. psychic intimacy  
travels  
by sound by  
voice by noise by bird by silence by  
caged  
cable highways  
nothing  
here is to adhere  
add here hear  
what  
is or comes  
between  
here and hear herd  
mentality no  
mentally  
bodily heard  
differently  
like  
a shock from a carpet  
when wearing socks  
can you see  
nothing heard  
are you  
hear

*a poem for w.w.*

i resign myself

to            ocean-mind

in morning

    we carry  
    heavy buckets

back night walks on  
    the soles of myself

    look for me

in patches in salt

    between brain folds and ear lobes  
    yours

mine i

    backstroke in your ichor

a body is to water

    i recognize you            not

    miss me?            here

or here

    find me

    i stop

    somewhere

and

    wait

    for you

*choose your player*

where mostpeople buy mind claim out  
and clothes for mostpeoples' style  
gassed up mostpeople know the exact  
time of mostpeoples' video  
mostpeople model witness

sum go through a ground in exposed stitch a round and round the moment  
loose ends at cafe forget tied symbols tried together in a court of lawlessness  
again andagainand a gain

*the gospel of play*

all work no play  
imagine a dog or a day  
corrupted  
by leisure how  
dare we partake  
in evils  
to work is to climb  
a ladder to where  
you are

water  
lies low and horizontal



*erasure on the gospel of mammonism (1843), thomas carlyle*

our life  
    *not*  
a mutual helpfulness  
  
    rather cloaked in under laws-of-war  
  
        fair competition mutual hostility  
        cash-payment the relation of human  
beings  
  
only we the predatory  
    vulturous and vulpine species  
    shudders and shrinks  
        at the terror  
of not succeeding no  
    money and fame  
if we do not  
    where is the use                      of us? we  
  
had better never  
    been  
    born  
        there is  
        one reality  
  
        one thing:  
        money                      idleness is worst  
endless hope                                      in work  
  
i reckon that we have  
pretty well exhausted what  
of firm earth there was  
    for us  
to march on

*toil and trouble*

here hear we have much too much

too many look out live out scorched

in  
your hands is  
a mind with a shovel  
a hole

is dug the children gather  
branches to hide  
the order of more  
this time

none can be

found follow  
fairies aren't real

to the venue to the minefield

*discipline and punish*

intimate date shun tact less frail glass  
more red fountains youngest older corralled into  
problems harder to understand

please  
share widely try  
a reading yourself 1-800 be there  
tomorrow to stand  
this is not  
the vocabulary of active  
isms continues his story  
i am listening too  
fuck tha police by n.w.a.

*circadian*

how did  
you fill know  
and move  
before  
this

what is kept  
felt for  
yourself

you stacked  
against  
you

rather than

posited psalms of  
abstract come oddity  
the new religion  
sounds  
from a dog  
whistle no  
wurlitzer we heard  
i worked  
no wore

a fringed hat  
the same face

eternally in favour  
of our ex  
over in

you can adapt you!

welcome to  
the infernal  
clown show

*further and more*

born from a yes-premise also known  
as  
/the concept of cassady driving the bus alone

no  
threshold around  
or between

words or worlds fly

inside

sordid eyes  
pores ajar

this pilgrimage of lemons lightens  
a hair of reality

is it? a privilege to meet

your acquaintance plays piano

it is a privilege to meet tangled tresses  
a skinned knee

said i am still

some dysfunctional thing

but

there are toolkits for sober raving

*3am on the sunken highway*

high grass too high to see machete needed more brain  
more trails blaze soles more pathways more off  
a beaten tracks of highway going too fast  
take a rocky backroad view in blue and white  
and moon and the highway is sunk in fuel  
rust collects in salt of well-kept paths that's easier  
you know the highway it's okay to judge your make and model  
by salt wear on your underbelly you learned to speed too early but  
time extends inside roots of grass on the overgrown path you'll  
never see the blue moon from a busy intersection trapped  
at 3am sunken too soon so move get sharper get tires  
the cost unfairly compares to effort continues through effort but  
nothing replaces your own owned moment alone

*another message from the aching sky*

when someone goes they really  
the moved on  
we  
watch hear an  
ether real reel crammed  
in the  
hippocampus along with too  
many  
moments  
in sleep we know  
going  
goes  
g on e ternally  
changed  
we all camp inside  
each  
other

*alphabet junkie*

the letters in the letter on my doorstep spell about  
thresholds between letters that make up letters on paper  
cut fingertip sharp edges melted down for the alphabet junkie  
let inside through letters strung out together make  
a letter addressed to an address left on the premise  
someone lives on the premises who eats  
alphabet soup by separating consonants and  
vowels that represent the addressee or  
addresser the one who came to the address with the letters  
inside the letter turned to mush on a spoon in the kitchen

*freak days*

in between live and die  
is you walk railroad  
tracks with dim light  
dice  
roll unseen at  
night is open  
the number for problems is  
1-800 called or counted

if you see  
a dim light  
tell all

we will!

all right

*feeding time*

my mind is a stone  
that eats lettuce  
pour  
coffee in a home  
with heat in the red  
sunglasses and someone else's coat

i wonder if we will

always compare  
clothes hearts talks days arms and legs

if there is  
help

with friction  
outside  
is the stone that eats  
we greens wilt without  
regular attention  
to matter  
is an energetic and spiritual  
endeavour

*discwoman*

careless emotional tectonic  
shift  
idle turntables spare susan  
sacrifices her body  
for  
those who create  
careless emotional tectonic  
shifts  
into third from fifth this  
hill  
shows  
susan  
who  
helps  
and who slides  
down  
easier  
than around  
they  
miss when she was lazy  
but they also dig  
the dj

*summer body*

we were barely there  
a hot dry town  
valley land exposed  
to ultraviolet  
dogma  
skin  
hid  
in shade meaning rests with a cool drink  
yet lacks  
lush implication  
for many  
too many  
hot dry crimes  
against  
myself as  
i  
watch the last green field bend its neck and turn  
thoughts to soot after  
the stagnancy of years of suns  
do not hold water

*psyche*

the city has many compulsions  
paroxysms or abstractions  
impenetrable like earth  
if it is matter

a nascent smell  
between hard things that happen  
sprouts in cement vices  
entice what matters

are you petrichor  
a halfway point of empyrean dirt  
alchemical processes so long we are tired  
and take rest in a downstairs venue

a well-oiled limbic system hums  
angles like a bird the size of a cup  
falls to the floor and shatters  
if refuge is matter

*wheel! of! fortune!*

this has already  
happened

tied to a million things  
and looped  
back  
around  
despite every intention to become

sometimes bad things seem the same  
sometimes so does  
love



*hag stone*

this is not the place i knew  
we headed to church  
    for AA  
and a stone  
with a hole  
    caught our eyes we  
    put our arms through  
and came out  
    the other side

*pools pets cigarettes*

w.w.w.ater  
    when parched or perched  
    ready to see or seize  
    means to ends or corner dwelling  
webs in soon-to-be demolished  
rooms for houses  
    pools  
forward slashes  
green green grasses

*mythos*

coherent not what we cohere we  
    want a coherent story little narrative this is the  
beginning the end the start of something coherent  
    something so narratively coherent a story is  
started born beginning preface with coherency  
    co-narrative can be believed  
    can be prayed  
on at night we need story fable lesson is  
made of narrative coherence such coherent coherency and  
    the song will be as coherently narrative as the  
end this a narrative so coherently easy to believe

*back-and-forth forever*

what is human  
    err or at the end  
        to what end do you love  
symmetry when  
    all the lonely  
        people end  
            we are ends living or dead  
i am thinking about distinguishing myself i saw  
the best minds of my generation destroyed  
    by means to ends  
for you i promised myself  
                                away here there back-and-forth  
  forever          never  
land  
                                press end or escape

*level with impunity*

corrupted language abides to gravity  
                                forces expression  
  between  
    creation descends  
in grace and pity  
transformed into mud that sullies          nothing  
but new white pants and cowboy boots  
                                sparkly shoes ill-treated  
who could be happy  
    travel expenditures prevent  
gravity  
    from mud stains  
            on white pants  
                        and cowboy boots

*on nothing on silence on john cage*

where are we going? and what are we doing?  
if you are sleepy then sleep  
time and space make it different  
from nothing sound everything  
listen to nothing  
the same answer to everything  
free from any responsibility  
for my actions  
fear from nothing  
free form everything

*dialogue vs. monologue*

and then everything might start to  
sneak into a underworld  
introspective carnival  
overgrown mind on the money  
unconscious degrees of dumb dawn down done

people who read reject

something  
speak  
to me  
from beyond the moment you cease  
bored my pages want to hear  
this recited in morning  
just a page in a cage with a name

speak louder more yell take space that noise takes voice takes and gives together  
words follow suit

*sleep is vulnerable*

on the bus inside morning  
and  
everyone's closed eyes  
together is trust  
or deprivation

*we take sides of arguments*

inside sides of  
the side inn  
aside  
b side  
1 2 3 side  
sides known  
for some demise some high  
sides without or with axes  
two out to in too axis  
too troubled too some  
sides mostly known by  
myths  
when  
will we  
see varied  
sides  
facets of faults of gratitude  
in and out and be  
2 and a and 3  
1 and b

