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**HOMOSEXUALITY IS A POEM: HOW GAY POETS REMODELED THE LYRIC,  
COMMUNITY AND THE IDEOLOGY OF SEX TO THEORIZE A GAY POETIC**

A Dissertation Presented

by

CHRISTOPHER HENNESSY

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

February 2015

Department of English

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Approved as to style and content by:

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Ruth Jennison, Chair

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Peter Gizzi, Member

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Henry Abelove, Member

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Jenny Spencer, Chair  
English Department

## **DEDICATION**

To my husband and my mother and father,  
for their patience and love

## **ABSTRACT**

**HOMOSEXUALITY IS A POEM: HOW GAY POETS REMODELED THE LYRIC,  
COMMUNITY AND THE IDEOLOGY OF SEX TO THEORIZE A GAY POETIC**

**FEBRUARY 2015**

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This dissertation approaches the work of three canonical post-war gay poets in an effort to construct a discourse on sexuality and the minoritized writer that argues the lyric functions as a historically contingent, politically invested, value-laden genre in which some subjectivities might be prohibited from or find their expression made to signify in ways that re-inscribe oppression. The first chapter theorizes the possibilities of a gay poetic and analyzes the gay poet's subjectivity as one obsessed with the ways in which he is marginalized due to expression. In the chapter on Frank O'Hara, the poet is shown to disfigure the lyric through the unliterary to allow it to speak for the perverse. In the chapter on Jack Spicer, the poet's concept of 'we alone' is shown to outmaneuver subjugating identificatory structures. The chapter on John Wieners shows how his queer failure frustrates the normative lyric's reception to produce the very marginalizing the gay writer must resist. The final chapter analyzes the poetry published in the years following the beginning of "gay liberation" (1969-1973) and suggests some poets relied on lyric expressivity in their work; others sought to fashion a poetics that married graphic

content with radical experimentation and thus produced a more politically and poetically complex liberationist text.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: HOMOSEXUALITY IS A POEM

“...it has become, in my opinion, imperative to achieve a shifted attitude... towards the thought and fact of sexuality, as an element in character, personality, the emotions, and a theme in literature. I’m not going to argue the question by itself; it does not stand by itself.” (384)

—Walt Whitman, “A Backwards Glance o’er Traveled Roads” from *Walt Whitman: Selected Poems 1855-1892*

“Homosexual and heterosexual desire and bonds, given their different cultural valuation, have entirely different available narratives, legality, forms of expression, as well as different available relations to abstraction, specification, self-definition, community, ritual, temporality, and spatiality. This is not to suggest that there are not overlaps but rather that any treatment of homosexual desire as simply another form of desire (read, heterosexual) will be fundamentally flawed, if not also in the service of a homophobic fantasy of a world without gay people in it.” (30)

—John Emil Vincent, *Queer Lyrics: Difficulty and Closure in American Poetry*

#### **Part 1: “It is the law of my own voice I shall investigate.”**

“So we are taking off our masks, are we, and keeping /our mouths shut? as if we'd been pierced by a glance!” begins a poem entitled “Homosexuality” by Frank O’Hara, unpublished in his lifetime. Because I want to explore here, and indeed throughout the chapters that comprise this dissertation, the deeply and complicatedly imbricated relationship(s) between poetry and homosexuality, it feels appropriate that I begin with a poem that does this just this through its title and through its focus on voice, self, and sex. I have cited the remaining lines of the poem in their entirety:

The song of an old cow is not more full of judgment  
than the vapors which escape one's soul when one is sick;

so I pull the shadows around me like a puff  
and crinkle my eyes as if at the most exquisite moment

of a very long opera, and then we are off!  
without reproach and without hope that our delicate feet

will touch the earth again, let alone "very soon."  
It is the law of my own voice I shall investigate.

I start like ice, my finger to my ear, my ear  
to my heart, that proud cur at the garbage can

in the rain. It's wonderful to admire oneself  
with complete candor, tallying up the merits of each

of the latrines. 14th Street is drunken and credulous,  
53 rd tries to tremble but is too at rest. The good

love a park and the inept a railway station,  
and there are the divine ones who drag themselves up

and down the lengthening shadow of an Abyssinian head  
in the dust, trailing their long elegant heels of hot air

crying to confuse the brave "It's a summer day,  
and I want to be wanted more than anything else in the world."

O'Hara's poem is about desire and sex, to be certain, but it is also about the speaker claiming an identity and it is about questions of the public and the private. The poem begins with a sly rhetorical question meant to mischievously implicate the reader as well as call into question the speaker's own willingness to fully articulate, open-mouthed, the poem's title: "So we are taking off our masks, are we, and keeping / our mouths shut?" (The mask may be seen as a precursor to term "the closet," which historians suggest came later<sup>1</sup>, though work still continues to be done around this issue.) The vocal declaration is, for the moment, kept in check by a threat of being seen, a threat (sexualized, penetrative) of violence, if the speaker's outward appearance is recognized as somehow signaling their homosexuality. Just

as an assertion of self is being made, uttered in the poem (“It is the law of my own voice I shall investigate”), the poem also not so subtly hints that the speaker's sexual identity includes performing *unlawful* acts (sex in public places like railway stops and parks) and at any moment can be ‘investigated’ by the authorities. The speaker is daring in how he relishes a transgressive image of sexual self: “It's wonderful to admire oneself with complete candor, tallying up the merits of each / of the latrines.” The ‘latrines’ are New York's public restrooms, where gay men trick for sex and which were also under surveillance because of this. So, while at first the title seems to be an act of agency, of self-definition, the poem invites us to wonder about the consequence of such a public admission.

The speaker's declaration of self moves from the rhetorical to the sentimental: “I want to be wanted more than anything else in the world.” As I’ve written elsewhere<sup>2</sup>, these final lines of the poem are about one of the things poetry can mine most richly, the *site* of desire. They remind us that for O’Hara desire can be more urgent than anything else in the universe. But what is more crucial to note is that this ‘cry’ emanates from the “divine ones” (other gay men). But something even more interesting is happening. The desire of desire, a want to be wanted—even its semantic and syntactic mirroring calls up same-sex desire. In this way, the poem is not only about desire but also about sexuality as its own language; it enacts how a specifically gay desire shapes poetic perception and the linguistic embrace. Thus, a poem need not be about desire to reflect how sexual identity shapes expression—how it allows us so effectively to critique the present, to see clearly, and to call for, a future of possibilities.

Centering her discussion on this poem on the line “It is the law of my own voice I shall investigate,” Hazel Smith focuses on how the speaker must find another form of speech for himself, different from “that enforced by hegemonic heterosexuality” (144). But the voice here is not simply an individual’s speech but metonymically represents the lyric voice. Smith’s focus, though based on the right idea, is in other words too narrow. But she is right about the need to find another way to represent self and sexuality, a way that does not veil itself in difficulty, nor assume a lyric expression is a ‘law’-less territory in which a homosexual subjectivity will function the same as a heterosexual one. O’Hara boldly replaces those ‘laws’ as he experienced them at the time—public norms of self-reflection, values of literariness, modes of address that fix identity— with an as-yet-undefined (i.e. requires investigating) “voice” of the poet, a lyric self-in-creation caught between revealing sexuality and self-silencing predicated on the threat of social violence. The ‘other form’ the poem seeks is not simply a voice, but in fact it represents O’Hara’s contention that the homosexual is in a unique (divine?), if perhaps troubling, position. He understands he must make for himself a new mode of writing, or lyric voice, and more importantly, he must forge a new *relationship* between poetry and the homosexual, the minoritized writer. He must reject or radically re-imagine the laws (including the lyric’s ‘rules’) he has been given. These laws, what I’m using to refer loosely to New Critical theories of the lyric in O’Hara’s case, cause him to bristle at their normalizing confines, their valorizing of the private and the fearless exhibition of the public.

The need to explore the relationship between poetry and homosexuality was

also felt by Berkeley renaissance poet Jack Spicer and Boston poet John Wieners, the other two poets I study in the following chapters. In fact, Spicer also wrote a poem called "Homosexuality" and Wieners wrote a poem entitled "Queer." (Spicer's poem is also discussed in chapter three.) Because both are brief, they are included in their entirety below, so that I might add them to our discussion here. Spicer writes:

Roses that wear roses  
Enjoy mirrors.  
Roses that wear roses must enjoy  
The flowers they are worn by.  
Roses that wear roses are dying  
With a mirror behind them.  
None of us are younger but the roses  
Are dying.  
Men and women have weddings and funerals  
Are conceived and destroyed in a formal  
Procession.  
Roses die upon a bed of roses  
With mirrors weeping at them.

Wieners writes:

Do I have to accept his  
repetition of rival thrust  
use of assholes and bitches  
to gain entry of a youth's kiss?  
  
run by alcoholics and fakes  
to penetrate each night  
with the tenderness and pride  
from ambition's sneer.

Both poems are dark and cynical, much more so than O'Hara's. Though more encased in interpretive difficulty than O'Hara's, these poems are fairly explicit in their critiques, a dissatisfaction with the available identity paradigms (Spicer) or with discourses on sexuality (Wieners). The violence hinted at in O'Hara ("pierced," etc.) is here in Spicer's and Wieners' poems, too. As I say in chapter three, Spicer's

poem seems to take on identity formation as something "conceived and destroyed in a formal /Procession," and posits the homosexual as infinitely reflecting image (in this case, a rose) that will perish on a pyre of bodies of a ghettoized sameness. Going deeper into the poem, we see that the formal procession of which he speaks is connected to the most traditional sense of heteronormativity: "Men and women have weddings and funerals." The heterosexual is put in opposition to the poem's title—but not as a way to define homosexuality's nature or actions or as a category of sexual identity, but to mock the 'formal procession' of what Spicer sees as an identity that is unproductive (funereal even?) of anything more than its own reiterative dominance.

Wieners' poem mixes graphic eroticism, violence and penetration to make the 'queer' individual question the very terms of his sexual desire. Must he "accept" a kind of violence to find love, the "entry of a youth's kiss"? To what extent is the queer relegated to the following: repetitions and competition (rival thrusts); these 'uses' of body and the misogynistic impulse to feminize and denigrate (assholes and bitches); a sexual world tainted by double lives and self-medicated despair (all of stanza two)? None of the options are encouraging, and yet the poem is not without hope. That the poem openly (publicly) accepts the epithet of "queer" (a term that at the time a homosexual would loathe to be called) reminds the reader of a societal homophobia that lies behind the tainted self-image of the poem. What then does "queer" mean or refer to if the society that uses such an identifier can be blamed for that which it despises?

Any number of alternative readings could be made, but what seems to reside at of the center of these three poems is the notion that self-naming and identity formation requires upheaval—requires the poem, a new poem. O’Hara, Wieners and Spicer were resisting the bounds of existing discourses, and in fact each of these poems at some level suggests the definition of homosexuality is *not* usefully constructed by its relation to heterosexuality, that an attempt to do so would buttress the very idea of heteronormativity. In each of the above examples the use of the title as a naming device to problematize the poet’s own identity is surely demonstrative, instructive. Each poet in his own way is simultaneously resisting and embracing sexual identification, simultaneously celebrating and critiquing categorization. For the gay subject, it is two very different actions to be named "homosexual" by society or to create or find one's own sense of that identity (usually named as different, gay, queer, etc.); thus, titling a poem in this way gives the poet the power of self-definition in the face of a culture that would take that away from him at the very moment he publicly acknowledges his sexuality. And what better way to privilege an identity that is feared and criminalized than by using it as the title of a poem, seeing in “homosexuality” or “queer” not a fixed category but able to produce complex and even contradictory meanings, letting it play out those meanings in such powerfully expansive structures such as figure, image, and symbol, and gifting the word a deep relationship to the music of language and architecture and argument of the lyric utterance. In a way, “homosexuality,” simply by commanding the poem into existence (as the title), becomes its own

poem, an idea I hope is at the heart of the chapters that follows and that I will endeavor to clarify—and complicate.

These remaining chapters have three general, interconnected aims. I do not place these aims in a hierarchy, nor suggest each aim carries an equal, lateral weight or importance. One poet may require more work for one aim to materialize; another poet may require a great deal of focus on an entirely different aim. As I discuss the first of these three aims, I want to stress that I am unapologetic in my focus on sexuality as not simply a theme in literature, but, using Walt Whitman's terminology, a question that "does not stand by itself," as the epigraph above notes. In other words, I, along with Whitman, reject the dominant idea that these poets' sexuality could be somehow compartmentalized or even made solely a biographical concern or worse yet a footnote. (I discuss this at length in my chapter on O'Hara, as a response to Perloff's initial, later retracted, claim for the poet that this marginalizing approach was possible.) This allows me to assert homosexuality, as theorized in and represented by poetry, as meaning-intensive. This aim of making sexuality central instead of peripheral requires historicizing the poet's work but also includes discussing this poetry as not simply 'containing' poetry of a sexual candor but that is willing to consider what I call an eroto-poetics.

A second aim is, through the work of these poets, to make a case for that the postwar lyric as a form still influenced by the long shadow of The New Criticism but that can be better understood when we analyze how the minoritized poet uses it. This argument emphasizes the way in which a gay poet must negotiate (and resist, even transform) a Cold War society of privacy and consensus, fixed concepts of 'self',



and an interpretive regime that assumes knowability and literariness—all of which work against or are antithetical (in highly complicated ways) to the experience and social reality of the homosexual. To put it more simply, this third aim is show how the lyric functions differently for the gay poet; he must re-model it in order to theorize homosexuality and to dramatize that process by which he comes to understand both his individual and community identity, empirically, ontologically, and politically.

A final aim is, quite plainly, to begin new critical conversations about my individual subjects. These include taking seriously these eroto-poetics. Another, informed by recent interventions in lyric studies, envisions these poets as lyric theorists. Still another complicates how homosexuality was expressed at mid-century through their work.

Before moving on past this preface of sorts, I want to include a brief note about terminology and the all-male focus of my study. First, I've chosen to refer most often to the poets as homosexual, rather than gay, to avoid suggesting that they may have seen themselves inhabiting a solidified 'gay' identity, complete with associated customs, politics, speech, and behavior. Certainly their poems show us they were very much aware that they shared certain signifiers with other gay men (I think immediately of Frank O'Hara's poem "At the Old Place," written in 1955), and in fact in certain situations each may have embraced "gay" or used it without much anxiety. But we must acknowledge these men were writing at a time when concepts of sexual identity were undergoing important changes, expressed to some degree in terminology (see more on this in chapter five). An anecdote about O'Hara seems

appropriate to suggest the complicated relationship I'm trying to describe. Joe Leseur recounts an interview with John Button, in which Button says the poet would have thought gay liberation was "silly, but he would have *loved* the dances" (169). Jack Spicer's reflections on homosexuality in a speech he gave to The Mattachine Society (see chapter three) also make us wonder what he would have called himself: "[W]hen asked whether I am homosexual, I answered by asking 'When?'" (qtd. in Killian 27). Wieners lived into the gay liberation era, was active in gay groups and thus likely came to see himself as gay, but when this occurred we cannot be certain. In a sense, "homosexual" might also be problematic, but it seems safer because to use the term "gay" assumes knowledge we don't have access to.

This being said, though I will focus on gay male identity I will do so *not* with in mind a stable, monolithic identity, but rather as a shifting, discursive concept whose users are aware of its definitional uncertainty *as* a modern category, "the result of this long historical process of accumulation, accretion and overlay" that David Halperin theorizes in *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (106).

While homosexuality can of course also refer to lesbians, I use it here as a way to talk about homosexual men. This use is not ideal, and I in no way mean to marginalize lesbians through the use of homosexual in this way; however, terminology, ironically, often leaves us in these uncomfortable spaces of imprecision. It seems to me my only other recourse is to use "homosexual men" or "male homosexuality," but since my focus was male-centered this seemed highly unproductive and awkward.

Lastly, I should note that my focus on gay men is personal and not meant to exclude women for some political purpose. Because of my own subjective interests, I wanted to focus on certain ideas of sex and sexuality and certain sexual spaces as they were experienced and expressed by gay men of a particular era. These included promiscuity, anonymous sex, the public in private, perversion, anal sex, the 'blow job' (as a male-male oral sex practice), and other practices. While these are not solely within the field of male homosexuality, they are more precisely contained within that field. What's more, the male homosexual was a more visible 'threat' to society in Cold War America (due to complex gender politics), and this too opened up issues of privacy and identity I wanted to pursue. Linda Garber's excellent all-women focus in *Identity Poetics* makes similar arguments about what can be gained by such a focus and should be consulted as comparison, though admittedly her analysis is more thorough than my own.

## **Part 2: Theorizing a gay poetic**

One of the goals of this introductory chapter is to accomplish the following: to make clear this dissertation's through lines, note what ideas recur as central tenets and to illustrate how they accrue meaning; to think more generally about lyric expression; to draw connections between the poets (how they negotiate sexual identity and the expression of gay desire in their re-modeling of the lyric); and to think about the worth of a term like 'gay poetics' and the idea of a paradigmatic gay poet. These goals will coalesce into a discourse on sexuality and the minoritized writer that argues the lyric functions as a historically contingent, politically

invested, value-laden genre in which some subjectivities might be prohibited from or find their expression made to signify in ways that re-inscribe oppression.

First, however, I want to suggest that the poets I study (O'Hara, Spicer and Wieners), are not usually seen as linked by their sexuality and the circumstances surrounding sexual identity and community. Consider the ways in which these poets are similar, what these poets have in common: They were all important members of communities formed by shared sexuality and poetry; they all write openly about homosexuality prior to Stonewall (their contemporaries that did so are, for the most part, not widely considered to be as significant, with the exception of Allen Ginsberg and Robert Duncan); they all write about their poetics and have poems that are meta-textually productive of a poetics; despite or because of their communities, they all write about either belonging or feeling isolated, connecting these feelings to their sexuality, and discussing in prose this connection and its place in their work; they were all white, middle-class men; and they were writing in the age of popular movements like the Beats and confessionalism but are not or should not be considered among those groups. It is this nexus of commonalities—bounded by the concepts of audience/publics/ community—that positions these poets as perfectly suited to make an intervention into the fields of post-war gay poetry, the intersection of poetics and sexuality, and lyric studies.

Even biographically these three poets shared linked experiences, relationships and locales. Of course O'Hara got to know Wieners when O'Hara worked at Boston's Poet's Theater in 1956; Wieners visited O'Hara in New York, and seemed to make a further impression on the New York poet. In 1955, Spicer left the Bay area and

briefly visited New York City, met O'Hara and Ashbery and generally hated his time there.<sup>3</sup> (He famously calls John Ashbery's *Some Trees* "Thumb Twees," in what seems to be internalized homophobia, or at least that's what has been argued.) Spicer then went on to live in Boston and work at the Boston Public Library for a short time, spending time with Wieners, and pining for home. Wieners also traveled to San Francisco, where he reconnected with Spicer in 1958 and wrote his breakout book *The Hotel Wentley Poems*. These three poets' interactions also found their way into their poems. Wieners wrote about O'Hara ("Chop House Memories"), and O'Hara wrote about Wieners ("To John Wieners" and "A Young Poet"). Spicer also wrote about Wieners (part I of "Golem"). Wieners mentions Spicer in "With Meaning." The poets also share a complicated relationship to the most public of gay poets at the time, Allen Ginsberg.<sup>4</sup> Spicer and Wieners use the name and image and notoriety of Ginsberg in important poems to create an important distance between their work and his. (This is briefly explored below in a section about the Beats' concept of the self.) O'Hara had a more friendly relationship with Ginsberg and also mentions him by name in poems.<sup>5</sup>

There are also surprising examples of critical comparison. Marjorie Perloff writes that "one can see many similarities between Wieners and O'Hara. Both loved to parody established genres; both write bittersweet lyrics, at once formal and colloquial, about homosexual love; both regarded all Movements and Manifestos with some suspicion" (15). It is no coincidence that these same issues are the bedrock of my argument—resisting the homogenizing effects of communities or

coteries, complicating the lyric expression of homosexuality, and troubling generic values.

Perhaps where this all leads is most telling. What did each of these poets share in terms of their work? They violently resisted the lyric tradition in different ways. They refused what O'Hara calls, in an early journal entry, the "impulse, the, at times, compulsion, toward normalcy...when its fulfillment is known to be unsatisfactory, and when the level of endeavor is, as it is by definition, inferior to that possible through idiosyncratic behavior" (*Early Writing* 101). None of their work is easily categorized, and even among the groups they were a part of, often the center of, they struggled with their place. Wieners' work is often connected to the Beats, but there are glaring differences, as I discuss in chapter four. O'Hara is a "New York School" poet but one of the first things critics always point to is how different he was from Ashbery, Koch, and Guest, and the others. Spicer's work was celebrated by fellow Berkeley poets Duncan and Blaser, but he, too, had a project that was much different from his fellows. (And their falling out is infamous.) But perhaps this could be said about many of the poets of Donald Allen's *New American Poetry*, of which all three were a part. Even so, it is this idea of 'not fitting in', and how I see this idea at work in their relationship to the lyric, that pushes me to acknowledge what I see as a specifically gay counterpoetics, something that develops more clearly from chapter to chapter. Their poetry resists its time, its milieu, the assumptions of its school, and it acknowledges the limitations of the lyric and seeks to redress that issue. These factors, each discussed at length in the pages that follow, allow us to consider how their homosexuality positioned these poets to see in stark relief what

they could *not* do, how they were different, and to transform difference into opposition. I want to stress, however, that this opposition was more than a mere “negative mirror<sup>6</sup>” approach. Their opposition is in response to a homophobic society at large but more precisely from society’s ideas about homosexuality itself. It is not an act of essentializing their sexual identity to submit the idea that they saw their aesthetic uniqueness in conversation with their approach to their own homosexuality (resisting a unified, true ‘self’ and eventually resisting the liberating potential of groups based on privacy ethics). Spicer writes, “We are all alone and we do not need poetry to tell us how alone we are” (311), and as I say in chapter four, perhaps he’s right on some level. But as I argue in that chapter, poetry *can* tell us how to transform that ‘alone’-ness into a political alternative to identity as a basis for a liberation narrative. As Spicer writes, “The self is no longer real / It is not like loneliness / This big huge liveness. Sacrificing / All of the person with it” (1-4) [from poem “I” of *Fifteen False Propositions Against God*]. A specifically gay counterpoetics becomes a structural, as opposed to an essentialized, question I put under the hermeneutic microscope.

To be a homosexual poet is even more radical than simply being a homosexual, because he is so well positioned to warn against the expression of a fixed, totalized identity (how the lyric has so long been conceived), even as he relies on its ability to connect individuals through networks of desire, like poetry itself. What we discover as a sort of through line in the chapters that follow is that the poets begin to negotiate the unsettled questions of identity by making gay sexuality and desire meaning-intensive; to be more precise sex and desire signify in these

poems 'in an excess of meaning.'<sup>7</sup> We can see this in Wieners' use of "the verbal blowjob of a poem," Spicer's use of an avatar for homosexuality that never settles on one thing, or O'Hara's idea that "it's the property of the symbol to be sexual." Or consider O'Hara's image of three-way sex (both oral and anal) in "Personism" used to suggest the poem is produced as a site of undifferentiated pleasure. Thus, the homosexual poet uses the intersection of sex and textuality *not to define* homosexuality but to make it signify in metaphoric, multiple, symbolic ways. The point is to give sexuality a power by allowing it to range over various meanings without being forced (or disciplined, as society would have it) to consolidate, to settle, to solidify into a reified mass of acts and behaviors that can then be regulated.

The recurring use of oral sex (which is prominent in all three poets) is also telling, a form of sex intimately linked to the mouth, of course, and thus the voice. (Spicer's avatar at one point is a phallic eagle inserted into the throat, and similar symbolic meanings are at play for Wieners and O'Hara.) For these poets, oral sex is a form of transgressive sex that specifically enables them to explore complex issues of perversion's radical power of critique, non-reproductive sex as another form of resistance to heteronormative values, and the role that non-penetrative pleasure plays in unnerving sexual norms. Experience of non-reproductive sex linked to writing or reading, to take one kind of example, becomes a metaphor for a poetry invested in the moment (and not in establishing a fixed future) and in poetry of undirected pleasure. If sex is a kind of text, then, it is a palimpsest, or a riddle, or a metatext, but always a poem. The poem itself becomes the enabling metaphor for theorizing homosexuality. So when I say homosexuality is a poem as my work's title,



I don't mean "gayness" is poetic, or some other banal, trivializing, essentializing formulation. I mean to suggest that the experience of gay male desire, before it had emerged fully as a political and social identity, was a textual experience, a discursively identity rather than a set of acts. But perhaps more importantly it was a question, not an answer, the way in which the best of poems function.

This approach is in part what I mean when I suggest we think about a gay poetic. Maria Damon's work is highly suggestive of the possibility of such a project. In much of her work she carves out spaces to think about how her individual readings reflect larger concerns of the minoritized writer, in particular how the gay poet's sense of self and identity is unique and uniquely informs their use of the lyric. She supports my view that their individual relationships to their versions of gay identity are in fact part of what their poetry obsesses over. (I go further to say they take up this obsession in the form of a meta-text that links sex and writing/reading.) Damon writes that "the experience of displacement [as those who "inhabit the double consciousness of the minoritized, non-normative subject] is the subject matter of their work" (176). My studies suggest a gay poetic uses lyric conventions (often stretching or breaking their boundaries and properties) to theorize and comment upon the challenges and pleasures of writing from a homosexual subjectivity. When it is a meta-lyric, it is pointedly aware of its own generic limitations, behaviors and expectations and what those limitations mean for a minoritized poet. But it's important to note that this is not mere theorizing on the part of O'Hara, Spicer and Wieners and even some of the gay poets of the early seventies. When these poets link sexuality and textuality, I argue they are both

theorizing the gay poetic and employing its use. For example, in chapter four I will explain how Wieners' poetry, in its failures, shows how writing produced out of gay desire is marginalizing to the poet.

Another part of a gay poetics is reflected in the gay poets' rejection of the monologic or expressivist modes of the lyric and using instead a relational approach, often creating what Michael Davidson memorably calls an "erotic dialogue." Davidson called this a performative poetics—with "its status as an act and its self-referentiality"—that "does not stand in specular relation to reality but creates new relationships between author and reader and, ultimately, between reader and reader." He goes on to write:

the emphasis in a performative poetics is on the contingent nature of the poet's address and upon the *reader's active participation with that address*. A performative poetics stresses less the ontology of the speech act itself...and more the dialogue established between poet and audience. (*San Francisco* 22; emphasis mine).

Davidson suggests that this kind of poetics can lead to the reader "attending to [the poet's] testimony...[so that the reader] will be in a position to see things differently in the future...[and that readers] are not meant to receive the poem passively but to grapple with its implications in their own lives" (22). A gay poetic is an expression of the performative but that sees the erotic as an engine that drives the relational. So, for example, Spicer's rejection of the Beats' unitary speaker can be understood, as I argue, as rejecting a subjectivity that doesn't address the double-consciousness Damon refers to.

If we propose a gay poetic, should we not also attempt to sketch out a paradigmatic Cold War gay poet, not as an essentialized, abstract concept but as a

way of talking about how these poets saw themselves, how one might have imagined poetry as resistance and vision. His is a subjectivity obsessed with the ways in which it becomes marginalized due to expression. It is a subjective position mired in potentiality as the best one can hope for, a position of radical independence, or one that is ambivalent or even hostile to being positioned as the 'other'. It is a subjectivity entrenched in solitude, always desiring but rarely being satisfied, one hyper-aware of a kind of ontological inevitability of being 'always alone'<sup>8</sup>, one that understands (erotic) connection as always dangerous. Again and again these poets fashion their individual forms of resistance by building within their poems structures of un-reproductive desire, fomenting pleasure and promiscuity, rejecting expressivity and replacing it with performativity. They each take a different approach. O'Hara disfigures the lyric through the unliterary to allow it to speak for the perverse. Spicer's concept 'we alone' seeks to outmaneuver subjugating identificatory structures. Wieners' queer failure frustrates the normative lyric's reception to produce the very marginalizing the gay writer must resist. But each's vision cannot be detached from their sexual identities, nor can it be read outside the context of Cold War anxieties and obsessions (see more on this below).

Such a vision is another way of defining the gay poetic. It is invested in beauty but steeped in shame; stipulating to the idea that a knowable interior is pure fantasy but persisting in the belief that identity is a stable, essential experience of a self-becoming; that views the poem as a communal object that even so isolates its speaker; and that celebrates the idea of lyric voice as it erases any link between

voice and subjectivity, in favor of a ghostly lack that echoes the unfulfilled desire mandated by a homophobic society.

### **Part 3: Approaches and aims**

This introductory chapter also allows me briefly to discuss my critical approach (in particular how it is different from a traditional approach) and to make clear the critical aims of the dissertation. Taking a cue from Sedgwick's reparative reading strategy (as discussed by Heather Love) which I touch on in chapter four, I early on decided I wanted to resist a certain set of "academic protocols" that felt like they would 'get in the way' of the story I wanted to tell and more importantly leave me without the means to engage the poets on specific levels I felt compelled to explore. Specifically, the idea of "maintaining critical distance" and "refusing to be surprised" and assuming mastery (Love, "Truth and Consequences" 326) all seemed to foreclose some of the most central pursuits I felt were needed for me to complete the imagined text I desired.

To explain what I mean, it is necessary to discuss my own subjectivity as a gay poet-reader and how that informed my directives. I realized that I was so invested in understanding the role desire and difference plays out in how we use, resist or transform formal structures in poetry, that I had to acknowledge the ways in which my own desires, fantasies, fears and anxieties, pleasures, and my subjective position as a gay poet would affect the formal (epistemological, heuristic) structures of my analysis. To that end, I have sought to produce a study equal parts scholarship, analysis (including as applied to my close-readings), a kind of a poet's

heuristic, and lastly, the adoption of the role of a promiscuous erotic reader. The first two approaches, I hope, are self-explanatory but are also shown concretely later in my introduction. Obviously, however, these last two approaches require comment if this dissertation is to be understood as the kind of document I hope it serves as.

First, as a poet, and as gay poet myself, I wanted to approach the lyric not simply as a genre (even a contested one, even one debated, as it has of late, for its continued stability *as a genre*); I didn't want to study poems as simple receptacles of subjectivity and interiority. I didn't want to see form as apolitical. I understood from theorizing my own practice as a poet and through interviews with over twenty major gay poets, that in choosing to work within the lyric tradition, a gay writer was implicitly and explicitly forced to grapple with a specific relationship to self and voice and a certain set of values and ideologies. As I wrote I wanted to allow myself to wonder how *I* used the lyric in my own writing life. Was I wearing the lyric like drag, or anticly inhabiting the corpse of James Wright or Theodore Roethke (my first, straight, poet-loves)? Was the lyric more like a behavior (with different rules for different categories of people) than it was the performance of a voice? I was most eager to see how a poet could turn the lyric *I* away from mere representation or expressivity and instead use it to materialize a relational text in which the reader (or what I would come to understand as the reader-lover) would be implicated in the performance of the poem in profound ways. But I also wanted to initiate a larger conversation about the lyric's past, present and future. And my interest in making my study more capacious in its use for other poets also led to what I'm calling a

promiscuous and polymorphous eroticism (words that will come up many times as I address them to the poets' work). What I mean by this is an adoption (even if only a kind of generative pose) of a kind of analytic eye that was less about a kind of penetrative interpretation<sup>9</sup> and more of allowing the text to penetrate me. I don't mean to suggest a kind of passivity or singular erotic access point, but more of a all-over erogenous relationship between me and a poem equally invested in producing in me a shifting, unfixed pleasure. One could argue that this approach is embodied in the moment in O'Hara's "Personism" in which he places "the poem squarely between the poet and the person, Lucky Pierre style, and the poem is correspondingly gratified. The poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages," but noting that Lucky Pierre is a specifically gay slang meaning a particular kind of three-way sex, as I referenced earlier and what I describe more fully in chapter two.

Let me try to explain by giving an example of how imagining myself as this kind of erotic reader influenced my writing. When I sat down to being processing the effect the individual poets had on me—a group I began, without shame, without possessiveness, without allegiance, but lovingly to call 'my boys'—I began to realize I could not write about Spicer, for example, without imagining I was writing a letter to him, as he had the dead Lorca. I could not write about O'Hara without perverting the very academic etiquette that I was expected to follow, as he perverted the literariness of the poem. I could not write about John Wieners without being unabashed in the autobiographical, subjective investment I had in his work, just as he had tested the boundaries of shame, confession and the personal but never sequestering his poems in the arena of a disciplining privacy.<sup>10</sup> (If I could have done

so, I would have written my chapters as poems, or narratives of desire.) By imaging myself as metaphorically in bodily communication with the poets, I allow them to infiltrate my critical approach, and I have taken part in a kind of dissemination<sup>11</sup>.

Beyond my unique subjective lens, I also want to more specifically address the kind of critic I tried to be, or perhaps to be more frank, the kind of critic I became while writing these pages, becoming intimate with these poets. While I apply different critical and theoretical approaches to each individual chapter, I use this space to explain a more generalized foundation upon which I built my ideas and refined a queer hermeneutics.

There have been two main foundational strands of criticism for twentieth century gay poetry, strands that sometimes intertwine and feed on each other. The first, and the strand that seems to have risen to prominence, has been to seek out homosexual codes, coded language, or other linguistic or structural methods that the poet uses to speak about same-sex desire and identity in ways hidden. (I have simplified and generalized these to their basest argument.) These analyses often discuss how such poems connect to gay audiences in ways different than the mass public. For example, John Emil Vincent looks at “difficulty” in poets like Crane and Ashbery; Thomas E. Yingling looks at homosexuality as a set of codes in Crane’s work. The most relevant approaches that seek a praxis for this strain are Scott Terrell Herring (“Frank O’Hara’s Open Closet”), Tim Dean (“Hart Crane’s Poetics of Privacy”), and Christopher Nealon (*Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion before Stonewall*), as discussed in chapter four<sup>12</sup>. If one synthesizes a central point from these texts it is that the gay poet understands that the textuality of the lyric

itself, the meeting of public communication and ostensibly private expression, can bring the reader and poet into a public-privacy, allowing that reader to craft their own subjectivity within the safety of the interpretive act. It is a vision not too far removed from Crane and O'Hara's gay father figure, Walt Whitman, and his hope that the text would literally (and erotically) connect poet and reader as part of its project: "This is no book, / Who touches this, touches a man, / ... / It is I you hold, and who holds you, /I spring forth from the pages into your arms..." (355; sec. 20). I differ from this approach in that I don't seek code-breaking narratives but rather focus directly on theorizing a minoritized poet and an undisguised lyric of sex, sexuality or desire.

The other strain of criticism, which seems to have become less critically interesting because of queer theory's critique of identity studies, has been to trace a homosexual tradition (a gay poetry genealogy or family tree) back to Whitman. Robert K. Martin's work began this. Gregory Woods took up an almost primarily formal approach; David Bergman examined the gay tradition through psychoanalytic criticism. An aspect of this approach has been to look at the prevalence of poetry from gay poets that speaks to these genealogical attachments and to examine how gay poets might be crafting a unique tradition based on a sexual identity and why. These studies often discuss the history of gay identity formation from homosexual behavior to modern gay sensibility. Martin's, as an example, has been criticized (by Damon) for its assumption that the reader "must learn to read the text as if it concealed a truth more significant than that displayed on the text's surface" (145).



By no means do I want to suggest that these approaches are not useful. In fact, many (Martin and Yingling in particular) were pathbreaking and have become influential in what has followed them. Rather, my second imperative as a critic was to find a place within existing discourses where I found my work 'fit' or, instead, where it sought to intervene. The above foundational texts haven't traditionally sought to focus so tightly on critiquing the lyric as a genre, as my study does. When it groups gay poets (instead of focusing on a single poet), it is interested in a gay tradition (Martin, Woods or Bergman) but not precisely as a means to pursue the idea of the gay poetic as a form of political resistance as well as poetic re-visioning. This, on the other hand, is what I seek by taking up Maria Damon's work theorizing a gay lyric.

Damon's work, above all others, is the kind of criticism I emulate, one that marries historicized close readings with a theorized concept of a minoritized writer. She argues that "the subversive radical subjectivity of poetry has emerged with particular relevance for nondominant groups" (8). She is alert to the possibilities of the lyric as an archive not just of oppression but of resistance at a crucial historical moment when gay men and women were beginning to understand sexuality as a political question. Damon sees the lyric as a genre with the potential to mirror a consciousness aware of its marginalized status. With his unique "double valence of pre-Stonewall gay consciousness," the gay poet can serve as a kind of "liminal subject par excellence." He is "the meeting place of language and eroticism (since he utters words through his body), of otherworldly and this-worldly, of spirit and physical/material" (155). His double-consciousness is marked by:

alienation and unhappy expression of outsiderhood on the one hand, and on the other, tendencies toward affirmation, positive eroticism and the meaningful constitution of community. The poets thus bridge not only material and spiritual worlds, but two historical eras marked by different political climates and different attitudes toward homosexuality itself. (155).

Damon quite precisely is able to see how the lyric is imbricated and implicates the historical and social relations unique to post-war gay poets. She writes that in these poets “same-sex eroticism, a severely marginalized set of desires and experiences, interacts dynamically and problematically with the civic imperative toward community; [and what’s more] the necessarily centrifugal position of stigmatized sexual orientation and the nationalistic, centripetal urge to establish and carry public weight cohabit these poets’ consciousness (143).” She goes on to say the poets “differing treatment of similar themes mirrors the possibilities of gay consciousness from the 1940s through the 1960s, in a way that dramatizes both the tragic and exhilarating possibilities of life in a burgeoning culture that had tremendous vitality but as yet no political power or social visibility, and that shows the painful contradictions of occupying such an emergent position” (145). This conceptualization and historicizing of a Cold War gay consciousness sets the stage for my own readings of O’Hara, Spicer and Wieners poems that treat subcultural identification as a trap but also as potentially transformative.

I began as a bricoleur of criticisms, but once I discovered Damon, I felt like I’d discovered a framework within which I could build my own argument. Advancing to the work of a magpie, I went on to collect critical and theoretical bonding agents that would help me make sense of my readings. These included ideas from John Emil Vincent’s *Queer Lyrics* and Eric Keenaghan’s *Queering Cold War Poetry*. Vincent’s

work draws out the way in which the lyric can “challenge heteronormative meaning” and can “doggedly explore the epistemology, ontology, and phenomenology of nonheterosexuality” (xv).<sup>13</sup> Vincent’s work, for example, teaches me to see the lyric capacity for open meaning as correlating to the polymorphous perverse, and Damon teaches me to theorize and historicize such a connection as reflective of a gay consciousness.

In Keenaghan’s analysis, the lyric “improperly draws the seemingly unrelated object [i.e. the reader, which the lyric ‘others’] even closer and thus resignifies understandings of the ‘proper’ and the ‘private’ (26). Keenaghan also stresses the importance of the lyric paradox of joining private experience and public discourse. He writes, “In lyric, the irreconcilable contradictions of social structures speak through the authors’ voicing of their singular experiences” (26-7). Similar to Damon, he goes on to describe the particular context of privacy in Cold War America and even more specifically for marginal groups, like gay writers. He confronts the “ideological constructions of privacy” and argues the “[c]onfessional lyric supplied a paradoxically visible privacy for disenfranchised subjects, especially women, gays, and lesbians.” For Keenaghan, marginalized writers had even more to gain from exploring the paradox of personal disclosure through public means. He explains, “Deemed inappropriate and too revealing, poetic discourse draws attention to the fullness of citizens’ otherwise censored interior lives. (27). What he describes as a Cold War lyric often “draws our attention to how language mediates and redefines our ‘public’ lives by bringing it ever closer to our ‘private’ selves” (28). Keenaghan’s

work contextualizes Damon's minoritized writer in a more specific Cold War ethos of privacy.

#### **Part 4: Situating the time of textual production**

The postwar poets I investigate produced their major works in the years that roughly span the fifties and sixties. (For my final chapter, I bridge the sixties and the seventies, a transition that I discuss in that chapter.) Of course the dominant narrative I tried to contend with as I sought to historicize and contextualize my study was that of Cold War America. Because chapters two, three and four each focus on a single poet and their individual contribution to lyric revisioning, I have tried to tailor to those chapters precisely just what aspects of Cold War culture seemed most relevant and essential to understanding their poetics, their view and practice of sexuality and identity, and of course the argument I wish to make. This has meant certain ideas recur, are amplified, and become core concepts to a larger view of the era. For example, the Cold War ethos of privacy has profound bearing on not only the practice of homosexuality but the lyric, too. Though brief, since the chapters individually address this need, I want to bring together some of these socio-historical, cultural and political contexts in one space to give a more holistic picture of the time of textual production for the poets of this study.

Any dominant narrative of the poetry of the 1950s and 1960s must contend with a striking contradiction (one of, no doubt, many). The contradiction of which I'm speaking, though complex, can also be summed up in a single word: homosexuality. Politically, socially and even literarily, this was an era in which the

male homosexual was criminalized and pathologized at the same time his artistic production was valorized, and indeed came to represent American innovation in the arts and the country's desire for cultural supremacy<sup>14</sup>. It is within this complicated matrix that a scholar of gay culture finds him or herself.

When I think of the history of gay men in the mid-twentieth century, I personally think of Robert Duncan's 1944 essay "The Homosexual Artist in Society." I think of Auden's 'blowjob' poem passed among friends in the late forties. I think of James Baldwin's 1949 essay on homosexuality "The Preservation of Innocence." I think of the wild popularity of (bisexual) Paul Goodman and his 1951 essay "Advance-Guard Writing 1900-1950," and how Spicer and O'Hara both felt called by his idea of writing as a way to be 'intimate' with a group of friends<sup>15</sup>. I think of Duncan, Spicer and Robin Blaser at a reading at Berkeley also in the forties, Duncan reading these lines from "The Venice Poem": "Yet here seeks the heart solace. / Nature barely provides for it. / Men fuck men by audacity. / Yet here the heart bounds / as if only here, / here it might rest"<sup>16</sup>. Of course I think of Allen Ginsberg's saintly motorcyclists being fucked on that day in 1956 when he read *Howl*<sup>17</sup> for the first time. I think of O'Hara and Wieners, and the gay poets in New York (John Ashbery and James Schuyler) and Boston (Stephen Jonas and Charley Shively) that surrounded and supported them. I remember Donald M. Allen's *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960*, a veritable who's who of gay poets: Ashbery, Blaser, James Broughton, Duncan, Edward Field, Ginsberg, O'Hara, Peter Orlovsky, Schuyler, Spicer, Wieners, and Jonathan Williams. Then, and only then, do I think of the blowback Duncan received from John Crowe Ransom after Duncan's essay was published. Only

then do I think of the fact that *Howl* was tried as pornographic. After I first relish their expressions at a time when they were risking so much, then I remember the consequences, the lives of mental anguish and psychic (and sometimes physical) trauma. But I don't begin with the dark, the shadow life.

That's *my* story. The *dominant* narrative told about gay men during the fifties at least, however, is the narrative of the closeted homosexual who is helplessly steeped in regimes of privacy, whose behaviors and expressions are surveilled for any variation for heterosexual norms, and whose very desires make him a threat for a culture of consensus. This is the standard narrative of "the Dark Ages of gay male identity and politics" at a time that has "come to embody the disciplinary regime of the closet" (Corber 191). Historian of homosexual politics, culture and community, John D'Emilio describe this narrative like this: "A society hostile to homosexual *expression* shaped the contours of gay identity and gay subculture." It is a world in which the "fear of discovery kept the gay world invisible" and "erected barriers against self-awareness" (13). The evolution is from oppression by one's self to "sharing one's predicament" (22).

Though it certainly conveys one social reality of many gay men, and though there is worth in highlighting aspects of this story (as I also do in my individual chapters), it is a historical narrative told in much greater depth and complexity in other places, most prominently in D'Emilio and George Chauncey's work. For my purposes, I want to suggest that the poets who make up the history of this study may benefit from a different angle of context, an angle my chapters integrate as well. For a group of poets who saw the potential for resistance through the lyric, it strikes

me that a context of resistance can tell as much if not more about the era's character, its obsessions and anxieties, political, social and cultural. To that end, I want to contextualize Cold War America as also a time of possible (if not always visible, and not always viable) creative, personal, political (subversive) and *sexual* responses to the era's pressures and discourses.

Drawing on Robert Corber's *Homosexuality in Cold War America*, we can begin to think of how writers (in particular he examines James Baldwin, Gore Vidal and Tennessee Williams) responded to the culture that defined them as different, or worse, criminal. I want to respond to Corber's three case studies as a way to lay bare Cold War ideologies that will inform my arguments and the readings I use to support them. Specifically Corber's idea of an "oppositional consciousness" represents a shared interest between my study and his and that makes his work uniquely relevant as a form of context. (Could it be that Corber and I are writing studies that differ only in their focus on specific writers and genres?) Corber focuses on how writers at the time rejected easy ideas of 'subcultural forms of identity' for homosexuality. They were not interested in gaining access to the Cold War version of the American dream, not interested in assimilating to its ideal of a kind of 'melting pot' solidarity. They were keenly aware, says Corber, of not taking part in the maintenance of what they viewed as a fiction (5). Corber argues that "they understood that [sexuality and gender<sup>18</sup>] were crucial to understanding postwar structures of oppression" and that they "sought to broaden the definition of the political by extending it to issues of subjectivity that, according to the Cold War consensus, transcended politics" (3). But also they "tended to treat homosexuality

less as a category of identity resembling other categories of identity such as race and ethnicity than as a form of oppositional consciousness” and “stressed the construction of gay male subjectivity across multiple axes of difference, thereby promoting a model of political solidarity that was rooted in a collective rather than membership in a particular community” (4). As discussed in chapters two, three and four, a crucial aspect of the era was how a gay man negotiated the transition from individual to community, from feeling alone in his difference to part of a group of shared oppression. But as Spicer and O’Hara’s work illustrates in different ways, such an experience sought to fix identity in ways the poets resisted. As Corber discusses, a fixed idea of the homosexual as subcultural identity was one that played into the Cold War need for categories, hierarchies and binaries. The existence of alternatives being theorized reflect how, as homosexuality began to coalesce into a minoritarian identity, it came to see policing of sameness inherent in its politicizing of identity.

Corber also writes about a growing awareness that the gay man’s identity was unique in its fracturedness or what Maria Damon sees as double-consciousness (from W.E.B. Dubois, of course), as I’ve referenced earlier. This consciousness is the result of having to live a life in which the self is split into private and public expressions, a private, desiring self and the other in some senses a façade presented to the public. Though the poets I studied were able to voice their desires in public, they were keenly sensitive and no doubt experienced this split themselves. Corber argues that his subjects:

contested the dominant construction of homosexuality by foregrounding the construction of gay male subjectivity across variable axes of difference. They



sought to define a mode of resistance that exploited gay men's fractured relation to identity. For them, the multiplicity of gay male identity did not entail a loss of agency but enabled a mobility in solidarity. By contrast Williams sought to reverse gay men's fractured relation to identity. On the one hand, his representation of gay male experience seemed to deny that gay male subjectivity is necessarily decentered. Because gay men must survive in the interstices of the dominant culture, they do not enjoy the luxury of having unified and coherent selves but must construct their identities from an atomized historical experience. (114)

Each of the poets I study, in fact, uses the lyric to explore this relationship to self.

Their poetries are not grounded in a fixed, coherent speaker invested in an expressivist lyric. As I mentioned above, theirs is a performative lyric, or a lyric of erotic dialogue, or a lyric of queer failure (*disconnection*); all are ways in which these poets are inhabiting a subjectivity that cannot be expressed as a solitary speaker content in a unitary sense of self.

Of course, radical shifts were taking place in the arena of sexuality as a practice and in the discourses that swirled around it during these years. Alfred Kinsey's ground-shaking 1948 report on male sexuality set the stage, among other things, for a fraught relationship between the homosexual and the regulators of national identity and security. Kinsey's revelation that forty percent of men had engaged in homosexual activity and that homosexuals could not be categorized according to age, social level, or locale, profoundly unnerved American assumptions (Corber 10-11). Kinsey's work unintentionally fed a Cold War fear of the invisible homosexual that drove national security fears and would lead to the now infamous State Department firings of suspected homosexuals. Just three years after Kinsey, Donald Webster Cory wrote *The Homosexual in America*, which suggested gays should see themselves as equivalent to a minority like black or Jewish people

(Loughery 195). Once homosexuality was articulated as this kind of ever-present but invisible threat, seeking to gain its own agency, societal fears increased. In a diary entry I cite in my chapter on O'Hara, John Cheever writes that by 1959 "everybody in the United States was worried about homosexuality. They were worried about other things, too, but their other anxieties were published, discussed, and ventilated while their anxieties about homosexuality remained in the dark: remained unspoken. Is he? Was he? Did they? Am I?" (qtd. in Lehman 13). Those anxieties would find representation in the media in the early sixties, part of what historian John Loughery calls "the more eroticized tone of American life on the eve of the counterculture explosion" (256). Loughery and others cite an early sixties boom in major media stories like "Growth of Overt Homosexuality Provokes Wide Concern" in the *New York Times* and as well as 14-page spread in *LIFE* about a "a [gay] secret world" that was becoming more bold in its openness and in which "homosexuals [were seeking to] build a society of their own" (qtd. in Loughery 258). Such a cultural environment enforced privacy in order to keep that secret world invisible, making any expression of homosexuality a disclosure, a confession. O'Hara, Spicer and Wieners all reject confession as a mode; sexuality is not a secret to be revealed in their poems, and so their poetry, especially Wieners', doesn't assume expression as liberatory, for example. But as historians like Loughery point out, such media coverage told thousands of closeted gay men and women that there were many others like them, in a way opening up a line of communication for gay men and women. This complicates the idea that an expression of homosexuality required the use of shared suggestiveness, that saw homosexuality as an open

secret, much discussed, but kept in shadow. (As I point out above, this has traditionally been a kind of assumption overlaying criticism of gay poetry of the mid-century.)

Despite the stirrings that would eventually loosen both discourse and practice and lead to the sexual revolution of the sixties, homosexuality was an oppressed sexuality, without question. But a fuller story exists within this historical trauma. Corber reminds us of how sexuality was viewed at the time by leading thinkers including Herbert Marcuse, Wilhelm Reich, and Norman O. Brown. Like these men, Corber argues his subjects also saw “sexuality as an emancipatory force that had the potential to disrupt postwar relations of power. In their work, gay male identity is defined less by sexual preference than by resistance to the dominant political and social order...” (4). In each of my chapters (perhaps most profoundly in my final chapter), we can see how the poets I study conceptualize sexuality in this way. Much like an oppositional consciousness is a way to understand homosexual identity formation, it seems we must make room in our narrative for the potential of sexuality itself as not simply something that ‘was opposed’ but that could become its own oppositional force. (Marcuse becomes especially important for gay liberation theorists like Dennis Altman, who argued for a similar idea, as discussed in chapter five.)

Each of these issues of privacy, community (and consensus), identity, and sexuality reappear when related to the literary movements of the era, the waning power of The New Criticism, the appearance of confessionalism, the Beats, and the more general conversation about various avant-garde poetics. I summarize these

contexts in my chapter previews below, but I will briefly note some key ideas here. Imagine a literary milieu where values and ideologies swirled in competition and opposition. For the New Critics poetry was a knowable, fully public artifact in which it was not only possible but necessary to uncover an objective truth, without which it would be flawed. Confessionalism imported into its poems a complicated relationship to disclosure and privacy. The Beats promoted a “visionary, expressivist poetics” that saw the poem “as originating within the individual,” (Davidson, *San Francisco* 151), a centralized, totalizing idea of identity wholly rejected by many of the poets of Donald Allen’s *The New American Poetry*.