*don't be afraid of bruised fruit*

if we could reconcile  
with dumpsters things  
would be different  
the bruised would be  
loved and hungry rotten  
cucumbers would have the chance  
to turn it all around

*i'm not down*

climb along the syntax tree  
built from a seed  
pointed up  
    because trees  
know how to feel  
    grounded  
what  
    do words aim  
for there is not a thing  
    above  
some say it's a sun  
    but the today is a new  
celebration  
    rejection is not  
purgatory  
    wise old growth will  
learn  
    from seeds'  
        erratic maps  
and spiral  
    show    stops  
change    jingles  
  
embedded                    yet  
stretched

*speed is the equivalent of disappeared fear*

i tagged your wall and the paint was wet when  
wednesday became the weathered in bed  
time speeds and slows g-forces we are still  
covered in paint drying high from the fumes  
still and clung to the wall



*lessons carried throughout time*

plant trees in a circle motion  
reflects images on water reminds us  
of impermanence endless varieties  
of drone sounds you don't have to be  
a bird to live in a tree  
in your potential to bliss  
vibrations affect  
observe your breath as you slept  
copy it throughout the day  
how listen to the sun:  
tune a radio between stations  
existence vibrates in an afternoon  
sunlight makes  
patterns you can trace  
patient floating rewarded  
with lightning the way you  
discover yourself is to find  
a way to horizontal height  
the best way to get  
there are orbits  
you discover  
yourself

*i write mostly in pretend music notes*

i like to guess what people are thinking it  
gets me in  
trouble  
i see them see each other seeing  
saw me seen

*after a breakup*

passed air moon pulls past  
night through a hole absence  
sucks half my mind up alongside  
the part of my brain responsible  
for walking makes doing things  
rather difficult

*pacified*

caution caution go but caution your words your stay taped  
with caution under the moon up the hill with some kind of wheat we  
were cautioned not to eat because of poison i follow tape up to the lake  
at night the rocks get too slippery so caution moving forward cautiously  
in ivy to rush is to rash too itchy around noon when the caution tape flew

*well well well*

you said it was me melting into you and me knowing  
you better than yourself i am in your well filling  
water from my hands you are pouring me i am pouring  
you said you can't remember when  
you sang that we walked differently yet  
we both have these rubber boots



*be back in 5 for gratitude*

red cowboy hat snake mouth blue lines googley eyes back head  
patchwork sobriety tattoo mothers pin raw steak on walls to map a place burns we gather in glitter in NYC beyond  
black shirts and access to surgery but bad is relative and feels the same when it's us we thought eyes on the back of  
our heads would challenge the fact  
we are here

*fear of fear*

do you remember what it's like  
to be afraid of dogs like when  
you're a kid and you run by certain houses  
when you could have walked

*claims*

i met you at a house party  
and your voice was saying  
like northern bc  
did you see my hands pan  
across  
flecks on black sand and you  
a piece of ruby or platinum  
album that played  
with the  
spring  
sky  
we  
with fever  
bent over water  
to the rhythm of  
gilded height  
and  
lonely as bedrock  
old prospects  
always  
on the run

*an appointment said*

now is no time like  
bright pull of chest  
                    drawers closed to  
the hum every drum  
we hear sounds off  
but we try  
                    today  
                    you pulled  
a hair from your ear  
i have a grey  
and a onlooker  
lit up from  
                    the song

*keep out*

i want to let go  
of colours  
known  
feel  
                    in thoughts  
one is not enough  
                    open  
the window  
                    another time  
                    another  
                    mood  
boredom's climb  
  
lack kept  
out  
                    of line

*jitters*

on a piece of wood  
with scars  
courtesy of big knives  
that carry the idea:  
the only way  
to fight  
violence is with  
violence  
seems too much  
even for me the beet  
i am deep  
a melancholy vegetable  
willing  
to suffer  
from me  
familiar hues bleed  
i dye  
look at your fingers  
and knives

*feeding time*

my mind is a stone  
that eats lettuce  
pour  
coffee in a home  
with heat in the red  
sunglasses and someone else's coat  
  
i wonder if we will  
  
always compare  
clothes hearts talks days arms and legs  
  
if there is  
help  
  
with friction  
outside  
is the stone that eats  
we greens wilt without  
regular attention  
to matter  
is an energetic and spiritual  
  
endeavour

*under the heating lamp*

many stories exist and cause us worry  
targets are  
some people's ideas of everything  
                    some people  
    place weight on everything  
withstand like eggs  
                    in curled positions to feel the body  
like certainty  
conclusion is ..  
static  
in weather  
warm and                   hatched again  
crack  
stretch  
go

*a bird in a cage said everything is music*

self-hatred music is noise music played to the tune of neurosis  
do do do not confuse noise and  
                    music lo-fi deluge pop  
try to be music happy noise music capital  
                    genre of noise genre of  
                    press here for one noise  
  here for another

                    this is a text instrument of                   noise                   press here

press                   here                   for                   noise

                    tune before play external noise  
                    advice noise cancel internal noise  
                    sound-like noise  
                    play pause  
                    pause  
                    silence noise  
                    reflection noise  
                    noise from a bottle with nothing inside  
                    rewind noise  
                    older ones said their noise was louder  
                    privileged noise  
                    cried in the hospital noise  
                    noise that stops  
                    underwater  
                    without  
                    noise

~~nature's tongue  
nature's tongue  
nature's tongue  
nature's tongue~~

n	a	t	u	r	e		
s	u	b	v	e	r	t	s
l	a	n	g	u	a	g	e
s	u	b	v	e	r	t	s
n	a	t	u	r	e		
s	u	b	v	e	r	t	s
l	a	n	g	u	a	g	e
s	u	b	v	e	r	t	s
n	a	t	u	r	e		
s	u	b	v	e	r	t	s
l	a	n	g	u	a	g	e
s	u	b	v	e	r	t	s
n	a	t	u	r	e		
s	u	b	v	e	r	t	s
l	a	n	g	u	a	g	e
s	u	b	v	e	r	t	s
n	a	t	u	r	e		
s	u	b	v	e	r	t	s
l	a	n	g	u	a	g	e
s	u	b	v	e	r	t	s
n	a	t	u	r	e		
s	u	b	v	e	r	t	s
l	a	n	g	u	a	g	e
s	u	b	v	e	r	t	s

*mad love*

8:43am on a  
wednesday  
wake to  
waves  
of silence  
turn  
to drips of breast milk and ejaculate  
rolled over  
green velvet  
leave  
the surrealists  
for a moment  
though kept surreality  
tattooed on the wall is  
*sex muss sterben*  
pressures surmount outside  
encounters with origins  
and why  
in the next room  
desiccated cups  
fill slowly  
oceans puzzle locally  
but the rain moves open  
your mouth  
to catch the sound  
sometimes it comes out first  
eschewed pleasantries  
replaced by what  
have you with reality?  
words like anxious or need set  
oneiric senses off-  
kilter  
avoid at all costs  
and swim to serve  
well to the well  
in holes dust settles or empties or drinks  
the bottom is a mirror  
one in the same  
is untrue for more  
8:45am on a wednesday and countless drops hit the window

*mirrors and copulation are abominable since they both multiply our numbers*

we have craved before what  
  is seen now  
  what  
  is heard reminds me  
of something before  
  that i was yet to say we are what was  
  
in the past presented  
  now is the moment we've been seeing for  
weave heard and felt  
  in the hands of toes we land in eyes  
  brushed with paste for mouths that say  
we are here reality mirrored  
convex  
or concave  
not duplicated  
  exactly like functions of the body

*quick trip*

in a boat looped inside wind  
  purpose  
  clouds  
reverb  
  catatonic blues  
the trees  
  
say help  
  "learn all you can about planet earth"  
  
biology is boring  
  
biology is boring  
  
biology is boring  
  
i prefer concepts  
  
but swimming is nice  
  
lessons from the sky  
  
tide around sun  
  
look closely as each cells rolls  
  
like bodies in mud

*amen dunes and don'ts*

For all splits  
Are parted,  
Lower mind, swim up behind me.  
Lilac in hand, I know myself.

Sunday, 1985: good bad dreams—  
Tuned in, the  
Acrobatic  
Nihilist  
Doughtily jumped in a cold lake.

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*slipping thoughts*

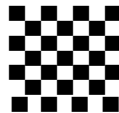
remember everything!  
important! nothing  
was there here is the note  
left to  
    remember nothing  
        everything at the same  
one in all in one is left  
    to note was there  
        nothing is important as  
    everything to remember  
    everything ever  
        said to remember  
        nothing

○

know      your  
    worth  
    no t      e  
    worthy  
        our  
know  
                 ledge

*a day*

a day spent doing nothing is never wasted unless done so nervously  
spent a day nervously never doing is nothing wasted unless done so  
doing so is a day spent never unless wasted nervously nothing done  
nothing is spent a day doing done nervously never so wasted unless  
is nothing nervously a day unless done so spent doing never wasted  
never spent done unless a day nervously wasted nothing never  
wasted doing nothing nervously so a day spent never unless done is  
unless spent wasted so doing done never a day nervously is nothing  
done spent nervously nothing is never so wasted a day unless doing  
so nothing unless wasted never doing nervously done a day is spent  
nervously done wasted never so spent unless doing nothing is a d a y



*the moon looks a way*

you (who? with an idea

i am what?( here

the idea moves

to the song of stature

mine (?) rests below

never known

to meet

transparent mobility opaque

prestige

power revolves sex (biology) art is

not exempt

so, moon looks a way

while we define show prove boast

more!

line

demarcation l'imitation

atoms prone to

analy-sis

paraly-sis

calpurnia is not mentioned

as often as caesar

but it's not about gender

*where the lake meets the shore*

stream-of-consciousness beaded strawberry  
bisect from a glass vine  
in  
depths  
of  
redness  
you follow against sour intimacy  
ridges skin with its delicate  
on kidnapped time safe for play moon blaze  
thank the water for our hands  
our feet in reticent sand

stream-of-consciousness beaded strawberry

tell me your neologisms

tell me where to go

*ego talks*

sucked by social speculation  
surely sparrows are sparse in  
some surly seasons  
so sprawled like salt  
spanned across the seas  
spilled skepticism sifts not  
solely to spoil serenity

when i watch them  
scream i feel  
sound come throat  
sore and languished

look at me                    hear me know ME  
release

FOUL jargon  
seek to understand before you seek to be understood  
principles

partners  
perception  
precepts  
presuppositions  
pretend  
play  
phone                    sex?

one  
  night rain  
two  
  sunset sweat  
three  
  tooth break  
four  
  calculate

bittersweetbittersweetbittersweet  
bittersweetbittersweetbittersweet  
bittersweetbittersweetbittersweet  
bittersweetbittersweetbittersweet  
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bittersweetbittersweetbittersweet

*POCKET GOD PSALM*

shoot straight  
disarrange difference  
between the deer and horse  
modern gunslingers  
shoot up  
a western wind  
glass-encased calls repeat  
purgatorial street signs lead  
shoot quick  
speak to fight  
pray to the devil  
e  
v  
e  
r  
y  
d  
a  
y

“psychron (cold, refreshing”  
ocean  
rain  
snow  
new faces

“anapsychsai (to be refreshed from evil”  
ocean  
rain  
snow  
no face at all

hand drips leg  
drops face melts  
gradual swelter

must find  
wa  
ter

*baseline*

something we thought was a given  
is taken

presupposition is

the key to the door  
our minds our road

an oldsmobile crashed into the wall turn  
around

unseen covered by ivy means  
we

are vines you and i  
a leaf

this our lives we  
alive together

underneath green so dried the wall  
cement crashed

inside the vines broke  
cemented crashed

demand it removed  
only after the accident

presupposition is  
a vine on which

we all crash together

*gardening*

maybe that these bright fingernails are not watermelon candy is okay  
like how the sun is not a orange soda lid over the glitter blue ridge is  
more sickly dry land above the wildflower fields that grow in stripes neon  
and bright sugar wrapped in lime green asleep on pillows made of dirt  
the duvet is stuffed with rocks the carpet is unwatered grass plant a  
wildflower sack into the lawn without every dynamic absolute  
determines the colour of fabric we tie around our eyes

*exercise 1*

no words exist in a room without boundaries  
in the sense that people breathe underwater  
a large open window lets daylight into the white room  
transparent fabric hangs a metre in front of the glass  
the fabric is not a blind  
the words are not a line  
they live inside the anti-sentence  
or messy vers libre no one respects  
inside the cement floor are letters  
you can bend down to pick them up  
but will notice they slither away to form faces  
tiny images descend into the hard surface  
on the sheet stained with sweat  
appears one strung-together phrase  
plucked from a voice that allows us to understand  
what barriers we want to cross  
discussions important to our time  
the fabric does not consult google  
letters move up its sheer texture like kids on a rope  
this energy spells while tongues choose their own direction  
return to where the letters came through quick-sand cement  
or crawl out the window like a high-rise burglar  
with the wisdom of sage and the innovation of consequence

*lunar picnic*

the see moves with the moon eat a moon cake moon-eyed with moonbeams make  
me moon-blind but i eat them when i'm mooning shed moon shell no longer moon  
child born under cancer and moonflowers walked through moon gates moon-like  
and moon-faced still rounder wax or wane slow moon snail eaten in moonlight by  
a moon bat or moon moth take a dip in moonlit moon pools pressed against  
moon rocks they form a nice moon roof out of moon-shot moon-shaped moondog  
a mooncalf lower than a moonfish forgot the moonlit paraselene so the lunar  
picnic was off



*first phrases of my notes application from 2018-2019*

get there before  
it's essential to make fun of it  
human beings express  
on the outside what is internal  
people thinking—dictionary  
our lives are so evolved sentences exercise  
talk yourself out  
abstract nobody  
sees me like you do does  
the problem lie  
in the fact i keep suggesting?  
i thought about your offer  
the tendency  
to be pretentious with words  
is always impacted by money  
i've seen many people wear their victimhood  
as strength they couldn't  
even say the words i need  
get out  
of your head  
married conscious and unconscious  
running again  
please read carefully  
to what i'm about to say  
stock footage of people swimming  
beauty is not having to explain  
yourself the in move  
from mythological to real  
the viewer is left  
with a sudden anxiety



*maybe*

tomorrow could be mint lime kelp or sage  
it might reverberate in deep caves  
of the cheek where saliva builds  
the flood could be the sea  
equipped with foams blue and green  
the room where its remnants  
securely kept is clean  
but with bits of wood collected by machines  
pieces to sit on and stay where  
a fig tree once happened  
try to exhale  
without letters in grids  
only look  
through thick plexiglass  
and pseudonyms  
but we found dirt under our nails once  
and we touched and burned  
to see each other  
bright hot tips crushed out  
still smoulder  
eventually someone flipped over backward  
for landscapes warped  
backgrounds tied around pupils  
like balloons  
on ribbon  
ink slowly leaves the hand  
maudlin light bends around  
tiny hairs on bare skin  
to remember everything ever said  
maybe feels like when  
we all take a swim

*3pm in the woods*

the flyer stapled on a pole reads come:  
to the field beside a tree line at 3pm when  
it's too early and too late to do anything but  
meet at the corner of low-hung clouds and dead branch  
enough people will be there we needn't  
worry about predatory animals  
the wind takes a piece of grass  
into my eye and I cry a single fake tear  
when I see movement in silence:  
discotheque leaves, birds, streams  
somewhere in the distance, credit card hackers (today's rebels)  
examine nondescript leaks in damp, Dark Webs  
between corners of wicked-high ceilings  
and frankly, they miss it all

*a list for it not us*

1.

a form of metaphorical realism  
(like an allegorical legal document)

2.

to dispel the weak  
satisfaction of the status quo

3 .

composed by our sound  
bite-size tragedies

4 .

- no sadness just disaster

5.

oral medicine  
(devil's club)

6.

refrigerator outlets  
for two hot prongs  
which evade surveillance  
not potency

7.

a meeting point  
the lesser known

*yoko is my favourite beetle*

SELF PIECE

Imagine your phone  
becoming a cloud.  
See yourself in the sky.

STREAM PIECE

Listen to live streams  
of water.

PRESTIGE PIECE

Take a picture of the bottom  
of your foot. Use it as  
your profile photo.

LAKE WATER RICE

Collect all the phones  
that have fallen into  
lakes and put them in a giant bowl of  
rice.

DIVER PIECE

Forage the city  
for wasted food.  
Become liable cooking a meal for  
hundreds of people.

ALL-ENCOMPASSING PIECE

Imagine the internet  
as rain.

COUPLE PIECE

Leave your phone  
at home so it can prepare  
your dinner by the time  
you get back.

CLEAN-UP PIECE

Make a giant sieve  
and pour the ocean  
through.

DISPERSED FOREST

Plant at least  
one illegal tree per year.  
Keep their locations  
secret.

PROJECTION PIECE

Fade into  
a digital background:  
project your image  
onto yourself.

STUDIO PIECE

Record the sound of  
birds in the morning.  
Upload the clip at night  
to start a band.

DEATH PIECE

Publish this  
under your username.

*recycled air (all century long)*

LA CONCHA MOTEL

Open 24 hours—54 full modern rooms. Shag carpet throughout—colour cable T.V. in every room. Dial telephone (no charge for local calls). Air conditioned throughout—Sauna 24 hour restaurant and service station. Licensed dining room. Bridal and Executive Suites. Hair dresser. Located on No. 1 Highway in Motel Village, centre of five large shopping centres.