What I want to add to this matrix of values and assumptions is an idea I address elsewhere only in the notes section to my O’Hara chapter. Though it may be obvious, I want to differentiate my use of the narrative of “oppositional consciousness” (again, adopting Corber’s angle of view) from what Allen Golding in his essay on *The New American Poetry* called the negative mirror critique. Golding writes, “In this critique, a number of early reviewers accuse *The New American Poetry* of lacking any positive identity beyond its claims to oppositionality, or of perpetuating the academicism it claims to re-sist.” He goes on to cite several instances of this criticism. He then adds:

In the ‘negative mirror’ critique, all resistance becomes merely reactive, shaped by its opposite, and indeed the critique itself can function as a way of denying cultural resistance any seriousness. While this set of claims has some substance to it, to exercise this co-optive logic in the present risks understating the undeniable historical impact of *The New American Poetry*; underplaying the genuine differences between the traditions upon which Allen and Hall, Pack, and Simpson drew; and over-looking the kinds of internal difference that I have laid out here. To trace those differences and to unpack the editorial process behind Allen’s anthology should lead us to reshape and complicate the critical story that we tell about *The New*

*American Poetry* and the literary historical moment it catalyzes. (206-7)

I cite this at length because it's necessary to remember that at least part (and I would argue a large part) of the resistance and opposition I want to track and explore must be linked to a subject trying to understand his homosexuality. That even in literary spheres there was a move to 'deny cultural resistance any seriousness' by divorcing it from context should be a chilling reminder of what these poets faced. I speak more about this in my chapter on O'Hara.

Perhaps one of the most important comments I want to cite is also the simplest, and I'll let Maria Damon have the final word for this section. She writes that "these poets, these gay citizens were participants in a revolution on the cusp of political actualization" ("Ghost" 151). The revolution was political and personal—and poetic.

### **Part 5: Chapter summaries**

In concluding this introductory chapter I want to offer ample summary of my four remaining chapters as a further opportunity to make connections between chapters and to better prepare the reader to utilize the close-readings that close each chapter.

The three biographical stories with which I begin my chapter on Frank O'Hara intertwine to introduce a more central thesis: that O'Hara as a canonized figure, a representation, a man, a poet, a homosexual, sought to radicalize rather than reject the lyric in order to destabilize certain ideas valorized by the form. This calls into question those values and allows his experimental poetics to dramatize

and theorize homosexuality itself as a rebuke of fixed meanings. While O'Hara's poetry is often described in terms like oppositional, nonconformist, anti-literary and avant-garde, those same critics who use these terms often don't sufficiently pursue how what begin as formal choices become responses and critiques in an O'Hara poem. Many also don't consider how that oppositionality might be tied to his sexuality and how it marginalizes the homosexual. Thus, also understudied is O'Hara's embrace of the margin as a nonnormative space more productive than outright exile. To put it another way, some critics mistake sexuality as productive of subject matter only, while I argue O'Hara himself encourages us to link sexuality and textuality as inextricably linked in how they function *formally*. We cannot help but see, in the very specific ways in which he deploys a radical formal difference, a more engaged interplay of poetics and sexuality.

In this chapter I seek to define O'Hara's gay poetic (a poetic I more specifically define as a poetics of the orgasm) as one based on the 'perverse dynamic.' As I show it at work in my close-readings, his poems pervert normative lyric values to both critique those values and as a way to dramatize the effect that the 'closet' has on expression, on poetry. O'Hara's poetry is not a poetry of liberation; however. That would seem difficult, at least, for the time. In lieu of revolution, O'Hara's radicalization of form is expressed as: illegibility, undecidability, resistance to closure, a refusal of an ideal of universality, and it revels, as I've said, in marginality.

In order to contextualize his oppositionality as something more than a simply idiosyncratic and aesthetic preference (or the 'negative mirror' theory proposed by

Alan Golding), in this chapter I discuss recent scholarship from O'Hara critics including Andrew Epstein (*Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry*), Hazel Smith (*Hyperscapes in the Poetry of Frank O'Hara: Difference/Homosexuality/ Topography*), and Lyttle Shaw (*Frank O'Hara: The Poetics of Coterie*), and others. These critics allow me to explore his fraught relationship to the avant-grade or to his coterie as one in which he bristled against its strictures (Epstein, Shaw) and his celebration of the margin (Smith). Turning to David R. Jarraway (*Going the Distance: Dissident Subjectivity in Modernist American Literature*) and Jonathan Dollimore (*Sexual Dissidence*), I add to this matrix the ideas of formal perversion as a critique.

Finally able to begin constructing the precise contours of O'Hara's poetics, I replace the standard critical use of "Personism" (as a core idea of relationality) with a focus on the "Lucky Pierre" reference, a sexual metaphor for a threesome. Supported by Scott Herring and Gregory Bredbeck's work, I metaphorize the 'cruise' (abstracted, impersonal desire) and sex (material intercourse), to re-see the moment as positing a gay poetic. Through the poet-reader-poem triad, O'Hara proposes that the poem is not a fixed, knowable emanation of subjectivity that can be eventually mastered in its meanings. Far from such a one-dimensional artifact, the poem must be viewed as an undifferentiated pleasure embodied *specifically* in the gay male lover, or in other words an abstract site of pleasure, not localized in any single reading practice nor really even locatable in a subjective expression.

There is only limited value is just asserting a poetics, however. O'Hara's corpus contains provocative examples of poems that exhibit the stakes of writing as

a gay man. We can read his poem “Those Who Are Dreaming, A Play about St. Paul” as a closet drama (pun intended), exposing the effects of the closet on expression. Denying the gay poet the ability to present experience publicly, the poem argues he will be left to *represent* privately, which the poem critiques as a worship of abstraction premised on a fear of exposure. Abstraction becomes a kind of violence in and of itself that poisons expression.

Three other poems can be seen as marshaling a defense against such an outcome. These are “Mayakovsky,” “You are Gorgeous and I’m Coming,” and “Poem “(Twin spheres full of fur and noise).” The latter two poems are among O’Hara’s most explicitly erotic poems. The first of these poems is read as theorizing a paradigmatic gay poet. O’Hara constructs the gay poet as Narcissus, rehabilitating the figure to access a generative undecidability. The speaker cries out:

Words! be  
sick as I am sick, swoon,  
roll back your eyes, a pool,  
  
and I’ll stare down  
at my wounded beauty  
which at best is only a talent  
for poetry. (15-21)

This version of the gay lyric breaks the strangling control over meaning that The New Critics sought, just as Narcissus breaks the surface of his reflection. The poem both argues and shows the way in which the gay poet uses desire to advance a poetics of “wounded beauty.” It does this through an approach to interpretation that values ‘soaring’ and ‘leaping into an unknown and disfigured (wounded) lyric surface.



The final thrust of my chapter on O'Hara moves from theorizing the gay lyric to showing how the poet enacts such an idea, in the process directly refuting the closeted writing that poisons "Those Who Are Dreaming." In "You Are Gorgeous and I'm Coming" O'Hara's use of the acrostic to embed in the poem the name of his lover, Vincent Warren, positions the reader between the poles of revelation and secrecy in a poem whose very title is about sexual release. Ironically, though, O'Hara argues that neither embracing self-exposure nor the closet will deter society from trying to define—to make legible—the homosexual. The poem becomes the very space in which homosexuals found themselves in during this time, the space he laments in "Those Who Are Dreaming." Gay men can find sexual release in a constructed privacy (here represented by the construction of a hidden name), and yet the poem's searing critique is that they cannot know each other, possessing only the "obscurity of emotion which is simply and very definite / even lasting" (my emphasis 4-5) that comes during climax in "You Are Gorgeous and I'm Coming." The orgasm becomes an always already moment of loss for the homosexual.

"Poem (Twin spheres...)" is what I call an explicitly gay paean to oral sex. O'Hara reverses and warps how time unfolds in the poem (the erection comes after the orgasm, a seed comes after a tendril.) The poem also uses both graphic references and a ludic play with language to unsettle the reader's experience of the orgasm. In so doing, the poem produces a lyric intensity that is linguistically and temporally *outside* of standard modes of perception. The poem's critique is embodied, yet again, in the orgasm as a metaphor for the experience of time, or more precisely a temporal paradox in "which heaven is it that we inhabit for so long

a time / it must be discovered soon and disappear” (14-15). He is arguing that the homosexual’s orgasm, as a transgressive realization of pleasure, cannot be represented through normative modes of expression, that it disrupts the very ‘reading’ practices that seek to fix it in time and signification. In this way, the poem valorizes flux, the shuttling and play of the gay lyric that relies on perverse reading practices. (I add a controversial coda to my reading of this poem in which I explicate, through an intertextual reference, how homosexuality cannot be contained in time, history, or within normative lyric structures, because it breaks with a heteronormative obsession with reproduction and literary greatness as both means to achieve immortality. )

These two explicitly sexual poems also subtly interlink textuality and sexuality. What’s more, these poems ask fundamental questions about the use of codes and shibboleths to find a privacy that in the end does not stop society from seeking knowledge (and control of) the homosexual. (The risk of the closet is also to deaden the poet’s abilities.) One such question would be, to disclose or to hide within a code? O’Hara finds a third way by making readerly pleasure the center in the undecidable. Through what I call a poetics of orgasm, O’Hara proposes this new and different relationship to meaning and the reading practices that produce it. It is not that there can be no meaning but that there is a felt resistance to any one meaning at any one moment. To value the undecidable is to give the homosexual a strategy of being in public that allows for both survival as well as pleasure.

Jack Spicer’s relationship to the lyric is perhaps less about embracing an oppositionality and perhaps more about using the poem to resist the “double bind”

of identity. His poems at the very least critique these identificatory 'traps' of sameness and consensus; sometimes, in his most complex poems, Spicer seems to be using the lyric to overcome the negative counter-effects (ghettoizing, disciplining, etc.) produced by claiming an identity in postwar America. Spicer constructs a theory of identity and a poetics by employing the seemingly paradoxical idea of "We, alone," the isolation felt by a member of a marginalized group. Daniel Katz (*The Poetry of Jack Spicer*) calls this the heart of Spicer's poetics, and my readings confirm this but complicate what Spicer means by 'we alone' and how it becomes a transformative idea for the gay poet. Spicer develops and practices a lyric that imagines itself 'an erotic dialogue' (to adapt Davidson's term), eschewing other forms of utterance that aren't able to create an intersubjective space of meaning-making. This chapter contextualizes Spicer's poetics by examining what recent critics such Katz and Andrew Epstein say about his membership in the Berkeley Renaissance, a group of mostly gay poets (including Robert Duncan and Robin Blaser). They show how his role in this group informed his poetics. Katz argues Spicer's "problem is not only the danger of suffocating narcissistic parochialism inherent in any subcultural identification, but that group identification in almost any form is seen by him as a threat to the individual in and of itself." He argues that Spicer's experience with the homophile group The Mattachine Society has left him "seriously in doubt as to whether gay cultural and political organization and activism were a means towards greater 'freedom,' or another element that would quash it." He adds:

What gives the politics the depth they have, however, is that in some moods Spicer's suspicion of identification, rather than remaining a defense

mechanism to protect an imperiled self, extends even to the identification with that very self as such, as concepts such as “dictation,” “the big lie of the personal” or, as we shall see, “nonsense” imply. Ultimately, for Spicer the individual is just as tyrannical a structure as the group, for one’s very individuality. (ch. 3)

Spicer finds himself in a complicated and seemingly paradoxical relationship to self, community and identity. But he understands his poetry must grapple with how to answer this question.

As I do in each of chapters two through four, next I focus on how the poet’s own work holds within it a way to define the gay poet. Spicer’s “Some Notes on Whitman for Allen Joyce” examines, critiques and in the end rejects Whitman’s epistemology of sexuality and the sexual body (at least as Spicer understood it). We can see this poem as Spicer’s argument that Whitman takes part in a fundamentally backward ontology of the body. Specifically, he genitalizes the abstract (language, nation) and neuters the physical body. By contrast, then, Spicer seems to make a case for a more poetical and political use for genitals and genital contact as a means to assert political power. This is an important early work for Spicer, allowing, as it does in my reading, to see him as politically invested in a gay subjectivity, but one that resists identificatory claims like Whitman’s that seem to privilege a way of knowing about identity that is politically naïve in Spicer’s view.

In order to bring a more critically informed view of Spicer’s critique of gay identity, gay subjectivity, and the ethnic model of gay community, I next draw on important early work by Spicer critic Maria Damon and more recent work by Daniel Katz (*The Poetry of Jack Spicer*, the first monograph that takes a sustained look at Spicer.) Damon’s readings show Spicer tries to understand both the bitterness and

pride the homosexual felt as a member of an emerging political group. Katz fleshes out the picture of Spicer's conflicted relationship to sexuality by examining and situating historically the tensions he experienced between self and group, much akin to Epstein's work on O'Hara. These critics position us to see Spicer as keenly aware of the homogenizing powers of subcultural affiliation and wary of the punishing effects of the dominant culture.

In a sense Spicer answers these concerns in poems that are a kind of poetic and political theorizing. More specifically, we can see at least two ways (through two poems) in which he posits the possibility of a 'way out' of the double bind, paradox, or trap of subcultural identification. In "The Unvert Manifesto," a strange, wide-ranging, often absurd piece, Spicer offers up an alternative to the hierarchies of inside/outside that identity requires. He further develops the concept of the 'gay poet' here; he is the 'great destabilizer' as he aestheticizes queer sex (non-reproductive, invested in pleasure) as an art form, one radical in its ability to subvert the naturalizing effects of identity categories.

The poet's "Three Marxists Essays," the second of these politically minded poems, may be a key work for Spicer studies. In it Spicer tries to escape identity's homogenizing and naturalizing effects. Further, his use of Marx and Christ and the intersection of sexuality and textuality come together in a vision of a 'we alone' homosexual identity that can be used as political resistance. Here is the most crucial moment from the poem:

Homosexuality is essentially being alone. Which is a fight against the capitalist bosses who do not want us to be alone. Alone we are dangerous.

Our dissatisfaction could ruin America. Our love could ruin the universe if we let it.

If we let our love flower into the true revolution we will be swamped with offers for beds.

Spicer recuperates homosexuality's marginalization as potentially transformative, re-making isolation as something shared by a group.

To make my case that Spicer sought to critique identity's double bind, I perform a reading of one of Spicer's more understudied poems, "The Poet to the Reader." This is a poem of direct address that nonetheless, in its explicit theorizing of the reader-writer relationship, deserves a place in the Spicer canon. In this poem, even more interestingly, Spicer sexualizes the reader-poet interaction *through* the lyric address, developing a social text (a social space) in which he privileges a kind of writing that rejects expressivist values. This social space is a homosexually defined space comprised of structures of non-reproductive desire, not subjugating identificatory structures. The poem argues that the solitude (or isolation)—upon which lyric production has traditionally been predicated—in fact mistakenly valorizes that private experience as self-protecting. Building off of Virginia Jackson's provocative work on the 'intersubjective' space of direct address in the lyric, I show how the poem rejects the personalized, privatized 'scene of writing,' and instead embraces (what Spicer advances as) the eroticized, public and dialogic 'scene of reading.' As I consolidate the poem's meaning, the intersubjective direct address and the social space it creates becomes one way in which the homosexual poet can mount a resistance to the social isolation forced upon him by society.

Much like Spicer's poetry, the poetry of John Wieners, the subject of my fourth

chapter, adapts the lyric to produce an eroticized reader-writer relationship. Instead of using that erotic dialogue to provide an alternative space in which to transform homosexual (and lyric) isolation, as Spicer does, Wieners' poems both critique lyric privacy and the lyric itself as functioning differently for the minoritized writer. Instead of seeing identity as a trap, Wieners sees privacy (abetted by the lyric) as a trap the minoritized writer must either escape or condemn. Specifically, Wieners invalidates the act of lyric reception by yoking the lyric to an idea of queer failure, erasing the possibility of real dialogue and in this way making the poem itself proof of its failure to speak for the gay poet. Wieners emphasizes the generic limitations of the lyric when faced with the Cold War imperative of the closet and the unique relationship to disclosure the homosexual writer must negotiate. The lyric, in Wieners' hands, becomes not a *description* of how privacy ethics disciplined homosexual desire and maintained the closet, but in fact it becomes a response to the closet. Wieners' subjectivity is obsessed with the ways in which it becomes marginalized due to the expression of gay desire.

To contextualize Wieners' contribution to lyric complexity, one must examine more closely how privacy (in the form of what would be called a closeted life) was not protective but disabling. Though it often was an issue of survival for gay men, historians and scholars suggest that the ethos of privacy early homophile groups adopted could be said to support the dominant ideology that makes gay sexuality only acceptable when it is invisible. Deborah Nelson (*Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America*) places this idea in conversation with the lyric as a form obsessed with privacy, individual sovereignty and autonomy. Nelson's work sets the stage for my

argument that the lyric may reflect societal ‘obsessions’ but that it is also uniquely able to be used by poets to comment on or even resist such an ethos. Eric Keenaghan’s recent book (*Queering Cold War Poetry*) offers one approach to the intersection of gay poetry and privacy. Keenaghan shows how a poetry like Robert Duncan’s can reject privacy as self-protective by instead privileging ideals of vulnerability and embodiment (experiencing the body in public). Keenaghan defines privacy as “the apparatus through which power is exercised over our most intimate experiences of ourselves” (22).

The gay poet of the fifties and sixties also found himself having to negotiate yet another nexus of public-private concerns. Citing Edward Brunner’s *Cold War Poetry*, I argue that the New Critical emphasis on public poetry and its consumption, and the pursuit of an objective truth the reader must ‘uncover’, placed the gay poet in a precarious position. If he creates a poem that resists accessibility, the poem might be deemed a failure, says Brunner. The gay poet also feared the poem might become the space in which his sexuality was ‘discovered’ and that he would need to disguise meaning (changing pronouns, employing obscurity) that could hide his secret but still speak to certain (homosexual) readers. In a completely different way, the confessional poetry movement presented its own problem for the gay poet. Nelson is again helpful, contextualizing confessionalism and privacy as having different cultural and poetic meanings. Paradoxically, Nelson implies, confessionalism only ‘perpetuates the illusion’ that there is such a thing as privacy. Wieners resists the idea of ‘confession’ and confessionalism because he understands how its relationship to privacy and disclosure would mean the homosexual’s desire would



be read as private only *because* homosexual. For Wieners this can be seen in poems of graphic gay sex that don't assume a tone of revelation, that don't seek to use the confession as liberatory. Wieners' awareness of audience, his poems that invoke their own production, and the pointed, purposeful connections they make between the personal and the poetic, these all suggest something more than seeing his graphic sexuality as confessional.

This chapter also builds on previous discussions, perhaps most prominently in my chapter on O'Hara, about the lyric *I* and its assumption of a unified self. Damon, a constant presence throughout my dissertation, applies her insight directly to Wieners, placing his work at a particularly important transitional moment. She writes, "One of the central tensions in the history of modern lyric poetry, the relationship between signifier and referent as allegorized by the lyric *I* [was especially 'profitable' to consider for those] on the cusp of what we now consider the postmodern: to, right before a generalized acceptance of performativity and multiplicity, take a final ambivalent and anguished stand in favor of a utopian and nostalgic model of unalienated unity" (160). We can then see Wieners' poetry as a struggle between understanding the clear fiction of a 'unambiguous single self' (proven a lie by those having a public persona different than their private, homosexual life) but nevertheless part of a mode traditionally reliant on the idea of a unifying voice. It is a particularly important example of how this split between different conceptions of self and voice made the lyric a kind of psychic minefield for the minoritized writer.

How can a gay poet respond? Tim Dean, Christopher Nealon, and Scott Terrell

Herring offer critical work that suggests, in line with my own interests, that gay poets understood they would have to find an alternative approach to the lyric, a way in which they could communicate simultaneously to gay readers as well as write a public poem. Examples are Dean's remodeled lyric of impersonality, Nealon's "poetic language of shared but occluded historical experience" (14), or Herring's visibly invisible. Each of these is a way in which the poet attempts to connect to gay readers and express gay desire through means of shared privacy. But, theorized in this way, the gay poet must still accept the public-private split. What if there is a way to not only remodel a lyric mode but to remodel the lyric address itself? This is the question I turn to.

Wieners' poems do take part in this re-modeling, but with an essential difference. As I write in chapter four, his poems *reject* the traditional paradigm of the lyric model by showing the genre as complicit in sustaining hegemony. Wieners accomplishes this by linking sex and text. In poems, especially those that are self-referential and that metaphorize writing as sex, Wieners pursues what I call queer failure, a term I adapt to the lyric from the work of Judith Jack Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz. Wieners' queer failure is intimately fixed within the theory of the lyric; it undoes the lyric address; it makes suspicious, fraught, contradictory, the assumption of relationality, in some cases actively interfering with reception. Wieners idea of lyric reception is not simply a case of a monologic approach. Rather, the lyric instantiates waiting, silence, repulsion and distance.

The key that unlocks Wieners' ideas of the lyric and the stakes for the gay poet lies in how he links poetry and homosexuality, eroticizing lyric relations. Here I

draw on Berlant and Warner's idea of counterpublics as "an indefinitely accessible world conscious of its subordinate relation" discoverable through alternative forms of intimacy (199). Wieners, in refusing the idea of shared suggestiveness (that Dean, Herring and Nealon see as the gay poet's answer to privacy), uses instead the idea of reading/being read as form of intimacy that could make possible a queer counterpublic for his poetry. This eroticized relationship—the very vocabulary of which denies codes, suggestiveness, etc.—re-scripts and queers the lyric as sexual, not merely textual. More precisely, Wieners uses anonymous public sex as a kind of analytic metaphor to posit the promiscuous, mobile, non-monogamous, non-totalizing *possibilities* of the lyric. This comes with indefinite, impersonal and non-reproductive lyric modes, disrupting various lyric assumptions and values and allowing Wieners to create what I call a dissident lyric.

To define a dissident lyric, I turn to close-readings of two poems. The first reading draws on Wieners' use of self-referentiality, the instability of signs, and a heightened sense of the difference between interior and exterior to produce a speaker who is intensely aware of his minoritized, marginalized presence *in the poem*, as well as in the world. In one of the most telling lines the speaker proclaims, "who knows these men refresh me // daily, in gay bars for twenty years, who have I found // that is not Confessional verse, it's obsessional" ("The Gay World Has Changed" 5-6). But it's his self-reflexivity that is perhaps central to my reading in that it allows Wieners to point directly to the ways in which 'this poem you are now reading' has not liberated its speaker and in fact has only served to further marginalize and alienate him (and no doubt a gay reader). In a not-so-subtle way,

for example, Wieners uses the poem's own structure to make this point, isolating the word "homosexual" in a line, placing the word as close to the right margin as possible without completely exiling it from the poem's world.

In my second reading, I turn more directly to the sex-text link to examine a poem that on the surface is all about public sex but that more pointedly is about what that links activates for the poet and the reader. Though there is much in this poem that connects to a diverse range of themes (e.g. privacy is not protective), the crux of the poem depends upon unfolding a line I've taken for chapter four's title. In this line the speaker describes the poem itself (again, 'the one you are reading') as aspiring to be "a verbal blowjob of a poem" but that has degraded in front of our eyes into a masturbatory "style." This sets up a comparison for Wieners, between what he comes to define as this failed poem (the minoritized poem) and an ideal poem he cannot write. The comparison is made through an erotic vocabulary that is essential to the poet's point. The ideal poem would transform reading into an intimate act (think Warner and Berlant's queer counterpublics); his poem, in its expression of a minoritized discourse, is read as having no relationship since it seeks only its own pleasure. To cap the idea of failure, Wieners suggests the poem in fact cannot pleasure the reader, an example of its own failure. Importantly, however, Wieners indicates he *knows what we cannot do*. He cannot overcome his self-awareness of being alienated from his own utterance. This is made clear at the poem's end when the speaker must take someone else's words and lovers (Ginsberg's in fact) to make sex possible. Wieners' success, ironically, is in using failure to show the cost of a lyric that embraces its isolation (waiting, silence,

repulsion, distance). He makes the minoritized writer's impossible position not just described but experienced by the reader.

My final chapter examines what happens when more and more gay men begin to turn to poetry to advance a political message of 'coming out' in the late sixties and early seventies. A clearer picture of what those poets accomplished and failed to accomplish comes into focus as I examine the catalyzing effect the imperative of visibility had on poets as they filled the pages of the gay liberation journals of the early seventies. They were poets who embraced a fantasy of an essential and natural expressivity of the lyric. They viewed sex as carrying its own political significance, empowering simply through its expression. Paradoxically and problematically, their poetry sometimes uses that visibility simply to reproduce scenes of repression. Others assume lyric expressivity in and of itself can produce political power. Still other poems use that openness, however, to answer the promise of gay liberation (seeing sex in new, revolutionary ways); they use the lyric to eschew mere expressivity, in ways not dissimilar to O'Hara, Spicer and Wieners. In fact, by comparing these earlier gay poetic (its complexity, its metatextuality, the power of its critique) to the gay liberation poets, I use my final chapter to define gay liberation poets and to diagnose why their poetry may have failed. As I characterize it, at this crucial moment the majority of poems written by gay men were simple representations of sex and desire. Only a few gay poets used the lyric in more radical ways to defamiliarize gay sex even more than it might already be. Their hope was to transform homosexuality into a force for change.

Poetry and politics in this time were very much linked, and as a reader looking back almost forty years one must admire and celebrate the defiance and creativity and joy with which these poets wrote. But the story behind these poems, behind this marriage of poetry and politics, is more complicated, even contradictory, than one might assume. If one tries to distance oneself from a nostalgic lens and replace it with a more objective one, the poems are often not as celebratory as the idea of 'liberation' suggests but instead reflect the very oppression and even the impulses toward silence and sanitizing the poets sought to escape. Poetry was seen at the time as part of a "Gay Cultural Renaissance," though in retrospect the poems are in great part less literary than they are rhetorical, or what some critics call 'overly politicized.' They use sex and sexuality to signify as transgressive, but their traditional forms or lack of formal complexity ('mere representation') made it difficult for individual poems to speak to the time's more radical politics, specifically concerning sex.

In order to clarify how this era's poetry has different relationships to politics, sex, audience, and the lyric form, I construct a provisional taxonomy for the poetry. The four categories are: activist, erotic, neo-Romantic, and radical faggotry. The activist uses sex or sexual identity and writes a poem meant for straight readers or to the new gay men who swarmed into the urban centers in search of a gay life. These poets sought to fly a political banner in their poems, and their message was enabled by sex. The erotic category was geared toward gay readers and either presented a pointed argument or was more pornographic in its goals. The neo-romantic, the most problematic, sought to write a poem that parroted forms and

structures of an overly simplified and traditional lyric—without the critical reflection that would uncover just how much that tradition might not function the same for the gay writer as it did the straight ones. Their poetry may be technically the most proficient, an interesting statement in and of itself. The radical faggotry category holds the most exciting poems, however. These poems see the lyric form, *not* simply visibility, as catalyzing of the radical power of sex. These poems are both transgressive in their use of open expressions of sex and in how they experiment with form.

To provide essential context, I turn to historians, gay liberation theorist Dennis Altman and retrospective accounts from publishers, editors and poets. The picture I hope to paint fills in key details necessary to understand how pivotal poetry was at this moment, what kinds of debates it produced, how ubiquitous it was, and how it was used as a political tool. I turn to Michael Bronski's (*A Queer History of the United States*) recent revision of Stonewall as *the* hinge moment, opening up a more relevant focus on the debate over the importance of sex and sexuality as theoretical concepts related to movement ideals. This is a debate taken up in earnest by the poets themselves. It is echoed in the differing approaches of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and Gay Activist Alliance (GAA), the GLF envisioning a larger critique of capitalism, jingoism, colonialism, human rights and more. Tying a specifically homosexual vantage point to their politics, the GLF argued the whole system had to be revamped. The GAA's approach was more in line with working within the system to secure civil rights; it did not necessarily see (or want to see) homosexuality as different.

The context of liberation theory, whose most articulate proponent was Dennis Altman, is central to the era's political quandary. Altman's work sought something closer to the GLF's project of radical overthrow of ideologies that denied the innate bisexuality of all people. His ideas were built upon theories that deplored the limitations imposed on people as well as ideas about sex that focused solely on genital sex. This was a politics that envisioned the human being as capable of polymorphous perversity, a practice that could more closely align the sex act with the idea of a more 'human' form of communication and interaction. If only these ideas could be successfully transferred from "gay" practice to the wider social sexual realm, then so would we be able to eradicate patriarchy, sexism, and homophobia and even end sexual violence, sexual limitation, and sexual shame.

The question becomes, for the poet, how could these tenets be articulated as poetry? If the poem celebrated sex, was it celebrating the right to be graphic, the right to insert homosexuality into the public sphere in graphic ways? Or was it celebrating a new revolutionary approach to seeing sex as having, for example, the ability to explode dehumanizing ways of approaching the body? As it might be obvious by now, the central point of this chapter suggests celebrating the right to public expression was politically insufficient.

The historical and theoretical context of the ideology of sex is only part of the puzzle, of course. Crucially, the poets were one of the most vocal groups that were exploring sex as an idea. In fact, "poetry was everywhere" (17), as gay poetry scholar Walter Holland puts it. The movement's literary and political publications were bursting at the seams with poets. The editors and publishers and even the



poets themselves reveal that one of the important questions at the time was whether or not these poems were merely in service of their politics. Other conversations suggest these men saw poetry as having a special power to create a kind of unadorned, clarity of expression, which, for a movement based on visible and articulate public expression, might explain poetry's centrality to the movement's cultural expression. This enables us to ask a central question at the heart of this chapter, "Is the poem of openness revelatory, radical and transformative because it hides nothing? Or because it hides nothing, is it in fact empty?"

For my primary texts, I use the four most popular anthologies spanning the years 1973 to 1983. The first of these, *The Male Muse*, is caught between openness and the act of aestheticizing (one might argue uncritically) the knowledge of the trauma of lives still being lived, trauma not stopped by openness. This comprises poems that are about toxicity, negativity, and what I call a dark openness. They legitimize the normative instead of rendering some unique vision of gay sex. One can even theorize that a normative formal approach even becomes a kind of apology for the use of graphic sexual content, or a balance against such content. The poems of this anthology also illuminate what I mentioned earlier, the debate over the role of sex that was a central political issue. One might even say the stakes of the revolution's direction, as it were, were being debated in poetry. Was anonymous sex a distraction from political empowerment or was it the way to access and demand such empowerment? What role did the gay poet play when the publications were awash with what seem to us now as uncomplicated, unsophisticated poems

tied to their sexual content and little else? The poems become an archive of this moment's struggle to understand itself. What I discover is that the more provocative poems are those more invested in lyric experimentation, in poems that defamiliarize gay sex in order to access its transformative, radical capabilities as political ideology. In other words, as I argue, "Rendering sex visible at its base is not a radical act [at this time], and a poet who doesn't seek to marry the transformative nature of gay male sex with some kind of poetic complexity is implicated in his own failure." Here I perform close readings of some experimental poems from John Giorno, Allen Ginsberg, and Charles Ortleb. Each of these examples illustrates the necessity of the lyric poet to engage with his form, for example, to make the reader feel the unnatural and artificial nature of the speaking subject. Such a position, such an effect, really, allows the poet to: use the form's self-reflexive qualities to argue that even the most graphic and transgressive sex can be rendered impotent in a poem (Giorno); to show that language builds and accrues meaning through repetition, making sex as an idea slip in and out of stable systems of meaning (Ginsberg); or to more generally use the male body and same-sex desire to destabilize what male eroticism *means* as a way to fashion a political critique of masculinity (Ortleb). Each of these poems could be said to use their formal experimentation to create a poetry *about* gay sex rather than poems more simplistically interested in rendering an erotic scene.

My conclusion to this chapter represents my effort to suggest a productive way forward, a way to use these poems and others as a base from which to more complexly theorize the intersection of poetry and liberation theory's concept of sex.

To this end, I suggest the poems be more sensitively examined for the idea that sex cannot have only political but also creative power. By this I mean to suggest something like Charley Shively's idea of 'cocksucking' as a "road to creation, to the modification of reality" (526) or James Broughton's blurring of sex and spiritual questing. To scaffold this idea, I turn to Patrick Moore's revision of sexuality as a radical tool in his recent book *Beyond Shame*. Moore returns to the sexual lives of liberation era gay men to suggest a new paradigm in which sex itself was being viewed as a creative act, one that I suggest is akin to the writing of a poem. Might we begin to develop a new poetics for the gay poets of the seventies based on this idea of the creative potential of something like "indiscriminate promiscuity" (again from Shively)? In reality this possible poetics may be closer to the practiced poetics of Wieners, Spicer and O'Hara than we first realized. It is a poetics in which the radical lies in the openness of meaning, in seeing gay sex and desire as being in excess of meaning. Or, as I write near the end of this chapter, "the best of these poems finds a radical gay sexuality not in the 'openness' of the graphic but in the 'openness of meaning' a lyric poem achieves through formal invention and experimentation."

My coda to this chapter, and in a sense to my dissertation as a whole, takes up Bruce Boone's 1979 essay on Frank O'Hara. But I use Boone's conclusion for what it says about gay men's internal political struggles and the imperative to write openly, and how this affected poetic expression in those years in which so much seemed possible. Boone's essay, as one of the only (the only?) pieces of writing to attempt a more theoretical approach to this era's poetry, becomes a fascinating archive in and of itself, having been written from the perspective of the era and not

in retrospect. Boone uses Basil Bernstein's "elaborated" vs. "restricted" codes of language practice to illuminate contradictory approaches to what he calls the post-assertive politics of the era, a time when "political practice has given language the option for openness." Boone's comparison is between the practices of the leaders of the community (elaborated) and members of the community (restricted). As I explore the ways in which these two modes are similar to the very approaches I mapped out in my taxonomy, the question of audience resurfaces, as I had promised it would. Does the poem speak 'to rather than from than the community'? Audience, to simplify my argument here, defines language practice and defines the poem's political and literary sensibility. Such a statement asks important questions. What is the gay poet's relationship to language and audience? Does the poem use openness as a means to assert political power over the community, as an expression of its leadership? Or does the poem see openness as a way to invoke community as a shared experience, eschewing masks and celebrating the clarity of expression as means for political agency? I suggest we can use this comparison of language practices to look backward as well, to see O'Hara, Spicer and Wieners as perhaps prescient, insightful critics that "sought openness before it was gifted and produced what we now deem highly 'successful' poems. I use "successful" here to mean: productive of poetry that resisted privacy; a poetry that was performative and not expressive; that celebrated perversion; sought to make the poem an intersubjective space or an erotic dialogue; and constructed a critique of lyric failures.

I end the coda, and my study here, by taking up Boone's ideas that a new poetics might have been emerging at the time, one that didn't fit into either language

code categories. I see this as instigation, a way to envision what I call in the chapter a “liberationist gay eros (as experienced as a radical creative act)” and how this can be grounds for a powerful poetic “that propels the poem beyond both abstract rhetoric as well as simple attempts at ‘liberated’ speech.” Drawing on the evidence of this last chapter, I suggest the graphic poem of sex may be just that form of expression, in the hands of poets who understood formal complexity as its own device, to speak both to and from the community, a poem that “may represent subjective desire as easily as it invokes communal political aspirations.” In this way, I hope to position the homosexual poet as one uniquely positioned to imagine his poem as, in Boone’s words, “an individual erotic reverie of language itself” (90). In understanding the creative power of desire to transform one’s relationship to language and form, the homosexual poet *makes of himself* the most beautiful, most complex of poems.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> There seems to be agreement that this term only came to use in the 1960s and that we must be careful to not retroactively assign meanings to it that might not be historically accurate. Michael Sherry says before ‘coming out’ indicated a public avowal of homosexuality it first referred to “our slang for coming from a majority and going to a minority,” that acknowledging one was entering into a ‘gay world’. Sherry’s discusses the term in his *Gay Artists in Modern American Culture: An Imagined Conspiracy* (103-5). See also Henry Abelove’s discussion of “reticence” in O’Hara’s poetry in *Deep Gossip* (85). George Chauncey’s point that we must use care when using it as an “analytic category” (6) is perhaps a general guideline to follow.

<sup>2</sup> I discuss the poem in my introduction to my book, *Our Deep Gossip: Conversations with Gay Writers on Poetry and Desire*.

<sup>3</sup> See *Poet Be Like God*, Kevin Killian and Lewis Ellingham’s biography of Spicer. For an excellent summary of this time, see Peter Gizzi and Killian’s excellent notes at the end of *My Vocabulary Did This to Me* (432).

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the second most public of gay poets was Robert Duncan. As I discuss in chapter two, O’Hara resented what he saw as Duncan’s self-appointed reign as ‘queen’ of poetry. And of course, large swaths of Davidson’s writing takes up Spicer and Duncan’s relationship. Wieners, of course, studied under Duncan (and Olson and Creeley) while at Black Mountain.

<sup>5</sup> As one might guess, there is much more of this kind of biographical information about how these poets’ lives and work touched each other. Again, see *Poet Be Like*

*God* (Spicer's biography), *City Poet* (Gooch's biography of O'Hara) and Leseur's memoir of O'Hara. Wieners' biographical information is less collected. (See my chapter on Wieners for a discussion of this.) There are, however, helpful interviews in his *Selected Poems* and in *Gay Sunshine Interviews*.

<sup>6</sup> I discuss Alan Golding's use of this term below.

<sup>7</sup> This idea in some form comes up in scholarship on Spicer most, but also on O'Hara. I first encountered it in Gizzi and Killian's introduction to *My Vocabulary Did This to Me* (xxi). As my readings of Wieners will make clear, I think the term applies to his work, too.

<sup>8</sup> In her excellent book *The Dark End of the Street: Margins in Vanguard American Poetry*, Maria Damon cites Jack Spicer's quotation "to be a homosexual is to be alone," and adds "how much more alone is the homosexual poet" (177).

<sup>9</sup> Vincent (*Queer Lyrics*) uses the language of penetration to discuss interpretation (12).

<sup>10</sup> For non-traditional critical approaches that inspired me, please see the essays of Wayne Koestenbaum and Reginald Shepherd.

<sup>11</sup> I am thinking here of what Michael Moon theorizes as part of Whitman's project, dissemination. Moon's *Disseminating Whitman* works to show how he sought a 'dissemination of affection' *through* his poetry by conflating of the literary and the bodily---"to disseminate affectionate physical presence from one [author] to the other [reader], fervently and directly." It seems odd but his meaning here is literal, to "project actual physical presence in a text" (3). This creates a rich contradiction in Whitman, one:

which exists between Whitman's repeated assertions that he provides loving physical presence in the text and his awareness of the frustrating but ultimately incontrovertible conditions of writing an embodiment that actually renders it impossible for him to produce in his writing more than metonymic substitutes for such contact (5-6.)

<sup>12</sup> I summarize this moment herein: Dean's work on Hart Crane is about a "poetics of privacy" in which Crane renders an experience of ecstatic intensity via the "logic of metaphor." For Dean this creates a kind of impersonality that is qualitatively different from an "informational privacy" (i.e. containing something that *can* be *known* once revealed). Nealon argues that "homosexuality prompts [Crane] to shape a poetic language of shared but occluded historical experience" (14). Herring writes, "Through Personism...O'Hara strategically manufactures an alternative public sphere in which public individuals paradoxically meet as private persons" (416).

<sup>13</sup> Vincent writes:

Lyric form, particularly in relation to, and in the relation of, difficulty and closure, has transmitted queer meaning across the span of American poetry, both from poet to reader and from poet to poet. Lyric devices have been, since Whitman, used as tools in powerful survival and world-making strategies. These queer poetic innovations include but exceed thematics. Queer lyrics do not simply record lives lived and feelings felt. At the best, they offer performance, or demonstrations, of living and feeling" (Xiii)

<sup>14</sup> One of the major projects that chronicles this particular narrative of margin and center can be found in Michael Sherry's *Gay Artists in Modern American Culture*. One might also consult Douglass Shand-Tucci's *The Crimson Letter: Harvard, Homosexuality and the Shaping of American Culture*.



<sup>15</sup> Lyttle Shaw and Hazel Smith both write about O'Hara's interest in the Goodman essay. Andrew Epstein does the same for Spicer. Here is the relevant moment from Goodman's essay:

It makes no difference what the genre is, whether praise or satire or description, or whether the style is subtle or obscure, for any one will pay concentrated attention to a work in which he in his own name is a principal character. But such personal writing about the audience itself can occur only in a small community of acquaintances, where everybody knows everybody and understands what is at stake; in our estranged society, it is objected, just such intimate community is lacking. Of course it is lacking! The point is that the advance-guard action helps create such community, starting with the artist's primary friends. (375-6)

<sup>16</sup> See Daniel Katz' *The Poetry of Jack Spicer* for this information (82). The Duncan lines in question can be found in the second section of the "Imaginary Instructions" subsection of the long poem.

<sup>17</sup> John D'Emilio writes that *Howl's*:

description of gay male sexuality as joyous, delightful, and indeed even holy turned contemporary stereotypes of homosexuality upside down. *Howl*, along with other poems in Ginsberg's first collection, offered gay readers a self-affirming image of their sexual preference. And....Ginsberg served as a bridge between a literary avant-garde tolerant of homosexuality and an emerging form of social protest indelibly stamped by the media as sexually deviant. (181)

<sup>18</sup> Though my interests lay outside gender studies, I should note some important context about the "postwar crisis of masculinity," as Corber calls it. He discusses how a "model of masculinity that stressed domesticity and cooperation gradually became hegemonic" (5), requiring men to "define themselves through their identities as consumers" (6), and the range of signifiers this entailed.

## CHAPTER 2

### FRANK O'HARA'S POETICS OF ORGASM AND OTHER PLEASURES: PERVERTING FORMAL VALUES TO THEORIZE A LYRIC OF 'UNDECIDABILITY'

#### Part 1: Questions, an instigation

What would happen if one were to replace the critical discourses on Frank O'Hara—there are three such primary narratives<sup>1</sup>, in my view—with three glimpses? Glimpses into: his life (and death), his relationships, the emotions (the desire!) he and his work stir in people, the image (or surface) he presented to the world, his 'talk' and the intellect that simmered beneath most everything he said and wrote. What would happen if these glimpses, each their own smaller narratives, when placed in conversation with each other created a kind of lyrical essay? Could such an approach illuminate for us a Frank O'Hara whose relationship to difference and desire was one of the most unique and complex of twentieth century poets? What would happen—let's push this further—if such stories, normally placed outside of the main text, replaced the standard, discursive narratives? If, then, those critical discourses were relegated to the status of endnote? In other words, what would happen if one approached Frank O'Hara as he approached his world: intensely focused on the social but somehow disconnecting referents from subjects; with risk, provisionality, a sense of the lived life, and a devotion to the personally particular; uninterested in any heroic author-ity or claim to a universal ideal; with the veneer of the surface that holds within it a great depth; with authenticity and frankness (yes, and Frank-ness) built *not* on the idea of a cohesive sense of self but

on the splintered self found in perhaps his most famous poem “In Memory of My Feelings”:

My quietness has a man in it, he is transparent  
and he carries me quietly, like a gondola, through the streets.  
He has several likenesses, like stars and years, like numerals.  
My quietness has a number of naked selves,  
so many pistols I have borrowed to protect myself  
from creatures who too readily recognize my weapons  
and have murder in their heart! (1-7)

What would happen? My answer, enacted below, is also my entrance into O’Hara’s poetry and poetics of desire and difference.

## **Part 2: Preface**

Brad Gooch writes of a harrowing, emotionally raw graveside at O’Hara’s funeral. Gooch recounts a particularly troubling eulogy from Larry Rivers, a friend and one-time lover of O’Hara’s. (Rivers is the same artist who painted *O’Hara Nude in Boots*.) Gooch recalls one mourner saying, “Larry’s eulogy was searing, cauterizing. [...]He took us out of our bodies, threw us first into the grave and then into the sky.”

O’Hara’s famous poem “To the Harbormaster” is written to Rivers, a poem that some critics read as a love poem about a promiscuous speaker worried his lover will not want him, his body used and broken down. It ends with a dark intimation of being lost under the very waves (of other lovers) that have kept the speaker from his beloved:

I wanted to be sure to reach you;  
though my ship was on the way it got caught  
in some moorings. I am always tying up  
and then deciding to depart. In storms and

at sunset, with the metallic coils of the tide  
around my fathomless arms, I am unable  
to understand the forms of my vanity  
or I am hard alee with my Polish rudder  
in my hand and the sun sinking. To  
you I offer my hull and the tattered cordage  
of my will. The terrible channels where  
the wind drives me against the brown lips  
of the reeds are not all behind me. Yet  
I trust the sanity of my vessel; and  
if it sinks, it may well be in answer  
to the reasoning of the eternal voices,  
the waves which have kept me from reaching you. (1-17)

\*

The man who would become one of the most influential poets of the twentieth century had the following obituary headline in the *New York Times*:  
“Frank O’Hara, 40, Museum Curator Exhibitions Aid at Modern dies—Also a poet.”  
“Also” has never seemed so dismissive, such an erasure. It is even syntactically removed from the main body of the sentence. The obituary contained this moment:  
“A year ago the question of when exposure of human anatomy in painting is or is not offensive became an issue at a showing in the Jewish Museum of Larry Rivers’s paintings. The exhibition included not only female nudes but also a full-length portrait of the artist’s friend, Mr. O’Hara, posed frontally and clad only in shoes and socks. The issue was not resolved.”<sup>2</sup>

The issue—of what is and is not offensive—was not resolved. They were actually boxer’s boots, according to most accounts. They are laced to mid-calf. O’Hara’s hands are laced, too, resting on top of his head. In one sense he looks as if he’s been arrested. But because his left foot rests on a cinder block and this juts his hip out, the pose is sexualized. (Not all nudes are sexual. Perhaps this is why the

issue was left unresolved according to the *Times* account.) His penis seems to point in a kind of erotic defiance. Donald Allen used the image for the cover of O'Hara's *Selected Poems*. He is handsome, both masculine and feminine<sup>3</sup>. He is an object. He is not a poet at this moment, defined (or is he?) by his ability to produce eloquent speech. He is, rather, a man posing for a lover. He offers his body, but in so doing gives it promiscuously to any eye that falls upon it. How we read the body tells us more about ourselves than it does the relationship between object and painter, perhaps as it always does.

As it regards the obituary, we may take umbrage, on O'Hara's behalf, at the suggestion of something offensive about his image as well as the suggestion he was "also a poet." O'Hara would not. There is an erotic anticipation, a pleasurable edge, in that which is 'not resolved' and which is shuttled to the margin where it can accrue power in its perversion (as I will argue).

\*

One night O'Hara was giving a reading with Beat poet Gregory Corso, and a drunken Jack Kerouac was in the audience. Kerouac began harassing O'Hara during his reading, at one point shouting out, "You're ruining American poetry, O'Hara!" O'Hara, in both Gooch and Joseph LeSeur's description of the scene, didn't miss a beat: "That's more than you've ever done for it," he shouted back. As Lyttle Shaw<sup>4</sup> writes, for O'Hara, perhaps American poetry needed to be ruined. Perhaps this was a badge to wear (136). (O'Hara even resisted fellow gay poet Robert Duncan's praise because he felt it was an attempt on Duncan's part, as "queen of the west," to somehow align himself with Duncan's imprimatur<sup>5</sup>.) But that word—ruin. "Ruin"

has never seemed so resonant. In Shaw's argument, it doesn't need further comment. I wonder, though. The word vibrates in the scene; it draws on Kerouac's antagonism and transforms it into pride. But the vibrations are on some level sexual. Mustn't O'Hara have read Hardy? "True. One's pretty lively when ruined...." What about that "tattered cordage" built on desire, the promiscuous lover's body, used by a room of eyes and the 'ruined' and depleted organs and orifices shimmering in the sweaty gleam of use? The word is transformed.

\*

Graveside, Rivers continued his painful and pained eulogy by recounting how O'Hara looked in his bed at Bayview General Hospital in Mastic Beach, Long Island, where, Gooch says, he had lingered for almost two days after the Fire Island accident (he was run over on the beach late at night) that led to his death. "The more Rivers went on, the more groans came from the mourners. Some yelled 'Stop! Stop!'" writes Gooch. Rivers is said to have go on:

'He was purple wherever his skin showed through the white hospital gown.... He was a quarter larger than usual. Every few inches there was some sewing composed of dark blue thread. Some stitching was straight and three or four inches long, others were longer and semicircular. The lids of both eyes were bluish black. It was hard to see his beautiful blue eyes which receded a little into his head. He breathed with quick gasps. His whole body quivered. There was a tube in one of his nostrils down to his stomach. On paper, he was improving. In the crib he looked like a shaped wound, an innocent victim of someone else's war. His leg bone was broken and splintered and pierced the skin. Every rib was cracked. A third of his liver was wiped out by the impact.' (Gooch 9)

A shaped wound. A body rendered as aesthetic wound. A grotesque image of mortal injury reminds Rivers of what might have seemed in that moment the once-immortal beauty of his friend and lover. In his bed, dying, O'Hara's injuries became a

horrific kind of nakedness. Or an irrevocably battered hull. “[T]he waves which have kept me from reaching you.”

\*

Let’s not leave O’Hara there. Let us leave him, still problematic, perhaps even still motionless, but more truly himself, even if just an image. Brian Glavey uses the image of O’Hara as an artist’s model to point out an interesting irony: “Despite his reputation for postmodern restlessness, O’Hara...spent a great deal of time standing perfectly still, striking a pose while his likeness was rendered in plaster and paint” (783). Glavey cites a comment from painter Nell Blaine<sup>6</sup>: “Frank was the cock of the walk. . . . He didn’t mind stripping and posing for us.” Glavey says this emphasizes:

...not only O’Hara’s vanity but a cockiness not far removed in its own way from that of a Pollock or a de Kooning. O’Hara’s sense of the complex dynamics of this cocky self-display is just as rich as his grasp of the ironies that constitute his poetic voice. His experiments with words and images reveal a savvy understanding of the political and psychological power of visibility. Like Gertrude Stein, whom he admired, O’Hara was energized to write by sitting for portraits (784).

I wonder what O’Hara thought about while posing for Rivers that day. I’d like to imagine he sat writing a poem in his head, the statue of his body finding flight in an idea of poetry that embraced its own unresolved nature, that found in desire a kind of poetry (instead of making a poem ‘out of’ desire), that saw in motion and resistance to expectation a kind of erotic anticipation, that imagined the self as an image on water’s surface, rippling into subjectivities at the slightest touch.

\*

### **Part 3: Directions, terms, and targeting a critical intervention**

I chose these three glimpses (graveside, reading, and portrait) for one reason, a reason that returns us more directly to the pursuit of O'Hara's work, his poetry, poetics, and their effect on the lyric poem he practiced, as well as the role his sexuality may have played in it all. The story of Rivers's scalding eulogy; the infamous Kerouac snipe and O'Hara's brilliant and telling comeback; *O'Hara Nude with Boots*, an image that has come to be representative of a very particular (erotic, cocky, mysterious) O'Hara—each of these symbolically stand in for one of the most talked about but little agreed upon aspects of O'Hara's corpus. That is, to use just one of the many terms that critics employ, his oppositionality. Or maybe in some instances we can even call it 'the perverse,'<sup>7</sup> a word that more pointedly joins the political to the sexual, the ideological to the formal.