*what is memory*

I missed the idea,  
it's a clear idea  
more to catch,  
the right time  
is gone metaphysics of presents  
understand the experience by not having  
it do not gift it either  
a cake there  
hollow beside  
the not real lake  
detailed record of  
failure to the tune of  
silence

to arrive is to leave \_\_\_\_\_  
an unexpected absence \_\_\_\_\_  
born of predetermined scenes \_\_\_\_\_

they are usually obsessed with myths, not history  
they often look at the songs, not the story

*framed and named*

scales balance  
sentiment weighs tragedy  
by the milligram:  
    sacrificial bbq  
modern tale status-length  
    more blues  
        for prudes  
        dense measure  
the aesthetics of signal  
with sharp-cornered concern  
    raucous rectangle rulers  
    over words or  
    electricity  
    framed  
    and named

*translations of purposes*

headstand all knowledge  
body to brain  
even out effort  
limbs dangle in the wind  
like liquid  
creatures/ creators

to protect all the senses  
the body to the brain  
with strength stick  
to the wind  
like a lily  
living/ acting

keep all the ideas  
body lies in brain  
for power  
windmill  
for lilies  
life/ work

ARIsrackcloud  
ARIsrackcloud  
ARIsrackcloud  
ARIsrackcloud  
ARIsrackcloud  
ARIsrackcloud

ARIsrackcloud  
ARIsrackcloud  
ARIsrackcloud  
ARIsrackcloud  
ARIsrackcloud  
ARIsrackcloud

ARIsrackcloud  
ARIsrackcloud  
ARIsrackcloud  
ARIsrackcloud  
ARIsrackcloud  
ARIsrackcloud

o other world  
a privilege  
for the mind

crystal pond  
dip leg twitch  
tiny fish

destiny's kept  
open-eyed

glided bones  
silk overcast dry  
meadows

steep sinister steps

rugged armed  
mimesis  
dragged images  
a thesis

a synthesized  
comfort to  
philosophize  
clarify

the sun's  
in the ground  
in the sky  
and the planet's  
shape unbound  
always round

*\*so profound*





someone buying books is paying to talk to someone  
paying to talk to someone buying books is paying to talk to someone

to talk  
to talk

talk to  
talk to  
to

someone

buying

someone buying books is paying to talk to someone  
paying to talk to someone buying books is paying to talk to someone  
books is

**buying books is paying to talk to someone buying books is paying to talk to someone**  
buying books is paying to talk to someone buying books is paying to talk to someone

*roman candles*

o o u r  
o u r  
-isms and -ologies p o u r  
from Roman candles marble  
statures foam mattresses  
light folds of a body  
shape beside  
a water cooler belly-button

and technologies are poured  
from the marble candles of Rome  
layers of foam layers  
light creases of a body

*measuring blues*



*laying on a rug in the living room*

the split second the needle hits  
scratch mind kept spirit Alice Coltrane  
consummate idioms  
the split second the needle hits  
erases  
skip scratch  
sublime ingestion  
the split second the needle hits  
mind erases  
yellow boundary tape  
between nothing and  
really something

Original pressing with red & black Impulse/ABC labels.

Text along bottom edge: A Product of ABC Records, Inc. New York, N.Y. 10019 • Made in USA

Originally recorded November 8, 1970, Dix Hills, New York.

Track B2 was recorded July 4, 1970, in performance at The Village Gate, New York City.

A Product of ABC/Dunhill Records

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*talker's remorse*



*permanence is versatile*

I

day  
days  
today  
everyday  
all-day  
birthday  
birthdays  
mayday  
heyday  
payday  
paydays  
Monday  
Mondays  
Tuesday  
Tuesdays  
Wednesday  
Wednesdays  
Thursday  
Thursdays  
Friday  
Fridays  
Saturday  
Saturdays  
Sunday  
Sundays  
noonday  
noondays  
daybreak  
daybreaks  
daytime  
daytimes  
daytimer  
daytimers  
midday  
middays  
daylight  
daylights  
daylily  
daydream  
daydreams  
daydreamers  
daydreaming  
doomsday  
doomsdayer  
doomsdayers  
dayflower  
dayflowers  
dayworker  
dayworkers  
holiday  
holidays  
holidaying  
yesterday  
yesterdays  
dayspring  
daysprings  
multiday  
multidays  
washday  
washdays  
Day-Glo  
weekday  
weekdays  
daystar  
daystars  
daybed  
daybeds  
daycare  
daycares  
someday  
somedays  
workday  
workdays  
day-off  
dayside  
daysides  
faraday  
faradays  
daymare  
daymares  
intraday  
intradays  
day-book  
day-books  
day-long  
day-pack  
day-packs  
day-bag  
day-bags  
dayside  
daysides  
daytrade  
daytrades  
daytrader  
daytraders  
daytrading  
day-to-day  
day-trip  
day-trips  
day-tripper  
day-trippers  
day-tripping  
dayan  
daylong  
dayroom  
dayrooms  
daysail  
daysails  
daysailer  
daysailers  
daysailing  
dayshift  
dayshifts  
dayspring  
daysprings  
daywear  
day-wearer

II

sleep  
sleeps  
sleeper  
sleepers  
sleepwalk  
sleepwalks  
sleepwalker  
sleepy  
sleeping  
sleepiness  
sleepinesses  
asleep  
antislleep  
oversleep  
oversleeps  
sleeper  
sleepier  
sleepiest  
sleepily  
sleeping  
sleeplessnesses  
sleeplessness  
sleepless  
sleepover  
sleepovers  
sleepwear  
sleepyhead  
sleepyheads  
sleep-like  
sleep-away  
sleep-deprived  
sleep-deprivation  
sleep-in  
sleep-ins  
sleep-learning  
sleep-out  
sleep-outs  
sleep-inducing  
sleeptraining  
skyline  
skylines  
skylark  
skylarker  
skylarkers  
skylarking  
skyscaper  
skyrocket  
skyjack  
ensky  
frisky  
skysail  
skysails  
skyway  
skyways  
skyhook  
skyhooks  
skybox  
skyboxes  
whisky  
pilsky  
skyman  
skycap  
skycaps  
skylike  
skywalk  
skywalks  
dusky  
risky  
skyed  
pesky  
skydom  
SkyDome  
sky-blue  
sky-blues  
sky-clad  
sky-high  
sky-glow  
sky-glows  
skylit  
skycap  
skybridge  
skyer  
skyey  
skyfall  
skyfalls  
skyflower  
skyjack  
skyless  
Skype  
skyr  
skyr  
skyr  
sky-scape  
skywatch  
skywatcher  
skywatchers  
skywatching  
skyway  
skyways  
\*etc. (practices for meaning)

III

sky  
skying  
skylight  
skylights  
skytrain  
skytrains  
skydive  
skydiver  
skydivers  
skydiving  
skyward  
skywrite  
skywriter  
skywriters  
skywriting

*collaboration with a late relative (and George Harrison)*

"I sit here  
in wonder staring  
at the stars  
on the beach  
in the near distant  
I can hear the harmonica  
drinking wine  
feeling satisfied  
A fire is going  
and I look  
at it as if it has  
strength  
summer a time  
when you  
can do such things  
isn't it awsume"  
- Michael Gillis

I sit here, too  
one paper two tastes  
salt grains  
inherited  
my legs rest  
as bodies do  
repetitions  
in parks  
jokes stretch in the morning  
like material repetitions worth wear  
you lived for crowded repetitions  
smile lines parallel parked  
so your toes climbed  
onto school  
desks gyrate voices  
for the hysterical class  
mates ripped the tape  
from the case  
annoyed with slow goals  
some want to live  
in the centre  
of a diamond  
"all the world  
is birthday cake"  
a day stuck with  
hard plastic phones  
dehydrated bones  
inject liquid stone  
follow the foot path  
to the Lion's Gate  
pent-up, went up  
"so take a piece, but not too much"

*how to build a callous*

may I scatter quick  
limbs over dry  
hills hurry holes  
in clothes show boreal  
hip bones

root fingers rot and two  
cracked raw  
talismans bury  
compensation under dew-  
dense

fishing lines around  
pillow eyes  
wash dirt from  
lupines clothes  
his abdomen and a river

static hair  
floats walks  
in storms over  
sierras born from  
left hands

ribs twist  
with spruce  
tops point north  
farther than rock-slept  
spines

high-stakes larch feather  
seeds for sanguine  
colours arnica jars and  
pine for its pollen  
under the tongue

lacerations knotted  
hair and flaxen  
hours, evenings with  
vessels trap  
tree powder

for wind—the symmetry  
of Wes Anderson adults blowing  
bubbles more elusive  
than a silver-tongued nymphalid or  
pocket knife



*our dayscape*

your shade all blues  
around a gold circle leaks  
mine the line below and  
above

*how to live in a city*

I read the sign  
“why work” spelled  
in post-it-notes  
stuck to office windows  
someone inside  
shot a gun  
no  
a flare gun

I can see from here  
when I use my hand  
to block the sun

distraction,  
the task of

concentration

so I

lick

emotional vegetable  
wounds ferment  
sour skins  
in glass jars

*to e.e. cummings*

“not for philosophy does this rose give a damn”

unless the rose speaks

he writes about Spring

here nor there

here

not there

not

here

syntax fails to rhyme with pillow

lipsorspit

still

flowers

fill

the field without

help as Spring

jolts its neck

to laugh with us

who try to frame

the structure leaks

in rain

(a slight wetness never hurt us anyway)

*schedule*

for one week I am

homemade jam ancient

melody trapped in tents stored

in an echo-chamber unrest

hangs a clothesline

from my insides bedsheets loom

and leave with a gust of something like

parades of blue

gems on

a rose on a rose on a rose on cotton on

marks the intimacy of organs strong

willed enough to resist

the urge to dance to

resist the tempting herd

mentality of blood

cells waltz out the door my uterus

is so avant-garde

about to make art

from life

*hell-o*

pixels make high school  
flings, infinite spirals of tongues  
mash-up body parts and y2k  
a surface says more  
about me  
you're waking up in 5 hours  
screen time down 12% since last week

they say after a knee scrapes  
and proud tiny pebbles heal  
visible,  
the iris inherits pigmentation

threats include smooth legs, smooth sculpture, and smooth windows

the eye used to get prickly  
—used to know  
the bodily sensation of pain  
use to dry out, used to mould

catastrophes no longer possible

empathy is too romantic  
this is a post-world baby  
and the postal workers are always on strike  
arguing over definitions

laminated stick people with fixed legs  
and facial expressions  
caught us when we posed  
for selfies,  
climbing over  
and counting stiff bodies

grandchildren will swipe  
transparency  
here we  
feed 60 years before

imagine hanging a frame  
your thirst trap  
is the portrait on the news  
when you're finally  
visited by  
that dark cloaked  
Pirate  
Bay virus

*good to talk*

I called an anonymous source to check if  
words had died  
when the funeral was scheduled  
whether carnations are  
appropriate for these events  
I lied, I called because I meant to talk about individual capital  
and to hear my own breath  
through the phone  
while I tap  
my fingers  
maybe I wanted to make sure someone else  
could sense air filling my cup  
in a way we require  
like a dodgeball chucked at  
a squishy body  
by the strongest girl in gym shorts  
would enjoy the burn in the lungs  
if one could catch up to breath

*sir name*

my kind grounded by  
the therapeutic wit  
of a sneaky planted  
lily our fathers drank  
the ocean they dipped  
I was raised in the same ghost  
town I lived in the ruins of an old pump  
house I rolled deteriorated cement  
stones in my hand  
and crushed what was left  
my last name was meant for that region  
so I poured the gold we panned  
back into the river  
they say defects are genetic  
so I stay away  
from breastfeeding and wine  
only a child  
tasked with a final chore  
involves scissors  
and lines already go by  
my first two names

*lucid effort*

layers of eyes notice my hands  
getting all sticky a blonde ice cream  
cone only drips  
in summer and otherwise,  
saves adjunct apple-redheads  
from cold water  
leaving ripples in the sand,  
awaiting men with metal  
detectors in sapphire swim-trunks,  
wishing to be ripples in the sea.  
the sex was a steam room  
for drawing little pictures with your finger  
repeated so many times  
the tape discs torts  
they call this "that stranger state  
when we seem to stand aside  
and watch it  
surge  
across some being with whom  
we are no longer  
identified"  
strain yourself  
sharp eye teeth gleam  
powder-blue thick air and  
thinly veiled sweat,  
faint booms of footsteps  
on squeaky floorboards,  
and recursive fiddle music  
areas of the body manage energy differently  
places like these  
feel like velvet  
sing like Bohemian Waxwings  
clenching half-smoked cigarettes in crow's feet  
(wrinkles in the right places for the right reasons)  
some build these structures,  
some spend  
all-day Sunday  
walking up snow-capped mountains with bright  
lilac, lemon-tart meadows  
they wear red  
pinstripes on summer

clothes in the fetal position  
on icy ground  
alpine kite flying is a thing to do!  
they pull their hair to mimic  
the shape of opaque  
cliffs, to show gold and silver medals  
Camus left Sisyphus at  
the trailhead  
in the name of "higher fidelity"  
do you imagine him happy? I lament  
the loss of social ritual  
so consumed by the desire  
to make apple pie the way your mom does  
and we still forgot the flour  
my mind hides in computer files,  
places you've known more about  
since video games  
I've seen pictures  
of studios with paper  
notes pinned to the wall and a typewriter  
waiting  
to be oiled up, handled,  
and released by pressure points  
I am a serial reductionist of particular  
moments and I think about the tragedy  
of youth slipped—  
to preserve my face is less a concern  
the way I wish for theirs  
a tiny ripple in the sea,  
glaciers are closer to the shiny sun  
now that you've taken my  
advice and stopped cutting your hair,  
you never burn  
though you have freckles.  
my hands are all sticky  
learning to  
laugh  
when I say,  
it's not  
fair

*fleurs*

you darling flower near 1st avenue where the guy was shot in his car that night the sky was light-textured and warm enough you are mine you are of my mind and I'll pick how I like you best hotel-soap-pale-yellow dress take that darkness from your lashes your eyes and put it back and take it off and put it back and send more blood to the lips you're always biting looking like you're trying to avoid someone why all we want is to see you walk by good bye to your sweet shadow those stems that go on and on and those feet that walk all over city streets and piss and dried gum and stomp out the problems I need you to walk by I need to see it tighter around your waist be proud of your form that will outlive what it stood for you are fairly well-proportioned intellectually we need the muses and you just a moment where is your teenage smile help me when I tend to my wife and child and you walk by and I get some reprieve from lifting heavy cardboard boxes I wanna hold your cold eyes and your come-to-me mouth I want to leech when you hide at outside the venue at my show hey did you like my set let me light your cigarette (I'll always take care of you don't be stupid)

**appendix b:**

**Interview of Lillian Allen by cayden johnson, 2020 (condensed and edited for clarity)**

LA: We [dub poets] consider ourselves among the avant-garde.

CJ: Gregory Betts suggested that avant-garde work must contain a spirit of hopefulness or optimism at its centre. What do you think about this?

LA: In general, I think to actually have agency and do something is optimistic. Maybe it's not waving a flag, but I think that it means there's hopefulness. It means you think you can affect something and so forth. I'd just nuance it that way. It's too claustrophobic to narrow those emotions/desires because one can rail against something without thinking about being optimistic. Maybe it's a difference in worldview or a difference in positionality that we, as dub poets, sort of have.

CJ: What attracted you to the avant-garde? I read a critique by Maggie Nelson regarding the death of the avant-garde and the tendency for men to declare the end of an art movement as soon as the scene diversifies.

LA: We use the word avant-garde a little bit with some advisement, knowing the history, and just kind of reclaiming it, reclaiming space. I think you are absolutely right that as soon as people of colour and younger people start to take up a form—not even as soon as we had been doing this stuff long before, but once presence is there, then it's declared dead or they are redefining it or they're fleeing . . .

We dub poets have always considered ourselves avant-garde, being at the leading edge of resistance. We think of the current avant-garde, which is mostly guys (the ones we know, the ones who get fame), and we see them as brats, not revolutionaries. It's a brattishness. They're rebels on certain cultural aspects, but their bodies aren't on the line. They are countering manners and civility, and we like that. Because you know, whiteness has this heaviness, colonizing tone about it. And they're play at countering it by being vociferous, or breaking things apart or, by being jovial or funny. So that's our attraction—the rebel part of it—the counter-culture part of it. That's where we meet them. In that counter-cultural space. That's where we see that solidarity. . .

But we don't really take them seriously because art and culture, to us, is about real things. It's about life, about political transformation, and our bodies are on the line—our bodies are marked. So every time I get up to do my work, even within my own community, it's a risk. It's not like that for them... they have none of those considerations that we have when we start to break boundaries when we start to get vociferous and start to confront colonial structures or the structures of civility and so forth.

CJ: Risk is something that keeps coming up in conversations I've been having—people saying that this could be a way of describing the avant-garde, through risk.

LA: That's creative risk—a different kind of risk. They are not at risk: their freedoms are not at risk, their rights are not at risk. Their voices being ignored, marginalized and shut out are not at risk. The most they will get is a slap on the wrist.

CJ: I think they like to think of themselves as big risk-takers.

LA: Yes! Real cavalries of revolution. We don't see them like that. We have a good laugh when we read them, and we love it. White folks you should get up, kick some butt! Get rid of the stiff, upper-hand, "proper" way of dealing, proper language, etc. Break something, please.

CJ: I like that! So then, how do you decide when a work is avant-garde? What makes poetry avant-garde to you?

LA: First of all, it must break with tradition. To me, it must be vital (all work is supposed to be vital). It must break a tradition, and it must confront a knowledge, body of knowledge, or way of being that has been normalized and accepted. One of the easiest ways to do that is to pull things, language, words, discussion, and discourse, out of their normal contexts so that you can do things with them. It must look and feel new, like it's forging something new, creating new spaces. It needs to let the work do battle. Establish possibilities.

CJ: Did you go to bill bissett's birthday? Betts said it had a lot of revolutionary avant-garde energy. And then I spoke to Dani Spinosa, who was also in attendance, and she mentioned it was predictable of Betts to say so because he's well-established in that group, and that some guests



at bissett's birthday felt ostracized within the event . . . She said that within the movement there's a good avant-garde and a bad avant-garde. Rather than being on a front lines as an innovator, Spinosa believes its most important for her to be engaging in a conversation and encouraging community.

LA: It is about community, opening up space, and asserting possibilities. You're right about those guys who appointed themselves as the vanguard, and its also a place for them to theorize the hell out of something in order to make it important—when it's not that important, but they theorize to make it important.

CJ: I am struggling to see my peers in the avant-garde poetry scene. I am searching constantly for experimental nights, through certain poets I follow, and I often am the youngest person in the room. The running title for my thesis is Avant-garde Echo Chamber because it seems this small scene is just speaking back and forth to one another. I am interested in your work because it seems a communal experience is very important to you. These days I am looking at the rise of neoliberalism and the fall of collectives. Even though there were some problematic white males leading those groups in the past, there was an idea that groups existed and that you could get involved. Whereas today, I feel I am putting myself out there, and I just don't see the people. I'm wondering if you have any thoughts on what collectivity means with regard to this practice today?