But what do I mean by oppositionality, or even perversity? Though not a new concept as applied to O'Hara, there is much to be mined in its meaning. It finds expression in O'Hara's taking credit for 'ruining' American poetry, for debasing it, for having the kind of countering effect powerful enough to break poetry's normative rules, to breach its readerly and writerly contracts, to disfigure its lyric surfaces. (I will come back again and again to these terms as I operationally define them.) These ideas are inherent in the (homo)erotic display of his body in Rivers's portrait, an image he knew would be transgressive at the time. It can be seen, most symbolically and most problematically (since it was outside of O'Hara's control) even in how O'Hara died (not through fast living but through a senseless accident) and in Rivers's grotesquerie at his graveside.



I don't simply mean to suggest either term, oppositionality or perversity, as synonyms for a term like avant-garde, for example. It's almost always the case that O'Hara scholarship explores the ways in which his work is avant-garde (or insert a term like experimental or other similar term). What I feel is lacking from these discourses—based as they are in O'Hara's nonconformism and his celebration of artistic resistance—is much discussion of the rich moments in which O'Hara speaks about desire or sex, often tellingly connecting sexuality and textuality. David Jarraway does an excellent job situating O'Hara in the context that I think his poetry requires:

An extraordinary paradox stands at the center of the poetic achievement of O'Hara. Avowedly, unashamedly, unrepentantly gay, O'Hara rose to prominence as a poet—a leader in the New York School—in one of the most virulently homophobic decades this century, during the Cold War years spanning the Eisenhower administration.... And yet an era wracked by an anticommunist paranoia that would bring about the trial of Judith Coplon for espionage, the conviction of Alger Hiss for perjury, and the executions of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg for treason as Russian spies could hardly be thought receptive, let alone encouraging, to the countercultural gay artist. (71)

So his sexuality is present, persistent, in the work despite the era in which it was written. Now, pair Jarraway's view with Gregory Bredbeck's view of the ways O'Hara's sexuality *means* and produces meanings in the poems and the critically complicated position in which this puts O'Hara. Bredbeck contends "that the primary reason O'Hara's poetry has been simultaneously lauded and marginalized is that it centralizes homosexuality as a linguistic rather than a thematic practice—although the subject is often a theme" (268). Perhaps this explains Jarraway's paradox; as a linguistic practice, homosexuality is somehow 'safer.' Bredbeck writes that O'Hara's "poetics demonstrates the potentiality of *absolute* play as manifested

through a *symbolic* embrace of homosexual eroticism (my emphasis on “symbolic” 269). But even as Bredbeck admits homosexual ‘themes’ are present, he seems more interested in symbolic order and linguistic practices that *reflect* O’Hara’s homosexuality. And Bredbeck is not alone. Even when O’Hara’s sexuality is discussed, it is often relegated to an explanation of O’Hara’s resistance to a stable idea of the self or uncritically linked to traditionally gay linguistic practices like camp.

Is there some kind of aporia in existing O’Hara discourse, one that so readily sees in his opposition or in his formal perversity *everything but* explicit sexuality? How can we address this? The way to start, I will argue, is to embrace the sexual nature of O’Hara’s work rather than ignore it. My critique seeks to bring into focus both the real meaning-intensive effects of sexuality in the poems with the ways in which sexuality is reflected, as Bredbeck suggests, in formal and linguistic practices and structures.

We must start by acknowledging that even (especially?) the first wave of specifically gay scholarship on modern American poets somehow had critical blinders when it came to O’Hara. He is not included in perhaps the two most seminal works in this early era of gay poetry studies, Robert K. Martin’s *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry* or David Bergman’s *Gaiety Transfigured*<sup>8</sup>. In terms of the earliest serious O’Hara studies, as I discuss below, one of the most looked to critics on O’Hara, Marjorie Perloff, even went so far as to address her own omission regarding O’Hara’s sexuality when she re-issued her path-breaking *Poet among Painters*. Certainly, as I’ve indicated, critics discuss his homosexuality, even if mostly

as a side note. And yet, there seems to be little interest in specifically theorizing a possible link between two critical issues that seem to share such powerful affinities: the nonconformism of his homosexuality (which entails his experience as a gay man in the Cold War, homophobic America) and his experimental, avant-garde poetics and values (which includes his membership in a coterie of like-minded poets who wrote in open defiance of dominant modes of expression during a time of oppressive consensus). While I won't argue here why I think this link has been understudied, my project in the following pages will seek to correct what I see as this oversight.

As a kind of preview of the arguments I will make, consider how in one of his most famous poems ("Meditations in an Emergency"), O'Hara makes clear the link between sexuality and artistic and cultural norms and values, and makes clear his feelings as well. In an exclamatory apostrophe to heterosexuality itself, the normative sexuality becomes emblematic of a kind of persistent doom that must be resisted. Following the declaration that "there is only one man I love to kiss when he is unshaven," the speaker cries out, "Heterosexuality! you are inexorably approaching. (How discourage her?)" (197<sup>9</sup>). It's as if the mention of kissing his lover—who is desired despite, not because of, a hyper-masculine signifier, the beard—signals a kind of panic. But it's not a panic one might expect for a man who lived through the era when gay men were fired from the State Department for being national security risks, who were routinely arrested, who were roundly thought to be sick. Rather, the panic is fueled by the worry that hegemonic forces cannot be fought off, even by explicit homosexual expression, written or real. As David

Jarraway notes, this moment from “Meditations in an Emergency” represents O’Hara’s belief that heterosexuality and its cultural expectations and trappings “will brook no traumatic mysteries” for the poet (76). An approach to art that would ‘brook no traumatic mystery’ would have been antithetical to O’Hara. Or, to reverse the equation in a sense, O’Hara’s homosexuality lead to his approach to art antithetical to the norms and expectations in his work. In either case, likely there was an interior conversation for O’Hara between his sexual values and artistic values, even if it wasn’t something O’Hara consistently was aware of while he wrote. “Meditations in an Emergency” and the numerous other moments I discuss in the pages that follow serve as evidence that such a conversation was present more often than perhaps critics have assumed. In any case, what is important is that one is as sensitive as possible to seeing the possible effects of such a conversation made visible in the work.

To that end, my project will be to examine and in some cases re-examine O’Hara’s much-discussed experimentalism as an expression of (but not essentially linked to) his homosexuality. To put it another way, can Frank O’Hara’s oppositionality (a resistance to normative poetics and their attendant values) be productively read as ‘in any profound way, constructed by the poet’s culture of sexual identification’ in Perloff’s phrasing<sup>10</sup>? Perhaps. But more importantly, what happens when we place his sexuality at the center of an investigation of his poetics instead of on the periphery or as just one of many factors. I discover in my readings that O’Hara, by *writing about writing* as a gay man in the fifties and sixties, in fact theorizes (and in some cases produces) a gay lyric. By this I mean a lyric *not* built on

a kind of naked eroticism that would simply be dismissed or go unread or perhaps would be seen as a kind of Beat poet spectacle. (See my discussion of the political inefficacy of Beat poetics in my first chapter and again in my chapter on Wieners). Instead, he produced a gay lyric that perverts New Critical values in order to produce a poetry more reflective of the experience of the homosexual poet and one more able to produce a critique of Cold War containment, consensus and concord. This gay lyric of O'Hara's is not one of explicit liberation per se, but one that draws on the social reality of the marginalized gay man. It is one of illegibility, the undecidable<sup>11</sup>, a resistance to closure, and a refusal to see universality as a meaningful barometer of greatness, so that all of these formal perversions work together to create a gay expression that revels in its own marginality.

To pursue these inquiries, my structure will be relatively simple. First, I illustrate just how deeply the narrative of O'Hara's oppositionality is ingrained in the discourse, so that I can then open a space amidst those arguments for my own ideas, less a corrective, I suppose, than a filling in. Abutting this discussion I review and discuss what critics have theorized by placing O'Hara's homosexuality in a more central position. Building off some of these scholars—Jarraway, Hazel Smith, Lytle Shaw, and Andrew Epstein in particular—I draw on O'Hara's poems and writings that show him to be a poet-theorist, similar to the ways both Spicer and Wieners inhabit this role by linking poetry and sexuality or sex. By taking up one of his most discussed poems as well as poems hardly ever studied, I show that O'Hara used his poetry to register and dramatize the effect of the closet on a poet, his expression.

Next, I suggest how he unnerved the reading practices of New Criticism in his use of

sexual metaphors in “Personism.” Then I use his celebrated poem “Mayakovsky” to show O’Hara imagining a gay poet in the role of Narcissus in order to trumpet a poetics of “wounded beauty,” one that breaks the surface of a static, quiet poem to theorize a poetic that is not interested in ‘charming’ or ‘wining’ but that requires crossing into undecidability. Lastly, I want to move from looking at the intersection of textuality and sexuality and offer a reading of two poems about gay sexual experience, taking the poetics theorized up to that point and putting them into play, finally coming to summarize a more general critique I find at work in O’Hara’s poetry.

#### **Part 4: Positioning O’Hara: How has difference been understood?**

First, we must examine how critics have positioned O’Hara as a poet of radical difference and what may be missing from such appraisals. It seems to me that most often O’Hara is seen as a poet whose oppositionality is reduced to a kind of formal experimentalism. Can it be that simple? When discussing what I’ll call from here on his oppositionality, several critics have enjoyed citing the following moment from an early journal entry of O’Hara’s:

The impulse, the, at times, compulsion, toward normalcy must be avoided, when its fulfillment is known to be unsatisfactory, and when the level of endeavor is, as it is by definition, inferior to that possible through idiosyncratic behavior. One must live in a way; we must channel, there is not time nor space, one must hurry, one must avoid the impediments, snares, detours; one must not be stifled in a closed social *or* artistic railway station waiting for the train; I’ve a long long way to go, and I’m late already. (*Early Writing* 101)

It’s a telling early sign of O’Hara’s awareness of the dangers, both artistic and personal, of the trap of the normative, a kind of lowest common denominator that is

certain to produce the 'inferior' because, simply, it stifles, closes off—*contains*. Originality and creativity, movement, resistance to tradition, these cannot find true expression if rules, expectations and parameters must be maintained to fit within a normative and dominant society. Such sentiments occur again and again in his poems. He often writes about literature as a medium whose strictures he seems hopelessly bound to: "How I hate subject matter! (from "To Hell with It") and "I am lyrical to a fault" (from "Hôtel Transylvanie"). "Personism" articulates literariness as a simple matter of attracting the reader and is not valorized as essentially important in and of itself: "As for measure and other technical apparatus, that's just common sense: if you're going to buy a pair of pants you want them to be tight enough so everyone will want to go to bed with you. There's nothing metaphysical about it" (*Collected* 498).

As I've stated, many critics seem to agree that O'Hara was a poet of radical difference, but I'm unconvinced that any consensus exists in terms of *the ways* his poetry performed this, and certainly there is no single focus on the reasons (aesthetic? political? personal?) for the radical difference so many so often point to. Often, terms like anti-literary, anti-foundational, anti-programmatic, anti-representational, anti-realist, or avant-garde, however, do suggest a critical recourse to the idea of opposition or antagonism.<sup>12</sup> One critical approach has been to connect his radical difference to likely influences, thus anchoring the very poetry that appears to find the idea of being anchored (or contained) distasteful as best and destructive at worse. So for example, critics examine O'Hara's connections to contemporary painting of the time or postmodernism more generally; or how

certain of his (especially longer) poems can be read as adaptation of Modernist movements like dada, surrealism and others. Perloff, for one, says O'Hara draws on a surrealist palette of images but uses an American idiom, an idiom that several critiques say points back to Williams, further grounding the very poetry that seems to be so invested in being radically mobile and shifting. Perloff writes:

Like the "all-over" painting, an O'Hara lyric often seems intentionally deprived of a beginning, middle and end; it is an instantaneous performance. Syntactic energy is thus equivalent to the painter's "push and pull"—the spatial tensions that keep a surface alive and moving. The rapid cuts from one spatial or temporal zone to another, moreover, give the poetry its peculiar sense of immediacy; everything is absorbed into the *NOW* (135).

Like other similar readings, a comparison to painting encourages a false (and unnecessary) *distinction* between surface and depth, a frequent move made by critics. But, as I hope I'll show, to simply oppose a depth model with a surface model is to read in O'Hara a simply reactive poetics<sup>13</sup> and one that seems to approach formal questions as simple aesthetic choices, devoid of any possible connection to identities or desire that may fuel artistic direction.

It's equally dangerous to reduce O'Hara's difference as somehow required for "the sake of writing great poems," as David Lehman has suggested. As many critics have done—and as I argue against—this risks making O'Hara and his fellow New York School poets interested only in 'art' and naively unaware that their aesthetics aren't always already synced to social realities and cultural values. Lehman may be correct when he says O'Hara and his fellow poets "experimented not for experimentation's sake but for the sake of writing great poems." In fact, I strongly agree that "[t]heir idea of innovation was very different from a value placed on novelty," but even though Lehman explains these poets' were invested in a kind of



Emersonian originality (“Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?”) (9), it’s necessary to move beyond depicting O’Hara as a figure of a cold aestheticism.<sup>14</sup>

It may be that these approaches are technically not incorrect, but rather I’d like to suggest that looking at O’Hara as simply an oppositional young Turk insistent on something new and different risks reducing and over-simplifying how O’Hara linked sexuality and poetics. Lehman for one, seeming to contradict himself, sees a link between style and the New York School poets’ homosexuality. He theorizes, “In their aestheticism, the New York poets presented an alternative to the aggressive heterosexualism of an era whose celebrations of manhood were themselves signs of a high anxiety.” After citing John Cheever’s description of the final year of the fifties as one obsessed with homosexuality<sup>15</sup>, Lehman offers this disclaimer:

Not the least attractive thing about the poets of the New York School is the freedom from guilt that their celebration of the imagination entailed. And while I would not want to over-emphasize their homosexuality as an element of their aesthetic practice, it does seem to me that one question some of these poets are asking some of the time is whether the American pursuit of happiness may be consistent with a poetics of gaiety in both the traditional and modern senses of the word. (13)

Just as Perloff leaves her own question unanswered, Lehman no sooner brings sexuality into the picture than he back peddles, not wanting to ‘over-emphasize’ their homosexuality. It should be obvious by now that such disclaimers and reversals only serve to highlight the need to study, without anxiety, the link between sexuality and poetics in O’Hara in particular. If it is true, as Lehman suggests, that O’Hara and his compatriots wrote about sexuality without guilt, then one’s criticism

should not only reflect this stance but inquire into its meaning and importance.

Fortunately, we can turn to two very recent and two other particularly relevant critical studies to contextualize O'Hara's oppositionality as something more than simply a formal response. Whether it is Andrew Epstein's "experimental individualism" or Hazel Smith's "concept of identity-in-difference," these critics can help us modernize the critical 'vocabulary of difference' in O'Hara's poetry. In addition to providing some socio-historical context, these critics enable us to see O'Hara's work as: 1) uncovering the ways in which *any* contract with normative writing is constricting; 2) connecting the contract's terms with values that are not solely artistic and indeed are social and political; and 3) aware of the need to violate or pervert, not simply toss out, the contract in order to write a transformative poetry. By working through these critical stances below I want to help prepare the reader for how I later use close readings to theorize my own view of O'Hara's oppositionality, one that differs from these critics in that it places sexuality and lyric form more forcefully at center stage and that illustrates how his oppositionality is intent on breaking the New Critical contract as a critique in and of itself.

Epstein's is one of the most recent studies of O'Hara. His work is sensitive to the Cold War era's paradoxical emphasis on both conformity and individualism, certainly something O'Hara had to negotiate as a member of an avant-garde community. (In fact, his study uses O'Hara in a way that somewhat mirrors how I read Spicer in chapter three, thereby suggesting that examining poetic community may be a productive approach for other gay poets as well.) Focusing on the paradox of a poet so well known as the social and literary center of his own community but

also at odds with the very idea of belonging and the risks to the individual this entails, Epstein argues, "O'Hara's work amounts to a full-scale confrontation with the manifold poetic, intellectual, and, perhaps most distinctively, social ramifications of the kinetic aesthetic (and the American tropes of mobility, transition, and nonconformity that underlie it) so dear to the postwar avant-garde." Epstein zeros in on a single aesthetic and examines O'Hara's opposition to the very poetic community his nonconformism would ally him with, furthering but also complicating the narrative that O'Hara was "too hip for the squares and too square for the hips," in Ashbery's famous phrase. Epstein, like Lehman, suggests a connection to Emerson to explain a sensibility in O'Hara that brought together an Emersonian pragmatic individualism and an enduring experimentalism that chafed at any strictures, even the avant-garde. He writes, "In part because of his pragmatist [Emersonian] sensibility, [O'Hara] this most sociable of poets vigorously refuses to surrender his individuality to any group that might dampen or narrow his personal and creative responses to the world." Certainly, Epstein ties this to a general 'discomfort' with belonging to any group, but he also sees in O'Hara an outright "rejection of the ethos of conformity in Cold War culture at large...mirrored by his wariness of orthodoxy rearing its ugly head within small countercommunities of dissenters predicated on nonconformity." He explains, "This sensibility can help explain why this legendary poet of literary coterie and friendship can also be one who so frequently makes comments (however overlooked they have been) which are seemingly opposed to friendship, community, and togetherness," going so far as to argue "many of his poems can be read acts of verbal and thematic resistance to

other writing, either his own or his friends.” What makes Epstein’s criticism interesting and different is that he uncovers more than just a concern with being part of a nonconforming group only to discover new but different requirements of conformity. Epstein targets O’Hara’s “preoccupation with flux and mobility” and its linkages to the trope of friendship. He argues that O’Hara and his fellow coterie poets’ “fierce commitment to kinetic change and mobility....renders the idea of maintaining intimate, stable relationships with other people profoundly problematic.” Epstein is able to construct a view of O’Hara as a practitioner of “experimental individualism,” which he defines as “[imagining] the human self to be radically contingent, mobile, and transitional” (chapter 3).

Smith’s work is so wide-ranging<sup>16</sup> (finding in O’Hara what she calls hyperspaces: “textuality, sexuality, the politics of location and mixed-media”) that it’s difficult to describe her critical stance let alone her primary argument. And since I will later focus more extensively on her chapter on sexuality, I will only briefly gloss her primary arguments here. Smith falls into a group of critics that seems to be describing O’Hara in terms of postmodernism or poststructuralism; this can be seen in her description of O’Hara’s poetics of “identity-in-difference” (130) and in her argument that “the process of difference-in-becoming is the poetry’s only all-defining feature” (1). She suggests his work is “a celebratory postmodernist embrace of surface, transience, sensation and the unknown” (14) and later explains that in his poetry “everything differs from itself and this is always an ongoing process. Ways of being and modes of writing are constantly deconstructing themselves and sliding into their opposites, as they swing athletically between the

poles of difference and identity” (9). (By “difference” she means “the co-existence of seemingly contradictory elements” [2].) The effect she locates is that “we, as readers, continually lose and find ourselves” (2). She writes, “O’Hara’s poetry thrives on the unrestrained reconstitution of textuality, subjectivity and representation. Within the poems the distinctions between the metaphoric and the metonym, the self and non-self, the humorous and the serious, are constantly overthrown and reworked” (9). One could use Smith’s emphasis on postmodern values, for example, to see O’Hara poetics as invested in undermining modernist assumptions, making “the hallmark of O’Hara’s poetry... reversal, eclecticism and the celebration of the marginal” (9).

Lyttle Shaw’s directions are more productive<sup>17</sup> for my project. Consider this list of terms he uses to describe O’Hara’s poetry and poetics: it is heretical; a monstrosity; it breaches, disintegrates, or deflates (deflates, for example, “History” with a capital “H”); and it imagines a different relation to the world (for example, through camp). In one moment representative of the kinds of arguments he makes, Shaw writes “Wit, mockery, and tonal modulation *irresponsibly* elide the serious and the casual. Straying into diction that fails to match the situation’s objective demands, the speaker *perverse*ly reneges on his contact with the reader” (my emphasis 86). This approach to O’Hara allows us to see O’Hara’s opposition to ‘seriousness’ (for example) more complexly as a critique of the very contract that valorizes ‘importance’ or ‘the literary’. More precisely, the critique itself—forcibly (perverse)ly joining casual diction and “the situation’s objective demands” [of a

more serious nature] (86)—invalidates the very idea that there can be or should be a contract in the first place.

In fact, Shaw's project, though different from my own, can be especially illuminating if we examine it a bit more in depth. His project, at its core, is to show how O'Hara's relationship to coterie allows him to recode kinship terms. His readings uncover in O'Hara's complicated and fraught relationship to coterie<sup>18</sup> a critique of community's limiting effects (similar to Epstein) as well as 'destabilization' of the kind of universality traditional poetry assumed (assumes?). Coterie does not function "as a symbolic stand against time but as a fluid and experimental way of conceptualizing literary and social linkage" and is "an invented form of kinship that uses the name in particular to re-imagine social logics that allow group formations in the first place" (37). Shaw's readings show "O'Hara's response [to "New Critical and Eliotic strictures" and their "rhetoric of universality"]...was less to claim his own identity as particular (and thus authentically marginal to the rhetoric of universality) than...to destabilize and displace the markers of literary universality that would allow poetry to operate in an established, understood public sphere—a sphere characterized by norms of tone, cannons of reference, and what O'Hara, referring specifically to New Criticism, calls 'certain rather stupid ideas about...the comportment in diction that you adopt'<sup>19</sup>" (5). Shaw can be used to construct an O'Hara whose opposition to New Critical values is as much about resisting norms as it is refuting a kind of poetry whose goal of a 'literary universality' traps the poet in stable and flat modes of expression. O'Hara's very system of referentiality—totally uninterested in opening up to readers

the closed-off meanings of proper names of friends, for example—defies such a literary worldview and its interest in creating a stable field of meanings, deadening avant-garde impulses.

Lastly in my brief critical review, I want to look to the work of Jonathan Dollimore (author of *Sexual Dissidence*)<sup>20</sup>, admittedly as applied to O'Hara by Smith and Jarraway, to suggest two more important ideas I draw on for my readings. The first is the idea that the formal (as an umbrella term) and more precisely the perversion of formal values, can be read not only as part of a political critique but that such perversions (disfigurings, contractual breaches, etc.) can themselves be a critique. The second idea is that such an approach may be a more strategic and in the end a more powerful response to repression, akin to Foucault's repressive hypothesis. Dollimore writes, "The most extreme threat to the true form of something comes not so much from its absolute opposite or its direct negation, but in the form of its perversion; somehow the perverse threat is inextricably rooted in the true and authentic. This connects with and partly explains another paradox of perversion: it is very often perceived as at once utterly alien to what it threatens, and yet mysteriously inherent within it" (121). These ideas can be linked to the transgressive nature of homosexuality. And it seems no coincidence that Smith and Jarraway are likely the two critics who've done the most complex work to animate a purposive homosexuality in O'Hara's poems. Smith sees implied in Dollimore "the link between gay writing and a radical attack on representation" (105), and Jarraway writes, "The truly revolutionary character of O'Hara's poetic project," he asserts, "...relates largely to matters of subjectivity and to gay subjectivity in

particular” (74). In a concise roundup of Dollimore’s main points, Smith explains, “Dollimore’s framework of perverse dynamic, radical interconnectedness and transgressive re-inscription...points to ways in which social subversion can be indirect, through the inversion and displacement of societal norms and literary conventions.” (105). How would this look in practice? One of the first examples Dollimore gives in *Sexual Dissidence* is the “transgressive aesthetic” found in Oscar Wilde, where “insincerity, inauthenticity, and unnaturalness become the liberating attributes of decentered identity and desire” (14). We see this idea, though perhaps not articulated in exactly the same way, in critics like Bredbeck, who writes, “[I]t is within the most flippant and campy moments of O’Hara’s poetry that one can glimpse a radical potentiality that not only bespeaks an importance but also questions the importance of ‘importance.’” Bredbeck points out that early on in O’Hara’s reception critics would not see this because they could not recognize the “epistemological importance of triviality and frivolity” (268).

Jarraway’s readings<sup>21</sup> are productive examples of what kinds of questions to ask. Jarraway situates O’Hara’s response precisely within the matrix of Cold War containment, using Foucault to understand the paradoxical power of what he calls O’Hara’s queer perversities (camp’s excess, destabilizing systems of referentiality, promoting disunity, subverting realist aesthetics, etc.). He writes, “O’Hara’s Cold War closet at the same time functions paradoxically much like the imperceptibly constitutive (as opposed to the more visibly constraining) function of the Repressive Hypothesis, in Michel Foucault’s well-known formulation. For within this paradoxical dynamic, the impasse of closeted repression, conventionally understood



as ‘a hindrance [and] a stumbling-block,’ *simultaneously* serves the instrumental purpose as ‘a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy,’ thereby perversely producing, ‘as a countereffect, [the] valorization and intensification of indecent speech’ coterminous with ‘the multiplication of discourses concerning sex in the field of exercise of power itself’<sup>22</sup> (72-3). Using “Poem (Khrushchev is coming on the right day!)” for his opening salvo, Jarraway shows how in particular the “playful intensification of sexual discourse” (“Khrushchev is *coming*,” “my tie is *blowing*,” “*hard* wind,” etc.) “marks the conversion” or “controversion of discourse from ideological repression to a highly sexualized expression.” Says Jarraway, “Countering Cold War containments, for O’Hara, accordingly, was perhaps like using ‘judo’ for Foucault, wherein “the best answer to the opponent’s maneuver never is to step back, but to re-use it to your own advantage” (74). Jarraway’s ability to show how homosexuality in O’Hara can utilize the forces of containment to break out of that containment is essential in not only deepening our understanding of O’Hara’s oppositionality but in understanding how O’Hara’s sexuality might fuel, at least in some poems, his refusal of universality, his “radical attack on representation,” and his foundational “identity-in-difference.”

### **Part 5: “Personism” as a gay poetics**

In this section, I will put into play the ideas I’ve been accruing and adapting in order to perform close readings of poems that clearly represent O’Hara’s deep investment in theorizing gay expression and doing so in a formal vocabulary of difference and opposition to the normative. First, as a way to stage a theoretical

beachhead for later readings, I will turn to the erotic metaphors of O'Hara's "Personism"—and building and departing from the most relevant critical explorations of a very particular moment in this "manifesto"—to show O'Hara theorizes the gay poet's relationship to both reader and poem as a perverse site of abstracted pleasure rather than a site where two individuals construct a fixed meaning. This will pave the way for the close reading of a suite of poems which all take as their theme what it means to write as a gay man in an era of repression.

If there is one element of O'Hara's scholarship that remains consistent it is the use of "Personism" as a centerpiece of O'Hara poetics, even, as many critics remind us, it is understood as only a half-serious statement of his aesthetics or as a mock manifesto, and at that a manifesto about other manifestos (Olson is usually the butt of the joke). I won't offer an extended reading of "Personism" because quite simply there is already enough written about it; almost every critic that has written about O'Hara writes about this text. Instead, I want to talk about perhaps the most specific and powerful example of the intersection of sexuality and textuality in O'Hara's work overall: "[Personism] puts the poem squarely between the poet and the person, Lucky Pierre style, and the poem is correspondingly gratified. The poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages" (*Collected* 499). I want to address what seems to me a glaring omission in almost every one of the critical discussions of "Personism." The most intriguing element of this moment is rarely discussed, (missing even from Jarraway's essay), and when it is talked about, it is done without recognition of just how transgressive this reference must have been. I'm referring to the Lucky Pierre reference, which in "Personism" is simply left to the

reader's imagination or intrepidity in research. According to *Sex Slang*<sup>23</sup>, Lucky Pierre is "the man (or the woman) sandwiched between the outer layers of a sexually active threesome," which is [g]lorified in the following lyric: 'Pierre gave it to Sheila, / Who must have brought it there. / He got it from Francois and Jacques, / A-ha, Lucky Pierre!'<sup>24</sup>. It has a "predominately gay male usage" (110). The reference is hardly ever discussed *as an image*, one that turns the poem into two orifices simultaneously producing (and receiving) phallic pleasure.

Yes, the overall suggestion of "Personism" is one of relationality, the idea of a poem acting as a bridge between reader and poet. As Stephen Guy-Bray argues in his *Loving in Verse: Poetic Influence as Erotic*, "Personism" "is a way or relating," a theory in which "a poem can create a situation in which some sort of communication is possible between (at least) two people: the identity of the people and the nature of the communication are to be determined each time the poem is read" (102). Guy-Bray and a few others, however, have also stressed that the "interrelations [in "Personism"] are primarily on the level of sexuality" and "the poet's wish is to write a poem that readers will desire" and a poem that "allows lovers to communicate" [via the phone metaphor]. He plainly states, "The poem ceases to be merely a conduit for information and becomes a third party in the couple's sexual life" (105). The two critics that do examine the sexualized metaphors of "Personism" are Scott Terrell Herring and Gregory Bredbeck<sup>25</sup>, and both suggest O'Hara means to emphasize the materiality of the poem as well as a reading practice that is about 'cruising'. For Herring, this means the poem is able to connect gay readers through the impersonal rhetoric of mass subjectivity. He explains:

Individuals join through the object, or commodity, that is the personal poem; the poem, 'Lucky Pierre style,' obligingly provides a body for the disembodied poet and reader to identify with. This exchange is, in turn, a disaster, "the death of literature," which is also a cause for celebration. All parties involved are then left "gratified" by the positivity of the textual object and by the abstraction that experiencing it induces; one body, in short, is replaced by another. (419)

Herring uses his reading of the cruise—and the abstracted, impersonal experience it enables—to see in O'Hara a very specific strategy to transform the traditional lyric relationship between reader and writer into something based on shared desire and sexual difference. He writes, "What may appear as a monogamous relationship between two persons is now made promiscuous through the mass subjectivity that the poet advances." For O'Hara this has the direct consequence of making the poem "nothing less than a node in the homoerotic bonds that structure the writing and reception of the work; it is a cruising ground on which gay men come together through impersonal intimacy" (422).

Bredbeck also emphasizes a cruising, through he uses Roland Barthes to theorize the text is not a site but a 'trick'. He writes:

At first [the metaphor of Lucky Pierre] seems to imitate Barthes's triangle of reader-writer-text, for the poem becomes "Lucky Pierre" ... but there is a critical difference achieved through sexual difference. This text, like the middle in a homosexual threesome, is both receptive and piercing....The binaries of agent and object, of passive and active, of *jouissance* and reserve that Barthes polarizes are here collapsed in the text. The "site of *jouissance*" that effaces materiality is, for O'Hara, the text itself. Barthes's text lies passively beneath *jouissance* like a woman in the missionary position, but O'Hara's "cruises" and "does" and "is done," both *tabula rasa* and *stylus*. The divisions dissolve, for, as O'Hara tells us, "everything is in the poems." The text, now neither a veil that obfuscates and privileges 'meaning' or 'truth' nor a tissue on which are drawn the mappings of homosocial fantasy, is, rather, material intercourse. (272)

So, Bredbeck's very postmodern view of O'Hara in one way supports my supposition

that O'Hara's poetics do not uphold New Critical values of 'meaning' or truth, nor even subjective expression (the poem inscribed with "the mappings of homosocial fantasy"). But perhaps more importantly it initiates a shift from seeing an O'Hara poem as one of a purely textual relationality and instead one of "material intercourse." While Herring and Bredbeck's readings of the Lucky Pierre reference are fascinating, it seems to me, focusing on 'cruising' can only take us as far as seeing the poem as either an anonymous or abstracted site of material connection.

But such a specific reference (and so transgressive) demands a more specific reading. In fact, to ignore the sexual and specifically homosexual, transgressive and graphic reference is to miss or ignore a whole level of meaning. Smith picks up on Bredbeck and moves us in the right direction when she discusses how "[w]riting and sexuality are interconnected [in O'Hara's writing]: 'it's the property of a symbol to be sexual'. Though she doesn't reference the Lucky Pierre moment, I think her comments reflect what's happening there nonetheless. She adds:

...in both cases [of writing and of sexuality] the signifier exceeds the signified. On the one hand, there are specific sexual acts, but on the other hand, sexuality breaks down the fixed limits of the sexed body, gender, sexual orientation. The sexual act is a site of celebration, but it also fails to fully satisfy because it closes off other possibilities which call to be explored: 'I am always tying up / and then deciding to depart'. Similarly, texts tend to close off meaning into final signifiers and the straitjacket of specific genres. (134)

O'Hara sees in both writing and sex the risk of a closing-off of meaning, something that would prohibit what he seeks, which is a kind of promiscuity of meaning. The use of promiscuous here is meant to echo what "Personism's" Lucky Pierre suggests, a poetics interested in producing a poem that at any one moment need not choose the site where pleasure emanates. Both reader and writer must work in conjunction

to produce what Smith calls the “radical interconnectedness of [O’Hara’s] textual-sexuality.” If everything is connected, the poem can be the ‘all-over body’ in which “any part can be eroticized and any part has as much erotic potential as any other” (135).

I would like to suggest Smith’s promiscuity of meaning can help us understand why O’Hara uses the specific metaphor of Lucky Pierre. First, we must clarify what this means: the sexual partner in between two others, he (or she) is most likely on all fours, the receptive partner to both anal and oral penetration<sup>26</sup>. In my reading, backed by O’Hara’s reference to the poem being “correspondingly gratified,” *the poem* (metaphorized as trick or lover) is pleased; in other words, to be read is to be fucked, *and* to be written is to be fucked. Neither writing nor reading *separately* enables interpretation. The passivity of such a position is ultimately a kind of eroto-poetic openness, metaphorizing interpretation into a kind of pleasurable polymorphous receptivity. We can take this further to metaphorize “meaning” itself as an undecidable, un-parseable mix of the reader’s desires and the writer’s desire-to-be-desired (a la Barthes). To summarize, the poem is not a product of a unified subjectivity, nor even a product of a reader uncovering meaning, as a New Critic would have it. Instead, the poem is a site of undifferentiated pleasure embodied *specifically* in the gay male lover. What O’Hara is able to do through the sexual-textual intersection is to make the poem a site of pleasure, a pleasure that cannot be located in any single reading practice nor can be it tracked back to a writer’s subjective expression. Such a poem is invested in the undecidability I will show is so important to O’Hara vision of and activation of a gay

lyric.

### **Part 6: A Gay poet, a Gay Lyric: O'Hara's theories**

To support my argument that O'Hara thought deeply about what it meant to be a gay poet and that he was interested in the effects the closet can have on the poem (not just the poet), I want to examine one of O'Hara's more accessible poems. There are in fact several poems about the closet<sup>27</sup>, though the poem I will discuss has ramifications for my larger argument in ways the others don't. "Those Who Are Dreaming, A Play about St. Paul" is a poem he wrote about his lover, dancer Vincent Warren, but that he published outside of the *Love Poems* collection that contains most of his other poems about Warren. "Those Who Are Dreaming..." is pretty clearly about living life in the closet, a reading I will unfold below. First, however, I want to note how importantly this poem stands out from O'Hara's other work. Instead of the "I" speaker that almost always inhabits (if sometimes problematically) an O'Hara poem, the poem refers to a third-person "he" that could be understood as O'Hara, since the 'he' is referred to as a poet. In other words, O'Hara is talking about himself in the third person. In fact, the poem suddenly shifts perspective in the second stanza when an "I" speaker emerges. What's more, O'Hara refers to the poem as a play in the title, an explicit resistance to lyric and the supposedly stable "I" speaker that the lyric often assumes. How can we read all of these different distancing effects? In a poem about the closet I argue O'Hara is literally dramatizing an act of self-closeting by speaking about himself in the third person, letting the first person only peak out from behind the curtain.

The first stanza is a frame in which “he” considers “love” and then picks up the phone to call his lover. (O’Hara’s biographers have shown St. Paul was a way for him to refer to Warren.) The phone, in contrast to the idea of activating desire in “Personism,” here represents distance and privacy: “...then he just / listens because he didn’t call to talk, he wanted / to hear your voice” (16-18). And so the two men talk. “He” thinks more of love, and desires writing a poem like Robert Desnos’ *The Night of Loveless Nights* (25-6), but fears the poem will create in his life its very eponymous subject. It is here that the poem talks pretty explicitly about the couple’s inability to be physical when others are around: “It’s more likely that he’s fond in front of people. / Then, if they leave the room he takes you in his arms / for a few minutes terminated physically by footsteps” (33-5). This is a particularly punishing version of closet. The couple’s romance is figuratively stomped to death.

But what cements the reading of this poem as theorizing the closet comes a little later when the poem speaks about a divided self: “...one continues / to try to make something appear between divided selves / clear and abstract as the word *thing* preceded by / another word, so you have lingered” (53-56). The forced privacy of homoerotic desire now is shown to require the need for two selves, a public and a private. The poem is about a romantic life that can only be carried on in private rooms, over the phone, or in the interior life (the imagination/dream).

But how does this affect our understanding of O’Hara’s poetics? At the very foundation of my theory of a gay lyric in this dissertation is the gay poet’s need to link sexuality (desire, eroticism, the body) to textuality. This occurs in “Those Who Are Dreaming...” at a crucial moment, directly before the reference to divided selves.



At perhaps one of the most beautiful and erotic moments of *imagined* contact—when the “he” (the poet) “feels his lips / pressing lightly against your closed eyes, though they are / not closed” (42-4)—the thought sets off a long, lyrical list of associations that come along with the ‘kiss’. One of these thoughts is of “certain poems which linger in his mind as essences / of what he is, and each thought feels familiar, each object / because you are familiar and have lingered” (47-9). The relationship is suggestive of a romantic ‘lingering’, and the connotations of ‘familiar’ are not intimate, but a more publicly acceptable ‘fondness’; and these closeted lovers are linked directly to the poet’s own poetic processes. The poet is affected by his desire, its forced containment, by his sense that he can only write about ‘loveless nights’. The effect is not simply to produce two senses of that self but to produce a kind of alienation so profound it makes the poem into an abstraction of the poet’s self—“essences / of what he is.” This is the symptom of a greater problem. A life in which physical, romantic contact with the lover is always imagined (“those who are dreaming”) rather than physically, empirically experienced, creates a reliance on, or even a desire *for* the abstract. In other words, the life of the closet leads the poet to a kind of worship of the signifier—“clear and abstract,” perhaps, but empty of meaning. This has profound implications for the poet.

This reliance on the sign creates a state of constant potential crisis in the poem, in which ‘something’ (“thing preceded / by another word”), might be taken from him— the very thing that is to “appear between divided selves,” or in other words to bridge the public and private selves. And though he is “protected by your love” (70), there’s no promise in the poem that that is sufficient to prevent the crisis.

In fact, the crisis is produced explicitly because the sign arouses him to reveal, as we see in the final stanza, *only* “an abstraction of your love.” What’s more, he is silenced and even strangles the lover with the “silent burden of his feelings” (67) he lays on the lover’s throat. To be clear, “Those Who Are Dreaming” isn’t really just a poem about the closet; it’s about how a poem *written in the closet* (and the desire experienced during its writing) will rob the poet of the ability to present experience, will only allow him to represent, to invest in abstraction for fear that connection will lead to exposure and violence. For such a poet, the sign will be replaced by the empty signifier, perfectly referenced in the poem by the eerie, threatening emptiness of *something* “pounding at the door” (69).

All of this is to suggest that O’Hara was aware he needed to find a way to write outside of the closet in a time when that may have seemed impossible. He did write openly about his sexuality<sup>28</sup>, but poems like “Homosexuality” to take the most obvious example (see my notes on this poem in my first chapter), were not published in his lifetime. We can theorize that even as he wrote such poems, he was aware of the difficulty of writing publicly about a desire that was placed outside of the public sphere.

What I will show is that he solved this problem not by coding the homosexual themes or by self-censorship but rather by writing a poem of opposition, that refused dominant literary values and created its own interpretive values, in particular perversions (e.g. undecidability and the lack of closure) of New Critical lyric values. In so doing, his poems’ values are more closely aligned with what it was

to live as a gay man. This was O'Hara's version of a gay lyric, and its critique is embedded in its oppositionality.

Before we see what such a gay lyric would look like in action as it were, we need to set out the parameters of a hermeneutics that takes seriously Perloff's question: is his poetic 'in any profound way, constructed by the poet's culture of sexual identification.' This hermeneutics must have an interpretive openness, not be fixed on finding and re-producing dominant values and must be open to understanding how those values may serve as expressions of how it feels to be homosexual and more precisely a gay artist. We must be willing to agree with O'Hara, at least provisionally, that "it's the property of a symbol to be sexual," (from "Returning") and that O'Hara's poetics are invested in the very linkage he references in that line (sexuality and the poetic) to produce a lyric that perhaps performs the most necessary theorization required for a gay poet—not to simply write about gay desire, but rather to discuss the challenges and power of homosexual expression itself, to imagine what kinds of critiques can be found in poems that are both perverse formally and that hold within them the perverse content of homosexual desire.

Making homosexuality an interpretive question that is both thematic and formal and placing it at the hermeneutical center of the work is crucial. By briefly reviewing here the history of a gay-centered approach to O'Hara's work specifically, we can be aware of certain essentializing risks to avoid but also be encouraged to take up new avenues of inquiry. In the first essay to take seriously the idea that O'Hara's sexuality was a crucial part of the equation, Rudy Kikel firmly, too firmly

perhaps, argues, “The originality of O’Hara’s designs are [in the journal entry cited earlier from *Early Writing*] rooted in gay impulses” (337). Because Kikel’s essay, not surprisingly titled “The Gay Frank O’Hara,” is so important in the genealogy of my own project, I want to consider more deeply what he initiated, accomplished, and left for others to pick up. In his essay, published in the influential *Gay Sunshine* periodical in 1978, he writes, “Without the fact of O’Hara being gay held *strictly* in the forefront of a critic’s and his or her reader’s mind, I wonder...whether the fully subversive nature of the poet’s contribution can be appreciated” (336). In other words, any reading of O’Hara that doesn’t take into account his sexuality risks an incomplete picture.<sup>29</sup> Note that Kikel is not saying the critic must emphasize, define or focus solely on the artist’s gayness, but rather if a project is going to look at the “subversive nature” of the poet, the critic is best served to at least theorize the connections between that ‘nature’ and sexuality.

We owe a debt to Kikel; however, his terminology and ideas like ‘nature’ and sensibility are used without the reflection they require. Take for example this moment:

How much do some of O’Hara’s early reading preferences (for Rimbaud, Auden, Djuana Barnes, Ronald Firbank, Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf) reflect a developing *gay* consciousness? How much does his *gayness* have to do with his aversion to the ‘unbearably right,’ with his tendency to parody his literary model ‘or at least to subvert its ‘normal convention’<sup>30</sup>? How much does his interest in Surrealism, with its potential for handling private anxiety in a veiled way, his rejection of ‘confessional’ poetry, originate in cultural homophobia? His scene of the ‘present’, the ‘immediacy’ of his work, his concern for the ‘commonplace’ and for Action Painting, in which the canvas becomes an arena upon which to *act* rather than a space in which to reproduce’: how essentially are these characteristics outgrowths of an accepted gay self? (336)

His questions, while smart and sensitive to O'Hara's work, attempt to make O'Hara's sexuality solely about sensibility, a sensibility constructed mostly as a response to oppression. With phrases like 'gay consciousness' and (later) "the nature of gay love" (345) and by calling upon Whitman's idea of "adhesive characteristics" (346), Kikel also essentializes and totalizes gayness, as is readily apparent in the final question above: "how essentially are these characteristics outgrowths of an accepted gay self." He goes on to read the poetry, astutely to be sure, by explicating the poems mostly for surface signs of camp, "gay doom" and "gay love" (i.e. more essentializing). (Of course, this was well before queer theory's interventions, and so this isn't surprising.) The effect this has is, rather uncritically, to accept the link between sexuality and 'sensibility' and 'nature' and to nominate O'Hara as a gay poet based on these readings. But for my designs this remains insufficient.

One of the key contributions from Smith's work is positing a non-totalizing, non-essentialized gayness, the idea that O'Hara posits a homosexuality that doesn't have to be and is not "a unilateral, circumscribed concept" and "not reducing it to one particular factor." She writes:

O'Hara's gay sexuality overlaps, then, with the carnivalesque, the campy, the humorous, the linguistically inventive, the deconstructive, and the ethically subversive in his work. This homosexuality is not just one of these things, and all these things are not only components of homosexuality. Rather O'Hara's sexual identity lies in the 'radical interconnectedness' [referring to Dollimore] of all these characteristics. (126)

Here she is making the case that O'Hara's sexual identity is not based on a fantasy of unity that an 'identity' belies but rather engages the "concept of identity-in-difference" (130), as I mentioned earlier. By seeing homosexuality in this way, the interpretive lens begins to widen enough to make sense of the idea that "it's the

property of a symbol to be sexual.” So, while I take heed of Kikel’s warning that the “subversive nature of the poet’s contribution [cannot] be appreciated” without recourse to the study of his sexuality as it is expressed in his poetry (336), there is much more we can do now, almost four decades later. For my own project, this means more specifically exploring the dominant (i.e. New Critical) lyric conventions O’Hara was responding to.

In speaking about camp language in O’Hara, Jarraway sets a productive example of this exploration. He writes that O’Hara’s camp language should be read in the context of New Critical values. Jarraway describes a “certain kind of poetry writing, prevalent in American universities by the early fifties, that, thanks to the proliferation of the New Criticism, particularly after the war, was allowing art, in fact, to accommodate itself to an intellectual establishment’s preference for the elegance of closed forms and appropriately rarefied content, in the wake of canonical high modernists such as Ezra Pound and especially T. S. Eliot—work of contemporary master craftsmen such as Robert Lowell, Delmore Schwartz, Karl Shapiro, and Richard Wilbur, among others.” But what I want to emphasize is how Jarraway reads O’Hara’s style. He writes that the poet’s “notorious disdain for the niceties of poetic style and technique (“if you’re going to buy a pair of pants[,] you want them to be tight enough so everyone will want to go to bed with you,” he acerbically posits in “Personism”), his endless experimentation with free-form structures, but most especially his often baffling and enigmatic semantic opacity or obliqueness—all of this indirection, no doubt, was calculated to hold art free of Cold War ideologues, intellectual or otherwise” (75). This supports my point that New

Criticism's reign and the academic poetry it produced were not, to O'Hara, solely or simply poetic concepts. They represented *values* he not only chafed against but indeed saw as pernicious, insidious, and unusable for avant-garde writers of any stripe. For example, the idea that a poem must be serious business, must be an 'important utterance' (something even Charles Olson upheld) was not just a poetic idea; its implication was that only certain ideas, feelings and experiences were 'suitable' for poetry. Such a *poetic* ideal hid an ideology that suggested a pure and an impure poetry and thus a pure and impure poet<sup>31</sup>. Put in those terms I hope it is obvious the kind of stakes that O'Hara likely felt were in play. I draw further support for this idea in that, as numerous critics have noted, for O'Hara life and poetry were lived as one. (Interesting that this was true for both Spicer and Wieners.) Certainly we can see ways in which this was literally true: his poetry is often comprised of his living, a record of who he knows, what he experienced, and even a daily moment-to-moment catalogue. But his poetry is not simply this record of a life but a poetic attempt to dramatize the various, shifting selves that made up his poems' unique subjectivity, to dramatize what the experience of living *feels* like. Isn't how we see and experience and respond to the world another way to describe a personal politics? It makes sense, then, that for O'Hara his politics would be expressed through his relationship to the dominant literary ideologies of his time, ideologies he saw as constricting and limiting and punishing.

### **Part 7: The Gay Poet as Narcissus the redeemer**

Though it is not traditionally taken as an explicitly gay lyric, O'Hara's poem "Mayakovsky" is perhaps one of his most important poems to theorize the idea of a gay poet. (Gooch has noted that the poem was written in the wake of a break with painter and some-time bisexual lover Larry Rivers.) The poem's "crisis of desire" as Lyttle Shaw puts it<sup>32</sup>, is the initiating factor that sets in motion the speaker's discussion of what it means to be a poet, and this fact alone must not be relegated to some peripheral meaning. While the lover's gender is never explicitly given, I will show O'Hara directs us clearly to a reading in which the speaker is in fact gay. The use of the Narcissus figure—a man who falls in love with another man, that is, himself—is one of the most telling factors<sup>33</sup>. This Narcissus-poet, however, adapts and indeed recuperates that figure's traditionally understood suicide narrative and transforms it into a transcendent story of perverse expression that is about "the ecstasy of always bursting forth" ("Meditations in an Emergency"), to use another line from a poem about the crisis of desire. In so doing, O'Hara develops a poetics that seeks to break the control (to ripple the surface) of the New Critical lyric poem, just as Narcissus breaks the surface of his reflection.

The poem begins with the speaker recalling a kind of first loss, a child's desire for his dead (or missing) father. Standing in his bathtub, naked and as vulnerable as when he was born, he calls for his mother. He has reverted to his childhood, but he is in great distress (his heart is racing, his temple is throbbing). He is experiencing a kind of amnesia or perhaps self-questioning, seemingly brought on by the desire for the kiss of his absent father. If he can obtain his father's physical



touch, he can re-join the world of movement, identity and desire (cruising): “then I can put on my clothes / I guess, and walk the streets” (9-10). The tone of a crisis of desire, even a crisis of self, set here will continue to drive the poem.

The second section is most central to the Narcissus<sup>34</sup> story. This section begins with the speaker again expressing desire, but he can only repeat “I love you” (11), perhaps suggesting he is seeking meaning in the words but finds emptiness in their echo. (Echo is the fairy who in the Narcissus myth is in love with the young man). So, the speaker ‘turns’ to his “verses / and my heart is closing / like a fist” (12-14). The suggestion seems to be the “turn” to verse (the pun a kind of doubling, another echo) has not expressed love, but shut down expression, even produced a kind of antagonism, or internal violence. The crisis rises again as the speaker apostrophizes his own poetry:

Words! be  
sick as I am sick, swoon,  
roll back your eyes, a pool,  
  
and I'll stare down  
at my wounded beauty  
which at best is only a talent  
for poetry. (15-21)

This is perhaps the key moment in which O'Hara signals that the poem is about homosexuality. His call is for his poetry not to be simply 'sick', but to be “sick as I am sick.” The distress he experienced in the first scene was brought on by desire and loss of self. Here, I want to suggest the phrase “as sick as I am sick” takes on the added meaning of homosexuality. It was widely understood by mainstream psychology that homosexuality was a psychological illness. In fact, one psychological explanation of homosexuality argued it was a problem with self-absorption. This

'sickness' is sickness of desire or lust. This reading is supported by the speaker's call for the words to "swoon," and for the now-personified poetry to "roll back your eyes" in ecstasy.

The "pool" of the eyes now becomes Narcissus's reflection in the river's surface<sup>35</sup>. The water he stood in, naked, in section one, now floats in front of his gaze. The use of Narcissus, as I suggested above, has strong homoerotic resonances, a beautiful young man falling in love with his own reflection. The Narcissus-as-gay-poet is what O'Hara will now develop as a redemptive character, not a suicidal self-absorbed myth. It should be noted here that in O'Hara's equation it is homosexual desire ("Words! be / sick as I am sick, swoon") that grants the poet access to the depths in the poem.

The end of section two shows the speaker's "talent / for poetry" does not lie in 'charming' or 'winning' (22) the reader. These terms are ideas of a successful poem O'Hara stridently rejects.<sup>36</sup> Instead, the reflective surface now blooms with 'clouds' of blood (24-5), as the "wounded beauty" of the poet pours forth. The cloud, however, can also be read as the reflection of the clouds in the sky, which would appear to the Narcissus-poet to be *deeper into* the water's illusion. The speaker 'embraces' the cloud; that is, he plunges into the water (26). In the prior versions of the myth this is a suicide (or at best an accident), but in O'Hara's version it allows the poet to 'soar' into the sky where the water of the river doesn't drown him but rains over him in a kind of baptism (27-8).

Section three transposes the scene of the drowning into a more modern idiom, finding the speaker on a city ledge looking down upon railway tracks "smoky

and / glistening with a passion for running” (34-5), a typical O’Hara motif of movement and flux. The scene is so inviting that the speaker ‘leaps’ off the ledge, but instead of a sudden, ugly death, he flies “into the leaves, green like the sea” (36). The river has widened into the sea, and once again the suicide is recuperated into a beautiful dive into expansiveness. [The allusions here, if one recalls O’Hara’s appreciation for both Whitman and Crane, can link the scene to both of these gay precursor poets—the green leaves a subtle reference to *Leaves of Grass* (“don’t let [the title] fool you: it’s really about sex,”<sup>37</sup> O’Hara wrote), and the leap into the sea an admittedly more problematic reference to Crane’s suicide.]

In the final section, the Narcissus-poet seems to mistake himself for the third-person: “It may be the coldest day of / the year, what does he think of / that? I mean, what do I? / And if I do, perhaps I am myself again” (46-9). In this question, the poet seems to be calling the ‘he’ to turn away from his reflection for a moment and to re-integrate into the world of desire (to walk the streets cruising for men?), to acknowledge the extremity of alienation of the modern world—what he has just described as the grey, cold, vague world, “snows and skies of laughter / always diminishing” (43-4). O’Hara ends the poem, “Perhaps I am myself again,” (48-49), and this is a self that has moved from “catastrophe” to “seem beautiful again, / and interesting, and modern”<sup>38</sup> (39-40). This moment is a perfect example of O’Hara’s penchant for seeing the self as multiform, the postmodern take on subjectivity that Smith argues. In fact, writing about this poem in particular, she says, “Subjectivity in O’Hara...is always an embodied subjectivity, which walks the city, performs variegated sexual identities, and ‘writes the body’. Vulnerability is physical: this is a

poet for whom ‘a talent / for poetry’ is a ‘wounded beauty’” (15). The speaker is unsure of his identity, saying only “perhaps” he is himself. The speaker might just as well still be waiting to return to himself. Indeed, he seems placid (“quietly waiting”) in his inhabiting of a “catastrophe” (37-8). What kind of world is this that awaits the ‘return’ of the self? It seems drab, even hostile and mocking—those laughing, receding skies “less funny, / not just darker, not just grey” (44-5). All of this complicates where the speaker has found himself, literally a liminal waiting, neither Narcissus nor his reflection, neither poet of the world nor poet of the self. These identities, in fact, are only surfaces, just reflections. The Narcissus tale, for the gay poet, is not a tale of giving into despair *because of* desire. It is *because of desire* that O’Hara’s speaker can escape the death of a fixed, singular identity. One must lose one’s self (yes, perhaps a kind of suicide, to understand a splintered self always in motion), must break the surface of language, the quiet lyric surface O’Hara is always toying with, to find the deepest, most complex, most catastrophic depths of all the quiet selves that hide there. The crossing from surface into depth, however, is dangerous, bloodying even. But it is productive of a “wounded beauty” that can do more than charm or win. Such a poet (gay, redemptive, Narcissus) transforms poetry into ‘soaring’, ‘leaping’, and “glistening with a passion for running” into the unknown.

But what of the poem’s strange title? How can we make sense of the Russian poet’s name in the context of my reading? I disagree with Lyttle Shaw that the poem is somehow just meant to show O’Hara’s love for Mayakovsky (24). Certainly, we know he did admire the poet. But this reading of Shaw’s is both too easy and, for a

poet like O'Hara, too directive. [Smith argues O'Hara allusions to other writers "are so diverse that we must abandon the diachronic model of the family tree for the synchronic model of the hpyertextual web: any connection between O'Hara and a precursor tends to splinter into differences, as a similarity emerges elsewhere" (46)]. It seems more likely that the title is meant, first, to set a tone of gravitas, to indicate that what will follow will be a serious discussion of what it means to be a poet, Mayakovsky serving as a kind of talisman for what O'Hara admires. Or perhaps Mayakovsky is the poem's ghostly interlocutor, not unlike the kind of conversations Spicer has with the ghost of Lorca. As much as Shaw's frame for the poem seems incomplete to me, he does write about why O'Hara turned to Russian literature (primarily Mayakovsky and Pasternak), and his comment sheds further light on the title. Shaw writes that "what a subject is, which modes of address are open to it, and which kind of freedom underlie it—ranging from political to sexual—are questions that O'Hara's connections to Russian literature continually bring up" (120). Mayakovsky may function, then, as a kind of permission for O'Hara to write a poem that calls into being a subject (the gay poet) that he knew would not otherwise be considered available to poetry. From the strange apostrophe to poetry itself (Mayakovsky was known for his use of apostrophe) to the playfulness of titling a poem with another poet's name without any other explicit reference to the poet anywhere else (referentiality in O'Hara is so often making some point), O'Hara calls on Mayakovsky to support his idea of a poem that resists normative reading practices. Shaw makes a fascinating comment in this regard when he points to where O'Hara and Mayakovsky actually diverged from each other on the very

grounds I've explored above. In his discussion of another poem, "Commercial Variations," Shaw writes:

Of eroticism entering the space of reading, Mayakovsky has said... "We abhor this foolish pandemonium because it creates around the difficult and important craft of poetry an atmosphere of sexual transport and swooning." By 1952, New Criticism had produced an American mythology of the "difficult and important craft of poetry" that was abhorrent to O'Hara and Ashbery. More important—though O'Hara would certainly not consciously distance himself from Mayakovsky's high ambitions—in the America of 1952, "foolish pandemonium" and "sexual transport and swooning" came to seem workable (or perhaps simply the only available) strategies of resistance. (136)

Shaw's final comments here—suggesting O'Hara redeems 'foolish pandemonium' and 'sexual transport and swooning' ("Words! be / sick as I am sick, swoon..."), as ways to resist New Critical self-importance and pomposity—are perfectly in line with my reading of "Mayakovsky." What's more, Shaw's words even serve as an appropriate description of the kind of gay poet O'Hara imagines, a poet invested in his own 'wounded beauty,' a poet of homoerotic desire whose expression bloodies up the very idea (the water's surface) of the perfectly placid New Critical poem.

Next, I want to offer up readings for two poems that I think enact the kind of gay lyric O'Hara theorizes in "Personism" and "Mayakovsky." These are also poems that directly refute the closeted writing O'Hara criticizes in "Those Who Are Dreaming." I've chosen quite purposefully two of O'Hara's most explicitly erotic poems.

"You Are Gorgeous and I'm Coming" is a poem that links sex (it is a poem about coming to climax) to poetry in the most intimate way. It uses a poetic form, the acrostic, which makes the writing process not about unfolding a single moment expressed by an eloquent utterance but rather by embedding within the poem the

name of the beloved, Vincent Warren. To see it another way, the poem rejects the structural principle of unfolding an experience in time, and instead the poem is built on secreting a name into the fabric of the poem, a name that for the reader has no meaning, because it exists completely outside the poem as a queer code. The fact that it can only be decoded by a reader who would know enough to seek out the code in the first place is a way for O'Hara to surreptitiously flout New Critical assumptions of interpretation in a way that is more pointed than the simple use of proper names of friends as in his other poems.

Certainly, an acrostic is nothing new or daring or even avant-garde. However, O'Hara is actually commenting on his own use of code, implicating himself as a poet. In other words, O'Hara creates a meta-textual moment in this poem that *points to* his use of the acrostic form to hide Warren's name, his *identity*: "...be that dark and purifying wave, the death of boredom / nearing the heights themselves may destroy you in the pure air / to be further complicated, confused, empty but refilling, exposed to light" (5-7). With its dual references to exposure and the threat that comes with it, this meta-textual moment seems to be discussing the very need for the acrostic code. This moment doubles as the most explicit description of the bodily sensation of release in the poem, and it is also the only moment in the poem that references the lover, the "you" that the poem spells out along the left margin. Warren, the one seemingly penetrated, is threatened with a kind of erasure if seen "in the pure air," emptied but refilled if "exposed to light." O'Hara is linking the self-shattering of the orgasm to the self-erasure of having a closeted sex life. This moment of release can only be redeemed by celebrating its own transgressive

nature (“I’m feeling corrupt” [3]). The synesthesia of the orgasmic experience (that corruption of the senses alluded to by the reference to Rimbaud and hearing color) deepens the moment of pleasure into something unable to be felt in normal ways.

At this point in the poem, the ‘coming’ becomes ‘becoming’, and the empirical becomes ontological. O’Hara writes that this acceleration of time felt at the moment of release is “becoming ultimately local and intimate” (10). This actually deflates the closeness a lover would feel, “local” hardly suggesting contact, and “intimate” in that context a little too precious a description for “coming.” Why such deflation? The partner is, after all, “gorgeous,” and was important and at-risk enough to be coded into the first word of every line. The answer can be found in how the poem ends, a description of the post-coital sweet nothings and heavy sighs of breath and collapse. For this scene, the speaker imagines “repeating the phrases of an old romance which is constantly renewed by the / endless originality of human loss the air the stumbling quiet of breathing / newly the heavens’ stars all out we are all for the captured time of our being” (11-13). The only thing of certainty—the experience seems to have taught the speaker—is loss. Even the use of “out” in the final lines revokes certainty, closure. Are the stars out (shining brightly) or, are they out, as in extinguished? Both options signify loss and both continue to build on the meta-textual discussion of exposure embedded into the poem’s formal structure. Indeed these meta-levels of meaning become the poem’s critique: lightness (revelation) or darkness (secrecy), the result is the same. The lover will leave; he cannot remain, because we (or perhaps more specific to this poem, the gay lovers) are “for the captured time of our being.”



Of course, this opens up the question of who or what captures 'us'. The poem is about sexual release and at the same time is about revelation and secrecy. The lovers' options are meaningless because neither can prevent loss, and yet these options are the very structuring terms of the poem itself. What's more, Warren as a sign (his name broken down letter by letter) has been shattered into tiny pieces of himself, and the orgasm isn't sufficient to piece him back together again<sup>39</sup> because neither revelation nor the closet can change society's need to know, to define, to make legible the homosexual. The poem as a space rather perfectly represents the space homosexuals found themselves, the space he points to in "Those Who Are Dreaming, A Play About St. Paul." That is, the gay lovers, though able to find sexual release in private (here represented by the hidden name), are left without really ever knowing each other, with knowing only the "obscurity of emotion which is simply and very definite / even lasting" (4-5) that comes, says O'Hara, in the moment of climax in "You Are Gorgeous and I'm Coming." This will always be the moment of loss for the homosexual.

"Poem (Twin spheres full of fur and noise)" is lesser known than "You are Gorgeous..." but is a more provocative poem, a kind of explicitly *gay* paean to oral sex whose meaning hovers on the very edge of explicitness. Before I explore this poem, though, I want to first note the many affinities the two poems share. While "You are Gorgeous..." does not stipulate an explicit scene of sex, as does "Poem," both evoke a unique experience of orgasm through a warping of the experience of time and through a vocabulary of violence. Both mediate the experience through aestheticization and more generally through a heightened use of language. Both

complicate the use of 'heaven' as a metaphor for sexual release. Both even refer similarly to "form." This suggests the orgasm as an experience offered O'Hara a unique palette with which to discuss poetry.

"Poem" has been read as a poem about fellatio, and this is certainly the case (the innuendo hardly conceals the act), but within the poem is a subtle discussion of art, time and history (and a linking of sex and art) that clearly works to provide its own commentary. In addition, the reader cannot inhabit the poem's sense of time with any certainty, because the way in which O'Hara unfolds the time-experience of the blowjob is warped.

The poem works by rendering oral sex in a language of almost absurd metaphors, not camp so much as a sublime (although the argument could be made that the speaker is marveling at the comedy inherent in such an act as much as he is suggesting its transcendent erotic power). The speaker's lover's testicles are "Twin spheres full of fur and noise / rolling softly up my belly bedding on my chest" (1-2). The penis is only given description through adjectival implication, alternately as flaccid and erect, or soft and hard. In this way, the poem clearly indicates it is interested not in graphically representing the act itself, but in something more akin to aestheticizing the experience, poetic language mediating even the lowly blowjob. For example, when the lover comes in the speaker's mouth, the speaker exclaims "my mouth is full of suns" (3). Instead of the poet referring to cum, the erotic charge of the moment transforms each microscopic sperm into a mouth full of blazing suns, suns that later in the poem "are smiling as they move across the sky"(12) or whose fire is associated with "the immortal spark" (10). In fact, the poem is fairly obsessed

with transforming the vulgar, messy discharge of cum into aesthetic artifacts, going so far as to create what reads like a kenning, the strangely beautiful “seed pearls” reference (8), which works in a similar way as the aforementioned “immortal spark.”

Perhaps what most transforms the poem into something more than a blowjob poem or sex-as-comedy poem is the radical (but subtle) play with temporality<sup>40</sup>, a warping of the present-ness or momentariness of the lyric. For example, the orgasm does not adhere to the forward flow of time, and in fact it destabilizes time. The first sign of this occurs after the lover comes in the speaker’s mouth. The speaker says, “that softness seems so anterior to that hardness” (4). Since the ‘softness’ is actually syntactically referring to the mouth ‘full of suns’, the line suggests the speaker is comparing the cum in his mouth to the hard penis that is simultaneously in his mouth; the cum only “*seems* so anterior” after all. Even the choice of the word anterior is significant. Think of the wordplay here: anterior means both ‘*coming* before in time’ but can also mean “nearest the head,” a kind of lewd joke. What’s more, an orgasm does *not* come before an erection; thus time is also reversed here. The circular nature of line 10 also plays with time, creating a beginning that is also an ending: “jetting I commit the immortal spark jetting.” Even a line like “each tendril is covered with seed pearls” (8), effects its own reversion in time. The line is describing the pubic hair (the slender curl clearly represented in the tendril) as now “covered” in discharge. But because the tendril comes before the seed, time (how an organism grows) is again reversed. And if we are to read, as I’ve suggested, the seed pearls as a kind of kenning for cum, then the speaker’s own

orgasm (his pubic hair is now “a tree in an ice storm”[9]) comes before he describes it (line 10, above). Time cannot be trusted to unfold as we understand it to. In addition, the playfulness and seemingly vulgar graphic quality swirling around the ‘moment’ of climax has unsettled our experience.

The next several lines, the physical center or heart of the poem, are a significant shift in tone and subject, and they complicate the poem’s relationship to and use of time. Suddenly, the speaker is mocking himself, and “that mouth that is used to talking too much / speaks at least of the tenderness of Ancient China / and the love of form the Odysseys” (5-7). When the speaker himself comes (again, line 10), he proclaims “you give that form [“the Ancients loved”] to my life” (11) and “as your chariot I soon become a myth” (13). The intensity of the moment leaps back in time and space thousands of years and thousands of miles. The speaker’s mouth is no longer just a receptacle but ‘speaks at last’ (or, at an end), and his body (prostrate, his lover sitting on chest) ‘becomes’ something essentially defined by its distance from the present—that is, a myth, ‘that form’ the ancients loved, like Odysseus, that great adventurer across time and space. But what’s important about these lines is that, even as they elongate and dilate the speaker’s perception of time, their double reference to form belies an interest in structures and traditions. O’Hara wants the reader to link lyric time with historical time, as both fantasies of stability in his mind. The power of the orgasm has cracked open this illusion.

At this point in the poem, even though the lyric has been hyperfocused temporally on a single moment (right before and right after orgasm), the lyric intensity *produced* by the poem is linguistically and temporally *outside* of standards

modes of perception. The final lines turn the orgasm into a decidedly temporal paradox: “which heaven is it that we inhabit for so long a time / it must be discovered soon and disappear” (14-15). The experience is lived in “for so long a time” *before* it is discovered, and what’s more, as it is discovered, it vanishes, which then revokes the possibility of this heaven having *ever* been inhabited, let alone “for so long a time.” The message is cutting: as soon as love (and lyric intensity) is apprehended, it vanishes. It is a rebuke of the New Critical reading practices that seek to fix meaning. To understand something fully is to possess it, to control its meaning and dissemination. In other words, to destroy it. Only flux and undecidability (where am I in time?) can keep desire shifting and shuttling within the perverse play of the gay lyric. For O’Hara, the homosexual’s orgasm is that unique experience that cannot be fixed in time or in meaning, and normative modes of expression are unable to even come close to representing it.

This poem requires a kind of coda, a kind of secondary reading that is enabled if we are to think intertextually, as O’Hara constantly encourages us to do in his work. If we are open to such a reading, we can see the poem contains a striking argument about what a gay poet requires (not coded words, but new words, a new lens on experience) and a radical way to see sex. In the process this reading also suggests one way a gay poet can escape the closeting effects of New Critical ideologies. This reading, below, sees the poem as a much darker discourse on time.

Read again the first line: “Twin spheres full of fur and noise.” With only slight alteration, the line is transposed into one of the most famous lines in Western literature: “full of sound and fury.” Suddenly, that strange reference to “noise,”

which certainly can be given sexual meaning, now seems to make more sense as an allusion. (To feign that the reference simply cannot be there is to suggest that gay sexuality is somehow so tainted a subject it cannot withstand the gravitas of Shakespeare, and certainly we must be open to the possibility that O'Hara would take great pleasure in joining the two.) The reference to Macbeth's great speech seems to ironize the voice behind "Twin spheres full of fur and noise," but perhaps not to the effect we might think. The speaker is not mocking gay eroticism through what seems an outlandish intertextual reference/comparison. On the contrary, he is suggesting something profound about the pleasure he is taking in describing a blowjob in these oh-so-literary terms.

As soon as the link is realized, one must now read this poem about orgasm in the context of Macbeth's famous soliloquy about time's passage and death. This profoundly complicates the poem's meaning. The speaker's playing with time as I've mapped it out is now a distraction (or protest?) against encroaching death: the death implied in the *petite mortes* of the orgasm; the death of the life-giving sperm 'lost' to homosexual pleasure-seeking; and even the death metaphorised in the lyric's inexorable advance to an end, its goal to trap the present-ness in the death (stasis) of mimesis, of poetry itself. The poem takes Macbeth's (Western) resignation that living is always about a constantly looming death and links it to the homosexual's reveling in the absurdity of the timeless moment of an orgasm that cannot be contained—that, because it involves only pleasure (between partners who cannot procreate) the orgasm isn't required to participate in the endless cycle of reproductive cradle-to-the-grave ontology that heterosexual sex often does. The

“tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing” is the tale of a reproduction-obsessed sex that, at the very point of orgasm, must give way to the realization that the new life just created will eventually end. I realize this is a polemical view, but I think O’Hara’s brazenness in so many ways in this poem encourages such an argument. At the very least, if one views homosexual oral sex as a kind of protest against the naturalizing of reproductive sex (as I argue is also at work in Wieners), the ironic voice of the poem is not mocking the act itself but the homophobic ideas that make it monstrous and vulgar. The poet here is both theorizing gay desire and poetic closure: Homosexuality cannot be contained (in time, history, or within normative lyric structures), because it does not have the same contact with death that a system based on reproduction has, that an approach to literariness whose self-important goal is immortality has.

As part of this discussion of O’Hara’s poetics of orgasm, it is important to note how O’Hara uses the experience of “coming” as an avenue to celebrate homosexual difference and as the perfect sensory experience to break the lyric’s contract with how it presents a moment in time. In the process, O’Hara naturalizes but also paradoxically defamiliarizes the experience of the gay male orgasm. He forcibly pulls the moment of release out of time and history, so as to critique the lyric trajectory of closure. One can imagine O’Hara, the great poet of mobility, dynamism and flux, is using the orgasm because it is that unique experience in human life in which, though we are motionless, held in the grip of someone else’s body (quite literally), our own body seems to embody “the ecstasy of always bursting forth” (“Meditations in an Emergency”).

If we see the above several poems in conversation with each other, as they do seem to be, O'Hara's critique begins to come into focus. As a way to bring together several critical and theoretical threads into a deepened and layered final critique, I want to suggest this critique gains its force from mocking the literary obsession with decidability (closure, intensity, unity as traditional lyric values), and in so doing is tied to the social and cultural regimes that are obsessed with making the homosexual legible, thus able to be disciplined. O'Hara embeds into the fabric of the poems the very question of whether to disclose or to hide within a code, but he makes the poem's question a pleasurable coming, a pleasure that doesn't end, because no answer is possible. His poems are not undecidable in that they don't have accessible meaning; my readings (and any number of other critical readings) attest to that. Rather metatextually and explicitly they are about their own undecidability, about a forceful, built-in resistance to any one meaning at any one moment. Thus, the New Critical indictment that poems that are 'confusing' or 'obscure' must be faulty artifacts holds no weight for these poems, for O'Hara's poetics. Their meaning is not final, not able to be closed off, to be as possessed as a product. By breaking the lyric contract the New Critics lived by, the homosexual poet can create new forms of meaning in order to render gay expression (as most powerfully seen in what I call O'Hara's poetics of orgasm) in the public sphere. The poems are really about the need to forge a whole new relationship to meaning and the reading practices that produce it, in direct contradiction to New Criticism.

I began this chapter with questions, and I want to end with one. Can we see the poems' homosexual desire representing metonymically the homosexual himself?



Does he abide in his own perverse *illegibility*? The homosexual for O'Hara need not relegate himself to the invisibly visible Herring would have him inhabit. He cannot be contained; he is not a fixed identity; he can be a site of pleasure, mobile, in flux, and constantly evading the powers that would fix him into (negative) meanings. Might we wonder if O'Hara shows the ways in which New Criticism, as an ideology, is at odds with (is hostile to?) the social experiences of gay men in Cold War America, experiences that must remain undecidable for purposes of either survival (in the worst of situations) or for purposes of pleasure (in the best)? Producing a poetry that imagines and in fact dramatizes such a resistant and self-empowered homosexual artist would have been an accomplishment in the post-Stonewall era, but during the fifties and sixties it is groundbreaking. That O'Hara's work hasn't been read this way traditionally (with the exception of some of the critics I've drawn on) surely speaks to the critical discomfort with seeing homosexuality in O'Hara in the first place. But just as we now deride readings of *Leaves of Grass* that don't take into account the poems' sexual meaning, we should deride readings that willfully resist a gay O'Hara when that is apparent. O'Hara should be read as a poet deeply invested in the intersection of sexuality and poetry. O'Hara may have said, "it's the property of a symbol to be sexual," but perhaps its time to read his poetry as one invested in the reverse: "It's the property of the(homo)sexual to be symbolic."

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> O'Hara criticism can be grouped into, in my opinion, three major narratives. There is the "poet among painters," a socially astute insider among the New York art elites whose poems are either glittery jewels of 'live talk' that embodied O'Hara's scene or are the linguistic version of Abstract Expressionism. This is the narrative that often highlights his "I do this, I do that" poems or perhaps his poems that use a raft of proper names and other references that come without context. A second narrative situates O'Hara as a one-of-a-kind amidst a community of avant-garde non-conformists, the very dynamic center of a moving target that was a major counter-cultural response to Cold War consensus. This narrative focuses on just how very much O'Hara's poetry was a calculated drive to *not* be literary or in other ways a part of the dominant culture, or even in some respects to be distinct from even such counterculture movements like the Beats or the Confessionals. It often sees his poetry as an adaptation of French surrealism with an American idiom modeled on the like of Williams. This narrative likes to discuss O'Hara's sprawling, difficult poems like "Second Avenue" or "Easter" as (sometimes flawed) masterworks. It often refers to O'Hara's poem "In Memory of My Feelings" as a perfect example of the postmodern belief in a self that is neither coherent, fixed, nor stable. The third narrative seems to work backward from O'Hara's death, and tries to figure out just what has made his work so influential after initially not being seen as important. It is a narrative of trauma, of a life cut short, a center removed from a thriving community of artists and poets, a life of the party snuffed out. This narrative seems

to be based on an implicit (sometimes explicit?) obsession with the scene of death as somehow biographically important. It adds a veneer of the tragic to O'Hara's life, a kind of death wish or inevitability to what it sees as his 'fast living'. (It is the most problematic and least productive narrative, obviously.)

Of course, these narratives are not so simply articulated nor are they mutually exclusive nor cordoned off from each other. In fact, they are often in conversation with each other. Some elements of his life and work are consistent threads through every narrative: the New York School, coterie and the poem as social text, for example, are repeated topics, especially in the more recent wave of O'Hara criticism. O'Hara's homosexuality and its relationship to his poetics, however, represents one thread that is by no means consistently discussed, and yet it is a thread that would actually seem appropriate to include. For some reason, in my view at least, it has been *the* vein of inquiry most stubbornly and willfully left aside, and when it is pursued it's almost always linked to his camp "sensibilities" or a poetry of surfaces, as if homosexuals were so easily categorized.

<sup>2</sup> The *Times* obituary is cited by Brian Glavey (796).

<sup>3</sup> Glavey writes, "[I]t is also important to attend to the statuesque O'Hara, the poet pausing before the eye of the spectator, aware of his body on display. This image of the poet is no less queer: his embrace of visibility is an important revision of a normative notion of masculinity for which homoerotic representations of the male body are unthinkable. Rather than associate this embrace of visibility with feminization, however, O'Hara created a homoerotic masculinity endowed with the

value and authority of modernist art” (784). Glavey also cites Gavin Butt in *Between You and Me*. Butts writes, “By painting O’Hara in nothing but his boots, Rivers echoes contemporaneous representations of men from physique photography which similarly stage the homoerotic appeal of the near naked (rather than nude) male body” (77).

<sup>4</sup> Shaw goes on to say that O’Hara’s comment means one can “accept not only poetry’s need for a new relation to and model of desire (not found in Kerouac) but also to see O’Hara’s deformations at the level of the writing subject as part of this necessary ‘ruining’—a ruining that here extends to straight accounts of abstract expressionism and disinterested historiography” (136).

<sup>5</sup> This is discussed in multiple locations, including Gooch (320), Shaw (101-2) and in a verbatim transcript of a discussion between Allen Ginsberg and Robert Duncan in *Homage to Frank O’Hara* (63).

<sup>6</sup> Glavey finds this quoted in a caption in David Lehman’s *The Last Avant- Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets*.

<sup>7</sup> David Jarraway’s work adapting Jonathan Dollimore’s “the perverse dynamic” to the study of O’Hara proved very productive for my own study. I write more about this later in the chapter. By narrativizing this aspect of O’Hara, I wanted to mirror the perversity of the content with a kind of formal perversity, a refusal of academic etiquette, thus the playful albeit non-traditional reversal of footnoted content with more discursive content. It is a tone and approach I will continue throughout my dissertation, as I’ve talked about in my introduction, Chapter One.

<sup>8</sup> Bergman explains the following in his text: “These early gay directions beg to be examined as ways into O’Hara’s early reception as ‘gay poet’ and placed in conversation with such facts that he was in fact widely read by gay liberationists.” For more on this, see Henry Abelove’s brief but excellent argument showing O’Hara’s influence on the Gay Liberation Front in his book *Deep Gossip*. Kikel, writing in 1978, makes an interesting distinction about how: “Willing his will, O’Hara acted ‘for himself’: he represents the endless endurance and resourcefulness of gay males at the breaking point *before revolution*. By *willfully making tracks* from social and artistic patterns that suggested closure to him, he set an example of gay independence, if not of collective liberation” (348). Unfortunately, this excellent idea to examine O’Hara’s movement away from “social and artistic patterns that suggested closure” as a way to understand his poetry’s liberatory potential isn’t really what Kikel’s essay gives its reader, with all due respect to Kikel’s powerful initiation here.

<sup>9</sup> Since this poem isn’t traditionally lineated, I’ve instead cited the page.

<sup>10</sup> Perloff writes, “That he was a radical and ‘different’ poet was my premise, but I regarded that oppositionality....as a question of individual ethos rather than as, in any profound way, constructed by the poet’s culture of sexual identification” (xii), and “The impact of culture and sexuality on that aesthetic was undoubtedly underestimated” (xiii).

<sup>11</sup> Though I choose this term because it reflects my own original close readings, I should note (and use as support) that Hazel Smith and Richard Deming also use it.

<sup>12</sup> An excellent criticism of this recourse can be found Allen Golding's essay on "The New American Poetry." I want to cite Golding's claims at length since in many ways it suggests a debate over O'Hara's oppositionality. Golding writes:

Recent readers still define *The New American Poetry's* identity in terms that uncannily repeat early responses to the text, terms that constitute what we might call the 'negative mirror' critique. In this critique, a number of early reviewers accuse *The New American Poetry* of lacking any positive identity beyond its claims to oppositionality, or of perpetuating the academicism it claims to resist. Thus John Robert Colombo writes, 'The criterion of inclusion is a negative one,' and Karl Shapiro finds in the 'self-styled literary Underground'-which he would apparently like to defend- 'only a negative version of culture poetry.' Among recent critics, Daniel Hoffman asserts that Allen's poets 'share little but their rebellion against the period style of the fifties'; Vernon Shetley finds in them 'an antiacademic opposition that had shaped itself as a mirror image of the academic formalism it was rejecting'; Walter Kalaidjian writes of 'the collection's oppositional dependence on the very traditions it repudiated.' In the 'negative mirror' critique, all resistance becomes merely reactive, shaped by its opposite, and indeed the critique itself can function as a way of denying cultural resistance any seriousness. While this set of claims has some substance to it, to exercise this co-optive logic in the present risks understating the undeniable historical impact of *The New American Poetry*; underplaying the genuine differences between the traditions upon which Allen and Hall, Pack, and Simpson drew; and overlooking the kinds of internal difference that I have laid out here. To trace those differences and to unpack the editorial process behind Allen's anthology should lead us to reshape and complicate the critical story that we tell about *The New American Poetry* and the literary historical moment it catalyzes. (206-7)

<sup>13</sup> A more open approach that occurs in the scholarship is the idea of an 'animating paradox,' a term used by more than one critic independently. Smith gives one example of such a paradox: "The New York Poets adopted an ambiguous position whereby they denied there was anything beyond surface, and at the same time, turned the surface into a kind of depth. In practice a surface was different from a symbol because it did not stand for a particular emotion or idea, but it inevitably

carried resonances beyond itself" (29). Lehman also discusses this idea. For Perloff, the paradox lies in the poetry's evocations of both intimacy and depersonalization. For Stein it's a play between the literary and anti-literary (what he calls a "poetics of experience").

<sup>14</sup> Perhaps the most problematic approach, in my view, has been to see O'Hara's oppositionality not only as solely a formal response but to see him as an apolitical poet. Simply seeing O'Hara as apolitical because he didn't use Khrushchev as a signifier for a political ideology or because he didn't respond directly to the importance of the Russian leader's visit in a poem that cites that visit (as Perloff's argument goes), is a reductive idea of what politics and poetry can be. Blasing's chapter on O'Hara is the best I've read at showing he most certainly can be read as a political poet. Smith also does an effective job at showing how the idea that O'Hara is a political lightweight is incorrect. She writes, "This [view of O'Hara] has been the case despite the fact that cultural and historical reference in his poems is dense and wide-ranging. In fact, O'Hara's poetry projects a politics of difference which, in some respects, is more comprehensive in the light of 1980s and 1990s postmodernist politics.... This is a politics of surface, contradiction and the personal, rather than a cohesive and objective statement. It is also what I will call a *personalised* politics" (16).

<sup>15</sup> From Cheever's 1959 journal: "That was the year everybody in the United States was worried about homosexuality. They were worried about other things, too, but their other anxieties were published, discussed, and ventilated while their anxieties

about homosexuality remained in the dark: remained unspoken. Is he? Was he? Did they? Am I? seemed to be at the back of everyone's mind. A great emphasis, by way of defense, was put upon manliness, athletics, hunting, fishing, and conservative clothing, but the lonely wife wondered, glancingly, about her husband at his hunting camp, and the husband himself wondered with whom he shared a rude bed of pines. Was he? Did he? Had he? Did he want to? Had he ever? But what I really mean to say is that this is laughable. Guilty man may be, but only an absurdly repressed people would behave this way" (qtd. in Lehman 13).

<sup>16</sup> One of the strengths of Smith's work is her reviews of various critical approaches, including a general review (4), a review specific to approaches that take seriously O'Hara's homosexuality (18), and an excellent summary of the critical debate over O'Hara's work having political resonances (16-17), as I note in note 12 above.

<sup>17</sup> Shaw's work was highly suggestive to my thinking in the early stages of my writing, though the ideas of perversity and the terminology of 'breaking a contract' are actually well represented in O'Hara scholarship and so not solely drawn from Shaw. I also found suggestive a way in which Shaw's methodology differed from other approaches. He looks at clusters of poems (11) instead of what he sees as a trend toward using short citations from poems collected as patterns, as well as using "Personism" as a 'core' to the work. Shaw argues "reading him exclusively in his own terms has a very traditional and limited effect" (10), an argument similar to the one I make in my chapter on Jack Spicer. Lastly, I find an affinity with Shaw's approach



to the lyric. In an off-handed remark, tellingly, Shaw calls lyricism itself “poetic subjectivity’s normative scale” (136).

<sup>18</sup> More specifically, Shaw defines the concept of coterie as a “seam between the empirical and the rhetorical” and about “conceptualizing the links between biography and textuality....” He adds that he wants “to reflect more generally on the often-elided theoretical dimensions of community. As community’s evil twin, coterie illuminates crucial assumptions about the ways that styles of referentiality are taken to encode models of audience. Because the charge of coterie marks a *breach* of an interpretive community’s tacit standards, that is, it can also be understood to anatomize that community’s operations as such” (16). Though this diverges from my own study, I think it’s worth noting that the breach of standards can be read in this way as well, and not solely as a breach of New Critical reading practices and aesthetics.

<sup>19</sup> Shaw here quotes from page 22 of O’Hara’s *Standing Still and Walking in New York*, edited by Donald Allen.

<sup>20</sup> Dollimore defines his “perverse dynamic” as that which “discloses not an underlying unity in the name of which social division can be transcended, but a radical interconnectedness which has been and remains the unstable ground of both repression and liberation; the ground from which division and discrimination are both produced and contested.” It is “not an identity, a logic or an economy, so much as an anti-teleological dialectic producing knowledge in opposition to destiny”(229)

and it “exploits the inextricable connections between perversity, proximity, paradox, and desire” (230).

<sup>21</sup> It is important to note that Jarraway insists that we don’t give into the “the temptation to view O’Hara’s queer perversities as an artful dodge in response to a punishingly homophobic period in American history and the equal temptation to read his at-times maddening thematic tendentiousness and frequent stylistic density as the lubriciously transcendent gestures of political and cultural quietism...” (85).

<sup>22</sup> Jarraway here, of course, cites Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality, vol. 1, An Introduction*, pages 101 and 18 respectively.

<sup>23</sup> This volume is drawn in large part from *New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*.

<sup>24</sup> Tom Lehrer, “I Got It From Agnes” (1953).

<sup>25</sup> Hazel Smith picks up on Bredbeck and pushes his ideas further but does not argue a totally new point, it seems to me.

<sup>26</sup> For Bredbeck, oddly Lucky Pierre is able to be both a receptive and a penetrating sexual actor. While I suppose this is physically possible (the three lovers would have to stand or lie back to front, with the middle man penetrating the man in front of him, while he is being penetrated from behind), it would require such an awkward kind of synchronized fucking that I can’t imagine this is really what Lucky Pierre refers to. (I can’t explain why Bredbeck would get this so wrong other than to suggest he was unfamiliar with, or with imagining, this kind of sexual practice.) I

hope I've only cited those ideas of his that would be unaffected by this mischaracterization.

<sup>27</sup> O'Hara's poem "Ballad" (367) is even more explicit about the closet:

Yes it is sickening that we come  
that we go that we dissembling live  
that we leave that there is anywhere in the world someone like us  
it is that we are always like a that never that  
why we it is me  
why is it that I am always separated from the one I love it is because of.... (1-6).

See also the sarcastic, biting tone of "Tonight at the Versailles, Or Another Card Another Cabaret": "I am appearing, yes it's true / accompanied by my criminal record / my dope addiction and my sexual offenses / it's a great blow for freedom...." (1-4).

<sup>28</sup> As Kikel, Smith and Jarraway all note, O'Hara's poems are surprisingly rich in homosexual content. Smith, for example, writes that "many of O'Hara's poems engage quite directly with gay sexuality, gay social environments, gay culture, and the gay ethos of the 1950s and 1960s"; that "there are also numerous mentions of gay archetypes"; and that "[h]omosexual contexts...flit in and out of the poems." She adds, "But more fundamentally, the emotional and social tenor of the poetry is...affected by the poet's sexual orientation" (127-8).

<sup>29</sup> I'm in no way arguing here that every poet who is gay must be read for signs of that homosexuality. I discuss these larger issues of categorization and the idea of a 'gay writing' in my introduction, Chapter One.

<sup>30</sup> Here Kikel cites Perloff (*Poet Among Painters* 139).

<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of the idea of the “impure” poem see Paul Carroll.

<sup>32</sup> Mayakovsky “enters O’Hara’s poetry at charged moments,” according to Shaw.

Citing Gooch’s biography Shaw notes the poem was written in 1954 and parts “were conceived initially as a response to O’Hara’s recent breakup with Larry Rivers.”

Gooch reveals that James Schuyler suggested the title of the poem, “inspired by a well-thumbed copy of Mayakovsky’s poems lying on O’Hara’s desk” (Gooch 254).

<sup>33</sup> For more on this idea, see Steven Bruhm’s *Reflecting Narcissus: A Queer Aesthetic*.

<sup>34</sup> James Breslin gives an excellent reading of this poem in which he also makes the connection to Narcissus. His reading of that figure, though, fails to see it as having any homosexual connotations.

<sup>35</sup> It must be noted that O’Hara’s feelings about the Narcissus myth are anything but simple: “I wonder if the course of narcissism through the ages would have been any different had Narcissus first peered into a cesspool. He probably did” (*Early Writing* 97). For a discussion of this, see Caleb Crain’s essay on O’Hara (297).

<sup>36</sup> See “Personism” for example:

But how 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? Too many poets act like a middle-aged mother trying to get her kids to eat too much cooked meat, and potatoes with drippings (tears). I don’t give a damn whether eat or not. Forced feeding leads to excessive thinness (effete). Nobody should experience anything they don’t need to, if they don’t need poetry bully for them” (*Collected* 498).

<sup>37</sup> This can be found in *Early Writing* on page 116. See Shaw’s reference (96).

<sup>38</sup> For O'Hara, the beautiful, the interesting and the modern aren't inherently or essentially to be valued, and in fact without context these adjectives are as empty of meaning as a repeated "I love you." See my above note referencing "Personism."

<sup>39</sup> In a sense, as soon as Warren's name is decoded the lyric surface itself is shattered, or least the reader's experience of the lyric surface is shattered. The reader's sense of the poem as emanating from a singular utterance is taken apart when she discovers the poem originated as a set of discrete clues. The poem, at that moment, is a puzzle in which the reader becomes more aware of the edges around each piece than of the final image.

<sup>40</sup> For more on temporality, see Breslin. He argues, "If the modernists tried to spatialize the lyric form, O'Hara radically temporalizes it" (216). In his discussion of "A Step Away from Them," Breslin writes, "Temporality is felt to be destructive, not a fullness, and the poet seems passive and sad and empty. It's as if the thought of the mortality shared by all makes him just another anonymous figure in the city; he's lost his animating sense of difference" (219). A very different discussion of temporality can be found in Jose Munoz's reading of "Having a Coke with You," in his introduction to *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (5-11).

## CHAPTER 3

### JACK SPICER AND THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY: DIRECT ADDRESS AND THE READER-LOVER

#### Part 1: Preface

April 2014

Dear Jack,

Is there any other way to begin the great wrestling match that is writing about your poems than to simply address you, call your ghost onto the page? From my first encounter with your utterly strange and indomitable voice—a poem entitled “Homosexuality” no less—I have felt drawn to you and repulsed by you, much as your friends once were in San Francisco, in the North Beach bars you haunted.

Should I invoke your Martians, the ‘outside’, the dictation, the radio signal—which of these methods of self-disavowal would replace the grand mythos you so carefully crafted for yourself? I will seek invention, not disclosure, at your suggestion. Can I replace the ideas that spill out from your poems, with something more ‘real’, something more of-the-word—like the blond boys you wanted to make materialize, in your letters to Lorca? For the second time I find myself invoking a body.

I admit, my own “I” deliquesces the more I write about you, the more I try to fix in words just what you meant by the dream of making poetry “almost a bedroom.” Or a dozen other mysterious yet intuitively sensed lines. The loneliness you felt so acutely, even when surrounded by a gay community of your own making, the

loneliness you used to rope together your two beloved and cursed identities, poet and homosexual...I will try to make sense of this emotional state. Invoking you I invoke the orphic look back that erases you, leaves me with myself, my loneliness, my desire. And yet *by* invoking you, *through* addressing you, I create a correspondence, a relationship, in which I, as your reader, am implicated, brought forth into being. Let's be alone together.

Signed,

The Reader of the Poem to the Poet

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If there is a poet who could command such an introduction—less criticism, more poetry; romanticized; lyric and indulgent in its risk—it is Jack Spicer. But I begin in this way, with this voice, with what is surely at best an unorthodox way to introduce a critical discourse on Spicer, because it foregrounds and even enacts the very issues my discourse here will take up. How else to address the poetry of Spicer than to *address* Spicer himself, the letter an address he so powerfully inhabited as lyric? Just as Spicer eschewed the necessity of “connection” (in all its connotations), I also hope to put in that word’s place “correspondence” (in all *its* connotations): “Things do not connect; they correspond” (133).

My letter to the dead Spicer, like his own letters to the dead Garcia Lorca and addresses to the dead Walt Whitman, allows me to introduce several of the very ideas that comprise Spicer’s mytho-poetics and that will layer my readings of his work. From the various metaphors Spicer used to explain his ‘reception’ process (he did not receive, he *was* the receiver)<sup>1</sup>, to the sexual rhetoric he used to talk about

poetry, to his theorizing of homosexuality as a state of being alone, Spicer's poetry may resist clarity, but often his ideas seem all too clear, prescriptive, emanating from a voice aware of its desire to direct us. Spicer famously declares, "Loneliness is necessary for pure poetry. When someone intrudes into the poet's life (and any sudden personal contact, whether in the bed or in the heart, is an intrusion) he loses his balance for a moment, slips into being who he is, uses his poetry as one would use money or sympathy" (150).<sup>2</sup> Critics most attuned to these ideas have spoken at length on this topic, but for my tastes too few have allowed for the possibility that Spicer's relationship to his own desires was more productive than destructive. Spicer tells us quite explicitly that poems are lovers, or the beloved, "the ones that must be seduced" (138). The lesser ones are paid lovers, "whorish cousins" to the beloved. He says plainly that when he writes he is seeking a lover; the lover is his audience. He also tells Lorca, "When you are in love there is no real problem.... I may not be a better poet when I am in love, but I am a far less frustrated one. My poems have an audience" (138-9). For a poet like Spicer who worries that his desire will cause him to 'lose his balance for a moment, slip into being who he is,' this seems to open more questions than it does provide answers, a rich location for a critic.

What is telling about much of the critical discourse on Spicer is how often it focuses directly on or circles the idea of a relationship between poet and reader, or more generally audience. This relationship isn't always discussed in terms of the lyric specifically, but it is nonetheless a consistent thread. It is also telling how rarely that relationship is treated with the specificity it seems to demand; for it is a relationship again and again marked as homosexual or to use a term critic Maria



Damon uses (and that Spicer himself uses satirically) “metasexual.”<sup>3</sup> For a poet of the postwar era to talk so openly and complicatedly about homosexuality (thought to be a threatening but invisible presence), this should be reason enough for criticism to grapple with homosexuality as a meaning-intensive site in Spicer’s poetry; such criticism should be especially sensitive to issues surrounding audience, reader-relationship, desire, sex, gender, the public-private split, or similar ideas. Certainly, these ideas are discussed at length in the criticism, but they are often de-linked from Spicer’s homosexuality and from his own conflicted study of homosexuality as a concept and category. Consider even the simple act, so prevalent in Spicer’s work, of making poetry and love—or poetry and sex, or poetry and homosexual—interchangeable: “The pieces of the poetry or of this love” (“A Textbook for Poetry”), or the other numerous lines that do something similar. For a homosexual of the this era, that ‘or’ invites so many questions.

In this spirit, I would like to position my contribution as a necessary re-emphasis, a way to recognize the importance of homosexuality in Spicer’s work. I contend that his use of sexuality (in many ways) can help crack open the previously understudied political and social *effects* produced in Spicer’s eroto-poetics. As with Wieners, Spicer offers both a new poetics and a new politics (and links them) meant to at least critique and at best overcome the negative counter-effects (ghettoizing, disciplining, etc.) produced by claiming an identity in postwar America. To this end, first, I will introduce a poet who, from the beginning, was a theorist of gay identity and desire, deeply invested in understanding what homosexuality means to a poet and citizen of the Cold War United States. I will illustrate how Spicer’s poetry and

biography (in particular his role in a coterie) both point us toward his need to understand the implications for the claiming of a sexual identity at this fraught historical moment. How does he position himself, and how was he positioned, to be a forceful critic of social control, by both the homogenizing powers of subcultural affiliation and by the punishing effects of the dominant culture? What happens when a marginalized individual, one already suspicious of the liberating potential of a unified self, risks forfeiting whatever individuality he has in order to become part of an equally marginalized group? This is the question Spicer asks as a member of both the Berkeley and San Francisco Renaissances and as a citizen of a culture that promulgated consensus.

I will next propose three responses to this question that Spicer articulates. First, through a reading of "The Unvert Manifesto," I will argue Spicer imagined an alternative to the hierarchies of inside/outside that identity requires. While his alternative is satirically positioned as a kind of fantasy in this work, Spicer uses it to highlight the need for the poet to be the great destabilizer by aestheticizing queer sex as an art form, one radical in its ability to subvert the naturalizing effects of identity categories as practiced by the dominant culture. The second response will unfold the even more radical message at the heart of Spicer's "Three Marxist Essays." Here I will show how Spicer responds to the question above by recuperating homosexuality's social marginalization as potentially transformative, re-making isolation as something shared by a group (a 'we alone' formulation that lies at the heart of Spicer's poetics and erotics), and further making this a form of political resistance to the "capitalist bosses who do not want us to be alone" (328).

The final thrust of my argument will place poetry itself as resistance. Through Spicer's sexualizing of the reader-writer relationship in the lyric direct address, I will show how the poet seeks to make the lyric a social text, which recent scholarship<sup>4</sup> has suggested as a productive vein of inquiry. Furthermore, I will suggest Spicer was able to construct a lyric that was not simply a social text but a social *space*, and what's more a homosexually-defined space comprised of structures of unreproductive desire—not subjugating identificatory structures. This space, one I will suggest is similar to what Virginia Jackson calls the 'intersubjective' space of direct address, allows Spicer to give the homosexual poet a way to resist the social isolation forced upon him by society, an isolation the lyric mistakenly valorizes as self-protecting. The lyric experience becomes re-focused not on the self that sat alone during the scene of writing but on the scene of reading that produces a 'we alone' so central so Spicer's poetics and erotics.

## **Part 2: Spicer's study of homosexuality**

Even during a time when gay men and women necessarily had fraught relationships to their homosexual desires, Spicer's life was especially marked by difficult relationships, alcoholism, and paranoia. As Robert Duncan discovered after he published his now famous essay "The Homosexual and Society," being openly gay only made matters worse. (Duncan's publication of the essay in *Politics* in 1944 led directly to a homophobic response from editor John Crowe Ransom, as I discuss in my introduction). Duncan, one-time friend and Berkeley Renaissance co-founder, said that for Spicer "homosexuality was a curse, a trick in the game of a God who

predestined such love of man for man to damnation.<sup>5</sup> Being a gay poet, wrote Duncan, was a “dual curse” for Spicer (xiv). Donald Allen, who as editor of *The New American Poetry* anthology in 1960 gave Spicer one of his only national audiences at the time, saw something else in Spicer. In his introduction to Spicer’s posthumously published *One Night Stand*, Allen recalled Spicer as “the most vividly original gay man I’d ever encountered anywhere” (xxix). This openness is in line with Spicer critic John Emil Vincent’s analysis: “From the beginning of his career [he] did not hold back,” producing a poetry that “includes a very open consideration of the politics of nationality and homosexuality” (152).

What can be said with certainty is that Spicer was a man who thought deeply about his own sexuality and how to express it in his poems. He didn’t seem to use difficulty as a mask, and in fact some of his most accessible poems are about his homosexuality. But the nature of that identity, that sexual expression, was under analysis, rather than a decided issue. Spicer used his poetry to theorize a particular kind of sexual identity that was more complex and perhaps more forward-thinking than the prevailing ideas that swirled among homosexual activists of the 1940s, ‘50s, and ‘60s; more specifically his ideas diverged in profound ways from the outré, celebratory sexuality of Beat poets like Allen Ginsberg.<sup>6</sup>

In an early poem, “Homosexuality,” the poem’s title doesn’t easily connect to the poem’s content, which is resistant to any simple interpretation even outside the lens of the title. The poem is here cited in its entirety:

Roses that wear roses  
Enjoy mirrors.  
Roses that wear roses must enjoy  
The flowers they are worn by.

Roses that wear roses are dying  
With a mirror behind them.  
None of us are younger but the roses  
Are dying.  
Men and women have weddings and funerals  
Are conceived and destroyed in a formal  
Procession.  
Roses die upon a bed of roses  
With mirrors weeping at them.

Spicer's poem seems to take on identity formation as "conceived and destroyed in a formal / Procession," the homosexual as an infinitely reflecting image (in this case, a rose) that will perish on a pyre of bodies of a ghettoized sameness. What seems to reside at the center of the poem is the notion that self-naming and identity formation, bordered by traditional structures of marriage and courtship, requires upheaval. In this way, it is perhaps a powerful critique of an American double standard that prevents the homosexual (or queer) from forming authentic relationships (not just reflections of self or mere performance and affect) and then criticizes him for what it labels an innate drive to pursue a sexual shadow life of anonymous sex and promiscuity.

Clearly, Spicer was grappling with what it would mean to call one's self a homosexual at such a time. We can see his probing of what the homosexual identity means in his involvement in early gay activism. According to Kevin Killian's archival work, Spicer was involved with the Mattachine Society briefly in 1953. In a state convention speech that begins with questioning the term "gay culture," Spicer said:

[W]hen asked whether I am homosexual, I answered by asking 'When?' Then it was pointed out to me that I am homosexual not only when I am indulging in a sexual expression, I am homosexual many other times. Perhaps there is something inherent in homosexuality that gives me a different response to the world that I live in. Or perhaps there is something inherent to my adjustment to homosexuality in contemporary society that determines my

method of expression. But at any rate, I am homosexual a good deal of the time and I draw from, I exist in, and I hope I may contribute to an area of expression and activity which may be defined by the name 'culture.' We think of many men who are prompted because of their homosexuality to do certain things . . . So I like the word 'culture' now because I see it has a meaning, a meaning of activity, thought, or expression. However, we are not an isolated group. We belong to humanity. (qtd. in Killian 27)

Spicer here makes it clear that he is interested in homosexuality as a potentially meaning-intensive identity able to express more than just one's sexual activity. He also seems to be saying that something about being gay may even 'determine' his "method of expression," a moment of essentializing. Both of these ideas will find articulation and complication in Spicer's poetry, discussed below.