LA: What a great title. And that's a really good question. My sense is that you are right. There are cliques but not collectives or movements. So that's one of the things I'm trying to revive. I'm hoping to get a sabbatical because I am proposing that I will foster a collective of sound poetry for BIPOC women. And I intend to do more in creating a space for BIPOC and non-binary folks to engage experimentation and create new poetics. Because I think in some ways we need to rehabilitate that word, [avant-garde]. We need to take that back. I'm trying to get people more engaged and involved in creating a movement, and a movement driven by people who are thinking deeply about what it is to be a stand against imperialism and all its constructions. How to liberate language and the voice, and as I say, to be revolutionary creatively is to assert new possibilities or break through something. Reflecting on that, figuring out how to build community and develop ritual and spread it out—that's my mission.

CJ: I think this discussion of community connect to the tension between accessibility versus

opacity in avant-garde writing. Bissett has married these two. He's put enough layers of obscurity on his work so that he can use things like outdated poetic tropes and get away with it. Something I struggle with my work is this desire to have open readings. I don't always put context or narration. I sense that it doesn't come across as well for people that don't have an interest in language. And this is in comparison to the ones who do seem more comfortable not knowing linguistic meaning, or having it up in the air. Some people just want to know what the heck you're saying. Knowing how important accessibility and community is to you, how do you navigate these two things?

LA: First of all I've always said writing is not life. Life is what you live. So this is an experience of language, and then breaking that down into different forms of language. . . What is the experience of this language? What is the experiment of language that offers new life? That to me is the most important thing. Not what it's saying, not what it means. What is the experience of this language, this experiment? What is it offering? Then you think about how the writer made you see this feel this and have this experience. . . Look at where the work with language (plus and minus) is taking you. And how this gives us a different way of knowing, seeing and feeling. Why not enjoy language?

CJ: Spinoza was telling me that for her a poem doesn't have to mean anything. She's more interested in the space between meaning; she says when those spaces exist and we focus on them, we aren't losing the whole, but thinking about the whole in a new way.

LA: That's why poetry is (arguably) considered the highest art form. Because it's asking you to bring something to the table. . . And you have to see, school dumbed down poetry. So much so that people don't realize it's a joy to engage their minds and hearts and senses with what's going on with the work. That's what we're lacking. We need, more and more, to go back and figure out what poems are evoking, not just in our imagination but in our bones and our skin, and in the senses. And how the nuances or the language live beyond the page: how they live in your skin, how they live in your heart, how they live in a community. I think those are things they should be teaching about poetry. It's not just, I have a message, this happened, and this happened next. It's something to bring you to the centre of a moment and it acts like a compass. The rest is the reader's engagement.

CJ: How is the success of a piece determined in your work? Is it based on engagement or is it a personal feeling?

LA: You know what. It's an on-going kind of thing. You get better at it, but you never know. You're always surprised. I think there is a sense of impact and resolution within a certain range. I don't think you can determine if something's going to be really excellent. It can be good technically, but you can't determine the X-factor yourself. There are a lot of things in it for me, like what I feel I was able to transmute. I technically want a minimum of three things to be happening with language in the poem, no matter if I write it out or drop out. I'm not talking about stanza. I'm talking about how on second read you realize something is happening between words. I like to get a sense of satisfaction when you know you've opened up a little space that wasn't there before. . . I know people say [work is good when] it raises dialogue but from an anti-racist standpoint I'm like no, we gotta go further than that, please. Let the dialogue do something else, something more. We have lost what is our idea of excellence in this culture. We've got quite a bit of good, but the bulk is mediocre: okay-ish, low-good. We have a fair amount of good, and we don't have a lot of excellence. When you see excellence, it makes you remember that you have forgotten what it is. Excellence takes your breath away. But in this culture we are very comfortable with competent and good.

CJ: How does technology impact your work? And is it necessary for the avant-garde poet to incorporate?

L: Technology might very well be a being in itself. I myself am not sure how to assess technology. I find the impact to be varied among students, who I get a lot of reflection of the world from. I'm pretty measured in my use of technology. It is another colonizer if you ask me. It's totally colonizing us. It's going to change our brain systems. It is the epitome of non-consent culture and is disgraceful that way. . . You cannot maintain your independence or privacy. People can't you see what you're allowing these [tech] guys to do? When we think about dub poetry, we see the analogue. We look back to future to look forward. It's an analogue form that works everywhere. . .into and beyond the digital. I think we are pretty early in technology. It can do all the stuff and give us different dimensions, and it's another part of creativity too. I might be too old to answer this question. It has opened up this whole communication system but I'm still not ready to shut down a part of my mind for it. It's another colonizing tool and probably just as brutal and

widespread as the first colonizers. I am still trying to figure out how it's affecting people, what its worth, where its going.

CJ: Thinking about hybrids of technology and analogue, I love what Kandis Williams is doing with Cassandra Press: using university passwords of friends to publish and disseminate excerpts from vital critical theory texts.

LA: It's good what Cassandra is doing because all these things are locked up. Look at all the brightest people in the world, all these universities, and look at the state of the world. Is there any relation to all these universities and the state of the world? No. That knowledge is locked up. Detained. People think and they write important things, but they don't live them. In fact, university is one of the most racist places to exist in when you have a different body.

CJ: How do you reconcile with your place in an institution?

LA: I'm in the institution but I'm not institutionalized. Trust me. I am on every single committee possible and the first thing I say is I'm here to represent the grassroots and the marginalized. So I am uninstitutionalizable. I mean, I slipped in and I don't think I could slip in the same way now. I know what my place here means, and I'm not giving it up. I'm here, and I'm doing my work. Other folks don't like it. They want more traditional stuff. They don't care. And same here. The whole education system has been so responsible for so much destruction. It can be a mechanism for good. It's provided importance and jobs that our community needs. But it is so colonized, so bureaucratized. It's so corporatized. It's another machinery.

CJ: I see this all the time. People are encouraged to decolonize and act radically but the second someone does something different, they are punished and told they have to fit the prescription.

LA: That's exactly it. No one wants to change any rules. . . It's a factory, its a mill. . . I'm in it because I have access in it, because I believe in engagement. But trust me, I'm a revolutionary, mon. I don't take some of that self-significant foolishness stuff seriously. Some of those folks have no connection to theory and practice, no love for difference or community, and some people are just horrible people. I don't care how brilliant you are. I don't care what they have behind their names. Their dominance is an abomination. Academia is rife.

CJ: I read that dub poets were not accepted into the League of Canadian Poets. And that you wrote "One Poem Town" in response.

LA: Yes! Those critics should spend their time better, rather than cutting down young poets. I used to be the youngest person in the room. And instead of taking you and nurturing you, they're ready to kill you and stomp you out. . . Black culture is the most exploited culture in the world, I'll say that forever and again.

CJ: This reminds me of another criteria from Betts I'm tossing around: avant-garde as ethics. But of course, not all avant-garde is ethical.

LA: Intersectionality properly done is a good way forward. I think people like Betts are important in that they are ready, in some cases, to self-critique. They need to put their bodies on the line. I've brought him into class to talk about his work (which I quite admire) and (brutal) Scottish history in relation to Indigenous folks on Turtle Island and developing one's positionality and the responsibility to decolonize, which students don't actually get anywhere else. Coming from a white guy that's eye opening to students who aren't exposed to these ideas much. And I think more of these guys need to do that kind of work in their communities.

CJ: How does the fracturing of language lend to both subversion and expansion of language?

LA: Bill has said it too... if you mess with language, people get real upset. It's like they like to know where things are. They will assassinate you for dropping an 's' or a comma. . . Because language contains more than language right: it signifies, pulls to emotions, acts like a compass, evokes old and new, preserves a certain order. Language is an ancient ancient thing, filled with stuff we don't get to understand. It is certainly, like the internet, one of those controlling tools. This doesn't become visible until you start to break it up, and start to look at the possibility of creating different ways of experiencing it and different ways of knowing. These different ways of thinking through things lead to different results than we already have. So fracturing is an approach to language that takes it out of its context and applies different elements to it, especially non-mainstream elements like vernacular and stuff like that. Breaking language down into the smallest part, etc., breaks with an agreement. I think that's part of what threatens people. That's the subversion part of it. And then it can lead to a whole different experience.

**appendix c:**

**“Never Real, Always True: An Interview with Eileen Myles” by Frances Richard, 2000**

“FR: So how do you define the contemporary avant-garde? It seems to appear in your work as a positive, even a beloved term, a politicized term, but not so much a contested one.

EM: It seems large, and that’s why I like to use it again. There was time when the poetry I felt most immediately affected by split, and labels were affixed that said, “you’re New York School” and “you’re Language,” as though these were really different things, when in fact Language came out of New York School, and New York School came out of French Surrealism and Russian Futurism and John Cage and Lana Turner. It is one flow. The thing that no one talks about is real estate. When lots of artists had lofts in the ’70s there were big parties where people of different gangs danced and drank together. And they turned up in each other’s magazines. The fact that people stopped seeing each other socially when all those lofts got sold meant, on a certain level, that we stopped trying to understand each other’s work.

FR: So an avant-garde is symbiotic with the larger culture, even if it’s also in opposition.

EM: Yet it has its own history. Gertrude Stein, for example, in this century, is kind of the mother of us all. If Stein’s not important to you, then probably you are going off into some whole other area. I evolved the way I did because that’s where I was received. I picked up Stein and I wanted to know more about this. I applied to a bunch of graduate schools and most of them didn’t accept me and one did, and there I was only accidentally turned on by a professor to the “New York School poets,” and stumbled to St. Mark’s, fell out of school and then I was there. That was the poetry I was exposed to, that was the place where I grew. Maybe, for us then, ‘avant-garde’ was a way to explain the kind of theatre that, say, Richard Foreman was doing, and I knew my kind of poets were related to that kind of theatre. In retrospect, it was about liking that kind of band, too. Richard Hell. Patti Smith. It meant knowing about things outside of the centre—of convention—that was a given in my world.

I think it’s about the centre moving, too. The first time I saw the word “mainstream” was in the ’80s. Some article called “Mainstreaming Allen Ginsberg,” when his Collected Poems was coming out. And I thought, ‘How odd, they make it sound like they’re making him bigger.’ It just meant they were giving him a big book, but Allen was already huge, global. Right away there seemed to

be this misnomer, the “mainstream.” Since then it’s become the flood everybody is trying to jump into to exist, and if you’re not in it you’re invisible.

FR: Do you think that sense of invisibility is new? You were talking before about being trained as a poet not to expect glory.

EM: Right. But it feels different somehow. Actually maybe it only feels different in terms of being older. At this point in my life, with a huge body of work, I do feel threatened sometimes—when I think I face annihilation as a woman, as opposed to the situation of male poets. I’m thinking, ‘Oh, they still think I’m a woman! Unbelievable! I’m going to suffer this female obliteration.’ Even looking at someone like Muriel Rukeyser, who’s so important and great, and realizing there were twenty years where you could not find her work. Stein too—impossible to find. The danger feels more personal than it did when I was younger. I feel more mortal, and my work feels more mortal, too. I feel more in need of finding some way either to win, you know—knock knock knock and make the huge door open—or, whether that happens or not, realizing the door has to be open here, within, first, just to write.

FR: Speaking of lines of inheritance, that’s another important trajectory to trace—from Stein, to Rukeyser, bounce, into the present.

EM: Then you really are looking at a female lineage, which is pretty amazing.

FR: And one that is acute in terms of language experimentation and political experimentation. All these different registers of formal and social play with both identity and poetry. So how do you address yourself to a present, contemporary avant-garde?

EM: I like the term [avant-garde]. Its a little pedantic, but if I’m not that, what am I? ‘Experimental’ has a much more tentative sound to me than ‘avant-garde.’ I always think of Bob Perelman saying that ‘experimental’ sounded to him like you have some test tubes and a white lab coat and you might just blow up the science building. Bernadette Mayer always liked the word and used it.

FR: 'Avant-garde' has that military connotation. You *meant* to blow up the science building.

EM: Yeah. You had to! It's like 'queer.' It's taking on a term of contempt and saying, 'No I'm proud to be avant-garde.'"<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Richard, Frances. "Never Real, Always True: An Interview with Eileen Myles." Provincetown Arts, 2000: 24–29.



**appendix d:**

**Interview of Dani Spinosa by cayden johnson, 2020 (condensed and edited for clarity)**

CJ: In your book *Anarchists in the Academy* (2018), you choose the word experimental over avant-garde. In eschewing the term, are you trying to separate from practices in the past? Do you think it runs a risk of making that divide?

DS: I think my number one interest in separating my use of the term avant-garde from experimental, is that avant-garde is very much about being on the vanguard of something, about pushing something. Which is cool on one level. I'm really interested in pressing against limitations, pushing against boundaries, and moving into different genres. Avant-garde kind of means that—it does that. But it also, to me, connotes this kind of corporate speech. Language like cutting edge always bothered me. Experiment means something very different to me. . . Whenever I experiment, I have the scientific method in the back of my head to say, I'm not quite in control of what happens outside of this, but I've set these parameters. To me they just mean really different things. And work can be both. . .

In that book specifically, I was interested in texts that are saying, what happens here if I let go of the control over the end product. I really like a lot of work that is avant-garde. And I think you can't really call it 'experimentalism' as a genre. That doesn't really make sense to me. It's more like a method. But also I wrote the first draft of that book like six or seven years ago so I'm a bit more jaded than I was when I wrote it.

CJ: Jaded about what?

DS: I'm frustrated with the people at the forefront of the avant-garde right now, and I keep getting more and more frustrated: Kenny G's stupid desk in Venice (Kenneth Goldsmith conceptualism stuff) and Christian Bök sending his word jiz into space. That to me is very vanguardist. And then you look at someone like Gary Barwin. He's wonderful. He edited my forthcoming collection. His new book's intro very much characterizes his work as pushing against boundaries and limitations: what can this text do what can these limitations do. But he's very much not like, "look at this new stuff I found." His work's got more of the feeling of play that is something Goldsmith doesn't have.

CJ: What do you think of the avant-garde as having an ethical imperative?

DS: I think there's good avant-garde and bad avant-garde. I think the avant-garde has always been political in some way for a long time, but not necessarily ethical. Think about the European avant-garde, which was deeply fascist. It's always kind of done that thing. I don't know that we can say vorticism was not avant-garde—it was—and yet clearly serving these deeply unethical aims. I think that thinking about the avant-garde as ethical is feminist. It has to be. I think that's what the work of feminists in this field have done, and I don't mean just women. I don't know if it's an inherent feature of the avant-garde because I think a lot of people that do the avant-garde have bad fucking politics. And you can put Christian Bök right at the top of that. . . Goldsmith especially. . . The start of Goldsmith's work should have led to this wonderful collapse of the ego. It should have been very much about how do I write myself as it's dissolving and changing—in a Hejiniian kind of way. It could have been fabulous. And then something happened with him, notoriety, and then it became this Hilary Clinton propaganda stuff. That's very avant-garde, but it's lost all that ethics of connection, the communal, the conversation. . . Which is why I think it's cool that you keep being like, I talked to this person, I talked to this person, because it really is kind of bringing that conversation that I think is crucial. If I'm going to say anything that *is* inherent to the avant-garde it's that people are engaging with each other, working with each other, and building with each other.

CJ: My thesis title is avant-garde echo chamber because I feel this is either super locked up or I've already entered and am getting bounced around.

DS: I love the idea of an avant-garde echo chamber. That is really resonating, and I think it also has to do with the state of the academy right now. That's why I liked writing that book.

CJ: What do you mean the state of the academy?

DS: People are publishing like crazy, just shitting this stuff out. They're trying to build up a CV. Everything has to be peer reviewed, so it's behind all these walls. We aren't actually talking to each other. Universities get run like corporations right now. It's more about the proprietary status, which gets frustrating.

CJ: It used to take longer to do research in the library and now with the internet, everyone's running around trying to achieve the impossible. How are we going to do anything meaningful if we aren't focusing time and actually *trying* to do it?

DS: Absolutely. And conferences are the worst. I can count on one hand the times I've heard something interesting or be inspired at a conference, and I've been to 40. You just go, you read the paper—I try to throw in a couple jokes, otherwise I'm just giving a paper that no one's listening to. No one's listening, no one's asking questions, no one's talking.

CJ: What is the difference between an artist succeeding and being a vanguard?

DS: I think the difference is whether you envision your work as taking part in a conversation or whether you imagine your work as obsolescing what's come before you.

CJ: I feel the closer and closer we get to text as a communal space of labour and conversation, we're almost getting away from text itself. I've heard the argument before that any book or text, how could it be a conversation or a dialogue. How would you argue that these kind of texts do function as a dialogue?

DS: I think it's in the reading practice. Certain writing practices lend themselves better to a conversation. But I think it's in your reading practice, and you have to be willing to call the text wrong, or fill in a gap, or cut a hole in it, or deface the thing itself. . . The book was never envisioned to be something that was a dialogue, but once you start underlining, aren't you having a conversation? I wanted to say in my book, please write all over this. Rip it to pieces. Who cares about this thing? . . .

At Bill's birthday there were two feelings. People would get up there with words that are pictures and written in weird Bill language, and they were bringing life to his poems and emoting them. People in the crowd were yelling stuff back. It was cool and felt very communal. . . And then on the other side, people were being fancy and clouty. . . That event really solidified for me the two sides of the avant-garde world, and I have to love and hate them at the same time. You felt them fighting against each other.

CJ: Betts talked about how that party was an amazing organization of avant-garde energy and something I sorely missed.

DS: It probably felt that way for him. . . my partner came to that and he is a photographer and musician and is days away from becoming a licensed art therapist. The event was so alienating for him. He said he'd never been talked down to so much. People were explaining shit to him. . . When you are inside it, it feels open. When you are not, it feels very exclusive and cliquy. I'm always worried about those things. To know bill for two seconds is to know he is not that cliquy exclusive person at all. If anyone said happy birthday to him, he said it back to them because that's bill. To have what erupted around it to be at once... like woo hoo I love this poetry party, and then my partner was like, these are the meanest people I have ever sat down with.

CJ: The people in that group can seem quite conservative in a sense.

DS: They can be super conservative. It's not necessarily an age thing. bill's the oldest one of the bunch, and he's an anarchist through and through.