Killian writes that Spicer "suspected that the sex act itself might not be 'natural' per se, or at any rate that it might carry, like a virus, encoded layers of meaning and learning within it. The truth is that sex divorced from the social realities around it had reduced meaning and impact." In Spicer's view, Killian believes, "sex was, among other things, 'a sort of trial and error way of learning,' not only about anatomy, but about ethics. The reduction of a human being into sex object makes both object and reducer unhappy" (23). (Killian wonders if "perhaps there's a more fully articulated politics in Spicer's writing that has hitherto been perceived" [23]. My readings will make a case there is.)

Spicer was also determined to take up the more specific question of the gay poet. He does this most prominently in "Some Notes on Whitman for Allen Joyce." (Spicer was intimate with Joyce in 1953.) I will categorize this piece a poem, though with the disclaimer that its title and form suggests it doesn't fit this term. In terms of content, this is a diatribe from Spicer about how much Whitman, and in particular

his proto-homosexual paean “Calamus,” was naïve and a failure, heart-breaking in that the failure was not just a failure of a poem but of life in which ‘his love’ is defined more by loss. Whitman, says Spicer, didn’t understand that America was a country of “cruelty,” not comradeship or adhesiveness or democratic manliness. As Damon notes, in her discussion of this poem, Spicer’s “Oedipal rant against the father figure” shows him to be “let down” because Whitman’s “blithe pronouncements about the centrality of homoerotic affection to American public life...could not protect the mid-twentieth century queer from the whip and the lash of the law” (“Ghost Forms” 150). For Spicer, this makes “Calamus” “not of a possible world, but as a lost paradise.... In the last sense of the word—a fairy story,” meaning a kind of homosexuality that is feminized<sup>7</sup> but also a story that is told to children, that is ‘make-believe’ and about creatures that may be magical but don’t exist. Only children or the mentally unhinged could believe such a tale. Spicer is rejecting a Whitmanian epistemology of sexuality, in particular a version that misplaces the political and poetical utility of the genitals and genital contact.<sup>8</sup>

The poem actually begins with an epigraph from *Leaves of Grass*: “let shadows be furnished with genitals.” Disregard, just for a moment, that Spicer evokes Whitman’s poetry in a poem that denies its power. What is important about this epigraph is not just what it says but what it leaves out. Immediately following these words in *Leaves of Grass* is this: “let substances be deprived of their genitals.” (Thus it reads, “let shadows be furnished with genitals, let substances be deprived of their genitals.”) The epigraph, then, does not function, as is most often the case, as a kind of homage, indication of inspiration, or some other way to align the poem with

something prior, usually a very specific idea. In this case, I argue, the epigraph is evidence of the kind of flawed thinking that ‘damns’ (to Spicer’s way of thinking) Whitman’s epistemology. Whitman’s lines are a fundamentally backward ontology of the body: He genitalizes the abstract (language, nation) and neuters the physical body. (Of course, Whitman sees this as a democratization of desire.) Furthermore, Spicer had to know any serious reader would seek out, or know, the original context of the initial line. Cleverly, he transforms the epigraph into the very ghosted genitalia the poem critiques—the absent presence of the missing second line. The fact that Whitman wishes substance to be “deprived” suggests another level of the ghosted, since it evokes yet another absent presence, noting something that once was (or was possible) but that is no longer. The epigraph is a kind of neutering.

A similar idea is discussed at the heart of “Some Notes on Whitman for Allen Joyce,” and at the point where the poem shifts from “notes” to direct address<sup>9</sup>. Spicer writes, “Forgive me Walt Whitman, you whose fine mouth has sucked the cock of the heart of the country for fifty years.” Here we see the above idea again: the country (abstraction) is genitalized. It is orally pleased by Whitman’s ‘fine mouth,’ that is, metonymically Whitman’s poetry. This misplaced focus—sucking an imaginary cock instead of a real one—distracts Whitman from seeing the “cruelty” that has infected the country, giving him gonorrhea: “You are sucking the cock of a heart that has clap.” A symptom of the clap is penile discharge, so that fact that Whitman is made to, in particular, put a clearly infected penis in his mouth is a grotesquely ironic punishment for the gay poet. Spicer is so critical of this misplacement and misunderstanding of genitlization that he subverts Whitman’s own rhetoric, and



turns his language of the “comrade” and his famous “hand-in-hand” trope against the poet: “The comrade you are walking with suddenly twists your hand off.” Even Whitman’s famous beard is mocked; his naiveté tosses Spicer out of a ridiculously “bearded paradise,” which perhaps obscenely refers to the pubic hair around the genitals.

The hand-in-hand trope, however, returns, this time as a kind of physical embodiment, not as a abstract idea. Spicer says “when I touched you [referring to Joyce] or when I put my hand upon your hand” that he is moved to ‘dream’ of “Calamus.” Thus, physical contact (as opposed to abstracting the genitals) is what produces effects in the real world; it has prompted and created the very words we now read. Ironically, a gay erotic moment of contact has inspired a blistering critique of the progenitor of gay poetry in the U.S. Spicer concretizes political power within the gay body, in direct response to Whitman’s abstractions. It is the beginning of a Spicerian gay poetic.

### **Part 3: ‘We alone’? Identity as double bind, paradox and trap**

A full view of Spicer’s relationship to homosexuality must take into account not simply his understanding, context-less, of anatomy, ethics, and even epistemology. Yes, this is all crucial, though perhaps understudied, but for Spicer homosexuality was an idea he understood in context of community. In the above section about his time with the Mattachine Society, Spicer hinted at this vein of thinking: “we are not an isolated group. We belong to humanity” (qtd. in Killian 27). This may have been a political argument, but it would seem completely at odds with

Spicer's experience of a marginal life in the gay subculture of postwar San Francisco. Such a contradiction demands inquiry.

Michael Davidson's work has been path breaking in this regard. Spicer's experience with these groups, and perhaps even more importantly the gay bar culture of the city, had a profound influence on how Spicer viewed community as having a real effect on both poetry and identity. The intense community-forming activities Spicer took part in were not simply outlets for "bar talk" and poetry readings. According to Davidson, workshops, readings, publications, and time spent together in the North Beach bars, these shaped a response to audience that the Spicer group nurtured. He writes:

The Magic Workshop, Sunday poetry readings, favorite bars like The Place and Gino Carlos, group magazines like *J* and *Open Space* were the major venues for the Spicer group, each held together by pledges of loyalty and claims of territoriality. However insular such a community might have been, it created an audience that could set itself against a heathen world that had failed to listen. (*San Francisco* 153)

Crucially, Davidson situates Spicer's sense of insularity within the context of his homosexuality. In his discussion of what he calls Spicer's dialogic approach to poetry, Davidson writes:

For a homosexual poet, living in Cold War America during the 1950s and 1960s, such [an insular] community was especially vital. Spicer's cultivation of insularity.... may have been a necessary strategy in gaining speech at all. The McCarthy trials, the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings, and civil rights clashes were providing plenty of models of the 'outside' (Communists, blacks, eggheads, ethnics, and queers) against which average white citizens should defend themselves. Spicer, rather than rejecting such exclusionary rhetoric, inverted it to his own uses. (159)

It is not simply a stance Spicer and his group takes. It is not simply a desire to keep others out so as to maintain a certain esoteric value to the poetry they produced. It

is a survival strategy structured on self-exile from a larger, toxic society obsessed with rooting out the enemy within. While this could produce a 'closet' for some, or a reaction to the closet (see Wiener's use of failure), Spicer seems to have turned this ethics into his own poetics. (I discuss later how Davidson sees in that poetics a dialogism that for Spicer exerted a "power" emanating from confrontation.) As Damon reminds us, a necessarily oppositional culture really comes into its own when internal differences can be acknowledged at a public level; in other words, "cultural integrity is as much about difference as it is about solidarity" ("Ghost Forms" 147).

But more central to my discussion is how this space for interaction would become problematic to say the least. The critical consensus on Spicer focuses on his ambivalence, at best, to community and subcultural affiliation. Damon, one of the most articulate Spicer critics, sees this as a double bind. She writes of one particular poem pointing to "the double bind of the self-identified gay community at the time: the choice of love-object that identifies the community and gives it coherence is not only illegal but condemned by all institutional authorities: medical, religious, legal, and social. Having to hold in one's feelings and deny them expression cripples one's ability to love, since love is communication (*Dark End* 172). Damon's double bind also situates us, as I will do below, to think through the lyric address, the poet to the reader, and uses a different kind of confrontation, the confrontation that is desire.

But the subcultural affiliation he seems to have so cultivated was much more complicated than outside vs. inside. Damon writes, "Spicer's increasingly embittered and sparse lines reflect his ambivalence about membership in a cultural and social

ghetto on the verge of breaking into political visibility" (*Dark End* 144). But we cannot only see a reflection of this state of affairs in Spicer's writing. He takes part in theorizing "some of the possibilities of gay consciousness from the 1940s to the 1960s, in a way that dramatizes both the tragic and exhilarating possibilities of life in a burgeoning culture that had tremendous vitality but as yet no political power social visibility, and that shows the painful contradictions of occupying such an emergent position" (*Dark End...* 145). In particular, Damon<sup>10</sup> does significant foundational work in showing how to position Spicer's poems and poetics as theorizing and commenting on how to negotiate a critical moment in gay identity formation. She and others make the crucial point that Spicer does not take an uncritical acceptance of homosexuality identity as a starting point. She writes, "Spicer [is] critically and ambivalently concerned with the meaning of gay community" (*Dark End* 144). She adds, "His awareness of the gay community as a 'minority group' with its own culture and history surfaces again and again in his work, tinged with both the bitterness and the pride that mark the emergence of a consciousness of one's social marginality" (158). Daniel Katz uses the same term Damon does, double bind, but to highlight a different identity trap, this one having to do with "the opposition between oppressive mainstream society and constricting gay subcultural identity..." In his discussion on the Oliver Charming papers, Katz says that in the poem, "An attempt to build a gay cultural identity leads only to paranoid and hollow defensive gestures of differentiation, while the desire to transcend 'sexual meaning' ultimately annihilates differences that are in fact meaningful. He goes on to write:

For Spicer, the problem is not only the danger of suffocating narcissistic parochialism inherent in any subcultural identification, but that group identification in almost any form is seen by him as a threat to the individual in and of itself. In this context, the Mattachine experience seems to have left Spicer seriously in doubt as to whether gay cultural and political organization and activism were a means towards greater “freedom,” or another element that would quash it. To a significant extent, Spicer lapses into truism in insisting that they are both, and there is no question that a form of naïve individualism can often lead Spicer’s politics into the banal. What gives the politics the depth they have, however, is that in some moods Spicer’s suspicion of identification, rather than remaining a defense mechanism to protect an imperiled self, extends even to the identification with that very self as such, as concepts such as “dictation,” “the big lie of the personal” or, as we shall see, “nonsense” imply. Ultimately, for Spicer the individual is just as tyrannical a structure as the group, for one’s very individuality. (ch. 3)

I cite this at length because of how expertly Katz summarizes Spicer’s unique, difficult situation. Katz takes the various threads I’ve been discussing, of community, politics, subcultural affiliation, ideologies of the ‘self’ and historical realities, and weaves them together to give precision and context to this concept of the double bind.

Andrew Epstein’s important work in *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship in Postwar American Poetry* adds yet another layer of complexity to how Spicer, as a member of an experimental poetic coterie, must have viewed the tensions between self and group. In his discussion of the American postwar poetic avant-garde<sup>11</sup>, he writes, “In an atmosphere of McCarthyist paranoia, surveillance, and Manichean thinking, in which personal identities are pinned down for the purposes of persecution and in the interests of shoring up a unified, secure, monolithic national identity, an American avant-garde emerges that is devoted to the evasion of fixity” (17). For Epstein this is one of the “central paradoxes built into the avant-garde itself,” one that became a “tug of war” between “demand for group solidarity” and “[a]

simultaneous commandment that its participants must be anarchic rebels who resist conformity and convention” (39). He sees a “fundamental paradox...at the heart of experimental American poetry [that] pulses a commitment to both radical individualism and dynamic movement that is sharply at odds with an equally profound devotion to avant-garde collaboration and community.” Epstein argues this is a productive tension for the poets he studies, including Spicer. His readings suggest that this “tense dialectic—between a deep-seated aversion to conformity and a poetics of friendship—actually...[ ]drives the creation, the meaning, and the form of important poems, and it frames the interrelationships among certain key poets, leaving more contemporary writers with a complicated legacy to negotiate” (3-4). Of the Berkeley Renaissance, Epstein writes, “Spicer, Blaser and Duncan in late '40s and '50s...began consciously fusing writing and friendship as they set out to foment an insular camp of initiates who would create a new kind of poetry out of dialogue, disagreement, and insider knowledge and argot, all in opposition to a hostile (and homophobic) outside world” (27). (I explore below what Epstein goes on to call the social text he theorizes here.)

#### **Part 4: Escaping the trap?: Spicer as poetic and political theorist**

As I hope I've shown, Spicer found himself in a fraught, conflicted relationship to his own sense of self and community. Katz sums up the situation: Spicer was “wary of communal constructs and their pressures, at the same time it is community itself and all its ‘correspondences’ which offer the only escape from an individuality that is, for Spicer, fundamentally unfree, a ‘prison.’” Katz explains that

Spicer's politics are "vexed, incoherent, violent, and at times inspiring...precisely because they refuse to divvy up the question of the relations to self, other, and others along the traditional lines of public and private, ethics and desire" (ch. 3). In other words, Spicer did not choose self over group, individuality over community, isolation over subcultural affiliation. Like all the poets in my study, he sought a more nuanced, more complex, more politically radical answer to this riddle of homosexuality.

I want to suggest, however, that Spicer used the capacious space of his poetry to theorize a 'way out' of what must have seemed like a trap. In particular, below I offer two poetic responses found in Spicer's work, responses that are similar to political answers, or attempts at answers.

While Spicer was living in Boston for a brief time, he wrote one of his strangest but also most telling works, a 'manifesto' and diary in the persona of a mysterious personage named Oliver Charming<sup>12</sup>. This is Spicer imagining a "what if", a way to escape the inside/outsider hierarchy, a wish for a category that can escape the paradox I've sketched above. Damon argues that the manifesto "reveals an effort to create an (anti) community in tension with an uneasiness about identity" (*Dark End* 163). Uneasiness, in my reading, is an understatement. The point to be found in the satire is that only a fantasy could be the answer; the hegemonic ideologies at work in any identity would prevent anything but a fantasy from successfully negotiating the powers that be. It's a stinging rebuke to what's possible.

Spicer uses as a framing device the idea that the writing was 'found' by a man named "S" (obviously Spicer). The work's full title is "The Unvert Manifesto and

Other Papers Found in the Rare Book Room of the Boston Public Library in the Handwriting of Oliver Charming. *by S.*"<sup>13</sup> A few critics have discussed this bizarre, messy and tantalizing work, but few if any have catalogued the kind of definitional work Spicer seems to be attempting, albeit it satirically. It seems clear that Spicer is crafting Charming as a kind of a lonely early homosexual (playing on the early term of homosexual, the invert), who is trying to construct his sexual identity, to give it worth. Though Charming says the unvert is in fact not a homosexual, at least in one place "Charming" (talking to S.) seems to subtly conflate the homosexual and the unvert: "We began discussing homosexuality. I, by bringing in subtle pieces of unvert propaganda, and he, embarrassed and overintellectual as if he thought, or rather hoped, that I was trying to seduce him" (79).

Much of the actual "Unvert Manifesto" seems designed to define what an "unvert" is, to define his "metasexual" identity. For example: "An unvert is neither an invert or an outvert, a pervert or a convert, an introvert or a retrovert"; "Unversion is the attempt to make the sexual act as rare as a rosepetal. It consists of linking the sexual with the greatest cosmic force in the universe— Nonsense, or as we prefer to call it, MERTZ"; "An unvert must not be homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, or autosexual. He must be metasexual. He must enjoy going to bed with his own tears"; "An unvert chooses to have no place to turn" and should ignore the public dicta against sex in public and should make sex a "frightening experience like a dirty joke or an angel," among other deviations (74). Later, Charming, in his diary entries, writes, "It is our task to experience and unvert all sexual relationships" (79); "The negro's aim is integration. The Jew's and the homosexual's aim is segregation. The



unvert's aim is a grand degradation between men and angels. We are a minority group only in our heros" [sic]; and "Who were our precursors? The men who almost succeeded in freeing us from the yoke of sexual meaning?" (83). A bulk of the poem seems invested in almost a kind of anthropology of the queer.

But why create the unvert rather than just speak directly about the homosexual (which he does as well)? Why approach sexual identity through satire and a fictionalized person who is living at the same time he is, in the same place he is? Why move from manifesto to the ludicrous dimensions it eventually takes on (the diaries become filled with characters like Lizzie Borden, Thomas Higginson, angels, a gay Lot, and more)? It certainly isn't to code his own homosexuality. In response to the above 'discussion of homosexuality,' Charming recount that "S." says, "We homosexuals are the only minority group that completely lacks any vestige of a separate cultural heritage. We have no songs, no folklore, even our customs are borrowed from our upper-middleclass mothers" (79). It is actually this comment that can help us understand just what Spicer is doing with the Charming papers. Behind the satire is a critique of homosexuality. Seen this way, catalogued and characterized plainly instead of ludicrously and satirically, the unvert seems to exist to serve as the great destabilizer, to transgress and subvert, to be neither inside nor outside because to be either would validate the very systems and hierarchies that have created all these categories in the first place. Seen this way, doesn't the unvert seem to be a kind of 'queering' agent? Could we not change a single word in one of the above statements and find, "It is our task to experience and

queer all sexual relationships”? (It goes without saying I use queer here *avant le lettre*.)

But this ‘queering’ is also about art, how this metasexuality cannot only be a sexual transgression but an artistic transgression. He writes:

It continually amazes the unprejudiced Mertzian observer that even the people who struggle most against the limits of art are content to have sex in ordinary academic ways, as if they and their bed-partners were nineteenth-century paintings. Or, worse, they will change the point of view (top becomes bottom, male becomes female, etc. etc.) and think, like the magic realists that they are, that they have changed something. Everybody is guilty of this— from Cocteau to Beethoven. (77-8)

And earlier he writes:

The Dada in painting is not Duchamp. The Dada in poetry is not Breton. The Dada in sex is not De Sade. All these men were too obsessed with the mechanism of their subject. A crime against nature must also be a crime against art. A crime against art must also be a crime against nature. All beauty is at continuous war with God. (77)

The first entry is the argument that the subversive artist must shunt that energy into sexuality, and that to change sexual position (in terms of gender role during sex) is not sufficient to change the ontic nature of sex, to alter its ontological meaning in any significant way. The second reverses the equation. The sexual transgressor must shunt that energy to topple art’s rules, to dirty art. The form and power of “dada” (as applied to painting, poetry or sex) doesn’t come from “the mechanism” of subjectivity. It comes from understanding ‘cocksucking and artsucking’ must be co-instigating, that the artists must “understand beauty [as radical, at war with God] when it offers itself to him” (79).

Spicer subtly refines this argument, however, when he has Charming say, “Poetry, painting, and cocksucking are all attempts of the unvert to make God laugh,”

number nine on his manifesto (74). Not only must sex and art transgress and draw from each other; they must be invested in unnerving natural law (making God laugh), or perhaps enacting and affirming their own *unnatural* state. In fact, Charming goes so far as to say the “most complete and metasexual act” would be “the perfect wet dream,” and that this has the power to defeat God (82). Why is the wet dream the perfect metasexual act? Art conjoined to nonreproductive sex (cocksucking, wet dreams) can be the ultimate way to mock both art and sex that ‘reproduce’ a well disciplined citizenry.

But is there a way to recuperate homosexuality as an identity, perhaps even drawing on the social isolation the homosexual laments? “Three Marxist Essays” is the second response I will examine. It posits a theo-philosophical politics that might recuperate the “we” of subcultural affiliation, make it a ‘we alone’ that is transformative, not alienating, and politically radical. Critics have discussed this work as a political idea but too little, in my view, as a response to the paradox of identity.

“Three Marxist Essays” (328) is a set of three poem-essays. The first and third are concerned with the radical potential of homosexuality as a political effect. The middle, the strangest, is called “The Jets and Marxism,” and is about a group of men Spicer knew and called the Jets, with a young man named Tony Aste<sup>14</sup> at its center. It seems to suggest an apolitical and thus misguided pacifism (“They wear switch-blade knives tied with ribbons,” knives they would not use against the industrial complex-controlled state). This is the result of the Jets having never experienced economic hardship or aggression from outside forces. Perhaps even the

concept of class is foreign to them. Spicer seems to tie this kind of “ignorant” but alluring (a)politics to a kind of false masculinity, seen both in his use of Jets (the gang from *West Side Story* that dances and sings) and because he found Aste’s masculinity desirable.

In the third poem Spicer draws directly on the idea made popular by Marx: “from each, according to his ability, to each according to his need.” He attributes this to an early philosopher of homosexuality as well as to Jesus. He plays on the latter connection (the parable of the fig tree on which the need for repentance lies in a barren fig tree) through the pun in “To continue the argument is fruitless.” This essay, called “The Jets and Homosexuality,” may represent a kind of meta-parable. The Jets can be ‘saved’ by taking up a Christ-like, Marxist approach to class, which Spicer seems to suggest can be found within homosexuality itself. The ‘argument’ is “fruitless” not in the sense of the barren fig tree of the parable, but non-reproductive. If directed toward the aims of gay male desire, the homosocial group can form a masculine but loving group.

The most accessible of these poems, however, is the first, entitled “Homosexuality and Marxism,” and it is here perhaps we understand just how homosexuality can have a kind of Marxist theology embedded in it, if we are to believe Spicer. This poem is also highly suggestive of Spicer’s own political understanding of capitalism and hegemony and the homosexual’s power for revolution against these forces. I will cite this section in its entirety:

There should be no rules for this but it should be simultaneous if at all.

Homosexuality is essentially being alone. Which is a fight against the

capitalist bosses who do not want us to be alone. Alone we are dangerous.

Our dissatisfaction could ruin America. Our love could ruin the universe if we let it.

If we let our love flower into the true revolution we will be swamped with offers for beds. (328)

Katz, most emphatically of critics, places this idea “at the heart of Spicer’s politics, erotics, and poetics.” Katz draws out how the words of “we, alone” “can be placed beside each other, how one can remain a first person plural, yet alone.”<sup>15</sup> Katz points us to “Spicer’s use of the plural, the paradoxical aloneness which dominates the shimmering mirrors of community.” He argues, “Spicer’s poetry is less concerned with how alone ‘I’ might be than how alone ‘we’ always are, bound together by a separateness which divides” and is “without ‘company’” (ch. 3).

We are invited to imagine the power of aloneness in a society that demands consensus and the joiner mentality based on identity categories. But the argument his poetics makes is even more subversive than perhaps Katz is willing to argue. To be a homosexual poet<sup>16</sup> is even more radical than simply being a homosexual because he is so well positioned to warn against the expression of a fixed, totalized identity (how the lyric has so long been conceived), even as he relies on its ability to connect individuals through networks of desire, that is, poetry itself. Spicer says, “We are all alone and we do not need poetry to tell us how alone we are” (311), and in a sense he’s right. What we *do* need poetry to do is tell us how to transform that ‘alone’-ness into a political alternative to identity as a basis for a liberation narrative. As Spicer writes in poem “I” of *Fifteen False Propositions Against God*:

The self is no longer real  
It is not like loneliness

This big huge loneliness. Sacrificing  
All of the person with it. (1-4)

### **Part 6: The lyric direct address: the role of the reader-lover**

Spicer's "Unvert Manifesto" and "Three Marxists Essays," as I've presented them, are two important poetic responses to Spicer's conflicted sense of what it meant to be a gay man—and a gay poet among other gay poets—in postwar America. They suggest a Herculean effort on his part to negotiate a way out of what scholars have called, variously, a double bind, paradox, or trap of subcultural identification. The two poetic responses I've shown above, however, can be read as primarily expressions of political ideas. Certainly, their form affects their meaning. But for the gay poet as theorist of gay identity and desire, we must seek an example that allows us to more complexly and more deeply render Spicer's unique literary response. Below, then, I uncover a kind of queer lyric address and use it to build a theory of the poem as social text (social space, in fact) made possible by a sexualized scene of synchronic reading.

This approach requires some critical and theoretical foregrounding of the lyric address and, in particular, Spicer's specific approach to it. Drawing on and amplifying those ideas, my close reading will then illustrate how Spicer's lyric address can be seen to activate what Virginia Jackson has recently theorized as an "intersubjective space."

First, we must examine how the direct address is different, special in terms of the lyric. William Waters, one of the few critics that talks specifically and at length about the lyric address (and, importantly, *not* conflating it with apostrophe), suggests the lyric address can be productive of a kind of "uncertainty" or

“ambiguity” (that often sounds, to my ear, like a form of negative capability). Waters, in his essay “Poetic Address and the Intimate Reading: The Offered Hand,” shows the “the ways in which literature presses for a close relation with those into whose hands it may fall” (157). According to Waters, “modest scholarly attention” has been given to this issue, partly (or wholly?) because John Stuart Mill’s notion of poetry as overheard speech has been so repeated it’s become cant: that “all poetic ‘you’s’ must be apostrophic....” (189). Or else critics, according to Waters, have assumed the ‘you’ to be not a moment of readerly identification but always a “ruse” and “recognized as such the instant afterward, and so ironized and mediated virtually as it happens.” Waters wants us to see “that real reading is as much a matter of absorption as it is distance....” He seeks out in his study “the moment when a reader feels addressed by poetry’s ‘you’.

Crucially for my purposes, he suggests that positionality—the reader’s sense of being placed into the reading scene—need not be about “coercion” or interpellation (Althusser) but can be about “intimacy” (192). One thinks of how a whisper must bring the hearer closer. Waters valorizes the kind of poetry this makes available to us: “not so much a stable communicative situation as a chronic hesitation, a faltering between monologue and dialogue, between ‘talking about’ and ‘talking to’, third and second person, [the difference between] indifference to interlocutors and the yearning to have one” (191). Thus, we can begin to imagine how the lyric direct address might function in ways distinct from a lyric invested in the private utterance of the solitary speaker. (Once I’ve close read Spicer’s version of the lyric address, I will then go on to amplify Waters’ idea using Jackson’s more complex theories.)

Of course, when we talk about the lyric and Spicer, we must first confront the claim that he practiced a poetics of seriality and eschewed the lyric unit. (In his letter to Robin Blaser in *Admonitions* he famously writes, “Poems should echo and re-echo against each other. They should create resonances. They cannot live alone any more than we can” and rejects his earlier poems as belonging “nowhere. They are one night stands....[ ] as meaningless as sex in a Turkish bath”<sup>17</sup> [163]) Spicer’s seriality, or composition by book, has been one of the most critically discussed issues, and as is by now obvious, my concerns lie elsewhere; even so I want to agree with what John Emil Vincent has recently argued:

Whatever else poetic seriality is, it is a way to get narrative pulsion to interact with lyric units. It doesn’t however do away with the lyric. ‘There are no single poems’ does not mean that there are nonlyric units, only that in the successful serial poem every lyric unit is in relation to another lyric unit. This formulation invites experimentation with, rather than the dissolution of, the lyric.” (“Before After Spicer” 8).

But even more plainly, I would argue that we should seek in Spicer a complication of the lyric rather than take his word for it that he practiced ‘something else’ entirely. It may even be an especially important moment to seek such complication, after the wealth of criticism in the past several years has taken up the slippery nature of the lyric as a generic category: Does it even exist as a genre? Does how we receive a poem affect its classification?

Secondly, we must also confront the various *ways* in which Spicer address a ‘you’ (sometimes specific, sometimes not, sometimes ambiguous) and how critically central this is to an understanding of him as a poet. While in my close reading I will focus on a direct address, it’s essential to note a more diffuse tendency toward (a formal preference for?) addressivity in the more general sense. Consider this partial



list: the books *After Lorca* and its letters to (and from) the dead poet; the letters and the poems “for” individuals that comprise *Admonitions*; and the book *Letters to James Alexander*. These are some of Spicer’s most important books. (One of the more studied areas in this vein has been Spicer’s epistolary poems. Susan Vanderborg<sup>18</sup> calls these ‘paratexts.’ See Kelly Holt’s recent work included in *After Spicer*.) We can even extend this list to include the poems in *Book of Magazine Verse*, in which Spicer proposes that that book’s poems are being sent to magazines that Spicer anticipates will reject them. What is central to my point here is not that Spicer writes letters, but that he discusses address and audience and its relations to his poetics in these very letters, creating a kind of meta-addressivity. Catherine Imbrogio, too, not only notes this sheer prevalence of the address, but suggests it also illustrates a paradox: Spicer’s “body of work...is replete with direct addresses, explicit and implicit references to fellow poets and poetic predecessors, and numerous ‘I/you’ relations”—but it also contains “the poet’s withdrawal from audience.” She describes this as Spicer’s “(fractured) desire for an audience [which] is undeniably inscribed [in the poetry itself]. Imbrogio says that exploring that complexity “might provide us with additional means for considering Spicer’s poetry not only as a ‘practice by negation,’ to slightly recast Peter Gizzi’s apt phrase, but as ‘writing gone wild(e),’ to borrow from Ed Cohen’s felicitous title” (98-9). It seems clear that Spicer is a unique poet in that his use of address is not mere trope or even lyric byproduct, but it represents a complex relationship to audience that is knit into the fabric of his project and perhaps even his homosexuality<sup>19</sup>.

What complicates this even more is how Spicer's intrapoetic discussions of audience are often connected to metaphors of desire<sup>20</sup>. For example, in the much-discussed letter to his publisher Joe Dunn that begins *Admonitions*, Spicer is explicit about his awareness of the erotics in his poetics. He refers to "the sexual metaphor" and, as he is discussing the role of the "muse" in poetry, he writes, "Talk all you want, baby, but *then* let's go to bed." (Killian and Ellingham discuss Spicer's attraction to Dunn.) Here Spicer uses the letter to set 'talk' and 'sex' as oppositional metaphors for "truth and commentary" (which come before and surround the production of a poem) and poetry<sup>21</sup>. This is only one of numerous such conflation of sex and poetry, some more explicit than others. (As discussed above, of course, he uses a sexual metaphor when rejecting his earlier poems: "They are beautiful but dumb.") Damon writes, "Spicer's letters...outline his poetic, and comprise the most explicit examples of his ideas of the *indivisibility* of the personal, the communal, the erotic, and the poetic" (*Dark End* 158; emphasis mine), and Davidson argues the "terms for Spicer's correspondence theory are written in the rhetoric of homosexual desire ("Compulsory Homosociality" 212). Spicer himself defines a system in which this indivisibility seems to feed on itself: "the letters, poems, kisses....are directed by a fantastically inefficient system up to the place where poetry comes from and then back down again to the person who poetry, or letters, or love was meant to receive it" (207). Spicer seems to understand writing and loving (fucking?) as interchangeable acts. This has profound implications for how he utilizes the comparison of the scene of writing and the scene of reading in my close reading below.

Now that I've suggested the centrality and complexity of the address in Spicer's corpus, let's begin to unfold some specific parameters and goals for what his poems hope to accomplish. In defining the San Francisco Renaissance poetics as a performative poetics, Davidson lays the groundwork for at least one way to see the role of direct address: to call on the reader to create a relational experience that is about creating a material event rather than depicting one. Davidson writes that a performative poetics—with "its status as an act and its self-referentiality"—"does not stand in specular relation to reality but creates new relationships between author and reader and, ultimately, between reader and reader. ... [T]he emphasis on a performative poetics is on the contingent nature of the poet's address and upon the *reader's active participation with that address*. A performative poetics stresses less the ontology of the speech act itself...and more the dialogue established between poet and audience (*San Francisco* 22; emphasis mine). Davidson suggests that this kind of poetics can lead to the reader "attending to [the poet's] testimony...[so that the reader] will be in a position to see things differently in the future...[and that readers] are not meant to receive the poem passively but to grapple with its implications in their own lives" (*San Francisco*... 22). Christopher Nealon affirms this as a specific practice Spicer engages in, having strategies to "situate poetry in a 'matter' or a medium so as to present the poem as an event—specifically an event between reader and writer, but also between lover and beloved, teacher and initiate, friend and friend. So totality and coterie are wound together, stratagem and sociability, to make the poem confront a crisis and to stash away a land of magic made to ward it off" (*The Matter of Capital* 125-6). (Nealon argues this

enables of kind of protection from the postwar rise of mass culture, safeguarding poetry as minor art form and subculture that can exist outside mass culture.) Davidson describes this relationship as a dialogue or even “an erotic dialogue.” He argues that Spicer’s construction of such a strategy is at least in part a critical response to the Beats, and poets like Ginsberg whose “visionary, expressivist poetics” saw the poem “as originating within the individual” (151). For Spicer, voice is not “the outward sign of a unitary, emotive subject” but is “a dimension of public, interactive experiences,” Davidson explains. He adds, “Poetry is created in dialogue and argumentation, whether it takes place between poet and friend or between poet and God. If that dialogue is contentious (and it almost always is in Spicer’s world), so much the better, since it means that language is being tested (to adapt a line from Frank O’Hara) between persons instead of between pages” (*San Francisco* 154). Davidson does also place this idea in the context of Spicer’s search for “discursive models that circumvent lyrical subjectivity,” a list of ‘models’ that in Davidson’s view includes “surrealism, fantasy, nonsense rhymes, games, and cartoons.” Davidson suggests that Spicer’s practice of dictation or the outside is part of a “metaphysical” poetics that is “more dialogical and social,” with the ‘outside’ having its foundation “in human intercourse *within a community* and that its reception takes the form of a conversation” (*San Francisco* 155; emphasis mine)<sup>22</sup>.

Such extensive foregrounding might seem superfluous but, as we will see, it is needed to set in play the key ideas that one of Spicer’s more complex poems takes up. It was written during Spicer’s year away from the Bay Area, the same year in which he wrote “The Unvert Manifesto” and “Some Notes on Whitman to Allen

Joyce.” It is one of Spicer’s longer ‘single-unit’ lyric poems and can be read as a kind of transition poem, in that it begins to illustrate some of the more difficult poetics he takes up in his later books. Also, it is explicit about homosexuality in ways that are richly different from the prose pieces I discuss above. It is a poem of direct address and evokes powerfully the scene of writing (seen as a past dream, producing a speech in isolation) that is compared to a scene of reading, both scenes metaphorized as homosexual sex, though the former scene is depicted as impotent.

The poem I’m referring to is “A Poem to the Reader of the Poem.” As I suggested, in this poem Spicer prefigures his later poems of strangeness and difficulty, and yet the poem does have a kind of narrative to it. While it plays with the idea of a lyric *I*, it at times does seem like it is presenting a traditional speaker. That, however, is not the case, as the poem is an extremely complicated development of poetics. The poem’s foundation relies on contrasting the synchronic reader (‘you’) of the scene of reading, with “the reader,” that is the *antecedent* ‘you’, a listener who was only imaged to activate the writing scene, to write the poem in the first place. The scene of writing is a “dream” from “last night” in which the speaker “wrestled” with the reader. The synchronic ‘you’, then, is not simply a linguistic construction of the poet but is “dragged” *by* language<sup>23</sup> into the poem as a ‘live boy’, so to speak. This is made possible by the ways in which the poem uses the semantic and syntactic confusion concerning the identities of “the reader” and “the you”; this requires the synchronic reader to engage in a constant negotiating—self-positioning and self-citation. As Vincent reminds us, Spicer himself defines lyric poetry (in the pedagogy of “A Textbook for Poetry”) as “‘defining the air’ ...having the

divine love object walk in. Magical materialization of a divine love object is the sign of the lyric's success" (*Queer Lyrics* 167). The transformation of synchronic reader into a kind of 'reader-lover' is enabled by the positionality of the lyric direct address, based on intimacy, not coercion.

How does Spicer accomplish this and to what end? In its simplest terms the poem is about a speaker who recounts a sexual dream (a 'wrestling match') he had about the reader. However, the poem begins with the surreal "I throw a naked eagle in your throat," a statement that without context is almost meaningless. The 'eagle' is never fully clarified by the poem. At various points the eagle is: the dream, or wet dream; the dreamer; "God or Charles Olson"; and an avatar for homosexuality. It is even given voice in the poem. The eagle, then, is a force of (identificatory) destabilizing, but the poem centers this force, from the start, in "your throat," the site of utterance for the reader. The sexual innuendo the poem draws on throughout also makes the throat an erotic zone.

The second line of the poem introduces of the dream the speaker had "last night." This represents, as I've said, the scene of writing. As the title suggest, the 'I' is the poet, and the you is the reader. However, such simple positioning almost immediately becomes more complicated and even confusing. Early on in the poem Spicer writes, "I could tell you that I dreamed I was wrestling / With the reader of this poem" (11-12). The "you" and the reader are *not* the same individual, as one might have assumed. Even the poem and "this poem" seem different entities; 'this poem' is perhaps meant to solidify the idea that something is happening at this very moment of the poem-being-read. The 'you' is the current reader (what I've labeled

as the synchronic reader). The “reader” indicated in the title is what we might label an ordinary reader, the one imagined in the writing scene purely as a way to help materialize a subjectivity—the other, the object simply needed to define and delimit the subject. Once imagined, the lyric poet can ‘turn his back on’ such a listener, according to traditional approaches to the lyric, going back to Mill’s famous formulation. As we will see, Spicer creates this contrast between synchronic ‘you’ and antecedent, imagined reader/listener in order to reject the latter, a rejection of its solipsist, isolating conception of self. What does the poem favor by valorizing the synchronic ‘you’? Possibilities for a world-making, objectivist lyric, an experimental *social* lyric.

Because the “you” and the reader are marked out as different addressees, the ‘you’ is actually required to have a constant awareness of his status as *addressed object*. What’s more, he must become awake to his presence in the poem as he tries to situate himself—literally find himself—among the pronominal shifts. In this way, the poem becomes both an *address* and an *address*, the latter a citation of a dwelling place. The positionality in the poem becomes even more complex when Spicer places “Us” alone on its own line, fashioning the ‘we alone’ he theorized in “Three Marxists Essays.” The ‘you’ must now follow his presence as it is subsumed by the first-person plural.

Not only must the ‘you’ follow his presence through the interstices of the poem’s shifting meanings, but the ground of the poem itself is also in question. Poem, dream, and ‘us’ all become interchangeable, recalling the Spicerian indivisibility of poetics, desire and community discussed above. The instability of

the ground of the poem allows the 'you' to free itself, even for just a moment, to evade a fixedness.

Here is a crucial moment in the poem:

I had a dream last night  
That I was wrestling with you on the mountainside.  
Was it a wet dream?  
No I would tell you if it was a wet dream.  
It was this poem  
Us  
I wrestled with you in this poem  
And it was not a wet dream.

Then define  
If you don't want to scare him out of the poem.  
Define  
The dream  
The wrestling  
The lie  
And in  
What sweet Christ's name the eagle we were throwing rocks at was,  
And why I love you so much  
And why it was not a wet dream. (21-38)

Much happens in this moment, not the least of which is that it begins to become clear that this is a love poem. What also happens is that the moment of freedom experienced by the 'you' gives way to a new need to locate himself not just in space, but in time. Spicer must keep the 'you' "in" the poem, and to do this he must constantly require him to perform these self-positionings. Above, we see the 'you' refers back to that imagined, originary reader of the writing scene (the one from the dream *last night*, the one that was antecedent to the poem). It is important to note that Spicer begins to fill out the sexual metaphor here: "it was not a wet dream." The scene of writing isn't able to produce an actual emission; it must be satisfied, it seems, with the expressivist poem obsessed with its status as solitary utterance.



This is also one of the more confusing moments in the poem because of the pronoun confusion of 'him' and 'you,' yet another tangle. To reiterate his journey up to this point: he has now followed himself from 'you' to 'Us,' recognized the past-tense 'you' was not him, and finally, in the above lines, found himself defined in third-person, masculine gender (thus, why I've been referring to a 'he'). At this point, the threat of erasure is perilously close, causing the speaker to demand, "Define / if you don't want to scare him out of the poem." When he is given back the 'you' position ("Why I love you so much"), it is because he has escaped being erased from the poem by a kind of forced, constant self-awareness, an awareness specifically in relation to the speaker.

The next several lines make explicit what the poem has been skirting all along, and this is where things get sexually interesting. The dream's wrestling is actually a wrestling of naked men—or should we just call it fucking? "The eagle was men wrestling naked<sup>24</sup> / Without the hope of men wrestling naked. / The eagle was a wet dream" (43-5). It is the eagle we now see as a kind of blazon for homosexuality, but only the imagined possibility of homosexuality, not its actuality—a kind of homosexuality that paradoxically only exists in its foreclosure: "without the hope" of becoming real. We can think back to Spicer's use of the Whitman epigraph in "Some Notes on Whitman for Allen Joyce": "let shadows be furnished with genitals and the 'ghosted' second line, "let substances be deprived of their genitals."

It is this version of homosexuality, with the eagle as its phallic avatar, that now becomes a speaker within the poem, displacing for a moment the poem's true speaker. The eagle in fact *addresses* Spicer:

...“Jack,  
How can you write a poem to the reader of the poem?  
Even in a dream you must love somebody.”  
This is another lie.  
I did not wrestle with anybody.  
I wrestled with the reader of this poem. (46-51)

Much like a game of musical chairs, now everyone the poem invokes must find a chair: the speaker, Spicer and ‘you’ must all re-locate themselves in the matrix of the ever-developing reading scene. But the avatar of sexual identity has caused yet another problem. And this is one of the more baffling moments in the poem. Is Spicer’s homosexuality questioning his poetic self? Is the gay side of “Jack” suggesting that the poet is so impotent he can’t even write a poem to an imagined other, can’t even solidify a semblance of subjectivity, that his desire will cause him to “lose[ ] his balance for a moment, slip[ ] into being who he is, use[ ] his poetry as one would use money or sympathy.” This would be in line with his stated poetics. But at this point Spicer can’t be sure of his own experience. Can he even be sure he wrote this poem? Did he or did he not wrestle with the reader? Was it last night? Is it now? No answers are forthcoming in this moment.

What happens next is a final letting go the hardly-there pretense of “naked wrestling men” as a stand in for homosexuality. Spicer writes, simply, “Men kiss men / Not like anybody / Kisses a girl...” (52-4). The poem now suggests an alternative to the previous homosexual pessimism and puts in its place a specific act. Spicer uses the simile here, comparing a kiss to maps and a picture. How do two lips touching

resemble that which depicts something else? The simile crumbles under the weight of such a unworkable mediation. A gay kiss resists comparison, even depiction. Its unfamiliarity holds that much power. Not only do “men kiss men,” their kissing is special and even unable to be explained, understood.

Next, the poem turns its contrast of the writing and reading scenes into a contrast of sex acts. The past night’s dream of fucking was unable to produce a wet dream; however, an in-this-moment proposed blow job (“My darling if you flew / A naked eagle in my throat” [60-1]) actually, we will see, produces a kind of orgasm. The speaker here imagines the “my darling [you]” will put his penis in the speaker’s mouth. Instead of the reader putting the poem’s words, its script, in the reader-performer’s mouth, there is a kind of reverse ventriloquism. The reader is pleased by the mechanism of the poem. But the speaker, the one doing the ostensible pleasuring, is equally pleased in his own act. This releases from the speaker an orgasmic—because exclamatory and revelatory—response that begins several lines of actual utterance from the speaker:

...“Exactly!  
When I said this was a poem to the reader  
I wanted to dig a pitfall  
Only you could fall into.  
You  
Know who you are  
Know how terribly far  
From last night you are. (62-9)

The speaker here reveals his plot, the one I’ve been describing. The whole set-up for the poem was meant as a kind of trap, evoked by the “pitfall” only the “you” could fall into, The trap, however, is one of definition. The synchronic reader, having had to constantly position and cite himself, is now able to define himself in opposition to

the imagined reader of the writing scene (the dream from last night). The process of “undergoing”<sup>25</sup> is now complete: Spicer doesn’t require the reader to overcome any further obstacles; he places “You” on its own line so as to allow the reader no distractions. He affirms the reader’s self-knowledge in the lines that follow, a knowledge achieved by seeing how different, how *present* in both space and time (“how terribly far”) he is from the imagined reader of the writing scene. He is the furthest thing from the ‘reader’ from “last night’s’ impotent dream.

How can we understand the critique being made here? Because the past *writing* scene is one of isolation, the sex can only be imagined. The synchronic *reading* scene can actually—in fact requires—the ‘you’ to ‘blow’ the speaker, in a way—to put the speaker (his words) in his own mouth. By focusing only on the singularity, subjectivity and private utterance of the writing scene, the poet risks producing a weak, expressivist poetics that fixes the subject as simply a desiring self. In contrast, an objectivist poetics, evoked by the sexualized scene of reading and the creation of a reader-lover, allows for the potentiality of a social space where the object desired can be called into being.

Spicer now gives us the proof we may be asking for. Why should the poet avoid a poetry built upon the emotions and concerns with self that the scene of writing activates? First, the imagined reader cannot arouse the speaker. When Spicer writes, “It was not a wet dream or you would be wrestling / With a naked gravestone” (76-7), he is making a comment on a kind of poem that disappears once read, that has no power to affect (or effect) the reader, or in the sexual terms of the poem, that has no power to bring the reader to climax, to produce emission. I read

this line this way: A successful poem would have memorialized itself (a “naked gravestone”) and its poet, and that memory would still hold the power to engage the ‘wrestling match’ of the hermeneutic process. The expressivist poetics, on the other hand, cannot secure fame for the poet. In other words, forget such a poem, forget its focus on a past writing scene. It is a lament we hear in Spicer’s “Imaginary Elegy IV”: “What have I gone to bed with all these years? / What have I taken crying to my bed / For love of me? / Only the shadows of sun and moon / The dreaming groins, their creaking images. / Only myself”<sup>26</sup> (22-7). The writing scene here again is described as something that happens in the poet’s bed, but this time it is not only dreaming (of sex again), but the solipsism of one’s own tears as lover. “Only myself.” Reject this, the poem’s contrast says. “I am wrestling with you” (75), it says. Here, now, in this very poem.

But the poem isn’t finished. The speaker then attempts to simplify this argument, to more plainly offer up the love poem that it gestured toward earlier. However, it is a kind of love poem that Vincent describes in his reading of “Love Poems”: These are poems “centrally concerned with how to bridge distances between both actual and literary lovers. The lovers are entirely ‘in’ Spicer’s ‘ability’ to conjure a world and are most alive in the impassable closures of his poems in which their impossible possibility thrives in literary performance” (*Queer Lyrics* 176). In this final section, Spicer supposes this was all about some “spoiled camping trip” to hell (“a room full of faceless comedians”), where, like two horny boy scouts, the speaker and ‘you’ wrestled and fucked. But the speaker can’t fully play along, suggested in part by the silliness of this supposed scene. A camping trip to hell?

Faceless comedians? There's a ludic quality here, perhaps a kind of evasive tactic so the speaker can put off what he needs to say: the whole poem up to this point was "not what I wanted to say." The shift in tone is seismic, and the love poem that has all along been under the surface is given its moment. The speaker says he wanted to give the reader-lover the beauty of the world (grandeur, innocence). He suggests that to really have found love—"Where our hearts are / Where the heart is" (103-4)—he would have had to write the poem as "wet dream." Tellingly, the poem now uses only first-person plural, except for the penultimate line. This 'we' would have had to reject knowledge (those maps referred to earlier), the lifeless category of identity concepts themselves (the *dead* eagle avatar), the past (which "misplaced" the "us"), and perhaps most especially the "dead lines" of an impotent lyric. The entire poem, in other words, has built this moment.

However, a love of this kind of unification, a single heart ('hearts are' to 'heart is'), is the most romanticized of tropes. Spicer plays on this to criticize this unity as deceptive, false; the trope is immediately disrupted. The heart is "A wet dream— / I'll tell God / it was a wet dream." Spicer revokes any certainty. Was it a dream? Is that just what the speaker will tell God? But why? This is the only way to keep the reader-love and the speaker unified, the hermeneutic wrestling match forever in play. "Time does not finish a poem" (21), Spicer also writes in the fourth "Imaginary Elegy." Furthermore, the only way to know, beyond getting the truth from God (e.g. dying), would be to have the actual "proof" of physical emission a wet dream implies. In a final *coup de grace*, however, the proof in this scenario (semen) would not represent the heteronormative ideal of insemination, but the poetic,

Whitmanic ideal of dissemination, a spreading of desire, not creation. In other words, the (sexualized and social) scene of reading, not the (passive and isolated) scene of writing.

### **Coda: a new critical approach**

What do we achieve by showing the lyric to be a social text? Certainly, there is an instigation to revise old ways of seeing the genre. As Andrew Epstein points out, “Scholars have generally treated the lyric as the expression of an introspective self’s interiority rather than a space where the interplay between individuals, the drama of the social, could be staged” (4). He argues that the lyric need not be exclusively seen “as an utterance issuing from an isolated subjectivity but as a social text, caught in a web of interpersonal and intertextual relations. With surprising frequency, this poetry functions as a vehicle for externalizing interpersonal relationships and for performing, in Libbie Rifkin’s useful phrase, ‘tactical dramas of life in the literary field.’”<sup>27</sup> (15).

But specific to what I’ve been showing at work in Spicer, such an instigation can take us further than generic expansion. Here, I want to turn to Virginia Jackson’s recent work on the lyric to suggest a way to refine what I’ve called the social space created by Spicer’s direct address. Jackson uses Emily Dickinson<sup>28</sup> to construct her argument. She writes:

Rather than consider the lyric “I” as a “speaker” or, as [Herbert] Tucker puts it, a “persona” who talks to herself and so speaks for all of us, I want to examine what happens when Dickinson’s writing directly addresses a ‘you,’ when that writing attempts to turn toward rather than away from a specific audience. In turning form ‘I’ to ‘you,’ and from the metaphor of speech to the act of writing, Dickinson’s writing traced an economy of reading....a circuit of

exchange in which the subjective self-address of the speaker is replaced by the intersubjective practice of the writer, in which the writer's seclusion might be mediated by something (or someone) other than ourselves. (132-3)

Jackson goes on to build the idea that Dickinson's emphasis on the act of writing scene produces more precisely an intersubjective space, a solitude, in which "I [the writer] am not alone but 'alone with'" (134). Spicer's ideas speak in a strikingly similar way; simply substitute of 'alone with,' with 'we alone.' Spicer's concern is with the solitude of the act of writing as isolating; and certainly so might Dickinson be. According to Jackson's reading, Dickinson's seclusion is transformed into an intersubjective space because she replaces the idea of the lyric as generalized expression of speech with the act of writing to a specific addressee. I argue that Spicer replaces the act of writing with the act of reading, a similar move that fulfills the possibility of the relational that the lyric holds out in its 'circuit of exchange.'