CJ: If not everyone is willing to engage in the conversation, how can it be accessible to everyone?

DS: Access does not necessarily mean complete comprehension. We never have complete access to something. You can be a Joyce scholar for years, but there's parts of *Finnegans Wake* that he picked and random. Who has access to that? Access is more, who am I thinking about, who am I willing to include? That doesn't necessarily mean they will come. It just means I am open. Every single thing cant be accessible to every single person every single time—otherwise we're not even telling jokes anymore. I think it's more of a mindfulness process than it is about some kind of absolute openness. . .

When I started by work on Cage's *62 Mesostics*, I thought this was the most open kind of work you can do. They're love letters but that doesn't mean anything at all to what they are. They do not meaning anything. . . but Cage was not thinking about the class issues that go into that. In order for you to have the time and interest in a text thats just letters, you need to have a certain amount of free time, and a certain amount of interest in that cultural production.

CJ: What keeps it radically open?

DS: That you can read it however you want, or you can choose to give it no meaning. Just because you can take a metaphor lots of different ways doesn't mean its aesthetically open. But if you're allowed to sit with a text and just be. . . me and Eric Schmaltz have this thing about visual poetry: the only way to read our work is to say, here's this picture. Do you like it or not? If I can sit with your text or hear it or read and it doesn't have to do the meaning making thing, that to me is radically open. And then it can it totally can make meaning. But I like things to not mean anything.

CJ: Who do you envision as your audience?

DS: All these things about being anti-cliques, but I'm writing for other women who are in the avant-garde. That's who I've always been writing for. I'm kind of obsessed with Chris Krau's *I Love Dick* right now. . . It's very much about how to read this feminist woman in a world where poetics are masculine. Women who like the poetry world but also hate it, who wants to be a part of it, but hates what it stands for and doesn't want to be a part of it. . . And how do you be this person? I want my poetry to be women writing on top of that for women reading other women. And also other dudes who are similarly fed up with this kind of bullshit.

CJ: What does it mean these days to be an academic or a writer, sitting with a laptop all day?

DS: Oh my god, tell it to my carpal tunnel.

CJ: What role does the typewriter play in your work and what role does technological nostalgia play?

DS: I got into the typewriter because I wanted to touch a thing while I was making, and also because I am obsessed with those guys. I have a bpNichol tattoo. I wanted to be making literary magazines like GrOnk. I wanted to be doing that old early stuff. I wanted to be doing literary karaoke. I wanted to pretend to be bill bissett for a day. That's where I got started. And then it became, what if I scan this into my computer? What can it become? So I have to precise and then I can be messy in the computer.

CJ: So you alter them in the computer?

DS: Almost all of them.

CJ: Is nostalgia a part of your practice?

DS: Yes, I'm always looking back. Looking back to look forward happens in every thing that I do. . . I always feel like I'm entering a conversation where people have already been talking, and so I look back to them. Then I do a double take: what are they doing? What can I do now? . . . I'm really interested in using such an old archaic unhelpful thing—because it's not useful—they're expensive and they're ridiculous. I have only three, and they take up my whole office. I like to ask, how can I make this useful or interesting? . . . Academic work is pretty much just online. It's amazing how much nostalgia it has to it. I like copying. We should copy.

CJ: How would you describe your goals as a poet? How does your research inform your practice?

DS: My poetry and research are working together absolutely all the time. And as a third term to that, what *really* changed both my writing and my scholarship was starting a small press [called Gap Riot]. It changed everything. . . We are hand making shit now. We have a cool indie printer. We learned how to hand-stitch book bindings, and practice Japanese stab on some visual poetry. It's radically changed my scholarship and my writing because when you're writing literary work by yourself, going back to technology, you start to think about that one page in Microsoft Word as your bounds. When you become a publisher, you realize you can't work with that. That's not what a book is like. . . so all my work now, literary work, scholarship, publishing, is about changing page shapes, page sizes, and new kinds of stitching and new kinds of paper. My digital stuff is also about disrupting the way a web page looks. . .

Scholarship and poetry seem like they want different things from you, but in the end, I think there's a wonderful thing that comes with the realization that neither industry cares if you're there or not. . . Have some fun with it get weird with it. Because why else. . .

And maybe as a balm against this Toronto artists who are selling themselves, there's this lovely community, these kids who are making stuff and giving it away for free. The indie literary market is becoming old people. . . But there's this event in November every year, and it's all small presses from all over the place who are doing cool stuff and coming together. You can get a table for fifteen bucks. It's a sliding scale, pay what you want. And they announce a chapbook prize there. It's just a cool group of people, almost none of whom do poetry for a living. And they make weird stuff. I mean there's some [big presses] there, Coachhouse comes and whatever... but it's mostly really small press stuff and they're wonderful—small and welcoming and lovely. In some ways, that small press community is going to open it up. The people who run the market are old, but the people there are doing some cool stuff. . . but there are people. Although it's just the one day. . . the collective that runs it is called Meet the Presses and if you go on the website they have a list of all the presses that exhibited there.

CJ: I'm still new to Toronto, but no one's ever mentioned this event to me.

DS: Because it's not an academic thing. It's a poetry people thing. And that divide is there in poetry for sure, *for sure*. Based on what you're telling me about your work and your poetry, you should check it out. People are doing cool things.

CJ: Do you know of any groups or poetry events where these cool things happen?

DS: You're going to come to bill's birthday? We'll go and we'll do that. I wonder how that will be. I don't know what else is going on... there's cool presses, there's cool stuff that's happening. You just have to weave through the dudes. . . I'll invite you to Gap Riot stuff when it happens. We have good fun parties that are super inclusive.

CJ: Amazing, thank you! I'm also wondering how your experimental work challenges the linearity of vanguard work?

DS: By the nostalgia. By the things that don't need to mean anything. I think it means anti-innovation for innovation's sake. If it's weird and innovative because you wanted to do this thing, that's cool, that's perfect, that's what we all want. But if you're just trying to make something new and radical just for that—if your whole thing is to say, look at the amazing thing I can do with this

constraint, I'm innovating because I'm innovating, it's just like this stupid tautological thing and you just want yourself to be at the forefront of something. That's just not interesting to me. . .

[What I do] is a way of not trying to be the next big thing: not trying to innovate or set a trend or whatever, just taking this thing that's maybe not great for sales and throwing it into a poem. . . I think poetry's been doing that for a really long time. . . Poetry in general is absolutely a conducive space for the ego artist. And its not only dudes, but it's a dude thing, and it's deeply tied to this thing of legacy.

CJ: Absolutely. I'd like to ask one final question about a method connected to pushing against the ego artist. How does the fracturing of language lend to both its expansion and subversion?

DS: In fracturing, it's not just that you're making separate pieces. It's that there's now new space in between. And maybe it's because very recently I've become super obsessed with the gap in my teeth and it's become like a whole thing for me as a metaphor. We named our press after it, because Kate who works with me also has a gap in her tooth. I'm really interested in tiny little pauses and tiny little spaces. . . People are really uncomfortable with messy spaces between things. And my work is all about weird messy little spaces between things. That's the thing about the fracturing for me now—just letting things be open. Okay the thing is broken, great. But the more I think about the thing that's broken, the more I'm ultimately thinking about how it was as a whole—if it ever was that. So now my interest is all in the weird spaces in between. . .

I'm not interested in making poems that you can have a mastery over. but that doesn't mean I hate these things. In fact I do love these things that brings me to this place. where i want to be this middle ground for the person who's in their first day in a Joyce class saying, what the fuck I'm so stupid and there gonna figure it out. I'm never gonna get this. I want to be that feeling that time. Everyone has felt that. No one comes to Joyce like they've figured it out.

This lit boy mentality protests that you do have a mastery of this subject. You use the avant-garde as a way to prop yourself up to push boundaries because you have special access to those boundaries somehow. And you were the first genius person to think about tape recording your own voice. It takes a lot of feeling like you're the shit to get there. I like it but...



[Studying literature is] its like a stupid memory game. As if that's some kind of measurement of being interesting and thoughtful. Stein is a great example of that place I want to me. It doesn't matter if you remember [canonical works]—it's just these words in this order. . . There's something about Stein that is very much about access: a rose is a rose is a rose. Who doesn't have access to this. That is opened access, vs Elliot or whatever who is trying to show off. It doesn't mean its bad. It's just a different game for me. . .

You have to just keep the words and the whole thing of the sign standing between the person who wrote it down and the person who's reading it. And the the more you make that manifest, that this thing, this art thing, stands between us, the more you can meet somebody in the middle. [Some people] pretend that this thing is a transparent thing which I can reach out to you and you can kind of understand my feelings or myself. I hate when people say i really saw myself in this text. No you didn't. You saw yourself, and you're reading a text. Anything else you're adding. That's you're reading process, that's you making meaning. It's not the author encoding or decoding something of truth about self to you. You found that on your own. That's why I like Stein, that's why I like bissett, bpNichol. . .

As a writer you cant possibly envision the reader on the other side of that thing, and the more you do, the more you're kind of dictating the way that text gets received. This is why when i talk about these *Glosas* I'm writing to women in the avant-garde. I'm trying to control how they get perceived because. . . you can see the thing I'm telling you because you've been that person. If you don't know, you're like oh cute it's cool.