Jackson builds this idea upon an excellent review of the critical history of the idea of the lyric address as different from self-address (how critics from Mills to Frye to Tucker to Vendler use specifications, metaphors and delimiting definitions drawn from the figure of the voice speaking in solitude). She shows "how the syllogistic logic of address that....dominates postromantic theories of lyric reading" is in reality a "self-address" that "converts the isolated 'I' into the universal 'we' by bypassing the mediation of any particular 'you.' This bypass serves the purpose of what Herbert Tucker has called the 'intersubjective confirmation of the self, which was made the overhearing of a persona our principal means of understanding a poem'" (129). This is why Jackson turns to Dickinson's direct address of a 'you.' She wishes to fundamentally complicate the generic insistence on a speaker who either



“pretends” in his performance of voice that there is no audience or who, by not addressing any single empirically specific person, “pretends to address everything in general—to achieve a form of transcendently apostrophic address” (130). (Here Jackson draws specifically on a range of possible addressees given by Frye.)

What I want to suggest is that by pairing Jackson’s theoretical scaffolding with my own close-reading and the contextual work I used to introduce that work, that we can suggest a new way to see what critics traditionally have articulated in Spicer studies. Spicer is seen as a poet of loneliness and failed and disappointed desire. There is much discussion of Spicer’s claims of egolessness, to use just one term critics use to talk about his poetics of the outside, of dictation, the radio. He is said to pursue a poetry that must “perform, through its language, the unbridgeable gaps between subject and object” (Davidson, *Guys Like Us* 47). What about complicating this narrative? I propose that by re-examining Spicer’s intense use of addressivity—or is that another name for a kind of Spicerian desire?—we begin to construct a new narrative that looks at Spicer as poet-theorist of homosexuality. Can we understand Spicer’s creation of a reader-lover as a way to resist the enclosing powers of lyric subjectivity, but also too of resisting the trap he saw inherent in claiming a homosexual/subcultural identity? Instead of basing his poetics in the belief in the “unbridgeable” distance between subject and object, might there have been something that peeked through the clouds, as it were, that makes the ‘we alone’ of poet and reader-love into a kind of compromise. If we imagine a Spicer who valorized the scene of reading—what I’ve connected to Jackson’s intersubjective space—as defined by sexual energy, perhaps we can begin to see this itself a Spicer’s

critique of identity, perhaps even gay identity. It is a space not inhabited by a subject-who-desires, is not a receptacle for a voice overheard in solitude, is not a self-address that only imagines an audience. Rather, and the distinction is imperative, it is a space that produces a *desiring, an undergoing, a materializing*.

In the Afterword to *The House that Jack Built*, Peter Gizzi lyrically imagines what takes place within a Spicer poem. It is one of the most arresting passages I've read on the poet:

Since human and divine love fail the poet, it is the poet who must provide an erotic and social identity outside of those constructs. When Spicer writes [in "A Textbook of Poetry"] 'imagine this as lyric poetry,' he is critiquing both the personal content of the lyric and insisting on the empty space that moves from line to line, thereby allowing a larger discursive community to be dictated ... The poem is the ground not for private revelation but for a social epiphany. (184-5)

Though I take a liberty here by adapting Gizzi's ideas to my own, a liberty I hope he can forgive, this is what I find myself wondering about my own idea of what happens in a Spicer poem. Perhaps the "erotic and social identity outside" of the failed constructs of love, perhaps the "larger discursive community" he produces, perhaps the ground for "social epiphany," perhaps these are all ways of talking about how Spicer creates "a circuit of exchange in which the subjective self-address of the speaker is replaced by the intersubjective practice of the writer, in which the writer's seclusion might be mediated by something (or someone) other than ourselves" (Jackson 132-3). And that mediator? I don't mean Martians. To put it bluntly and in terms I think Spicer would have appreciated, what I mean, dear reader, is not even you. I mean: your cock in my mouth, a naked eagle in my throat. "Exactly!"

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Compare Spicer's approach to evade the self to how Scott Terrell Herring describes O'Hara: "Unlike Whitman, O'Hara never sings of his self; rather, his self is the instrument on which the poet sings" (86). Herring is discussed in Chapter One.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, I am citing the poems of *My Vocabulary Did This to Me*. If the work being cited is written in prose, I cite the page number. Otherwise, I cite line numbers.

<sup>3</sup> In Damon's conception, meta-sexuality is "a preoccupation with sex not necessarily accompanied by sexual activity—and again indicates a split between sexual activity as meaningful connection between two people or as a foundation for communal recognition, and sexuality as a charged but ultimately empty aura hovering over a fundamentally unsatisfying set of interactions" (*Dark End* 164).

<sup>4</sup> Consider such diverse projects as those of Michael Davidson (*The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-Century*), Andrew Epstein (*Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry*), and Oren Izenberg (*Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Life*). See also note 27 below.

<sup>5</sup> Duncan says he himself felt homosexuality was a "potentiality, a creative promise for love" (*One Night Stand* xiv)

<sup>6</sup> Spicer actually critiques Ginsberg in regards to his sexuality. In "Ten Poems for Downbeat" he mocks Ginsberg's particular version of homosexuality. Maria Damon points out that Spicer resents Ginsberg's "sidestepping of the social pain of his own sexuality in the name of some self-designated mythic higher love that incurs Spicer's

disdain—the diffusion of a specifically gay sexuality and culture into a smarmy, vague, romanticized a- or pan-sexual oppositionality leads to the vulgarity of which the members of the self-consciously gay ‘Berkeley Renaissance’ accused the mostly straight Beats” (“Ghost Forms” 139).

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the misogyny of Spicer and his coterie, see Davidson’s “Compulsory Homosociality” and in particular his discussion of Spicer’s rather infamous poem “For Joe,” which he read at an event in honor of Denise Levertov (210).

<sup>8</sup> I want to differentiate my argument here from that of Eric Keenaghan’s in his essay on the “translation” of Lorca’s “Ode to Walt Whitman,” a poem we can also use to think about how Spicer viewed the role of the gay poet. In Keenaghan’s essay, he, too, though for different purposes, foregrounds Spicer’s emphasis on provocative slang for genitalia. Keenaghan catalogues these terms and finds the following: tight-cocked, cocksuckers, prick, hard-up, sucked-off, wet-dreamed. He argues that Spicer sought out a “sexual register”—instead of Lorca’s metaphorical language, what he call an “encrypted” homoeroticism—for the purposes of “importing a concrete sense of male sexuality and rendering the male body and sexual activity highly visible poetic objects....” This “served him as a political tool, one that would bring the gay subject into his reading public’s direct line of vision” (274). Keenaghan argues “it was only these terms of visibility that Spicer believed to be politically and poetically acceptable”(276). For more on ‘translation,’ See also Lori Chamberlain’s essay on translation. Of course Clayton Eshleman’s work comparing Lorca’s version

of the poem and Spicer's "translation" is required reading for any serious inquiry into these issues.

<sup>9</sup> Vincent makes an interesting argument that these notes do not represent "the acceptance or rejection of a poetics or a politics" but show how Spicer "longs for a genealogy." He explains, "The vituperation of the last sentence is loaded with sadness, and loss, but all these minor chords are undertoned by a triumphant major insofar as the rant is addressed to Whitman" (169). I don't necessarily agree with the emphasis Vincent places on the 'major chord' he sees here, but it is nonetheless important that not only is Whitman addressed by Spicer but that this brings him into the presentness of the poem in a way.

<sup>10</sup> Specifically, Damon uncovers Spicer's use of camp as a minority discourse "characterized by de-territorialized language, collectivity and inevitably political content." She shows how Spicer's use of camp points toward "his own affiliation with a tradition he simultaneously acknowledges as oppressive" (*Dark End* 144). Damon's work to construct a paradigm of the Spicerian gay poet as 'acutely alienating' is highly productive.

<sup>11</sup> Epstein has a worthwhile discussion of bisexual poet Paul Goodman's important essay "Advance-Guard Writing: 1900-1950" in a section of *Beautiful Enemies*. This section is called "Coterie and Collaboration: The Avant-Garde as 'Intimate Community,'" and it begins on page 29.

<sup>12</sup> Gizzi and Killian supply helpful manuscript and biographical context for this work, 445.

<sup>13</sup> Maria Damon (*Dark End* 165; “Ghost Forms” 141) and Catherine Imbrogio (108-112) each have exemplary discussions of this text as it specifically applies to Spicer’s deployment of camp. For an interesting theory on the use of ‘unvert’ to signal a critique of the inversion model of gender and sexuality, see Imbrogio, 110-111. Katz makes the following remark in his discussion of the poem:

In certain ways, his politics resist the political and its domain in ways analogous to how his poetry resists the poem. At the same time, both the abstract question of the polis and more concrete ones concerning gay experience, culture, and activism are recurrent throughout his work, and seem to have been brought to the boil by his immersion in Mattachine. All these ambivalences come together in the diary of Oliver Charming, which in several complex and coded manners revisits much of Spicer’s life of the previous few years, including his political activism and commitments, and his musings on queer identity and culture (chap. 3).

<sup>14</sup> Ellingham and Killian uncover this in *Poet Be Like God*.

<sup>15</sup> Katz uses Spicer’s *Heads of the Town Up to the Aether* to unfold further “how one can remain a first person plural, yet alone.” He says that book “as a whole is about the relationship between eros, poetry, and community, [and the “Fake Novel about the Life of Arthur Rimbaud”] is certainly the most explicitly queer section” and as such is “so clearly” an “investigation of queer poetics.”

<sup>16</sup> I find myself echoing Damon’s phrasing here. She writes, “to be a homosexual is to be alone,” but for Spicer:

...how much more alone is the homosexual poet. The mediator, the channel for multiple energies and worlds, is beyond reach of human norms. In this way, Spicer’s version of gayness ...becomes crucial to him—his outsiderhood and misery in some sense guarantees his authenticity as a poet. However, insofar as Spicer allowed himself the comfort of any identity and community, his network of gay poets afforded him the context he resented and craved. For all his ambivalence in unhappiness, information of gay identity and his loyalty and love for his gay poetic circle sustained Spicer as a poet and as a

self-conscious member of an oppressed subculture, a 'minority group.' (177-78)

As should be obvious from this, I've found great support and insight in Damon's project, its affinity with my own interests so clear.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Snediker's discussion is worth noting, since he suggests this often-cited moment in the Spicer canon might actually be misunderstood. Instead of being about the singularity of the early poems, what he argues Spicer may really (or also?) be talking about is depersonalization, how the one night stand metaphor "posits the long-term relationship as middle ground between utter solitude and utterly extravagant, 'self-subtracted' sociability." For the extended argument, see pages 181-3 in "Jack Spicer's Billy the Kid: Beyond the Singular Personal."

<sup>18</sup> See Vanderborg's chapter on Spicer, "'Created to Explain': Jack Spicer's Exegetical Paratexts" (42-61).

<sup>19</sup> Imbrogio asks, "How then can such embedded audiences become 'possible,' given not only the frequent extrapoetic disconsolate messages about audience [in Spicer's corpus], but the poetry's numerous internal frictions with it?" For her the "impasse" is crossed by seeing camp discourse as a way to "read through and perhaps past" Orphic "discordances" (107). Camp as "semiotically disruptive" was "most likely influential in helping Spicer move his poetry away from an overly 'sincere' rendering of his own emotions, toward other, more destabilizing poetic performances and signs" (108).

<sup>20</sup> The metaphor of desire comes up briefly in Imbrogio's essay. She says that Spicer's camp reclaims the "Orphic vocation for poetry" but does so by "breaking

that voice apart, roughing it up, quite often sexualizing it....” Spicer sought this effect because he didn’t believe in or want the “unified, untroubled expression of the lyric voice.” Imbroglia attributes motivation to ‘doing justice’ to ‘lyric complexity’ and places that in opposition to the sincerity Spicer’s camp, in her argument, critiques. She goes on to discuss how two moments in a Spicer poem “posit the Orphic as gay under- and above-ground world of sexual desire (thwarted or realized) and an antiestablishment, anti-normative way of approaching sacred subjects” (128). From my vantage point, however, she pulls her focus very tightly around the issue of camp. I find it hard to believe the indivisibility of poetics, eros and community in Spicer can be reduced to his desire to create lyric complexity. Imbroglia’s focus on camp also belies another problematic issue I’ve noted. When critics talk about Spicer’s homosexuality, they almost always resort to discussing his use of camp. Davidson is a notable exception. I wonder if this trend risks uncritically essentializing camp as a homosexual sensibility. I hope my project suggests a the complex avenues that still exist for Spicer studies.

<sup>21</sup> Vanderborg discusses this as a paratext. See pages 52-3.

<sup>22</sup> This Spicerian definition of poetry as “created in dialogue and argumentation” or as ‘a conversation within a community’ directly relates back to the importance of Spicer’s experiences as a member of the homosexual subculture in the Bay Area in the 1940s, ’50s, and ’60s. More work needs to be done to clarify what Davidson means by dialogue (how does the reader respond?) and “erotic.” I hope my reading



has begun such a conversation, though I don't presume to know if my approach is at all connected to what Davidson imagined.

<sup>23</sup> I am thinking here, of course, of Spicer's claim that "words stick to the real. We use them to push the real, to drag the real into the poem. They are what we hold on with, nothing else. They are as valuable in themselves as rope with nothing to be tied to" (123).

<sup>24</sup> In what could be just an eerie coincidence or perhaps a sign of some larger personal mythos of Spicer's, all of these threads can also be found in a moment in another poem of address, "Song for Bird and Myself: "Have you ever wrestled with a bird, / You idiotic reader? / Jacob wrestled with an angel." (69). Of course, in this poem the bird is Charlie Parker.

<sup>25</sup> I borrow this term from Miriam Nichols. She first defines the term on page four. But for my purposes, I find the term productively employed in her reading of *After Lorca*. She writes:

By refusing closure to the emotions thus aroused, Spicer-Lorca achieves a kind of 'translation'; he creates a 'castle of skin and glass' that houses big, common emotions without attaching them to a specific narrative. Readers are thus thrown back on their own desires for beauty, their own needs for love, their own fears of suffering and death. These affective experiences will then correspond to those similarly undergone by the poet and whoever else is brave enough to risk the poem with him. (164)

She later on specifies that:

...because the emotions the poem encrypts are not bound to a concept, tamed by a narrative, or subordinated to a social project...they are wild and bellowing when Spicer turns them loose on the reader. The strategy is not to say the emotions, but to make the poem point to them. This is a gesture that leaves the reader to do the undergoing" (167).

She also declares quite plainly, “Spicer is a poet of undergoings” (142).

<sup>26</sup> The echo from the “Unvert Manifesto” is clear: “He must enjoy going to bed with his own tears.”

<sup>27</sup> Rifkin’s phrase comes from her book *Career Moves: Olson, Creeley, Zukofsky, Berrigan, and the American Avant-garde* (28). Epstein helpfully lists the other scholars whose work also looks at “the way poets conceive the ‘social’ among other things having to do with writing communities. These include: Rifkin, Michael Davidson, Alan Golding, Daniel Kane, Reva Wolf, Beret Strong, Terrence Diggory, Lytle Shaw, and Oren Izenberg (7). Davidson, of course, has written on Spicer. Izenberg recently wrote on O’Hara.

<sup>28</sup> Taking recourse to Dickinson, I think, actually makes more sense that it might at first seem. Like Spicer, her work is intensely interested in isolation, in experimentation, in a poetry that resists clarity because its themes defy such clarity. More telling for my purposes is the fact that both Dickinson and Spicer corpuses contain both “letters” and poems, and that great critical effort has been given to sorting out what that means. Spicer himself noted the critical difficulty of sorting what is poetry and what is prose, in a review he wrote of Johnson’s 1955 variorum edition of Dickinson’s *Poems*. (At the time, 1956, he was working in the rare books room at the Boston Public Library during his brief, abortive stay in Boston). Jackson, it is no surprise, cites this review (124) and places it in conversation with her interest in genre and how the lyric address can persuade critics not to make the generic distinctions about her writing that continue to be made. In Jackson’s theory

of lyric reading, such generic insistences have profound implications on “the literary afterlife” of a work (125). Though my interests lie outside the larger debate over lyric genre that has been so popular in the last decade at least, I can imagine Jackson’s work would be highly productive in a study of what we might call Spicer’s epistolary lyric. (Kelly Holt’s essay, though to my view unrelated to anything in Jackson’s work, also looks at Spicer’s epistolary poems.)

## CHAPTER 4

### JOHN WIENERS' 'POEM AS VERBAL BLOWJOB': DISRUPTING THE LYRIC, ESCAPING THE CLOSET

"Any kind of freedom we now have in our lives was taking ground in the conversation and mores of involved writers and artists meeting in bars, museums, and lofts—out of bounds one might say."

—"An Interview with John Wieners," *Gay Sunshine Interviews* (265)

"I feel that what I'm doing is to increase those feelings in others so they no longer have to regard themselves as tramps, deviates, guttersnipes or aberrations."

—"An Interview with John Wieners," *Gay Sunshine Interviews* (272)

#### Part 1: Preface

The first John Wieners' poem I encountered, in graduate school in Boston where Wieners was living, can be cited here in its entirety:

The hollow eyes remain  
Electric sockets burnt out in the  
skull.

The beauty of men never disappears  
But drives a blue car through the stars.

At the time I read these lines I was a young gay man censoring the slightest erotic urges in my own poetry; it was too frightening to have them articulated, read aloud in workshops, where they could be misunderstood (one reader thought it was strange the speaker's love object, who she assumed was a woman, had such large hands as described in my poem). Worse, erotic identifications might actually been understood, marking me in a way I didn't yet want to be. (Funny how sexual identity can work that way, a kind of cage until it can become a kind of freedom.) Wieners was still alive, living near my campus on Joy Street in Boston's Beacon Hill

neighborhood. He would die soon after I graduated.

Wieners' five short lines (the poem's cryptic title was "Two Years Later," found in *Selected Poems*<sup>1</sup>), performed a kind of liberating magic in me, opening a space in my psyche. I knew (or thought I knew) enough about electroconvulsive therapy, about its uses for gay men in particular, to understand the reference that begins the poem. But the final two lines—a declaration of desire and the idea of persistence in the face of oppression, with its absurd personification of gay eros as a kind of interstellar motorist, and Wieners' mix of the everyday and the impossible—perhaps this, all of this, was what it was like being gay, I thought. Of course, I felt immediately the knowledge that my self-censoring and anxiety were miniscule in the face of what I imagined gay men of Wieners' generation had faced, 'shock therapy' perhaps only the most horrific and physical of tortures, or 'cures'.

Wieners' words seemed to me to be an act of gay poetic defiance I didn't know had existed. But it was an act of defiance (seeing beauty, naming it as infinite) that was linked in crucial ways to the very oppression it sought to escape.<sup>2</sup> In Wieners' poem, the eyes that see 'the beauty of men' have been burned hollow, just "electric sockets" metonymically recalling the very 'shock' that created the symbolic wounds. It is as if the immortal, infinite qualities called forth in the final two lines are a reaction to the oppressive force that sought to erase desire. The act of defiance owes its endurance to the violence that sought to end it. It is a relationship characterized by a kind of violent dialectic.

Strikingly, though, the act of defiance is not politically efficacious, or to put it more bluntly, does the speaker no good. The speaker has no purchase on beauty, the

men who evoke beauty, or the desire underlying it all. Nothing in the poem is given a possessive pronoun. Whose 'hollow eyes' stare back at us? Are they the speakers'? Beauty is ambiguously possessed by a category, 'men', not a single individual. Possessiveness is further confused: It is not the men, but their beauty that propels (drives) the car. As much as that beauty owes some kind of power to its perpetual movement through space, it is a movement away, an impossible distance *out*, the speaker left alone—and blind?—on earth while beauty disappears into a beyond, quite literally a void, soundless, groundless, and meaningless. The speaker is either alienated from the sight of male beauty or loses it in the ether. What begins as defiance ends in loss, failure, distance, and a blinded speaker alienated from his own desires. We are given no reason as to why this must be, but perhaps the suggestion is that the oppressive force that was seemingly overcome, originally, was in fact never fully escaped, its gravity insurmountable to the speaker himself, even if a kind of ideal of 'beauty' could escape it. *Something* remained, just as the burnt-out eyes remain, that could not be wholly overcome. This chapter, in part, attempts to localize in history and subjective experience what that 'something' might be, as articulated through Wieners' poetry.

I begin with this brief recollection, a kind of memory transformed into explication (or is it the other way around?), because I want to invoke three things immediately before delving deeper into the larger exegesis at hand. First, within this reading I wanted to suggest a kind of rough overture, a sounding out of the major themes I will take up here (alas, in what is much less a symphony, and more an etude), including the lyric as evoking defiance *and* failure, the lyric poem as a site of

alienation from desire<sup>3</sup>, and the role played by disciplining regimes of the Cold War consensus and containment that made the homosexual a disease in the body politic. Secondly, through personal anecdote-turned-analysis, I hoped to gesture toward a kind of ethos I find generative in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's reparative reading strategy. A reading that resists the call to mastery and accepts the possibility of failure<sup>4</sup> seems needed in an approach to Wieners' own relationship to these ideas<sup>5</sup>. (Privacy scholar Deborah Nelson also makes the case that such a reading is also especially productive for work done in Cold War studies<sup>6</sup>.) Thirdly, I want to invoke clearly and immediately the concept of 'the (paradigmatic) gay poet' that Wieners can become for us, if we are sensitive to the ways in which he not only speaks to gay themes but uses the lyric to fashion a specifically gay subjectivity. He is a poet for whom "the beauty of men never disappears."

As much as Wieners was a kind of hero-poet for me, he was also a tragic figure, though I no doubt couldn't have said exactly why. (Perhaps this 'etude' will bring clarity to that question, but also complication—and in the process nominate Wieners' work for continued, more robust study, study that will cement his influential poetry as producing important, subversive effects.) Perhaps when critics too-easily tack on words like "melancholic" and "lonely" to this work they are reducing an aspect of his poetry to tone and content, when in fact we need to examine how he uses the lyric *formally* as a response to privacy ethics, not a description of it. His poetry allows us to see something crucial (and perhaps elusive?) about the time in which he lived and its relationship to art. Despite the open declarations of desire which defined much of his work, Wieners' poetry

emphasizes the generic limitations of the lyric (including the nature of the *public* utterance) as implicated in its very failure to escape the gravitational force of the Cold War imperative of the closet and its ethics of a (paradoxical) privacy. *What begins as defiant expression ends in loss, failure, distance, and a blinded speaker alienated from his own desires.*

## **Part 2: The Cold War, the Gay Poet, the Trap of Privacy**

There may be somewhat of a consensus that Wieners is an 'important' poet, one whose life intersected with a long list of other major poets. That consensus, however, has not translated into major studies of his work, a full biography, letter collections (though one is currently being produced), and few archival studies, all of which is necessary to produce a robust discourse. Because of that, some small measure of biographical information<sup>7</sup> is warranted here.

John Wieners was born in Milton, Mass., on January 6, 1934. He graduated from Boston College. He happened to hear Charles Olson reading poetry in Boston and would follow Olson to Black Mountain College where he studied there under both Olson and Robert Duncan from 1955-56. Wieners returned to Boston and there, in 1956, met poet Frank O'Hara at the Poet's Theater in Cambridge, Mass., beginning a friendship that would lead O'Hara to champion Wieners' work. From 1958 to 1960, Wieners moved to San Francisco during the height of the Beat years. Here he participated in the poetry renaissance there, meeting and interacting with Ginsberg, Duncan, Jack Kerouac, Michael McClure, Jack Spicer and others. He wrote his first book, *The Hotel Wentley Poems* there when he was only 24.



For the next five years, he divided his time between New York City and Boston. He was often in and out of mental institutions. It was in Boston in the 70's that he met and found support in area poets like Charley Shively, Jack Powers, Gerrit Lansing, and Stephen Jonas. (In an interview with Shively, Wieners stated, "I am a Boston poet" [*Selected Poems* 295]). Wieners was active in the gay liberation movement, educational and publishing cooperatives, and political action committees.

Allen Ginsberg's foreword to Wieners' *Selected Poems* situates the poet in a kind of narrative of progress, one that highlights the "impossible love" of a gay subjectivity and the authenticity of self (even if 'shattered'), an idea that was experiencing a shift in meaning during this time. Ginsberg begins his description of Wieners with the "youthful idealism" of *The Hotel Wentley Poems*, an idealism he says "dissolves" into *Ace of Pentacles*, a book comprised of an "intelligence [that delves] deeper and deeper into the hole, or void, created by his imagination of an impossible love"; and how his next three books, *Pressed Wafer*, *Asylum Poems*, and *Nerves* chronicle that poetic journey and are examples of "the few truthful moments of the late 1960s era" (15). He goes on to describe Wieners' book *Behind the State Capitol* as representing a "shattered mind" (17), a book that "makes an ideogrammatic picture of his mind, with a widening of subjects, and dissociation as method after Charles Olson's dictum [sic] 'One perception must directly lead to another'" (18).

Wieners most productive years in which he would produce the poetry that made him famous (and the period at the center of my study), very closely align with

the sixties decade—from his first book’s publication, *The Hotel Wentley Poems* in 1958, through *Ace of Pentacles* (1964), *Pressed Wafer* (1967), *Asylum Poems* (1969), and *Nerves* (1970). The socio-historical context necessary to understand Wieners’ project of lyric critique and its relationship to the minoritized writer<sup>8</sup> begin in the sixties Cold War anxieties and its literary shifts. This includes contextualizing the gay poet amidst discussions of: the privacy ethics of the Cold War; the shift from New Criticism to confessionalism, the reigning poetic school at the time; and the era’s changing idea of the unified self, especially, of course, as understood via the practice of the lyric poet. What’s fascinating about our attempt to see these three areas as distinct is that that are in fact inextricably linked, a fact of profound importance, as we will see, for the homosexual poet, who deploys the lyric *I* in a societal minefield of disciplining effects.

We begin with how to situate the gay poet in the context of the privacy ethics of the Cold War. The sixties in particular saw a rise in ‘homophile’ organizing efforts and a hope for greater equality pinned on assimilationist politics and an ethnic model for identity formation. Remaining invisible, despite these political developments, remained a powerful idea for many gay men and lesbians, a space that meant survival. However, increasingly the closet has been implicated in *disabling* the liberatory potential of the very privacy it thought protective and insulating, as I will explain.

It is widely understood that the Cold War culture of consensus, including its anxieties over any public display of difference, produced fears of ‘the homosexual menace’<sup>9</sup> as infiltrating American values, the belief that the homosexual represented

an insidious moral rot that would spread given the chance. The homosexual was 'hiding in plain sight,' made partially legible in the public sphere by differences in speech, dress, gesture, taste, but only visible (and able to be regulated, disciplined, contained) when expressing desire. Thus, it was always a risk for the gay person to express gay desire publicly; what we today call the 'closet', a term that scholars are now suggesting didn't come into the lexicon *until* the sixties<sup>10</sup>, was one solution to living a life that required sexuality to be ensconced in privacy. How we see the closet, however, has profound implications for how we see the era. Culture critic and historian Michael Bronski summarizes the problem of privacy simply and succinctly: "[F]ighting for the right to privacy completely reinforces the dominant culture's mandate that gay people are acceptable only when they are private, not when they are public or a community" (*The Pleasure Principle* 239). The "double-bind" of the closet, as it has been described, occurs when the need to maintain privacy re-asserts the heteronormative values and regimes that require the "closet" in the first place. In this way, the closet was a hegemonic mechanism that ironically was abetted and sustained, for example, by the homophile groups' argument that they should have equal rights because what made them different was sequestered to the bedroom, one of the ultimate 'safe' domestic spaces the Cold War era so valorized.<sup>11</sup> Historian Elizabeth Armstrong places the blame on these groups' failure "to define" "the public revelation of sexual identity as a personally and politically liberating act" (33).

Can the Cold War lyric be embedded in the ethics of privacy? A better question might be, how could it not, since, as Deborah Nelson in *Pursuing Privacy in*

*Cold War America*, reminds us:

Lyric poetry is...[a] site of intense preoccupation with privacy since it has been classified, most insistently in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as the most private form of expression, a genre of intimacy that must, of course, pass through public expression. The lyric, as many have argued, perpetually returns to questions of boundaries, intimacy, protected space, and exposure. Like the private space protected with constitutional safeguards, the lyric has been imagined as a domain of sovereignty that offers a representation of the experience of autonomy, or at least its fiction. (28)

This means the lyric is not just a coincidentally interesting site of tension and paradox<sup>12</sup> because it echoes societal obsessions, but more importantly it is a form ready-made to comment on, critique, and perhaps even resist those obsessions, as I argue Wieners does.

Indeed, the ways in which the lyric and privacy intersect have offered critics space for recent intervention in privacy issues, some using influential gay poets of the early and mid-twentieth century. Critic Eric Keenaghan, in his *Queering Cold War Poetry*, uses his project to fully critique the dangers of seeing privacy as protective. He writes, "An ethical reappraisal of liberalism should start with the recognition that the sacrosanct private sphere is not an abstract, metaphysical, or intellectual space removed from the civil or public spheres." He describes privacy as "the apparatus through which power is exercised over our most intimate experiences of our selves" (22). He suggests poets, like the openly gay poet Robert Duncan<sup>13</sup>, turned away from simplistic ideas of privacy and toward the idea of "embodiment" and "vulnerability" in their writing, by which he means: "regarding our bodies as instruments for redefining a social emphasis on privacy as an experience of a kind of publicity" (24). He explains, "[E]mbodiement itself blurs the line between the supposedly distinct spheres of public and private experience. *We are always public*

*entities, even when we believe we're in the most intimate or private situations" (22).*

Pursuing the experience of vulnerability through experiencing the body in public allows one to see the danger in assuming privacy is protective and self-authorizing in its containment. "Vulnerability," he writes, "promotes... courageous public living. To appreciate it is to pursue an adventure in commonality, to sidestep the temptation of mourning the passing of a seemingly authentic (yet utterly illusory and ideological) privacy" (25).

It is also important to note the transitional nature of the era, the waning of The New Critics and the rise of Confessionalism, though certainly the move from one to other wasn't so simple and so easily plotted. Scott Herring describes the era as being defined by a "public poetry" as it was understood in New Critical thinking, "its emphasis on an objective truth any reader could uncover" and thus consume (415). Edward Brunner, in *Cold War Poetry*, discusses both mass culture and New Criticism, noting, "Once the merit of a work of art was dependent upon its accessibility, then obscurity in poetry was no longer a virtue but a symptom of a particular failure: a mark of the incomplete work of the poet whose poems had not been suitably revised and polished" (7). This focus on public consumption and the idea that something lay in the poem that must be 'discovered' meant the gay poet, fearing his content *and/or* style would make legible his sexuality, needed to alter either style or self, or employ some other strategy (explored below) that would allow only certain readers to view the poem's disclosures while preventing others from 'the truth'.

Just as lyric is connected to privacy (and New Criticism in a sense invested in its opposite), the confessional style opens up its own set of questions related to the era's social fabric. But we must resist easy associations of confession-as-privacy. As Nelson writes, "To call these poems 'private', which was the term of choice for critics for several decades, is not to settle a question about confessional poetry, but to identify one of its preoccupations. What is privacy? And for whom?" (31). For Wieners these were real questions, and the confessional style was a kind of poetry he resisted and commented upon in his own poetry. Consider the ways in which confession's failed "liberatory potential" (à la Foucault) can open up important issues for a poet like Wieners who is invested in showing the fantasy of privacy's power to protect the self. Deborah Nelson's view is useful here to cite in its entirety:

Confessional culture is often cast as a danger to both public and private spheres. However, perhaps nowhere more than in the United States, with its faith in privacy as the location of free deliberation, has confession constituted such an important mode of political engagement and cultural expression. Michel Foucault's now axiomatic insight into the nature of confession—that it is always already coerced—refuses liberalism's fundamental privileging of the private sphere. Indeed, Foucault's denial of the liberatory potential of confession stems from his argument that the private is already infiltrated by power. That is, there is no real space of privacy, merely the illusion of privacy instituted in the formation of Enlightenment political institutions. Confessions cannot liberate a private self—indeed, they can only perpetuate the illusion that there is such a thing. (27)

Wieners resists the idea of 'confession,' as he does in his poem "The Gay World has Changed," discussed below, in order to avoid the trap of seeing homosexuality as confessionalism's<sup>14</sup> idea of the 'too private'<sup>15</sup> secret, private only *because* homosexual. Wieners' graphic descriptions of sex and discussions of desire and sexual identity are different in tone from his contemporaries, in ways that don't

make it easy for the poet to be categorized. Critic John Wilkinson reminds us, “Across all styles, drug use and gay sex are prevalent. The keynote of the sexual episodes is regret and yearning, their characteristic *mise-en-scène* post-coital; a tone distinct from the gay social round of Frank O’Hara’s poetry or the promiscuous abandon of Allen Ginsberg’s.” In other words, Wieners doesn’t “fit” with the idea of the resistant, transgressive poetry that one would, retroactively, it must be said, hope for; that is, when he shows graphic gay sex, it isn’t tied to a liberatory notion (even if doomed to fail) of public defiance of norms, nor does he code his poems or write out of a Modernist difficulty that would make it *seem* like he was; nor does he even reflect (at least for the most part) the double-consciousness the Beats were critiquing; nor does he even simplistically give society what it wants, ‘the miserable and lonely faggot’ willfully but pathetically living out his sickness in self-induced solitude. This final point is perhaps the most interesting because the most debatable; there are in fact poems, as I’ll show, in which he wishes for a wife, for example, or where he depicts gay sex as negative. In his “Unwaking” the speaker recalls a friend calling him “a fag afraid to be a fag” (9). Additionally, his poems suggest he remains unconvinced that simply articulating homosexuality as a public possibility can truly be subversive in the way historian Robert Corber argues gay male writers like Tennessee Williams used gay male experience<sup>16</sup>. Andrea Brady offers a more specific way of reading Wieners’ graphic sexuality: “The explicitness of his poetry could be read as an effort to subvert heterosexist monopolies on public self-reflection, to meditate not only on himself, but on himself as a gay man, a stigmatized or ‘outcast freak’. But it could also be argued that the spectacle of the

degraded self that he presented to 'all the world' became another screen, a defenseless persona whose theatricality itself served as a form of defense" ("The Other Poet"). To take Brady's cue, it follows that Wieners' explicitness is not a generalized attack on decorum but rather meant to show how the lyric positions the gay poet differently and in fact at odds with the form's inherent norms of "public self-reflection."

It may be difficult to distinguish how Wieners' writing from personal experience (often about graphically and about sex, drugs, and mental health issues) is different from the Confessional style. But it is crucial that we make such a distinction or else misdirect critical attention<sup>17</sup> away from how the poems address their own form. According to Brady, "Wieners was a fundamentally personal poet, revealing in verse the most intimate, tender or appalling preoccupations of his insatiate heart." She notes he "frequently confessed that the insular poetic community allowed not only his poetry, but himself, physically, to survive. In his poetry the literary and the personal, the aesthetic and the biographical, implicate each other fundamentally" ("The Other Poet"). Ginsberg, too, saw no daylight between the poet and his poems; Wieners was "a man become one with his poetry" (16). So how is this poet of the personal different from his contemporaries' confessional style? Wieners sense of the personal is so intense there is kind of self-awareness, a felt need to inhabit the poems, their moments of production, their awareness of an audience (even if ambivalently, disinterestedly). But it is patently not an awareness of 'disclosure', of the too-private. Whereas the Confessional poet reveled in their awareness of turning the self's deepest revelations into spectacle (to



be hyperbolic in order to make clear my point), Wieners had no interest in seeing his content as taboo. As he writes in *The Journal of John Wieners*:

[I am] writing out history in some dark room, doing my bit towards creating  
a new structure  
from love.  
It can only be that. For my other motive we fail. And love is a  
sparse thing  
to nurture all  
these years. (43)

The moment in which Wieners was writing was also a transition moment in which the idea of a unified self was making its final argument (through cultural agents like the Beats) before the postmodern critique of a fixed identity fully took hold. In this moment, some gay men and women, who had long lived a life of multiples identities, were now doing the opposite, no longer satisfied with the closet, but seeking a 'true' self, a subjectivity marked by a unified autonomy (or at least its fiction), all in order to gain political traction as authentic citizens. Maria Damon explores these issues as they pertain to Wieners' work in her most recent book (in a chapter titled "Loneliness, Lyric and Ethnography: Some Discourses on/of the Divided Self"). She writes, "One of the central tensions in the history of modern lyric poetry, the relationship between signifier and referent as allegorized by the lyric I [was especially 'profitable' to consider for those] on the cusp of what we now consider the postmodern: to, right before a generalized acceptance of performativity and multiplicity, take a final ambivalent and anguished stand in favor of a utopian and nostalgic model of unalienated unity." Drawing on the work of historian George Chauncey, she writes, "the sixties, for example, marked the era in which the double life of marginalized identity was put aside in favor of, to use ideas then prevalent,

'coming out of the closet,' 'taking off the mask...embracing your identity...as if you had only one" (160). She maps it this way: the 'divided, binarist self' of the modern period, "inner and outer, good and bad, mask and 'real self,' public and private, evolved into the fluid and fragmented self" of postmodernism. The liberation era, however, brought with it this message: "the unitary, 'authentic' self was proclaimed as needing emancipation from the false and oppressive roles imposed by an external, hostile, and conformist society." She adds that black or queer or other minoritized subjects "could not easily or glibly drop the pleasures, the protective maneuverability, or even the historical sorrows associated with the performative, the multiplicity of roles they inhabited (161). Damon argues that Wieners' and other "minoritized writers' work witnessed and documented both their own psyches and the societies in which they could only partially participate." On the one hand, Damon suggests, Wieners and people like him viewed the "unambiguously single 'self' [as] clearly a fallacy, [having not had] the historical luxury of living that fallacy, and [having had to craft] marvelous lives and art out of an ethos of performativity" (162). On the other hand, the lyric genre is almost defined by what Damon calls "a sort of self-sufficiency for the speaking subject" (165). It is a genre in which "consciousness itself is foregrounded, attended *to*, as the most interesting element of the text" (173), and in which "[lyric's appeal] "lay mainly in its ratification of the individual subject observing itself across a range of feelings and thoughts against a backdrop of objective correlatives" (175). Damon reminds us that by looking at itself so intently in an attempt to affect a unifying voice, it actually calls attention to how

that “recuperative” unity, not the ‘self-division,’ is ‘suspect’ (165). In a comment that connects the various threads we have been discussing, she summarizes:

The psychic alienation described by Wieners is both peculiar to his sensibility and typical of the split between public and private spheres that many minoritized folks negotiated without paying the high price of their sanity—but this is not to say they didn’t suffer. John Wieners lived through both epochal transitions<sup>18</sup>, from ‘divided self’ to the mandate to be ‘authentically gay’. (185)

How have critics envisioned the gay poet wrestling with these issues? A frequent argument seems to be to interpret their work as formative of some strategy to both express (coded) gay male experience while avoiding the disciplining effects that go along with it. Bronski points out one argument even *ties* gay male creativity directly to the closet: “One explanation of gay male culture’s impulse to creativity is that it is predicated upon imagining and acting out alternatives to the closet” (56), which sounds very much like Damon’s creation of “marvelous lives and art out of an ethos of performativity” (*Postliterary America* 162). Historian Robert Dawidoff looks at it from the opposite angle: “the closet fostered interpretive skills [for homosexuals]” (86).

Michael Davidson, a formidable scholar whose work consistently takes up gay poets of the Cold War era, including Wieners, suggests gay poets critiqued the sanctions against non-normative desire by using the very structures that kept them marginalized because of such public displays. Davidson gives us a glimpse of how sexual difference was articulated in one of Wieners’ most often-discussed poems, “A Poem for Vipers.” He focuses on how Wieners recuperates the marginal and the deviant (within their seedy social spaces) by making individuals part of a ‘community of difference.’ He writes, “Wieners creates of community of difference

by paying tribute to marginal types who inhabit alternative social spaces (the gay bar, the mental ward, the hustler's street corner) vulnerable to official scrutiny" (59-60). Davidson's readings show how "Wieners transforms terms for deviance into terms of personal legitimation" ("sexuality and drugs are rituals, ways of 'making it'") and how he uses alliteration to suggest "the lyric possibilities of acts shared by those, who, as he says later [in "Poem for Vipers"], "hide words / under the coats of their tongue," [the poem itself] "converting official sanctions against sodomy or drug use into a covert law unto itself" (60).<sup>19</sup>

It is a useful reading, but is the story more complex than this? Could a "community of difference" manage to convert anything in such an era so insistent on a very specific kind of consensus? Were "lyric possibilities" so easy to access, *especially* for gay poets? Recent criticism suggests, through some of the most important gay poets in the canon, the lyric required re-modeling or re-tailoring in order to speak on behalf of the gay poet<sup>20</sup>. Briefly, I sketch out the most salient features of these strategies here. In Tim Dean's work on Hart Crane, he characterizes what he calls Crane's "poetics of privacy" in contradistinction to the predominant, earlier critical view that the closet generated a poetry that hides homosexual desire within interpretive difficulty. He establishes instead how Crane renders an experience of ecstatic intensity via the "logic of metaphor." For Dean this creates a kind of impersonality that is qualitatively different from an "informational privacy" (i.e. containing something that *can* be *known* once revealed)<sup>21</sup>. According to Christopher Nealon's idea of what he calls foundling texts<sup>22</sup>, for Crane "homosexuality prompts him to shape a poetic language of shared but occluded

historical experience” (14). Once again, some measure of occlusion<sup>23</sup> is needed to make gayness legible but only as a kind of translucency and only when shared as a communal text. In criticism that has numerous cross-points with my own, Scott Terrell Herring takes on O’Hara. Says Herring, “Concentrating on the rise of the mass public sphere, I argue that O’Hara does not simply discard the New Critical creed of public poetry; instead, he completely revises it in a cultural milieu that was intent on identifying-to regulate-the homosexual body. Through personism, that is, O’Hara strategically manufactures an alternative public sphere in which public individuals paradoxically meet as private persons” (416). Anne Hartman’s interpretation of Ginsberg and O’Hara’s<sup>24</sup> poetry, seeks to show how the poets “deviate from the transcendent lyric model by explicitly addressing a specific public.” She argues they thus ‘re-model’ “the confessional mode to articulate a dissident sexuality...[and] simultaneously address and construct a counter-hegemonic homosexual public” (48).

All of these strategies involve accepting the public-private split (of course, what other option is there?), seeking an alternative (or shared) public to address the lack of a safe way for the gay poet to access the public. Re-model, re-tailor—this is the commonality. I argue Wieners, though many of his poems appear traditional, in a sense *rejects* the traditional paradigm of the lyric model by showing the genre as complicit in sustaining hegemony; he remodels not a particular mode but the lyric address itself. Many of his poems written from a gay subjectivity refuse to broker in shared suggestiveness.

All of these strategies seem invested in the idea that the poet must evade the publicizing powers of the accessible, universally signifying poem while walking a kind of edge of the personal (read: private, and private *because* homosexual). But as we recall the era's regimes and obsessions and anxieties, discussed above, that gird these arguments, one is left to wonder if these approaches cannot fully outmaneuver the closet, cannot help but sustain its power. In my study of Wieners' poetry, I at first found myself wondering if his lyric's explicitness and its awareness of its minoritized subjectivity, if these were more complex than "subversion." The more I studied Wieners, in particular his poems that are self-referential and especially those that metaphorize writing as sex, what seemed to me a kind of will-to-failure in Wieners' speakers began to materialize, a move signaling what I construct as a critique of the lyric genre itself.

### **Part 3: Wieners' poetics: lyric failure and queering the lyric relationship**

In order to begin thinking through what we might mean by 'failure' in Wieners' work I want to briefly turn to a poem he wrote, ironically perhaps, in the same year as the Stonewall riots. It is one of the poems that links poetry and sexuality, specifically by suggesting a kind of inverse relationship between his identity as a poet and as a gay man. Titled "Supplication," it is indeed a kind of prayer, one that begins with an apostrophe<sup>25</sup> to poetry itself:

O poetry, visit this house often,  
imbue my life with success,  
leave me not alone,  
give me wife and home. (1-4)

When a contemporary reader encounters this poem, the initial response may be one of sadness: Is Wieners really asking that *poetry* turn him straight, take him away from all of the things that have come to define his earlier work (aloneness, drugs, homosexuality)? Does he really want to be ‘cured’? Does he really see homosexual love as ‘wanting the impossible’? If not, this prayer for a heteronormative life must be ironic, yes? For a reader of the twenty-first century, luxuriating in his or her presentist attitude, the moment seems to be one of weakness, a kind of giving in, despite the fact that he may know full well the difficulty of securing a happy homosexual life in Cold War America, in or out the closet. Another reading could be that Wieners wanted to record this all-too human response to the constant pressure of life as a gay man in the sixties, more pointedly life as a gay *poet*. But a more provocative reading exists, that this brief poem is meant to be a way to define poetry as powerless, especially when it comes to removing the speaker’s “impossible” desires. If not powerless, then it is self-eradicating: the person Wieners would be—if poetry answers his prayer—would be someone unrecognizable. Perhaps, then, the poem is a cautionary tale, one underscored by the final line’s suggestion that either the poem or life (or both) is nothing more than “this suspended vacuum,” a void where sound cannot travel, where even his supplication is never heard, and where the poet remains audience-less.

It is this kind of poem, or more to the point it is the kind of reading, that profoundly complicates Wieners as a poet. It is understandable that we might want to see Wieners’ “project” as “fired by the stranglehold of a repressive, homophobic culture,” as Joseph Torra does. But Wieners’ poetic response may not be as simple as

when Torra argues the poet “doesn't hide in the closet but plunges freely into a world where sex is the nutrient for self-identity and actualization.... [his] text...a celebration of sex, turning Whitman's often-veiled homoerotic allusions into semen and sweat. Poem, like orgasm, as emancipation, reconciliation of body and spirit....” (233). We must problematize this kind of reading<sup>26</sup>. By acknowledging how Wieners' use of the sexual is tied so intimately to his idea of the lyric address (its obsession with privacy and disclosure, its fiction of a unified self), it becomes interpretively too easy to see “the poem, like orgasm” as meant simply to shock, unnerve and subvert. A more radical (if pessimistic, or realistic?) statement on the place of the gay poet in a homophobic culture can be uncovered: a statement more about failure than liberation.

Let's acknowledge here the often-felt need to fashion our readings to reflect our own aspirational, often presentist ideas of literary merit and our own desire to see in our interpretations the poet's political will and perspicacity as we *wish* to see it. Now, let's acknowledge that we must at least be open to the possibility that—*especially* for the minoritized, brutalized subject—their work may *reflect* that brutality, not recuperate it through art into a wiser, stronger critique of what caused it. As Judith Jack Halberstam reminds, “[S]ystems that tether queerness to loss and failure cannot be wished away; some would say, nor should they be. As Lee Edelman, Heather Love, and others have argued, to simply repudiate the connections between queerness and negativity is to commit to an unbearably positivist and progressive understanding of the queer” (98). Critics like Halberstam (*The Queer Art of Failure*), José Esteban Muñoz (*Cruising Utopia: The*



*Then and There of Queer Futurity*), and Heather Love (*Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*), have increasingly begun to argue for queerness as a way to subvert ideas of progress, work, knowledge, mastery, and political and personal 'success'. (After all, reminds Love, the homosexual has historically signified as a site of failure [6] and homosexual love has historically signified as a "social impossibility" [51].). Drawing on Love in particular Halberstam writes, "[I]f, in a Lacanian sense, all desire is impossible because unsustainable, then the queer body and queer social worlds become evidence of that failure, while heterosexuality is rooted in a logic of achievement, fulfillment, and succes(sion)" (94). Muñoz makes his project clear, "to explicate the ways in which...[queer artists] thematize failure as being something like the *always already* status of queers and other minoritarian subjects in the dominant social order within which they toil." He sees queer failure, as "more nearly about escape and a certain kind of virtuosity," something "often deemed or understood as failure because it rejects normative ideas of value"(173). For example, he distinguishes, crucially, queer failure "as active political refusal" from simple political inefficacy. Says Muñoz, drawing in this case on the work of Paolo Virno, even "negative sentiments" can be signify in queer ways as subverting heteronormative value. He lists:

...cynicism, opportunism, depression, and bitchiness [as] often seen as solipsistic, individualistic, and anitcommunal affective stances associated with an emotional tonality of hopelessness. Yet these bad sentiments can signal the capacity to transcend hopelessness. These sentiments associated with despondence contain the potentiality for new modes of collectivity, belonging in difference and dissent. (176-77).

I see this kind of work as carving out a space for critics to think about how a work of literature can show the effects of oppression on the psyche, on subjectivity, on

aesthetics, without resorting to historicizing the work as evidence of (a version of heteronormative) failure. This kind of criticism approaches art without the need to forcibly work out its hermeneutics until it meets some idea of success, the poem magically transformed into liberatory affect.

We can see this concept play out in the very theoretical foundations Wieners set out for himself in his poetry. In a deceptively unremarkable poem he left untitled, Wieners offers up a kind of theory of the lyric in six simple lines, rehearsing age-old ideas and then suggesting his own as a kind of non-response, my first example of queer failure. Wieners writes:

Some men seek silence for their company  
some see in crowded bars their retreat  
some find in single romance, solace

while for others the common white body heat.  
For me it is more in waiting, writing and waiting  
for the proper moment, through friends who love me. (Untitled<sup>27</sup> 1-6)

The poem presents a continuum of how men (sadly but unsurprisingly universalized here) experience the self in relation not to others but to the knowledge that others exist. In other words, it maps out sites of lyric address. The sites on this continuum are, according to the poem: (1) solitude<sup>28</sup>, the self speaking to the self in silence, Mills's 'poetry as overheard'; (2) 'the crowd' (what we might now call a public that engages the social or perhaps dialogic<sup>29</sup> aspect of the lyric); and (3) a lover off-stage, the traditional "you" the lyric is so known for that somehow functions as both a lover and the reader. This third option produces either solace or 'heat', that is a *feeling* of love or its *physicalized response* (i.e. an erection). This third site on the continuum seems to represent the idea of the lyric as monologue.

All of these, Wieners suggests, are viable; there is no judgment from the poem that suggests they are inappropriate responses. And yet Wieners suggests his own place on the continuum is none of the above: “For me, it [company, audience, relationship] is more in waiting,” the poet explains. *How* he describes this (in the final two lines) is telling: it is a kind of *non*-response that joins silence with desire, or more pointedly the anticipation of being desired (waiting *through* loving friends). It is a kind of paradoxical space that is static but bristling with the potentiality<sup>30</sup> of the idea of connection, and the realization of that idea through physical touch. Consider too the lexically clotted phrase “waiting, writing and waiting.” The waiting is for “the friends who love me” who are *not there yet* and who must wait for the “proper moment” to appear. Who determines this moment is not revealed. In the penultimate line Wieners suggests the ‘it’ he seeks is also “writing” itself, but the poem ‘loses’ or smudges “writing” by placing it in between two iterations of “waiting” (i.e. we mistake the line for ‘waiting, waiting and waiting’). The lexical confusion is mimetic of the speaker’s confusion: Will my poems materialize with only the potentiality of a loving embrace for their audience? Or more to the point: Is “writing” just a form of waiting? One critical exploration of the kind of subjectivity this implies has been put forth by Jennifer Moxley as a kind of ‘independence’. She writes, “The ‘selfhood’ in [Wieners’] works, while perhaps not enviable or socially recognized, does attest to a truly radical form of independence: a ‘for and by oneself’—to use Rimbaud’s phrasing...” While Moxley’s idea seems to describe aspects of Wieners’ work, it removes the relational figure I argue must be present, emphasized in Wieners’ use of sexual metaphor to describe his poems and poem-

making. After all, even waiting is *desiring*, a want for a lack to be filled, something that would seem to be precluded by 'radical independence'.

Even so, Moxley is right to point to Rimbaud's phrase to suggest *the address itself* as being independent, the poem itself as not requiring, even pushing away reception. In an interview Wieners once said, "The poet's role establishes distance from his address and distance from his audience. The audience is a sport of the author, and he must remember that" (*Selected Poems* 289). He spoke in a similar vein, though more at length and more forcefully, in his statement of poetics for Donald Allen's 1960 anthology *New American Poetry*:

A poem does not have to be a major thing. Or a statement?  
I am allowed to ask many things because it has been given  
me the means to plunge into the depths and come up with  
answers? No. Poems, which are  
my salvation alone. The reader can do with them what he likes.  
I feel right now even the reading of poems to an unknown  
large? public is a shallow *act*... (425)

He goes on to write that "poetry / even tho it does deal with language is no more *holy act* / than, say, shitting. / Dis- / charge" (426). There is a pointed ambivalence in how (or even if) the poem is received; its "act" somehow saves the poet but the implication is that it may do little else in the world—it has no need to be "a major thing," is shallow, is a simple bodily evacuation. At least we take from the conjunction of these comments that Wieners has indeed thought about lyric address and found it suspect at best. We are left to wonder about what exactly he means by 'distance'<sup>31</sup> and by the curious 'sport of the author' phrase. One of his most surprising comments on this score posits writing as "an act of repulsion" (1 "Rubbish"). Here the speaker does admit, "I feel better leashing / my own identity

within bounds” (3-4). The subjectivity is one of ambivalence: pushing away the other (which enables the self to construct its difference), but requiring the self to be bordered by some cohesive sense of a bounded whole.

Writing as waiting, silence, repulsion, distance—if the lyric is relational in its function, for Wieners its fraught, contradictory and complex. Then again, so is love, especially when everything around you is telling you it is “impossible” and doing its best to isolate you from possible lovers. And yet for Wieners poetry becomes defined as “the only way we / can keep in touch though not enough / love,” (“By the Five Dollar Bill” 7-9), sounding once again both erotic potentiality as well as insufficiency. And yet it is “the only way” out of loneliness. Elsewhere, in *Cultural Affairs in Boston*, he writes, “The poem seizes one, in an experience / almost, all-consuming, / as an orgasm” (“An Evocation to Tommy Dorsey” 5-7). “All-consuming” suggests that which takes possession, and leaves nothing. So what begins in sexual contact, ends in both release and self-consumption.

But Wieners also uses his poetry to transform these kind of inchoate moments of poetic-erotic affect to something closer to a poetic manifesto: “I don’t know anything about being a man, or a woman. / Only about being a poet, in love with one man” (“White Slavery” 1-2). This is far more than a posture for Wieners. He fixes his poetry as an epistemology of *writing* gay desire. Again and again Wieners reminds the reader of his use of poetry and desire, often linking them as he does here explicitly and in other poems in more subtle ways. The homosexual comes to know himself in the act of poem making.

This collection of moments from Wieners' poetry, along with others not cited, taken together produces a subjectivity obsessed with the ways in which it becomes marginalized due to expression. It is a subjective position mired in potentiality as the best one can hope for, a position of radical independence, or one that is ambivalent or even hostile to the 'other'. It is a subjectivity entrenched in solitude, always desiring but rarely being satisfied, one hyper-aware of a kind of ontological inevitability of being 'always alone'<sup>32</sup>, one that understands (erotic) connection as always dangerous. In other words, and in no uncertain terms, it is a paradigmatic gay male subjectivity for the Cold War decades. (This is one of the reasons why I take up for study those poems that speak directly to gay themes and eschew the need to 'discover' gay themes in the more difficult or oblique poems.)

Can we theorize a lyric effect at work in Wieners' linking poetry and homosexuality? Andrea Brady suggests one answer. She mines a poem Frank O'Hara wrote<sup>33</sup> about Wieners and draws this conclusion from it: "The *erotic pleasure of creation* first seduces the poet sweetly, but becomes 'cursed' when it exposes the poet to the cruelty of the world, the revelation of its truths, or when it abandons him" (my emphasis). The poem's move from private act of creation to public reception is a dangerous one, the danger in seeing a false privacy as insulating. Certainly this fits with what Wieners would have experienced in his own life. But could his eroticization be less about the process of writing ('the pleasure of creation') and more about commenting on the relationship the lyric instigates, a relationship we have seen for Wieners is fraught with confusion, ambivalence, hostility.<sup>34</sup>

Here I want to suggest one way of looking at this relational experience of the genre. Drawing on the idea of Michael Warner's queer counterpublics<sup>35</sup>, I want to suggest that erotizing the lyric relationship may queer it in the sense that it disrupts the genre's autonomy<sup>36</sup>, its trade in privacy, and the sufficiency of authoritative speech. In Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant's essay "Sex in Public," they argue queer people discover alternative forms of intimacy in order to create counterpublics, described as "an indefinitely accessible world conscious of its subordinate relation" (199). I want to suggest that reading/being read can be a form of intimacy and, per Wieners, so can writing; Wieners' brand of the lyric, then, becomes a very specific counterpublic in itself, one that doesn't require shared suggestiveness, an open closet, 'informational privacy', or the like because it rejects investing in dominant codes and re-scripts reading/writing/being read as sexual, not textual. In queering the lyric address in this way we can access the promiscuous, mobile, non-monogamous, non-totalizing *possibilities* of the lyric. Once in this realm, we can activate the indefinite, impersonal and non-reproductive modes that may be antithetical to standard paradigms of the lyric, using anonymous public sex as a kind of analytic metaphor<sup>37</sup> for study of the lyric.

Indeed, this turn toward a more social theory of the lyric is particularly generative for my approach to Wieners. In a response to critics who argue the lyric as a genre holds no special reason for study in and of itself, Jonathan Culler argues we need not jettison "lyric"; we simply needed to destabilize "the assumption that if the concept of lyric is to be retained, it must be linked to intensity, inwardness, and immediacy." Interestingly, for Culler the "crucial step [to accomplish this] may be to

displace the dominant pedagogical paradigm that sees lyrics as fundamentally dramatic monologues” (203). Culler’s suggestion is, at its base, to be open to other ways of theorizing the lyric, including the more complex ways the lyric addresses the reader (e.g. via intertextuality, allusion) and to see in the lyric what he calls a “rhetorical transaction” that includes a lyric “extravagance” of a speaker “without a known real-world counterpart” (202). (This last point is key to how I read Wieners.)

#### **Part 4: Reading Wieners’ poetry as a dissident lyric**

Wieners, as I have argued above, exhibits a complex poetics that, in its suggestion of failure and erotics, both represents oppression as it simultaneously formally reflects that oppression. What occurs is a transformation of the lyric into a vehicle able to critique the closet, the false protection of privacy ethics, and perhaps even the idea of the self. To this end, I conduct close readings of two representative poems from Wieners’ work from primarily the sixties. Undergirding these readings are the following questions: Can poetry liberate? Can the Cold War lyric, a form that relies on an essential association between interior and private, be used to depict a gay subjectivity without re-privatizing sexuality in a way that gives sway to Cold War anxieties? How does Wieners use the lyric to suggest, imply or enact its failure for the minoritized subject? And what are the implications for clarifying Wieners’ project and influence, for articulating the notion of a ‘gay poet’ in Cold War America, and for new ways to understand the practice of the lyric as a minoritized literature?

The first reading will serve to show how by making the lyric poem proxy for the gay bar, Wieners suggests the interior speech of the lyric *I* is helplessly



transformed (re-transformed?) into internalized homophobia, a response far different from the heterosexual's experience of privacy. The second reading will show how the gay poet must create a sexual relationship with the reader/addressee to resist the traditional lyric model and offer a solution to the very problems his poetics enact and demarcate.

The first reading examines Wieners' poem "The Gay World Has Changed." In the most simplistic of readings, the poem represents a self-loathing speaker's reduction of the gay person to the sex act; in this, it is possible to argue Wieners is showing how gay people take on society's homophobic diagnoses of themselves. In essence the poem can be read as showing the power of homophobia to create the self-loathing "faggot" of the fifties and sixties. Such a reading can be problematized by focusing on the poem's pointed self-referentiality and its use of the gay bar as a proxy for the poem's own (not simply or even necessarily the speaker's) relationship to the private and the public. The poem makes it a point (almost self-aware of this need) to reflect its time and place of production as central to its ethos. This includes the speaker's retrospective look back across the 'change' in gay bars over two decades, the reference to "Confessional" verse, and the idea of gay identity as comprised of an authentic self and a masked self ("normal looking enough, you'd never know"), prevalent—if increasingly resisted—at the time.

The poem is comprised of three sections, three fairly explicit explorations of gay life as the speaker sees it as having 'changed'. This idea of (questionable) progress is both evoked in the poem's beginning, climbing the stairs to a bar, and mocked in the ending, climbing the stairs of Harvard's library, not toward

knowledge but self-loathing. The 'progress' is out of a life of drugs and homelessness and towards a self-loathing reduction of the person to the sex act.

The poem's primary setting is the gay bar, a site that becomes not defined by desire but by a deeply ambivalent, to say the least, view of gay men and in particular the speaker self-reflexively. In this space gay men are depicted as better off dead but stubbornly refusing self-annihilation. Other men, even so, keep the speaker alive, and have for twenty years. At this point, the poet and speaker, merge: "...who knows these men refresh me // daily, in gay bars for twenty years, who have I found // that is not Confessional verse, it's obsessional" (5-6). His poems, specifically those written about men, these lines imply, represent a psychosexual compulsion, something unwanted, abnormal and unforgivable. And here we also find the suggestion that the intimacy associated with confessional poetry cannot be applied to gay desire in the same way it would be to straight desire; it must be made legible, instead, as a psychological illness.

This would be a startling use of the poem's self-referential nature in and of itself, but the poem then moves into a much more associative realm, using lyric signs ("bodies of lust & promesse" [8]) that have no clear signification, only "drums of colored words" (13) to use the poem's own nonsensical phrase. The object of desire has now been cloaked in the unspecific: clichéd, frozen, lifeless, the exemplar being statues of Adonis. The love-object is put "behind" a black topcoat, covered over in "harsh words," obscured by "smoky looks" and "wrapped" (9-10) in romance. As the speaker circles his 'favorites' at the bar, all of these ways of trying to obscure desire amplify those feelings; desire spills over, both trivial and serious, joke and a fever—

“this is / excess, hilarity & hot flesh” (10-11). Playing on the double entendre of “hot flesh,” the speaker experiences desire as something that warps sense and perception. What is clear is the speaker processes this fully aware of his minoritized, marginalized subjecthood—“stormy tides” bring him “bitching morality and society w/out a voice” (14).

The third and final section gives a clearer picture of how the speaker perceives the men at the bar, his fellow homosexuals. They are only normal *in appearance*, with only their “good clothes” and “intelligent con- / versation” hiding their ‘true’ natures. They are “normal looking enough” but “you’d never know, / are not degenerates” (15-16). Of course, this is artifice, disguise, dupe—the stuff of poetry, the poem’s own cynicism implies. Even in the gay bar, societal imperatives to appear normal reign. This prepares the reader to understand the self-hate that pervades the speaker’s inner voice at the poem’s end.

In a moment of optimism, the speaker (zooming out of the bar and into the interior space of his imagination) gets turned on by the men around him, dancing suggestively with them. This private fantasy is paired with the public act of “only two hours ago” climbing Lamont’s stairs while berating himself as a “faggot, a faggot, you’re nothing but a / homosexual, / nothing more; sex, sex, Sex and sex” (20-22). The “nothing more” of course is the suggestion that his sexuality defines him, supported by the stuttering of “sex” we imagine he says as he mounts each stair, not toward knowledge, intrinsically, but into self-reduction. Not to put too fine a point on it, Wieners isolates (literally marginalizes) the word “homosexual,” placing it alone on its own line, pushed as far to the margin as possible.

The poem uses its own lyric qualities (self-referentiality, the instability of the lyric sign, a heightened sense of interior and exterior) to implicate itself in producing its own ideological trap. Even the conflicted male subjectivity of the speaker cannot be allowed a kind of autonomous purity—linked at it is to the poet’s artifice, his “good clothes” and “intelligent con- / versation.” The failure the poem enacts is both thematic and formal. Poetry, it says, this poem you are reading in particular, *cannot* liberate, nor allow for forgiveness (to use ‘confession’ in another way), or even align the poet-speaker with a sanctioned public (the ‘mainstream’ of confessionalism). Writing produced out of gay desire is marginalizing, alienating, and in some twisted logic supports its own demonization. Persistence has led only to self-hate, the gay men who ‘*refuse to die*’, i.e. refuse to remain invisible, solitary and self-loathing, who persist in the face of twenty years of ‘change’, cannot empower their expressions of desire. It is, nonetheless, a stinging rebuke of society’s imperative on silencing the homosexual. In fact, the queer failure lies in Wieners’ ability to allow the poem’s form to retain and amplify oppression’s ontological and social injury, transforming it into a kind of political knowledge.

My second reading uses the poem “Memories of You” (*Cultural Affairs in Boston* 58-9), dated 1965, to further understand Wieners’ use of form. Specifically, mining the erotic-poetic possibilities of the sex/poem link allows us to see Wieners’ use of a kind of dissident lyric. The poem situates itself as perhaps the most typical, and sentimental, of lyrics, one both addressed to a particular “you” and based upon the recollection of memories, picturing a past relationship through lyric subjectivity.

The poem, in fact, is nothing like that. It is catalogue of public sex on the surface; but it also most explicitly represents Wieners' desire to pair writing and sex.

What is made more than obvious in the poem is that the sex depicted is public sex. The lyric's publicizing of a private act seems to be obsessively, transgressively asserted. More specifically, the speaker visits the very centers of gay life: San Francisco, Boston and New York City. To tour urban America is to take a tour of public gay sex. To further invoke the public (and celebrate a homosexual counterpublic), Wieners brings into the poem both O'Hara and Ginsberg, arguably the two most famous gay poets of his generation. (This can also be a kind of brash self-nominating for the gay poet title.) In fact, the only space in the poem that seems to be more private than public is a "locked" bathroom. Interestingly here Wieners makes a digression from his catalogue of public sex. He follows "locked" with "In my self? And what use // of this, this purgation of senses" (22-33). But the cleansing or purging (suggested by bringing the private experience to light) is 'no use', signaling the poem's belief that privacy holds no special powers to protect.

Even the introduction of the heteronormative, via the suggestion of a woman sex partner for the homosexual speaker, cannot re-privatize or normalize the speaker's subjectivity. According to the poem's logic, a prospective female lover, even if pretending to be a man to please the speaker, would meet with the speaker's feminine nature, making the pairing "lesbianism" (50). Homosexuality, in whatever form, is inescapable.

But the real crux of the poem rests on a single moment, a play between words (i.e. the verbal, the poem) and sex, when Wieners describes the poem itself as

“a verbal blowjob of a poem” (44), and discovers it has “degenerated into” a masturbatory “style” that even ‘pulls the prick’ of others (42-3), which could be interpreted to mean ‘fool it readers’. We can understand this to mean that the reader’s encounter with an ideal poem would enable the poem to pleasure the reader orally instead of aurally. A reverse of the reader putting the poem’s word in his or her mouth, here the poem would surround the reader in a sexual contact zone. But what is being suggested by valorizing, aestheticizing even, the act of oral pleasure, the poem’s ‘true’ aspiration? (Remember, the poem in front of us is an unwanted result, not the ideal.) How is the ‘blowjob poem’ more poetic than, by contrast, manual masturbation—and more importantly what does this all tell us about Wieners’ poetics? For Wieners it seems the ideal poem must be a highly personal, intimate verbal act in which the poem is so intensely in contact with the reader that it brings the reader to climax. It is a poem invested in relationship so foundationally that it has transformed reading into a physically (not just imaginatively) intimate act, the kind of queering of the lyric address I speak of above. The failed poem, the poem in front of us, is the kind of ‘overheard’ lyric that requires only the poet himself to manually (writing) stimulate himself. Wieners’ poem here tells us this kind of lyric address (or lack thereof, really) is personal but solipsistic, less authentic, a trick, autonomous-but-without-result (it fails), and technically unsophisticated. By eroticizing the very nature of the relationship between speaker and audience, in essence Wieners re-scripts the lyric. Wieners requires the lyric to repudiate its historical and generic assumptions, including the specific ways in which the lyric privileges the autonomous, sovereign, private self

and its monologic expression. He then connects these very characteristics, normally based on a sense of the protective or liberating, to ideas of failed connection, disinterest, or masturbatory self-interest. Further, in rejecting this traditional lyric of the unified, solitary speaker, Wieners argues that for the minoritized subject the lyric can be—must be, if it is to have even the hope of not being implicated in hegemonic structures that privatize intimacy—transformative, mutualistic, collective, and, yes, public. Importantly, however, by public I don't mean public in ways that reproduce or support heteronormative social codes of decorum, but I ways instead that call on the specter of public sex/sexuality that is neither transgressive, nor spectacle (i.e. 'confessional') but rather frontal, rhetorical, and social.

And yet what is truly radical about Wieners' use of this formal critique is the fact that even if the poem is advocating such a form, it simultaneously is an example of its own failure, a failure to find the ideal lyric that it openly admits it is not. The implication is obvious: Wieners knows how to write such a poem, has the blueprint, so to speak. And yet *something*—that something that has loomed over us ever since the burnt-out eyes of "Two Years Later"—prevents him from accessing it. (Seeing the poem's admission here, and perhaps it is more of an intention, I hope I can make clear why Love and others are so insistent in their argument we not blindly try to recuperate art in ways that ignore or mute historical trauma. The stakes are too high.)

That 'something' crystallizes in what is a kind of coda (section "2") to the poem that shifts the discussion of the erotic-poetic possibilities of the lyric to the

reality of what the lyric means for the minoritized writer in the moment. In this final stanza the speaker is not freed by the sex-in-public he has been having. He cruises “Boston streets again” only ‘pretending’ “it is all peaches and cream / while inwardly I scream and dream of the day / when I will be free.....” (56-9). The interior space so privileged by the lyric becomes the articulation of both rage and a lack of freedom. The defiance of all of this public gay sex has been contained, muted, forced inward. Even when a sense of liberation seems on the horizon—by ending the line with the “when I will be free”—Wieners shuttles the speaker back into heteronormativity: “when I will be free / to marry / and breed more children.” The only freedom he can imagine is a horrifying one, made vulgar by the assonance that connects “free” to “breed” and made discomfiting by the repeated screech of ‘ee’ sounds. Once again, though, the break at the end of a line is a kind of false horizon: “free / to marry / and breed more children / so I can seduce them” (59-62). The speaker will radicalize heterosexuality, will create sex partners *through* procreation. The poem here calls back to an earlier moment when Wieners writes about being ‘stained’ with cum: “How can I / face my brother who first seduced me -- / and my other brother who I seduced--” (30-2). In this way even the norms of family life are implicated. Heterosexual sex and the makeup of the family are both no more resistant to taboo than homosexual sex. But this is little solace to a speaker that can at best dream a dream that is (in a literal sense) morally unthinkable (pedophilia and incest).

Two lines in this coda ruthlessly remove any hope that the lyric, at least in its current form, can save the poet. The lines in question are both allusions to a famous



line from Allen Ginsberg's "Howl." The first reference is the speaker simply asserting his desire to go to San Francisco and "get fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists" (55). In the second reference the poem asserts the children of America will be seduced by the poet *and* by masculine, motorized and divinely-crowned queers, all under the imprimatur of Ginsberg (who in Wieners' poem is depicted as fame personified). But in fact, the poem's import is that Ginsberg's *poem*, not the invoked figure of saintly motorcyclists, will perform the act of seduction. The ideal of a "verbal blowjob of a poem" now fully gives way to someone else's poem entirely. (The prick being pulled is Ginsberg's.) The poem's progress toward failure has now found its nadir in necessitating someone else's lovers to make sex work, someone else's words to bring the reader off. The poet is so alienated from his own lyric utterance that he gives over his final words to someone else, a by now old image, one that could even be mocked in this context. The lyric poet of gay sex finds himself "locked in" and unable to purify his senses through his mechanical, impersonal jerk-off. The 'something' that keeps Wieners from his ideal poems is the knowledge of the very limits of the lyric a minoritized subject encounters. It is the knowledge, enacted in the poem, that the dream of open, public sexual expression is transformed into a private nightmare in which societally induced horrors and anxieties over sexuality reinforce the reliance on the closet. Though it shares so much with the closet and its need for a disabling privacy, the lyric is not a closet. It is a trap, one that leaves the gay poet wounded and visible, for all the world to see.

There is great worth in not simply acknowledging this, but showing it in action, suggesting its ramifications and implications, which can be far-reaching. In

this way “Memories of You” is a triumphant example of queer failure in that what it hopes for, it also imagines—perhaps something along the lines of a counterpublic that “support[s] forms of affective, erotic and personal living that are public in the sense of accessible, available to memory, and sustained through collective activity” (Warner and Berlant 203). But whereas Ginsberg and O’Hara “responded to...social isolation with an intimate poetic address to a community of friends” (Hartman 48) and other gay poets sought out communities of shared suggestiveness, Wieners responds by making the cost of that isolation pointedly *felt*. The great power of a queer failure then is that it motivates gay artists to do what, it seems, they have always done—to resist traditional forms, to experiment, to innovate, to transform sex into a heuristic for truly liberating expression. If acknowledging a call for transcendent public gay sex is a form of failure, it is a pretty queer failure indeed.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, I am citing poems from the Black Sparrow Press edition of *Wieners' Selected Poems*.

<sup>2</sup> This recalls the logic of early gay and lesbian historiography, which explained homosexual identity formation (individual and community) as a response to oppression.

<sup>3</sup> Maria Damon's 2011 book *Postliterary America: From Bagel Shop Jazz to Micropoetries* contains a chapter that focuses on Wieners, including his poetry's alienation. Here she builds on Adorno's belief that the drive to the lyric for the moderns can be tracked back to experience of alienation, citing Adorno's argument that "the social violence of modernity is always implied, even in the most solitary of pastoral verses, which latter function in dialectical counterpoint as compensatory balm to that social violence." In other words, a lyric solitude (articulated as isolation and loneliness in Wieners) does not escape the reality of social violence, and in fact that depiction of solitude is suggestive of a need to find a 'balm' to cover over the violence that prompted the solitude in the first place. Damon summarizes: "Thus, the apparent choice to isolate on the part of the lyric poet...is not a choice; rather, the already fragmented subject of modern lyric...." (163). Future work on Wieners might be well served to take up Damon's work on the poet's isolation (especially interesting is her reading of his poem "To Sleep Alone," 184-5) and ask if Wieners' structures of affect described as isolation in fact only amplify his experience of social violence, not simply recall it.

<sup>4</sup> In Heather Love's 2010 *Criticism* essay she sees Sedgwick's reparative reading as contrasting "with familiar academic protocols like maintaining critical distance, outsmarting (and other forms of one-upmanship), refusing to be surprised (or if you are, then not letting on), believing the hierarchy, becoming boss" ("Truth and Consequences" 326). Although Love argues for a kind of détente between reparative and paranoid strategies, I find much of what she says about the reparative mode highly generative in approaching Wieners' work, especially because the poet himself wasn't interested in poetry as a sign of mastery.

<sup>5</sup> In her essay on Wieners' archival material, Andrea Brady writes, "Wieners believed that the unconscious could surface through typographical errors, or more generally, that as a writer he could channel the magic of the universe through his pen or typewriter.... Wieners regards this magical apparatus as helpfully inexact. It is able to channel the 'flux' of the universe through its tendency to error: jammed keys, misprints, and accidents bypass the typist's intentions, inviting the random beauty of the universe into the poem" (136).

<sup>6</sup> In Deborah Nelson's *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America*, she writes, "No era is more in need of reparative rather than paranoid reading than the cold war" (xix).

<sup>7</sup> Ironically, Raymond Foye's entry in the 1984 *The Beats: Literary Bohemians in Postwar America* may be still the most used foundational source for biographical information. More recently Andrea Brady's "Making Use of the Pain: the John Wieners Archives" contains an excellent biographical sketch, including the claim that the period from the mid-1950s to the early 1970s "[was] the period of Wieners'

greatest productivity—the period which also won him his role as a flamboyant icon of dispossession and grief.” She adds, “In this period, he first entered the poetry scene as a young graduate of Boston College, making his way to Black Mountain and the tutorial protection of Charles Olson; he found freedom in San Francisco and New York City, then incarceration in the mental institutions of Massachusetts, before returning home to Boston.” Wieners, she says, “re-emerged as a public poet with the encouragement of Raymond Foye in the mid-1980s” (132-33). Brady fills in some other telling details about the sixties and literary relationships as well: “But where O’Hara had seemingly unlimited access to New York’s mysteries, Wieners described himself as feeling excluded and unpresentable in his own brief periods of residence in the city. After treatment for drug addiction and mental illness, he moved to New York in 1961 with help from Allen Ginsberg’s Poetry Foundation, and found work at the Eighth Street Bookshop.”

<sup>8</sup> Maria Damon uses Deleuze and Guattari’s “What is a Minor Literature” to construct an idea of the minoritized writer/minority literature as being one marked by deterritorialization, for example.

<sup>9</sup> While many historians have noted the fear that homosexual would poison American masculinity and moral purity, Michael Sherry’s discussion (*Gay Artists in Modern American Culture: An Imagined Conspiracy*) of the ‘homintern’ places the homosexual menace as a kind of political paradox, powerfully expressed in the case of gay artists of the period—an integral part how of America supposedly gained and maintained cultural global dominance but also implicated in the country’s

prominent paranoia that gay artists had a kind of wider homosexualizing potential that would lead to the country's moral weakening.

<sup>10</sup> I want to acknowledge what many historians have said about this term, that it came to use in the 1960s and that we must be careful to not retroactively assign meanings to it that might not be historically accurate. For example, see George Chauncey's point that we must use care when using it as an "analytic category" (6). See also an insightful discussion in Sherry's *Gay Artists in Modern American Culture: An Imagined Conspiracy* (103-5).

<sup>11</sup> This is an idea prominently discussed in Nelson's *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* as a kind of paradox in which the 'home' was imagined as the most private space but one that required surveillance if containment culture was to be maintained.

<sup>12</sup> Nelson writes, "During the period from 1959 to 1965 the perceived need for privacy was utterly transformed by its sudden visibility as a dying feature of modern and cold war American society" (9).

<sup>13</sup> See also Duncan's "The Homosexual in Society" (published in the journal *Politics*, 1944) as discussed in the introduction.

<sup>14</sup> Nelson, in her chapter on the confessional poets in *The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry since 1945* (editor Jennifer Ashton), complicates the term by suggesting its applicability to political groups: "speaking personally was considered a crucial form of intervention into the public sphere and the political process. In many of these cases, the personal voice was a rebuke to what was increasingly

viewed as fraudulent objectivity or a false universality.” Such a perspective on this type of lyric could produce “a considerably larger membership than the so-called confessional poets. She uses two gay poets, in fact, as examples (O’Hara and Ginsberg), who she says experimented in similar ways with the speaking voice (33).

<sup>15</sup> Again, I draw on insight from Nelson’s *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* in which she analyzes a different gay poet, Paul Monette. In discussing the Supreme Court case *Bowers v. Hardwick*, she writes:

[W]hat makes *Hardwick* significant to this tradition of lyric confession is that very little of what Monette discloses in *Love Alone* could be called confessional in the terms used for Sexton, Plath, and Lowell. That is, if confessional poetry marked out the ‘too private,’ Monette’s elegies are not confessional at all. One fact alone, his homosexuality, in the context of *Bowers v. Hardwick* rendered everything Monette disclosed a confession. While sharing with confessional poetry its emotional recklessness, his revelations are decidedly ordinary. (144)

<sup>16</sup> Robert Corber, in *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity*, writes, “Many gay male writers treated homosexuality as a subversive form of identity that had the potential to disrupt the system of representation underpinning the Cold War consensus. Their explicit treatment of gay male experience contributed to the dismantling of the signifying practices that naturalized the production of gender and sexual identity in the postwar period” (3).

<sup>17</sup> One of the ways Wieners has been described, and swiftly categorized, has been by focusing on his mental health and drug abuse issues, the stereotypical *poete maudite*. Fellow poet and friend to Wieners, Joseph Torra points out the problem with an oversimplification of these biographical details. Torra shows how Wieners gets barely a sentence in Peter Davidson’s book on Boston poetry, “[Davidson]

reducing him to a four word reference as ‘that sweetly demented poet.’” Torra argues, “For a socialite, cocktail drinking Lowell, madness is genius. For a blue collar, homosexual, drug-using Wieners, madness is crazy.” Not enough has been written on if this is also the cause of the relative lack of criticism on Wieners.

<sup>18</sup> Damon also suggests another possible way to begin looking at Wieners’ later work, which this chapter does not take as its primary study. She writes that some writers’ use of the lyric *I* “could not be sustained” in the face of the idea that the unified self was a fiction and fantasy; this “led to psychic strain.” She explains, “These writers, later in their careers, wandered about in the wreckage rubble of lyric as if it had been an overly ordered, hyperaesthetized cerebral city that had sustained a bombing campaign, their fragments, rants, and expressions of ‘solitudes crowded with loneliness’ testaments to the fragile fiction that modern unified subjectivity had been” (162).

<sup>19</sup> It’s worth citing Davidson at length on this score, since his ideas have the further benefit of showing how Wieners looked at homosexuality as an identity in different terms than others, including, Davidson points out, Spicer. He writes:

While the poem affirms homosexuality, its use of stereotyped terms for gayness acknowledges the degree to which sexuality, like race, is maintained within compulsorily hetero-normal terms. The speaker not only identifies with blacks in a racist society (“it’s a nigger’s world”); he gains strength from their example. In this sense Wieners anticipates more recent theories of queer identity, first by acknowledging his interpellation in a homophobic society by transforming a term of social opprobrium (“queer”) into an oppositional sign. He reinforces this act of inversion by rearticulating queerness as blackness, seeing one form of social marginalization by means of another. He sings the blues “like the black mama / on the juke box” and in the process participates in a version of nature otherwise denied him....” (“From Margin to Mainstream” 275)



He adds that unlike figures like Jack Spicer Wieners “chooses not to reconfigure homosexuality in heterosexual, macho terms but rather revises nature (‘rivers’ and ‘mountains’) as a kind of theatrical performance—as ‘powdered’ and ‘painted’—and therefore undecidable within gendered norms” (276).

<sup>20</sup> Poets, too, construct theories in this regard. See Deborah Nelson for her chapter on Paul Monette, “Confessing the Ordinary.” She writes about what Carol Muske and Paul Monette dubbed “conspiracy poetry,” wondering if it was possible to write a poem that never thought about being published at all, or about reaching an audience” (142-3), which may be a similar kind of approach we see in Wieners’ work, though a ‘conspiracy’ of one. Nelson explains:

Monette discovered that his privacy was to be purchased not through silence, and not simply through publicity, but through a studied self-disclosure, one that instructs in the ambiguities of self-presentation. We might turn to Monette’s work to think not only about the scandalous spectacle of gay visibility in American public culture but also about the banalities and fantasies of gay life, the ways in which homosexuality confuses the forms of American liberal politics and the ways in which gay people attempt to remake them. (147)

And later: “To those who imagine that a right to privacy is merely the self-erasure of the closet, Monette argues that privacy only belongs to those who have already left its brittle security” (155).

<sup>21</sup> This privacy based on impersonality resists relying on “homosexual signs,” for example, because Crane understands such signs “signify only within a system governed by the terms of the closet, which structures intelligibility according to a series of overlaid oppositions between heterosexuality and homosexuality, open

homosexuality and secret homosexuality, knowledge and ignorance.” The kind of privacy Crane’s poetry creates is “a more radical substantive privacy...whose intensity generates a secondary form of privacy by disrupting the relations (discursive, affective, and erotic) that conventionally connect persons to one another and to themselves” (91). It is a form of privacy, in other words, that connects through a shared ecstatic experience rather than knowable, relational knowledge *that is private as long as it is coded*.

<sup>22</sup> Christopher Nealon does important work in filling in what he calls ‘the other half’ of Thomas E. Yingling’s account of Crane’s strategy, that is, his “inventiveness in reworking the tropes of the inversion model of homosexuality in his love poems” (Nealon 14). Yingling’s *Hart Crane and the Homosexual Text*, discussed in my introduction, is a foundational early text in and of itself in suggesting poetics-as-strategy as it pertains to privacy, the closet and the lyric.

<sup>23</sup> Some critics perform virtuosic feats in their desire to see homosexual makers of culture as strategically outsmarting disciplinary regimes. Christopher Nealon, for example, in his chapter “The Secret Public of Physique Culture,” targets the ways in which physique magazines in the early twentieth century, though clearly signifying as gay to current optics, didn’t require gay identification and thus were not complicit in a kind of privatized shame but could also be explicit in eroticizing the male form. Nealon describes the magazines’ ability to create a kind of:

...mass simultaneity that confounds both the private preciousness and the public vulnerability in the idea of individual personhood but that consolidates nonetheless a sense of ‘identity’ through participation in that simultaneity. The morphologizing promise of the muscle magazines, then,

was the doorway to a fascinating readerly and consumer system, a proto-print public sphere, in which acts of purchase and identification together encouraged the initial development of a gay male community. (124)

<sup>24</sup> Anne Hartman's argument ("Confessional Counterpublics in Frank O'Hara and Allen Ginsberg") is discussed in my chapter on O'Hara.

<sup>25</sup> Jonathan Culler provides useful insight on the apostrophe, and its importance in advancing understanding of the lyric, in his "Changes in the Study of the Lyric" (*Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, editors Hosek and Parker.)

<sup>26</sup> Heather Love argues that gay history should not be based blindly on narratives and sites of progress but examined via what she calls the 'backward turn', the look back, the gesture to the past. For Love this means allowing the past to retain its trauma, to avoid 'historical rescue' work in which the past is simply a story of 'heroism'—or "taking care of the past without attempting to fix it" (*Feeling Backward* 43). This enables us to see how "[c]ontemporary gay identity is produced out of the twentieth-century history of queer abjection: gay pride is a reverse or mirror image of gay shame, produced precisely against the realities it means to remedy. In the darkroom of liberation, the 'negative' of the closet case or the isolated protogay child is developed into a photograph of an out, proud gay man. But the trace of those forgotten is visible right on the surface of this image, a ghostly sign of the reversibility of reverse discourse" (*Feeling Backward* 19-20).

<sup>27</sup> This poem is found on 254 of the Black Sparrow edition of *Selected Poems*.

<sup>28</sup> Men seeking "company" is here surely a coded gay term, especially when followed by the reference to men in bars as a "retreat." The gay bar was one of the few spaces

gay men of the time could interact romantically. For more on the historical importance of the gay bar see Martin Meeker's *Contacts Desired*: "[The] expansion of gay male bars warrant more attention than the radical gay liberation movement." Meeker argues activism "played a supporting role to the commercial imperative adopted by small-scale gay entrepreneurs (such as bar owners) that kept the bar a central institution in gay male life throughout the period" (200). D'Emilio cites the legal status of bars as an "indicator of progress" (211). See also Elizabeth Armstrong (45-51).

<sup>29</sup> Marianne and Michael Shapiro, in "Dialogism and the Addressee in Lyric Poetry," argue that the lyric is in fact dialogic, not monologic.

<sup>30</sup> For a discussion on the difference between possibility and potentiality, see José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*, especially the discussion of the Frank O'Hara poem "Having a Coke with You," in which he sees "a certain potentiality, which at that point had not been fully manifested, a relational field where men could love each other outside the institutions of heterosexuality and share a world through the act of drinking a beverage with each other" (9) and the "unlimited potentiality in actual queer sex" (18) and in queerness itself (21).

<sup>31</sup> Perhaps this is the same distance Maria Damon talks about when she describes Wieners' *Journal*... as "an attempt at survival through distancing himself...from the traumas of postmodernity, drug abuse, poverty and homoerotic passion in a repressive era" (*Postliterary America* 183). For more on the wider topic of "distance"

and subjectivity, see *Going the Distance: Dissident Subjectivity in Modernist American Literature*, by David R. Jarraway.

<sup>32</sup> In her excellent book *The Dark End of the Street: Margins in Vanguard American Poetry*, Maria Damon cites Jack Spicer's quotation—"to be a homosexual is to be alone"—and adds "how much more alone is the homosexual poet" (177).

<sup>33</sup> The poem Brady reads is "A Young Poet" (*Collected* 278).

<sup>34</sup> In a note in her essay "Re-thinking the Value of Lyric Closure," Rachel Cole supports the idea that the lyric can be viewed in this way. In a particular reading of a Stevens' poem she stresses that "our experience is one not of self-absorption in parallel with the speaker but of eroticized relationship with him" (397).

<sup>35</sup> Deborah Nelson also speaks to the idea of counterpublics. She argues for a "reconceptualization of privacy but in the formation of queer publics. Only in transformed public space where identities form, communities are built, and individuals are recognized in new ways can anything like sexual autonomy be imagined. This, of course, inverts the expectations of the privacy debate because sexual autonomy is not imagined as developing in private but, rather, in the public sphere" (158).

<sup>36</sup> See Nelson: "Withdrawing into privacy to conduct a conversation with oneself is one of the most powerful images of autonomy that we have" ("Confessional Poetry" 43)

<sup>37</sup> Scott Herring is instructive here. In his essay "Frank O'Hara's Open Closet," Terrell does something similar by suggesting the "personal poem" as "a cruising ground on

which gay men come together” (422).

## CHAPTER 5

### GAY LIBERATION POETS AND THE "PORNOGRAPHIC POEM": SEARCHING THE LYRIC FOR RADICAL THEORIES OF HOMOSEXUAL SEX

"Poem"

It's a dull poem  
    whose finish  
        is sex

& whose climax  
    is spoonful

of angelic

    gissom  
    flush'd down  
the drain  
    in a men's room (1-10)

—Stephen Jonas, in *Angels of the Lyre*, dated 1965

"After Hearing Heterosexual Poets in October, 1974: What It Seems Like to Write a  
Male Homosexual Love Poem Now"

It is to cut the ties of such familiar images,  
to start again at the first cries of speech,  
over and over, inventing our voices,  
until our unheard-of-testimony  
transforms the understanding of reality irrevocably.  
New language  
in amazement  
from this plain statement:  
I am a man; you are a man; I love you. (11-19)

—Joseph Cady, in *The Columbia Anthology of Gay Literature*

"Fag Art"

Fag art is not only queer at night,  
It's queer during the day  
When you don't want to think about it.

Fag Art is a wet dream  
You'll never be able to explain  
If you've got a dick in your mouth. (20-25)  
—John Iozia, in *The Columbia Anthology of Gay Literature*

### **Part 1: Introduction**

When we look back at the end of the sixties and the early to mid-seventies, it may be hard to imagine what it felt like for gay people, especially those living in urban ghettos where they felt increasingly safe, to drop the masks and double lives demanded in earlier years. It is even harder to imagine the kind of public and private struggle gay men, in my example, experienced when negotiating how to express themselves in a political climate that must have felt like undiscovered country. Can we, looking back, grasp the gravity of watching and participating in a movement that saw sex and sexuality as a way to solve the world's problems, as many in the gay liberation years hoped? And when we read the activist's poetry of those four or five brief years (roughly 1969 to 1974), poems often catalyzed by the strident calls for visibility that Liberation demanded...when we read these poems, might it be especially difficult to see sex and desire as those men saw it, for some a kind of liberationist philosophy. For others, sex required balance, was political in how it was practiced. Still others said some forms of sex were less positive, could even distract a gay man from the liberating potential of sex as fully relational. Of all the things about gay liberation politics, sex may be one of the most complex issues, from theory to practice. In some ways, it is also the least explored, especially in the poetry that so trumpeted it and worried over it.

Paul Mariah, a poet who writes graphic poems of gay sexuality but also



moving political poems about America's penal system, writes in one poem, titled "The Figa" (in *Angels of the Lyre*):

I want you to know  
how it feels  
to have a fist  
the size of a poem  
up yr ass. (1-5)

Reversing these terms, he ends the poem this way:

How does it feel  
to have a poem  
shoved up your ass  
the size of a fist?  
Now I am going to open  
my palm and make  
a scratch on the inside.  
This was the scene  
and I had to get  
out of bed to write it  
so you would know  
the size of it  
and we can go on  
gently, lovingly. (28-41)

Mariah, who was also the founder of the influential San Francisco literary journal *Manroot*, could be speaking to us now forty years in the future, "How does it feel" reading this poem? "I want you to know." But the poem also speaks to the audience of his own moment, of course, a moment he himself inhabits in the poem, so vital he incorporates it into poem's narrative—"I had to get / out of bed to write it / so you would know" what it's like to experience this poem, this sex. Mariah's choice of fisting<sup>1</sup> is pointed in this respect. In this way both poetry and sex become visions of extremity that must be introduced into the imagination of an 'other' and that by the end of the poem has actually become something akin to Spicer's reader-lover: "you are closing in / around my wrist" (26-7). The middle of the poem is a graphic

description of the slow and careful act itself in which Mariah again speaks to the reader-lover, commanding “Introduce rhythm” (12) and “allow the play to continue” (14) and “never stop the movement” (17). Mariah seems to have understood that fisting—perhaps frightening, mysterious (how does that feel good?), and an utterly alien act for even some homosexual readers and certainly heterosexual readers—was the one act that would be almost impossible for the uninitiated to fully understand. And that is the point. Mariah wants the reader to truly feel the radical power of gay sex as a kind of painful but loving ‘opening up’ (and indeed a consequent holding tight). The reader must let the gay speaker in, rather than the speaker giving in to the reader. It’s perfectly in line with the revolutionary gay liberation ideals of changing the world and not accommodating intolerance, sexism, patriarchy, and homophobia. *You* must ‘know the size of it’—poetry “the size of a fist” and his fist “the size of a poem.” Once the poem has conveyed its knowledge, “now we can go on / gently, lovingly.” Mariah is answering the question I’ve introduced—what did it feel like for men to write their sexuality into poetry at such a pivotal moment in history? It’s not about (or solely about) an expression of visibility. It’s not about arousal or even about validating gay pornography. It’s not even about rendering a private subjective experience as public. Eric Keenaghan has noted that even for those poets who may have already been “writing explicitly gay content,” they may have “discovered new liberties in a political climate emphasizing gay visibility and pride. Sometimes this resulted in a poetry that could seem to be a frivolous celebration of sex, yet its political significance rested precisely in rendering gay sex visible.” (“Gay Poetry” 542-3). Mariah and the other poets writing

during this time, I will argue, saw the poem of graphic sexual content, the poem of complexity, and the gay sexual act itself—all of this profoundly personal and political simultaneously—as radically transformative. If you are open to a poem like this entering you, they say, you will be changed, and loved.

Perhaps our difficulty in viewing sex and poetry this way has something to do with why so little critical work has been done on the poetry of the gay liberation era. We may see the graphic sexual content spoken by a lyric ‘I’ and tie that to some of the poems’ decidedly unliterary characteristics. Another reason that so little may have been written is that the poetry was almost always first published in the journals that thrived from about 1969 to 1974<sup>2</sup>, and few of these poets (beyond those who already had reputations) went on to produce a critically considered corpus of individual collections. This is why I’ve selected as my primary texts four gay poetry anthologies, spanning the years 1973 to 1983, that collected the poems from these journals<sup>3</sup>. The lack of existing critical work makes such a wide net necessary, rather than a more focused study on just one or two poets.

The lack of critical work also makes it even more urgent that the story of this movement be told. Winston Leyland, perhaps the most important arbiter of gay writing during these years, believed in this moment’s importance so much that in his introduction to the 1977 anthology *Orgasms of Light*, he proclaimed, “When literary historians look back on this period of American letters a hundred years from now I firmly believe they will view this Gay Cultural Renaissance as being of equal importance to other literary movements (such as the Beat) of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (9). We are almost half-way to this century mark, and Leyland’s

prediction simply doesn't seem likely to happen, and certainly he was biased in this and, if we are to be honest with our view of the much of the poetry, hyperbolic in his estimation of the work's literary endurance. But what is clear, even in the instance of Mariah's poem above, is that there *is* a compelling story here worth telling and worth telling in a more complex ways than we might at first think.

Part of the need to tell the story, however, is to try to understand not only poems like Mariah's but even the bulk of the writing, even those poems that perhaps too much prize the simplicity of being sexually and politically frank and that thus risks seeming like poetic failures or political propaganda. We can instead approach these poems as what they were, authentic, albeit problematic and sometimes contradictory representations of a marginalized community struggling to move from the closet to the street, to the page. I wonder if such a simple approach gets lost in historical revisionism and can help us establish a scholarly beachhead for this work.

What might that beachhead look like? It would re-write the easy narratives that tie a celebration of gay visibility and graphic sexual content to poor literary merit; it would be honest in its judgment of those poems that fail formally or technically; it would notice that often those same poems are surprising divergences from their time period's prevailing politics of anti-assimilation. It would not assume, however, that "unliterary" equals "failure" (O'Hara teaches us the opposite). If, even so, it finds a kind of failure, it would try to understand it as a reflection of the difficult social reality I spoke of above—of a marginalized community struggling to move from the closet to the streets and sometimes reproducing the scenes of

repression they wanted to leave behind. This is what Rudy Kikel appears to have been trying to make sense of as early as 1980. In an article entitled “After Whitman and Auden: Gay Male Sensibility in Poetry Since 1945” (published in the *Gay Sunshine Tenth Anniversary Issue: 1970-1980*), he writes:

...heterosexuals have no monopoly on pathologically extreme states of feeling in regard to romantic love—or on the clichéd expression of them. If gay males have seemed willing ‘victims’ in their amorous entanglements, however, it may be because the psychological projections by means of which they apprehend their light or dark enchanters...represent their lack, *our* lack, of self-love—the result of centuries of oppressive conditioning. (37)

He offers the example of feeling “unclean or imperfect” when the gay poet compares himself to a straight love object. This is part of the story that may have been forgotten; it must be part of the narrative, too.

What exactly are the terms of this narrative I’m imagining? This is a story about the meaning of sex. This is a story of politics and poetry in a way that the previous chapters simply could not have been. It is a story of what happens when a group of poets turns away from re-modeling the forms in which they work when they are suddenly given the gift of openness. What happens when some take up that openness without the critical reflection required? What comes with that openness and exactly what is the extent of the political agency it really allows the poet-activist? This is the story of just what power sex—and what power the lyric—holds and *doesn’t* hold in its expressivity. But this is also a story that illuminates poems in which the political and the literary—when they are linked—combine to argue for a radical idea of sex, one that tries to live up to the promise of gay liberation.

Before we get too far into this story, however, let’s take a slight step back. As I hope I’ve established in my earlier chapters, gay poets of the 1950s and 1960s

were engaged in a conversation about form and content, style and sexuality, politics and desire; as Frank O'Hara put it, it was a conversation that wondered how it was "the property of a symbol to be sexual" (from his poem "Returning"). Poets like O'Hara, Spicer and Wieners, didn't easily or straightforwardly express gayness as a fixed and public identity; it was a problem to solve, a theory to grapple with, a self or part of a self in conversation with other selves. Homosexuality was both a hurdle and an instigation to re-model how the lyric *I* functioned for the gay poet. And the expression of homosexuality within these lyric structures was always linked to cold war regimes of power. These poets rendered expressions of gay desire and sex but almost always as a kind of content embedded in discussions of power and of the problems of representation.

But what happened when Stonewall and the various other protests and movements made visibility an imperative? As I'll argue, this seems to have bled into the realm of literature. In one of the few places that contextualizes this time's literature, Byrne R. S. Fone claims that Liberation:

...moved coming out away from being a question of private recognition and acceptance and translated it into the realm of public political action, arguing that coming out is a necessary political act and the primary political weapon against homophobia. If gay literature after Stonewall celebrated the immediate intoxication of gay liberation, it soon turned to portraying the dizzying sexual and social choreography of the late 1970s and early 1980s. (730)

If Fone's judgment is correct, literature as 'celebratory' and as simply representational is part of what makes the poems, generally speaking, so unadorned, open, raw, graphic, direct, plain, plainspoken, mimetic of ordinary speech, formally uninventive, spare, and when not spare, "traditional" in their use of

figurative language. The poets of the seventies may have, for the most part, given up on that conversation that so consumed earlier poets. I want to suggest that perhaps what I'm calling the liberation poets saw such a textual conversation unnecessary (or never knew it existed?) and instead embraced what they *understood* as the natural and essential expressivity of the lyric as a tool to make gay desire more public and as a way to politicize the conversations about gay identity they were having in their liberation movement groups and publications, and indeed in their daily lives.

To that end I want to use my readings of the poems of the time to ask the following kinds of questions: Did the gay poets writing during a time of increased visibility and radical politics trust too much in the fantasy of lyric openness and expressivity? Is this why their poetry risked becoming more rhetoric than poetry? This chapter will contextualize the poems within the liberation era politics they were a part of (if not grew alongside with) that theorized sex in unique and revolutionary ways. It will investigate why a majority of the poems failed to express those sexual politics in ways that mirrored or expanded upon them. Instead, it seems, sex was assumed to carry its own political meaning. It was only those poems, as I'll show in my readings near the chapter's end, that utilized the new openness—to speak directly about the male body and about gay sexual desire—to embed a political critique much wider and more profound than the right for the homosexual to write about sex. In a sense, it's the beginning of a critique of the visibility (the supposedly great gift of 'coming out') that liberation offered, which says public expression of sexuality was not a political answer in and of itself, and that only

poems that were *more than* representational could transcend the deadly label of “political poetry.”

The critical lens with which I’ve viewed these poems, and that in turn has informed my argument, is directly in conversation with my preceding chapters. I am examining how these poems are different from the poems that were written before them, poems that had no wave of visibility to ride on but that depicted gay sexuality sometimes in defiance of cultural and social norms. The poems of O’Hara, Spicer and Wieners sought complex ways to theorize sexuality, often in the process needing to change the lyric form (or how they used that form) to suit that need. By analyzing the poems that followed soon on the heels of these major figures, we can begin to ask if the emerging liberationist politic is melded with depictions of gay male sexuality, asking what kind of theorizing these poems are doing, and if they too are pushing the lyric form, in similar or different ways.

What encourages me to take up this comparative lens, rather than looking at the poems as a separate entity, is how the poems themselves look back, are in conversation with what has come before, sometimes reaching back to Whitman or Lorca. We must also remember there truly can be no strict break, no pre- or post-Stonewall poetry, especially if openness about sex and sexuality are the criteria for establishing such a break. O’Hara, Spicer and Wieners show how such a criteria falls apart when we’re not afraid to read their poetry for its gay themes. They, in fact, are all included (as are Duncan and Ginsberg) in the anthologies I use for my primary sources; even though Spicer and O’Hara died shortly before the Stonewall era, we



can consider them contemporaneous with the poets who came to light in the early seventies, further dismantling notions of a strict pivot moment.

Consider just one example of the kind of conversation I find happening. Stan Persky, in his poem “Slaves” (in *Angels of the Lyre*) seems to directly criticize his mentor Jack Spicer. The poem is a bold critique of capitalism but also seems to suggest Spicer’s ideas of Martians or the radio are, according to Persky, part of a politically cowardly way of writing. He refers to Spicer as:

the crafty man who taught me...  
I’m simply the instrument  
of a message that wants to get through  
from a source we can’t know (37-40).

However, he also writes that “Poetry isn’t inspired-fuss like they say it is / in school. / True, autobiography gets in the way” (28-30). This all comes to a head when he writes:

These messages come from the actual conditions of  
slaves. I don’t have pat answers to  
explain the messages, like: gay pride, that  
I transmit but don’t autobiographically feel,  
because I feel real pain. (41-45)

Earlier he writes: “Sometimes I think poetry is the benumbed and / limited expression of the limited space / (a ghetto) we’re given...” (22-4) but that even so there’s an “art” to “[e]xpressing real pain” (24). He is arguing that poetry can and does originate in a subjective experience of pain, and that to shy away from the self will not allow ‘the actual conditions’ to be rendered with the political force that is not numbing or (on the opposite side of the coin) able to be ghettoized. His argument is problematic (as we have seen Spicer’s views didn’t stop his poems from carrying their own powerful critiques), but it nevertheless establishes the sense that

while no strict pre- and post-Stonewall categories can be easily used, there remains a critical rationale to compare poems in how they approach issues like visibility, subjectivity and political agency.

While more work needs to be done on the connections between the (gay) poets who reigned in the fifties and sixties and the possible connections to those of the seventies, it's also essential, in establishing the utility of a comparative lens, to note the influence of poets like Spicer on poets who would come to write the poetry of the liberation era. In fact Persky himself tells historian John D'Emilio:

“[Spicer, Duncan and their group] not only kept alive a public homosexual presence in their own work, but kept alive a tradition, teaching us about Rimbaud, Crane, and Lorca.... They *carried* into the contemporary culture the tradition of homosexual art and were sensitive to the work of European homosexual contemporaries. There was a conscious searching out, in fraternity, of homosexual writers. Thus, in my ‘training’ as a poet, homoerotic novels would be recommended to me.... This was at a time when the English departments of the country told us that Walt Whitman *wasn't* gay. (180)

These poets didn't need to have a wide-ranging influence (at the time none of them really did) to be useful for other gay writers. Henry Abelove has given us perhaps the most persuasive case that O'Hara (and others like Elizabeth Bishop) were read and were influential to the activists of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and in particular to their international anticolonialist critique. Abelove perceptively reads O'Hara's "Ode: Salute to the French Negro Poets" to show how the poet's specifically queer political bent would have been eagerly consumed by members of the GLF. With a powerful close reading of the poem, Abelove targets the erotic nature of the "Ode" as key to its political use for the Liberationists. He writes, "What the Liberationists learned or rather appropriated from these writers, and perhaps from others whom I haven't yet tracked, was a repertory of means for figuring the queer

erotic and its claims in a framework in which decolonialization mattered most.” He adds, they didn’t take “a quarrel with colonialism” from poets like O’Hara (they had that, Ablove reminds) but rather they took up the “rhetoric for connecting queerness to decolonialization and its struggles” (80). Ablove’s work shows there is more to be done to understand how the poets of the GLF and other groups who published in journals like *Gay Sunshine* may have been drawing in profound ways on the examples set by poets like O’Hara.

In terms of Wieners’ work, in the anthology introductions he is called one of the most important gay poets in terms of influence. Leyland writes that Wieners’ *Hotel Wentley Poems* was a “pioneering book” (*Angels* 8). One can see Wieners’ influence in other Boston poets, like Stephen Jonas, Gerritt Lansing, and Charlie Shively, whose works is similar and in the conversations these Boston poets embed in their poems. Wieners was the most active in gay groups (compared to Spicer and O’Hara) in part, perhaps, because he actually lived beyond the 1969 and 1970 protests. (He actually lived longer than many liberation era poets.) More work is required to understand the ways in which Wieners was so ‘pioneering.’ Was it only due to his graphic openness (one of his early poems was “Poem for Cocksuckers” after all), or were readers responding to such ideas as building on shared oppression that he makes a part of his poetry, according to critics like Michael Davidson?

Another reason, beyond influence, that I take up a comparative poetics for this study is the emphasis on ‘gay poetry’ and the discussion of the ‘gay poet’ the liberation-era poets took up. Much like the poets in my earlier chapters, these

liberation era poets were also invested in theorizing the relationship between poetry, identity, and sexuality, though in very different ways. This seems to me to be an important (and very understudied) continuation of the ideas found in O'Hara, Spicer, and Wieners and thus opens us up other comparisons. The difference, however, is that the liberation poets in essence pursue a more discursive argument than investing in poetic or lyric questions. Sometimes whole poems can be reduced to fairly straightforward political arguments. These poems are not always worth intensive line-by-line analyzing, but even just a handful of examples (as I pursue below), including Persky's poem above, show how important this conversation about gay poetry was to these poets and what its parameters were.

There was also a somewhat different conversation in prose about how to understand the post-Stonewall poetry<sup>4</sup> these anthologies purported to collect. Young, for example, makes a distinction between gay poetry and the term "gay poets," which he calls "a difficult and useless categorization." Rather, *The Male Muse* collects poems on "themes relating to male homosexuality, gay love, romantic friendships, what Walt Whitman called 'the dear love of comrades, the attraction of friend to friend'" (7). Leyland in a sense is even more open about his anthology's parameters: "My intention in compiling this collection...was not to divide poets into Gay [sic] and straight. Several of the writers included here are in fact bisexual, and almost none write poems that are exclusively Gay in content." For Leyland what's more interesting is "[the fact of] such a thing as Gay Sensibility" (akin to "Black, Chicano, and Indian sensibilities") in his mind. "This Gay Sensibility is more refined in certain poets than in others," he writes. "For example, all of John Wieners' and

Frank O'Hara's work is imbued with a gay *élan vital*, even though only a handful of the latter's poems are on explicitly gay themes." For Leyland the selection criteria was skill and that the poem be "imbued, directly or indirectly, with a Gay sensibility." He concludes that "one important truth illustrated by the poems printed here is that Gayness extends far beyond physical sexuality. There are many dimensions of Gayness, and especially since Stonewall, poets have been exploring the subtleties of these dimensions" (12).

While this comparative poetics undergirds this chapter and thus ties it to the previous one, I want to offer a brief clarification about how this chapter necessarily *differs* from the previous chapters. Unlike the singularly focused and more exhaustive single-theory readings of the early chapters, I see this chapter as more of a beginning, a sketch of a group of poets with divergent styles but all connected to a sudden and possible 'catalyzing' visibility. It is, I hope, an entry point for further study, perhaps making it possible for scholars to target those poets who may be central to more exhaustive scholarship. In fact, my explicit intention is to lay the groundwork for later, more theoretical interventions and especially to encourage archival work and oral histories. (The need to introduce this time period and its poets, in a way that the better known poets of chapters 2, 3 and 4 don't require, has meant more lengthy citations of secondary sources.) Lastly, even if I'm not always or directly applying the theoretical and critical approaches I've used to discuss the poets of the fifties and sixties (in which visibility was a question rather than an goal), I hope it's nevertheless clear how those approaches inform the following readings.

## **Part 2: A taxonomy of the poetry, and an introduction to it**

Unlike the work of say O'Hara or Spicer, some background on just what was being written, generally speaking, is required before I start to build my argument properly. Two things come as a surprise about the poetry of the early seventies written by gay men: in terms of content, there is a stark and ranging negativity and/or sentimentality (to use Rudy Kikel's term) about the speakers' relationships in many of the poems. Secondly, as it pertains to form, there is little experimentation and in fact a great deal of what might be considered a traditional use of figurative language or reverting to earlier lyric uses. When things like form and figurality *were* used differently, they seemed to help the poets, at least in one critic's mind, to negotiate their feelings of oppression. Writing in 1980, Kikel sees that "Much gay poetry has been *saved* from sentimentality—or self-stimulation—however, by poets who know when to *brace* amorous sentiment by means of an appropriately detaching instrument.... [meaning] understatement, implication, and the carefully chosen word to convey romantic impressions; humor..." as well as the "focusing metaphor." Kikel says this necessary distance enabled by these formal strategies is more precisely a distance "from an oppressive stereotype—of the lover who is experienced as 'ideal'" and that this "constitutes the subject matter of a good deal of the revisionist gay male poetry since Stonewall" (37).

Also in terms of formal issues, several poems are basically calls for a 'new language' but these are for the most part unmet with actual praxis. This latter point may be what critics are responding to when they suggest the poetry's literary

quality is left wanting. And while it is no surprise that there are poems where sex is graphically or poetically represented, the critical response to these poems as representative of the majority may be overstated, or even homophobic in its hyperbolic negative evaluation.

Eric Keenaghan's brief comments can help unpack some of the ways this poetry is different. He writes, this era's poetry "became overtly politicized in the wake of the 1969 Stonewall riots in NYC and the subsequent establishment of the Gay Liberation Front, the first radical, rather than assimilationist, gay and lesbian political organization." He describes this poetry as "characterized by both sexual playfulness and political consciousness" ("Gay Poetry" 542). Though written many years earlier than Keenaghan's account, the most thorough summary of this time's work comes from Walter Holland. (It is taken from his unpublished dissertation "The Calamus Root: American Gay Poetry Since World War II.") This can be a useful starting point in describing the kinds of poetry being written and perhaps can even be the beginning of a new taxonomy of the work. Since there simply isn't much else in terms of this kind of critical summative work, it is worth citing at length the following moment:

In the midseventies a style of rebellious, erotic, gay liberation poetry took the scene. Many of the poets in this movement lived in Boston and were published in Charles Shively's *Fag Rag* magazine (1976). They also found a home in the rural gay periodical *RFD* (1975). These 'Poets of the Pagan' or 'Fag Rag Poets' were the carnivorous saints, barbarians, bad boys, and sexual outlaws of their time. Many of them were members of what Rudy Kikel has called the 'Boston School.' Born of an aggressive radical activism, they celebrated the erotic, the revolutionary, the defiant, and alternatively the pastoral. An extension in many ways of the rebelliousness of the gay Beat writers and Ginsberg, Orlovsky, and Giorno's radical faggotry, these writers appropriated that which had been labeled pornographic and criminal. In later years they supported groups such as NAMBLA (The North American

Man/Boy Love Association) and the 'Radical Faeries.' The movement also embraced mysticism and the pagan celebration of the body. Just as feminism and the women's movement sought to reclaim the female body from patriarchal control, gay 'pagan' poets attempted to reenvision the male body, celebrating its receptivity, sensuality, and spiritual essences. This erotic gay poetry balanced itself between the sacred and the profane. The West Coast poet James Broughton is a strong example of this spiritual celebration of the male body. Magicians, fairies, 'cocksuckers,' 'faggots,' and 'queens' of all persuasions became the mythical beasts of this gay urban and pastoral verse. Their raw style, evocative of Verlaine and Rimbaud's celebration of the male sexual anatomy and Genet's fascination with the underworld and the criminal, proclaimed a new sexual freedom. Less taxed by form, often uneven in language, this verse could be highly charged and provocative, or spiritual, pastoral, and tantric. (16-17)

Holland also gives examples of the kinds of political arguments the poems were making, from social criticism of American jingoism and its connections to masculinity, to ways of imagining gay identity. Holland seems to find one group the most promising, calling them 'The Gilded Poets' (a term drawn from the work of Felice Picano) "to label the sensibility in...[a] broad group of extremely eclectic and gifted poets." Holland explains:

These writers arrived on the heels of gay liberation in the late sixties and early seventies and continued their work in the eighties. Many were steeped in a gay subculture at a younger age and wrote from the particular vantage of its colorful, romantic acculturation. Like Edward Field, Thom Gunn, Maurice Kenny, Ralph Pomeroy, and Tennessee Williams, some had been writing since the forties and fifties. Their work, indeed, was drawn to the locales and haunts of a masculine erotic subculture. Many came of age at a time in the seventies when lesbians and gay men had been polarized into separate communities and cultures. Their writing bears a certain lyrical, romantic, theatrical sheen or, as in Gunn, a raw economy of vision. Like Frank O'Hara, many were interested in American popular culture and its camp appeal, or, as in Williams (and even in Richard Howard), the vernacular of the gay 'queen,' worldly, complex, tragic, and bitchy. They were drawn to the drama of the gay bar and its rituals, to cruising and the urban haunts of gay men.... Homosexuality is 'out' in the work of these 'Gilded Poets' and becomes their point of departure, rather than providing a gritty background.... (16-17)

As I'll suggest below, this particular group may be too general in its parameters.



Field and Gunn, for example, are extremely different in their use of form. What is more useful about Holland's view of these poets is that they represent, for the most part, a strain of poetry that wasn't necessarily catalyzed by liberation, even if the poets took part in a gay publishing boom and found a new, more uproblematically open voice post-Stonewall.

Keenaghan's approach to the poetry seems to posit a dichotomy between the rhetorical and the more literary. In his entry, he notes a poem, as way of example, by Ron Ballard published in *Come Out!* in 1969 just following Stonewall. The poem is called "Voice from the Closet" and it "metaphorically comments on how, until gay liberation, anonymous public sex in 'tearooms' ...had been a kind of 'closet' that let homosexuals keep their sexuality secret and thus reinforced racist and imperialist hierarchies by not challenging the core issue of sexism (homophobic and patriarchal ideologies)." He places this in contrast to the "more literary manner" of a found poem of Ginsberg's "that pointedly links repressive sexual attitudes to wartime culture by mixing messages about same-sex desire...with commentary about Vietnam" ("Gay Poetry" 542). Keenaghan's observations are perhaps the most interesting for their connections to the liberationist views that saw oppression as a far larger problem than homophobia. He notes how the liberation poets "rendered same-sex desire visible and expressed that desire as the core of a coalitional antisexist, antiracist, anticapitalist, and antiwar politics" (542). (As I suggested when discussing *Abelove*, the poets' linkages of the gay erotic to these wider political aims would be a fascinating future line of inquiry.)

It seems to me the poetry of the seventies isn't easily grouped by geography, nor by a formal vs. less formal lens, which Holland seems to set out as possibilities, nor even Keenaghan's dichotomy. Holland's pioneering work, however, might be a kind of palette from which to paint. What might be most useful is a taxonomy that classifies the poets according to their sexual and political vocabularies, since this will give a clearer picture of where and how the poets integrated sexuality and sexual identity into their political tendencies or alignments. Admittedly, this approach assumes that the idea of a gay liberation poetry was, as Young and Leyland and others have suggested, catalyzed by the politics surrounding them. Drawing on Holland's suggestive terminology, this would create the following classes of poetry:

1) The activist poem: This poem is discursive, rhetorical, and unapologetic in its use of a political vocabulary or tone. It eschews much of the generic conventions of the lyric. It can be broken down into two sub-classes, one about sexual identity and one about sex. Its audience is non-gay readers as well as the gay men who were streaming into the gay urban ghettos and were hungry for a political education via the gay journals.

2) The erotic poem: This poem is primarily interested in representing a sexual scene and sometimes in arguing for the worth of such work. It uses direct language and sexual slang, strong images of the male body, and can sometimes evoke a feeling of erotica or even pornography, in an attempt to either arouse or shock. It, too, can be broken down into two sub-classes, one in which the sex scene is represented without comment and stands on its own. The other sub-class can be

cross-indexed with the activist-sex poem referenced above. It uses the scene of sex to make a pointed political argument. The erotic poem is generally, though not always, intended for a gay audience.

3) For my purposes, the most problematic class is the neo-Romantic gay poem. These poems are traditional in how they use figures and tropes and are satisfied in presenting an uncomplicated Wordsworthian, Keatsian or Blakean speaker. These poems are more recognizable as a lyric invested in being part of the dominant discourse but whose content is gay-related, often without comment. This class of poem sometimes includes poems that are not as celebratory in spirit when compared to the other two classes, but rather they reflect the social reality of gay men's lives and relationships. This is perhaps why they are invested in the mimetic, subjective aims of the Romantics. The poems may be pastoral or mystical in tone and may attempt to merge the sacred with the profane. Their audience is indistinct but may involve other poets. They are aware of poetic conventions but seem to assume their content is sufficient to make the poem radical or inventive or different. This poetry may be aligned with the Beats. But they also might be aligned with what Holland calls the Gilded Poets, which is part of the problematic nature of this class. One wonders if the use of traditional forms can be tied to assimilationist politics. Consider Fone's comment in his introduction, "Becoming Gay," on post-1969 writing: "Just prior to Stonewall some writers sought to normalize homosexuals, turning them into images conforming to heterosexual norms so that they looked and acted like, indeed were, indistinguishable from other men—except that it was other men they desired" (729).

Equally possible within this category, however, are poems that attempt to make gay sex and sexuality ‘signify’ as universal and/or normal, or worthy, by fitting them within ‘traditional forms.’ A third possibility is that the use of something akin to a dominant (heterosexual) trope may be used subversively—that the poem is purposefully ‘tainting’ the trope by association as its own critique. While these second and third more complex strategies are possible ways to view this category of poem, in my study I haven’t found rich examples on which to draw to make such a case.<sup>5</sup> Even so, this may yet hold productive veins of study.

4) The final class is what I am labeling radical faggotry, drawing that term directly from Holland. This is the class of poem that is most invested in melding revolutionary liberation politics with an attempt to fashion a radical gay sensibility (i.e. faggotry) in both content and form. The poems I’ve chosen to close read in my final sections would be placed in this class. They celebrate but reenvision what sex and the male body can be. Their use of scenes of graphic sex is tied to this project. They are often the most formally inventive and can often be self-reflective or contain meta-textual structures.

(A more refined and specific view of the poetry will come as I conduct my readings later. Also, in my coda, I use the early critical work of Bruce Boone to address lingering questions of audience that my taxonomy calls up.)

### **Part 3: History, politics, publishing and poetry—and how they are linked**

#### **A. History and liberation theory**

I've mentioned the catalyzing nature of liberation and visibility and the link between poetry and politics that so defined the early seventies in particular. But a clearer understanding of this essential context is required before I close-read a select few poems. I address context here so it is most proximate to the material 'life' of the poems. As is always the hope, this historical information informs my readings and will allow the reader to better understand how the poems I study are part of a larger context and are deeply connected to a very specific historical and socio-political moment.

First, we must acknowledge that the liberation era was indebted to the civil rights, black power, feminist, youth and ant-war movements that came before or were contemporaneous to it<sup>6</sup>. It should be viewed as part of a larger cultural moment in which the marginalized decided to form coalitions of sameness in order to be large and loud enough to force their way into the dominant discourse and make the political case for equal rights and political representation and other goals. Along with the feminist movement, the liberation movement also built upon the growing social acceptance of discourses on sex and sexuality that were so much a part of sixties life, media and culture.

Michael Bronski's 2012 book, *The Queer History of the United States*<sup>7</sup>, has a section in which he takes what is perhaps the most clear-eyed and even-handed recounting of gay liberation. It is also the most recent revision of this era<sup>8</sup>. For one, Bronski explicitly eschews the notion that Stonewall was as pivotal a moment as has

been often argued. He notes the Compton Cafeteria incident in August 1968 in which “transvestites and street people in San Francisco’s Tenderloin District fought with police...” when the officers were called to “to eject some rowdy customers.” He adds, “Undoubtedly there were numerous similar, but unrecorded, incidents in which gay individuals and groups resisted arrest and police violence.” Bronski also notes that what would become the “defining document for a new movement,” a long, radical, but playful manifesto by a young man named Carl Wittman, was written before Stonewall (which Bronski insists be called “sustained street altercations of raucous, sometimes violent, resistance” and not riots). In fact, Bronski spends as much ink on Wittman as he does the actual events on that early morning of June 28, 1969. He writes:

[H]omosexual liberation became predominantly a political question....[Wittman wrote] “A Gay Manifesto” while living in the midst of the political and gay scenes in San Francisco.... The conclusion lists “An Outline of Imperatives for gay liberation”: 1. Free ourselves: come out everywhere<sup>9</sup>; initiate self defense and political activity; initiate counter community institutions. 2. Turn other gay people on: talk all the time; understand, forgive, accept. 3. Free the homosexual in everyone: we’ll be getting a good bit of shit from threatened latents: be gentle, and keep talking & acting free. 4. We’ve been playing an act for a long time, so we’re consummate actors. Now we can begin to be, and it’ll be a good show.... [Wittman’s combination of community building, constructive dialogue, goodwill, trust, and fun was a mixture of New Left organizing, homosexual playfulness, and the single most important directive of gay liberation: to come out<sup>10</sup>.

What mattered to Wittman and the great majority of gay activists who would take up the cause was the idea that a gay individual must reject the earlier activist’s idea of privacy (promulgated by groups like Mattachine<sup>11</sup>) that, as Bronski puts it, “safety and liberation were found only by living in, challenging, and changing the public sphere.” Instead, a new political argument took hold in gay liberation circles

that argued the political and cultural necessity that every gay person make their sexual identity a public matter. Bronski explains that for men of this time “coming out was not simply a matter of self-identification. It was a radical, public act that would impact every aspect of a person’s life.” One can see this reflected in a poetry that places a premium on a clear and direct representation of gay sexuality as a matter of fact and not as a way to somehow explain or validate an idea of personal identity. If anything, the poets who discussed identity politics were emboldened in their use of sexual content to debate *how* that sex should be part of a holistic, healthy sexual being and not about hand-wringing over how it labeled them as homosexual. (In fact, the street-level linguistic turn from homosexual to gay has important ramifications in this regard, with calling oneself ‘gay’ a pointed break from a closeted past that made sex a clinical part of identity.)

Bronski also stresses that with the idea of making the sexual self public came the idea that “[p]hysical resistance was the logical course of action in this context.” Interestingly, Bronski notes these ideas were in play before Stonewall but that events like Compton and Stonewall were outgrowths of a simmering political plan to seek visibility. As he puts it, “Stonewall was less a turning point than a final stimulus in a series of public altercations.”

Bronski does give a good deal of attention to the two major political groups that the movement spawned, the Gay Liberation Front<sup>12</sup> (GLF) and the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA). The GLF was defined by its “its refusal to see antigay bias or hatred as disconnected from other forms of oppression” though in a sad twist of irony the other rights groups at the time avoided coalition building with gay groups out of

homophobia. They were invested in a radical re-making of the world by pursuing an all-inclusive ideal of social justice. (See Keenaghan and Ablove's comments above.) The GAA, on the other hand, was defined by its strict gay civil rights agenda, explicitly excluding any interest in other issues or groups.<sup>13</sup> The GLF's more revolutionary point of view was echoed in most of the major literary publications of the early to mid-seventies; their newspaper *Come Out!* was the model for many of these, Bronski reports. Perhaps unsurprisingly the GAA had a more lasting political effect on the mainstream of gay politics. As Bronski puts it, "It became the template for the contemporary gay rights movement, which works to change, not overthrow, the system."<sup>14</sup>

These groups generated enough visibility that the likes of *Time*, *Playboy*, and *Life* all featured homosexuality prominently in their publications from late 1969 to 1971. Says Bronski, this added to a growing fear among some heterosexuals that the world was changing. This was in fact true. Bronski notes "the huge success of anticensorship fights, the ongoing battle for reproductive rights (including abortion rights), the wider acceptance of recreational drug use, and increasing media glorification of nonreproductive heterosexual acts in films such as 1972's *Deep Throat*" all contributed toward a changing world for heterosexuals and homosexuals alike. He concludes that along side other movements' uneven but important political advances, "By the mid to late 1970s, the LGBT movement had not only made progress but had radically changed how some Americans thought about homosexuality, heterosexuality, gender, gender roles, sexual activity, children's sexuality, privacy, and most profoundly, sexuality itself." Unlike the other political



movements, however, whose successes were primarily in the arena of civil equality and 'individual dignity' (to use Bronski's term), the gay and lesbian political movements "were far more threatening to American society because they brought into question the underpinnings of sexual identity and sexual orientation. The idea that there could be 'hidden homosexuals,' that a perceived sexual identity might be a mask, or that a person—child, parent, brother, friend—could suddenly 'come out' was profoundly upsetting." Historian D'Emilio goes as far as to say the "new definition that post-Stonewall activists gave to 'coming out', which doubled both as ends and means for young gay radicals," was one of the few aspects of the movement that saved gay liberation from the "decline" experienced by the other movements happening at the time (235), though not for long<sup>15</sup>. He adds that coming out "acquired an investment in the success of the movement in a way that mere adherence to a political line could never accomplish" (236).

Certainly the political power that comes with 'coming out,' the visibility and self-agency that that affords, was foundational to liberation ideology. But a crucial part of the puzzle of Liberation theory is the complicated view of sex and sexuality that some of the most prominent liberation theorists articulated. These thinkers, Dennis Altman perhaps the most influential of them, were more in line with the GLF's foundational ideology that the system was rotten (to use Wittman's term) and must be wholly scrapped. To do this, a completely new idea of sex and sexuality had to be developed, one that believed in the innate bisexuality of all people, that saw a focus solely on genital sex as limiting, that envisioned the human being as capable of polymorphous perversity, and that saw sex as authentic human communication.

Only when these ideas were realized would the old regimes of patriarchy, sexism, and homophobia (all rooted in the belief that we need to categorize) as well sexual violence, sexual limitation, and shame be eradicated from the world. It was a revolutionary thinking, reflected in both Altman's theorizing *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* as well in the more activist-oriented, street-level documents of the time. For example, Allen Young, in "Out of the Closets, Into the Streets," declares, "Gay, in its most far-reaching sense, means not homosexual, but sexually free. This includes a long-ranged vision of sensuality as a basis for sexual relationships....[which means a] sexual freedom premised upon the notion of pleasure through equality, no pleasure where there is inequality" (28). And certainly the discourse was an integral part of the literary scene, perhaps most prominently, discussed in several of the extremely influential *Gay Sunshine* interviews, as evidenced below.

Altman, drawing heavily on but also reacting to Herbert Marcuse and Wilhelm Reich, sets a theory of liberation that envisions a world in which sex liberates human potential instead of being something that is used to oppress and categorize. Altman denounces the repressive triad of sex guilt, Christian theology (tying sex to family and childbearing) and "the strong negative attitude toward all sexual urges other than those that are genital and heterosexual" (75). That homosexuality radically diverges from these social constraints is what allows it to assert the idea of "sexuality as an expression of hedonism and love free of any utilitarian social ends" (80).<sup>16</sup> He writes that homosexual liberation "can only be achieved within the context of a much broader sexual liberation. What is needed is

in fact a theory of sexuality..." (72) and that "any real theory ....must take into account the essentially polymorphous and bisexual needs of the human being" (76). He explains that liberation "implies freedom from the surplus repression that prevents us recognizing our essential androgynous and erotic natures." He adds this "entails not just freedom from sexual restraint, but also freedom for the fulfillment of human potential" (96). It opens up "the possibility of the eroticization of everyday lives" (97).

Altman wonders, however, if theory turns to practice, how liberation can resist Marcuse's idea of "repressive desublimation," which Altman sees happening around him. There may be a "greater apparent freedom but [it becomes] a freedom manipulated into acceptable channels. Thus most of the Western World has abolished legal restrictions against homosexuality while maintaining social prejudices" (98). It thus becomes "necessary now to transform sexuality into eroticism" (99) to seek a way out of this state of affairs.

What I find most interesting about the theory Altman puts forth is a need to articulate a position on the very promiscuity many gay men in particular saw as part of a life of non-utilitarian sexuality. He writes:

Undoubtedly there is a positive side to the sordidness of traditional gay life, in that it represents an acceptance of sexuality in a way that perhaps fewer heterosexuals have experienced. *Some* one-night stands can be rewarding just as *some* lasting relations can be disastrous. In arguing for the eroticization of everyday life, I am certainly not extolling some new form of puritanism that would deny the possibility of transitory sexual encounters, nor would I want to uphold monogamy as either necessary or, indeed, desirable. Casual sex can be a good way of getting to know people. But it is hardly sufficient.... Promiscuity, even selective, hardly equals liberation, nor is the ability to appreciate the varieties of human eroticism....a substitute for the creation of real relationships. (101)

Is this what Altman means about transforming sexuality into eroticism? It's unclear to me where this middle ground is, when it comes to sex as a social pleasure and sex as inherently meaningful and relational. What's also interesting about this moment is how Altman seems to want to speak more practically to the sexual behaviors of his fellow gay men. I emphasize this moment in particular because it seems to me the questions Altman brings up, and the answers he tries to give, are the very meat of a debate over sex the poets of the liberation years were having in their work.

The *goal* of liberation theory? Says Altman:

Sexuality, once it became fully accepted, would be joyful, spontaneous and erotic, and with that one could hope for a withering away of both *Playboy* and the League of Decency. Above all, liberation implies a new diversity, an acceptance of the vast possibilities of human experience and an end to the attempt to channel these possibilities into ends sanctioned by religious and economic guidelines. (108)

This is no small feat, and considering how gay men were finding sex more and more tied to a political identity, it can be little wonder that the gay poets of the era found it difficult to negotiate a lyric that did more than just 'render sex visible.'

### **B. 'Poetry was everywhere'**

And where did poetry fit into this dynamic, complicated and polarizing moment in history? One must recall that there was a thriving cultural scene and daring publications supporting it that ran alongside (or supported) the energy of gay liberation. And in terms of the cultural sphere of these years, there was no more powerful cultural expression of liberation politics than poetry. Walter Holland writes, "Poetry was everywhere." As I've indicated above, the majority of gay liberation poetry was published first in journals and newspapers. These included

*Manroot* (1969), *Gay Sunshine* (1970), *Mouth of the Dragon* (1974), *RFD* (1975), *Fag Rag* (1976), and *Come Out!* (1969)<sup>17</sup> (Holland 17). David Bergman puts it quite plainly: “The emergence of a distinctive gay literary movement was built on the development of gay newspapers, magazines, and quarterlies.”<sup>18</sup> The anthologies I am using as my primary sources, it can be argued, collect the ‘best’ (as seen at the time by two main arbiters) of that material. They are Ian Young’s *The Male Muse* (1973), Winston Leyland’s *Angels of the Lyre* (1975) and *Orgasms of Light* (1977), and Young’s *Son of the Male Muse* (1983). The journals most often represented are *Gay Sunshine*, *Fag Rag*, *ManRoot*, and *Mouth of the Dragon*. Holland’s “Gilded Poets” in particular were, according to his view, “part of a golden age for American gay literary publishing. (17). Gregory Woods notes that the poems were being written and published, some times self-published, over many years and in many different venues, but that the overall force of poetry has to be looked at as a movement: “Each [publication] may be, on its own, relatively trivial; but taken together they constitute a significant, even major, development” (glbtq.com). Marco Pustianaz has written about the role the anthology had in producing a gay reader. In an article about the field of gay criticism<sup>19</sup> that would also bloom during the period, he writes, “The appeal of gay anthologies testifies to the remarkable figure of the male homosexual as ‘reader’, becoming a subject thanks to the gathering of the multiple texts in which he finds his ‘voice’ (147). Felice Picano, speaking from the vantage of having been a part of the movement (he founded SeaHorse Press In 1977), says, “By the mid-1970s gay newspapers and magazines proliferated, some lasting only a few issues, others like *The Advocate* and *Christopher Street*, for decades. As the gay world grew

exponentially so did the necessity to write about it, to understand it, to shape and critique it—and so did the number of people who did write about it” (119-120).

Young and Leyland each use their introductions to suggest, if not make an outright case for, poetry in their anthologies as historically significant (part of a “Gay Cultural Renaissance,” even, for Leyland) because it represents a new openness that built upon previous poets and cultural shifts. Young, in *The Male Muse*, sketches a brief history of gay poets, noting that the poets of forties and fifties (including Spicer and O’Hara) “were seldom openly and unambiguously gay, but with the ‘sexual revolution’ of the sixties and seventies, gay novels, theater, and films made breakthroughs in terms of both artistry and public acceptance.” He explains:

By 1971, a “gay poetry reading” could be held in San Francisco featuring poets as well known as Thom Gunn and Robert Duncan. Isherwood, Auden, Ginsberg, Paul Goodman, Merle Miller, and others were allowed to speak on TV talk shows and in large-circulation magazines about their homosexuality. What had been literally a conspiracy of silence was coming to an end, and both poets and public were ready for such an anthology as this. (9)

Writing only two years later, Leyland sounds a very similar note in his introduction to *Angels of the Lyre*. He writes that from the thirties to the early fifties novelists took on “homosexual themes,” but by the fifties “a few poets began to publish homosexual poetry and this publishing grew to a small flood by the early 1970s.” He points out that the sexual revolution of the 1960s “broke down many of the barriers to open expression,” and gay-themed poems appeared in places like the *Evergreen Review* and *Avant-Garde*, which first published Auden’s infamously explicit “A Day for a Lay” (8). As I noted earlier, Leyland goes so far as to say, “When literary historians look back on this period of American letters a hundred years from now, I firmly believe they will view this Gay Cultural Renaissance as being of equal

importance to other literary movements (such as the Beat) of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (9).

It wasn't simply the case that there was a great deal of poetry being written. It was the relationship between poetry and liberation that was often discussed. An idea that seems to resonate for both Young and Leyland was the idea of the catalyzing effect of the liberation movement. Leyland states plainly that the poets in *Angels of the Lyre* are contemporary poets “whom have been catalyzed profoundly by the recent gay liberation movement” (7) and that “for more than one poet Stonewall was a catalyst for a creative Gay ‘coming out’” (12). Leyland also discusses this in his introduction to the highly influential *Gay Sunshine* interview collections. He writes that this work demonstrate an existence of a “definite gay sensibility in the arts” and that gay liberation “was especially catalytic for this gay sensibility,” claiming that “the rise and spread of post-Stonewall gay consciousness has had a deep effect on many writers, freeing them from societal or self-imposed restraints.” For Leyland “[s]everal of the interviews...document the impact of gay liberation on the arts” (7).

While looking to the documents of the time is essential, I think more subjective, historically sensitive work is required in order for future study to mature. One place to start such work might be in oral histories or retrospective essays from the poets and editors who are still alive. Felice Picano and Perry Brass were directly involved in the literary scene, and both have written about their experiences, giving an insider's look into what was happening. Picano describes the late sixties through early eighties gay literature as set apart by two characteristics:

“(1) the complete acceptance of the existence of a wide, indeed international gay world, and (2) the operative intention to become another brick constructing or strengthening that gay world.” No matter where you published “you were suddenly something unprecedented in the world, [sic] you were suddenly a gay writer. This represented a crucial, overarching shift not merely in approach but also in sensibility” (119-120). For his part, Brass recalls Andrew Bifrost, editor of *Mouth of the Dragon*<sup>20</sup>, and his view of the magazine’s role. Brass recalls Bifrost saying:

I don’t want to feature poets. I want to feature the magazine. It’s the most important thing, not the poets in it. The poets are part of a political process. So I don’t want to repeat poets. There are enough poets out there not to do that; I want to bring in poets from all over the country. We’ll be able to do that. I want kids who’ve just started writing as well as seasoned poets. *In fact, the quality of the work is not important to me.* What’s important is that we show how much gay men are writing poetry, and what they’re writing. (my emphasis 16)

Brass implies that this may have placed poetry merely in service of a political message and not *part of its meaning*.

David Bergman’s entry on the exhaustive online reference [lgbtq.com](http://lgbtq.com)<sup>21</sup> discusses more in-depth the political context of writing and publishing in a post-Stonewall world, again stressing the place of importance that poetry held during these years, especially for activists. He also suggests some reasons why poetry was the first form of writing gay men may have been drawn to as they negotiated their newfound willingness to speak out:

The situation for poetry after the Stonewall Riots was very different... Several important poets had written works with explicitly gay content before Stonewall, and the issue of how autobiographical a work should be was not as problematic for poets, who work from a long tradition of highly personal lyrics, as it was for fiction writers. Consequently, poets did not have the same problems establishing a network and distribution system that fiction writers had. It is easy to speculate why poetry had an easier time of articulating gay



experience than had prose. In the first place, the highly metaphorical nature of poetry insulates poetic disclosure. Also because poetry has a smaller, better-educated cadre of readers than does prose, it met with a more sophisticated and less-shockable readership, and therefore poets felt freer to address homosexual material. In addition, the tradition of lyric poetry in general permitted writers to deal with more explicit sexual material. Because of Walt Whitman, gay American writers have from the outset found poetry a congenial medium for expressing their thoughts. Moreover, the confessional poets of the late 1950s and 1960s--Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, for example--had so prepared readers for "shocking" material about suicide, drugs, and other forms of unauthorized sexual behavior, that homosexuality seemed not particularly unusual. Finally, Allen Ginsberg's candid and popular works, particularly *Howl* (1955), set the stage for other poets to be equally candid.<sup>22</sup>

Brass seems to have similar reasons but notes that even before the seventies poetry was the vehicle of choice for gay men, even if "the publication of their work was usually cloaked beneath more acceptable and generic rubrics like 'Friendship,' 'Bonding,' 'Brotherhood,' or 'Democracy.'" He recalls, "On coming out, gay men wrote poetry because it was one of the few avenues of personal self-expression they had. [...] Poetry was intensely personal and you could get away with feelings in it that you could not in prose" (10). Again, according to Brass, Bifrost's ideas seem to support the idea that poetry also represented an easy gateway into 'the gay world.' He recalls Bifrost telling him, "But one day I realized that I couldn't fool anyone anymore. I was gay, and there was nothing I could do about it. I'd been reading poetry, and I decided that what I wanted to do was get involved with it. I know I'm not a great poet, but I can be a part of the gay world through poetry." Brass adds that he in fact had "met other men like him before, who had come into gay life through the door of the arts rather than the door of sex" (19), strangely turning the two options into a kind of fork in the road. (Oral histories would be excellent in sorting out if the paths were so clearly differentiated.) Poetry was not only the more turned-

to form of expression, it seems, but it may have led gay men to feel it had a special power to access and render a new sexually open life.

#### **Part 4: Figuration and the question of failure**

With this contextual work in place, a clearer understanding of what's happening within the poems can be experienced. When we begin to unpack the poetry from this era, one question presents itself: Are the poems 'revelatory', radical or transformative because they 'hide nothing' or, *because* they hide nothing, are they 'empty' of such effects? This is what I think Byrne R.S. Fone is getting at when he writes, "Some of the literature of the period... reflect[s] the dictates of gay fashion and sexual style in works that were themselves revelatory, promiscuous, exuberant and hiding nothing—and, some critics said, that also documented glamorous but empty lives that had only style and little meaning" (730). In my readings, I've made a concerted effort to read the poems while alert to how we might answer this question—in particular by confronting the poems' lyric conventions, how they fit within such conventions or attempt to trouble or remake them.

The first of the anthologies I want to examine more in-depth, and the first to be published, was Ian Young's *The Male Muse*. This is widely seen as a groundbreaking text, and there are several poems that earn the anthology praise; the simple fact that Young includes Robert Duncan's poetry (especially the important and understudied poem "Unkinged by Affection") and the poems of John Wieners, Thom Gunn, Allen Ginsberg, Edward Field, Harold Norse, Jonathan Williams, Tennessee Williams, Christopher Isherwood, and Paul Goodman (who had

died before the anthology was published and who it is dedicated to) marks it as seminal. The book is also extremely important in that it contains selections from Ronald Johnson's *Letters to Walt Whitman*, which Johnson later disavowed. The book is also international in scope, boasting poets from England, Ireland and Canada.

What's fascinating about many of the poems in *The Male Muse* is how the work exhibits a tension and ambivalence and trauma that seems representative of its moment of historical transition. I don't mean here to suggest the 'moment' of Stonewall as some singular pivot, but rather a moment of perhaps several years in which gay men became increasingly more willing to be open about their sexuality, only eventually culminating in the kinds of public protests like Stonewall and others. The very fact that some of these poems were no doubt written before Stonewall occurred is proof the poets were testing the boundaries of the public and private, for even if these poems remained unpublished when first written, they represent a decision to articulate and bring to light what had always been considered dangerous and private. At any rate, the poems seem caught between an new feeling of openness and the knowledge that there has been and will still be the reality of social trauma<sup>23</sup> attached to gay men's lives, that the time for a poetry of celebratory liberation had perhaps not yet come for so many of Young's contributors. In other words, it's one thing to write a poem; it's another to have access to a life where meaningful sexual connection is typical or frequent.

Amid poems of unapologetic descriptions of sex, sexuality and desire are just as often poems of pining, or poems quite plainly bemoaning how the speaker is

*lacking* the actual sexual connection or lacking the ability to be public in their love, including poems by Robert Adamson, Jim Chapson, and Robert Gill for example. With a retrospective gaze, a poem like Chapson's poem "In Oregon" seems a bit ludicrous in its attempts to rationalize the speaker's unwillingness to show public affection; the speaker and his beloved must wear "decorous masks" because their love is "too pure" (12) to be shown in public, and anyway such displays are "melodrama" (6). This is the kind of toxicity that sticks to some of these poems, despite their inclusion in a gay anthology. Were the poem aware of the social trauma it was discussing, it might be a more successful poem, and there are a number of these kind of more rhetorically minded works. But what is interesting is that Chapson doesn't use the opportunity to critique the public-private double standard.<sup>24</sup> (To be clear, I think it would be unfair to attribute a kind of universalizing sentiment to these poems, to see them as part of the long history of a speaker longing for his love<sup>25</sup>. And in fact many of the poems make this impossible, with explicit references to homosexuality and gay contexts.) Here are some other specific moments from poems in *The Male Muse* that are evidence of a kind of 'negative' or 'dark' openness. In "Rough Trade," as its name suggests, the speaker watches as a john and a hustler meet at an intersection. The poem, though brief, begins with a subtle eroticism but ends with a kind of warning, almost literal in its directness: "Beneath the caution light / the two submerge / and drown in hands" (13-15). In E.A Lacey's "Guest," the poem is an almost completely (and imagined) negative portrayal of sex, poisoned by drinking, pity, blood and brokenness, with "the perfection of a hunted animal" (5). Adding to the poem's tension is a total

uncertainty; the poem is a set of “if” statements that have no conclusion. The poem simply ends with the “torn” ‘animal’ weeping for his mother and blinded by a (post-coital?) morning’s grit.

In terms of more formal questions the poems bring up, one must confront the ways in which the poems (again, taken from *The Male Muse* unless otherwise noted) rely on innuendo and figures to discuss sex and desire. In addition to a poetry more interested in simply representation or in the creation of a politically vocal subjectivity, what’s interesting is how often these poems seem actually to sanitize or defuse desire in an anthology predicated on the radical power of openness. Some of these poems walk a thin line between being explicit and using almost precious figures, creating a poem seemingly at odds with its aims—clear in its need to articulate an openly gay subjectivity but mediating that subjectivity through a literary effect that doesn’t heighten or make specific that subjectivity but that in fact confuses or mitigates the erotic quality of the poem. Perhaps one of the most obvious examples is when James Mitchell in an untitled poem says a “penis / wobbles like a newborn fawn.” In a perhaps more interesting example, Graham Jackson in his poem “The Hill” writes of “how you’ll enter me again / to scatter moons inside my yielding frame / a milky way to ornament my soul” (10-12). The penetration and orgasm is transformed into a surreal cosmic aestheticization. Why mediate a physical, deeply visceral experience of anality through a visual image, especially one that seems to confuse moons with stars. It’s provocative in a sense, but in terms of the poem’s eroticism, there’s a blunting of effect rather than what one would assume would be the desired effect. In a similar vein, James Kirkup in

“The Drain” uses a kind of extended metaphor of the garden, ending the poem with the forced metaphor of love as some nameless buried thing: “It was my love they buried, that could have no name” (24). (This is yet another example of the negative portrayals discussed above.) Again, this brings up more questions than it does produce a satisfying poetic effect. Why be explicit about “my love” only to cloud the scenario in a rather awkward figure? In “Buying a Rose in San Antonio,” by Jim Egging, a speaker cruises and nearly propositions a young man who is a roadside flower vendor, but in talking the two are forced to use innuendo to express their desire, creating a speech that is overwrought and an innuendo that actually hides nothing (“This rose can stand a lot / more blowing” [25-6]). What’s more, the poem ends without any sexual or romantic connection, but only with the speaker ‘thumping like a melon’ (the flower comparison has suddenly disappeared) the boy’s “BIG / one” (27-9), which the reader can easily assume is the boy’s crotch. The poem seems to want to have it both ways: to be explicit and to be coded. Neither, however, produces a rich erotic effect, perhaps due to a feeling of confusion. In perhaps the strangest example, James Mitchell’s “The Orgy” (in *Angels of the Lyre*) is an almost clinical description of an orgy described by an “I” speaker who is taking part. The poem, however, without transition, shifts into the figurative register and ends, “...Their pale bodies squirmed / on the floor like libidinous trout in / a shallow stream” (19-21). The comparison is dark and, and despite the word “libidinous,” the scene is anything but erotic. The graphic sexuality of the orgy scene seems in conflict with the simile, as if the poet felt the urge to complete the picture with a figure as a kind of poetic legitimizing. The suggestion may be that the lyric

convention of figurality is being used not to render some unique vision of gay sexuality but to bring the poem back in line with a stable and normative form or expression. In this way, the poems can't hide their regressive nature in that that seem to revert to figures as a way to seek something to balance out (or even ask a kind of forgiveness of the reader for?) the graphic sexual content.

This is all in no way to suggest interesting things weren't being done in terms of figuration. But often the more 'successful' poems were those that sought a looser approach, that relied on implied metaphor, that found more associative resonances rather than direct and explicit mediation or comparison. Charley Shively's "Snow Poem" here quoted in its entirety, is a good example of this approach:

snow tasting fresh  
from the body  
salt mingled sex  
celebration of black bark  
trees  
northeaster naked  
genital heat melting  
minds kissed with tongues  
body troughed limbs  
crest  
wrapped with one another's  
exposed parts  
wet with one another  
in light orgasm.

Victor Borsa's poem "The Feel of Teeth" seeks a similar effect, in lines like "beak / upon my flesh in pause / of flight" (11-13). Both poems are included in *Angels of the Lyre*. The question then becomes, is the poem's inventive language enough to produce a transformative view of sex? While Shively's poem may be linguistically and even formally 'interesting,' I wonder if its looseness of form (clipped language, imagery in fragments, implied metaphor) means that the poem's ambiguity sanitizes

the sex in its own way—a naturalized, common, elemental (fire and ice) desire of genderless bodies experiencing a climax that is revelatory but unspecific in its revelation. Then again, as I've suggested above in discussing my taxonomy, this attempt to neuter the sex may in fact be a way of universalizing homosexual desire through poetic form, though I find no textual awareness of such a strategy.

As I tried to make sense of these questions, they led me to grapple with, of all things, a minor 1975 article in *Contemporary Literature* by Marjorie Perloff. I want to end this section with a brief review of her argument. In her review of erotic poetry of the early seventies, Perloff contends that this poetry (mostly heterosexual) “in terms of sheer quantity...is certainly the dominant mode to emerge in the early seventies” (“Corn-Porn” 124). Perloff suggests this boom means that the sexual revolution (she doesn't mention homosexuality at all in this) “has finally caught up with lyric poetry” (84). Over the course of about forty pages she defines “a set of conventions that governs the Liberated Lyric [sic] of the early seventies” (85). Her argument is that poets have ‘domesticated’ (87) sex in their work, often by moralizing about what should radiate its own transcendent power. She uses Susan Sontag's “analogy between pornography and the literature of religious transcendence” (86) to discuss what explicitly sexual poetry, ideally, might try to access. She writes, “What is missing in such poetry is precisely the sense of the demonic Sontag finds in the pornographic novels of Bataille or ‘Pauline Réage,’ the awareness that human sexuality is a complex phenomenon, involving irrationality and violence, fantasy and mystery, grotesque suffering and bizarre humor” (89). It seems to me that in some important ways this is how some of the best gay poets of



the early seventies were describing *gay* sexuality, as I try to show in my final sections. And if we look on the other side of the coin, one could see in Perloff's description of a 'domesticated' lyric some similarities to what I above called a sanitized gay sexuality. I suggest these comparisons as a way to further complicate our idea of what 'sex' is for the poet, suggesting at this time there seems to have been, across the board, a difficult negotiation of how to articulate sex when it could be rendered so graphically, explicitly, or openly as the social and cultural conditions allowed.

At the end of her scathing critique of book after mostly-heterosexual book of 'corn-porn' lyric poetry, Perloff applauds Adrienne Rich's and John Wieners' work as examples of work that is doing something 'new.' Nowhere does she theorize what it might mean that Wieners was gay. (Rich wouldn't emphatically announce her lesbianism until 1976.) I hope the following readings make up for this missed opportunity from forty years ago.

### **5: Poetry and the question of sex**

In an interview in *Gay Sunshine, Volume 2*, with poet Robert Peters, the interviewer asks Peters if "there is such as 'gay writing.'" Here is what follows:

Peters: Yes, but I don't want to be seen as exclusively as a gay poet. My poems are all part of a larger whole. There is a splendid amount of good gay writing around. I suppose that a spate of bad poems has to occur when any minority is being heard. There is a place for jackoff poems, and there are some good ones; but they don't do much as literature, except stir the groin a couple of times. And that's not bad.... I guess there has to be a whole subcontinent of these for the sake of the few peaks emerging from the water.

[Don] Mark: Sounds snobbish.

Peters: I don't mean it that way. And the tremendous amount of gay writing

published over the past two or three years, no matter how ephemeral much of it is, is crucial to an emergent gay consciousness.

Mark: So you think it's important to publish all this gay work?

Peters: Definitely. We're still a persecuted minority. The more vocal we are and proud of our subculture, the more bigotry quiets down. There's more to gay writing than the Continental Baths and alcoholism and whacking people with purses. We must demand respect from the straight world, more than their tolerance, that is. (136)

I cite this as support that even then poets were having deeply personal conversations about the role sex played in their writing, comprised of poems that often themselves take part in a debate over the role of sex in the social, political and indeed literary lives of gay men. What's interesting in this example is that Peters at first seems to equate gay writing as the "jackoff poem," but then when challenged he almost immediately widens the term to encompass a writing that "is crucial to an emergent gay consciousness." Even so, he then seems to devalue poems of anonymous sex, poems that discuss substance problems, and even explicitly political poems ('purse whackers'). Aren't these also part of the emerging gay consciousness? What Peters doesn't seem to acknowledge or even consider is how the poem of graphic sex can *also* be a vehicle for 'demanding' "tolerance."

In another interview in the same volume of *Gay Sunshine*, poet James Broughton in a way reverses the equation, with poetry itself, not necessarily graphic content (e.g. the jerkoff poem) as being erotic. He tells the interviewer (Peters, in fact), "I think the poetic impulse awoke in me in conjunction with my love for boys. Maybe that is why poetry has always been for me a kind of erotic turn on. Writing poetry is almost as orgasmic as sex" (28). One immediately thinks of Mariah's connection in "The Figa." But whatever the poem, there were exciting experiments

going on that envisioned sex in revolutionary ways and that attempted to make the lyric poem a part (and not simply the voice of) that vision.

Some poems, as I've stated, celebrated sex as a goal in and of itself. Others argued for what they saw as a more politically progressive move away from gay culture defined by often promiscuous and anonymous sex and toward a 'liberated' view of sex as communication, able to eventually create a world in which there were no sexual categories and sex was polymorphously perverse. (Some viewed anonymous sex, promiscuity and public sex as signs of oppression, behaviors from an earlier time when that was all that gay men had access to.) There was no consensus among the poets, perhaps mirroring the lack of consensus among groups like the GLF and GAA.

Perry Brass's poem's "I Have This Vision of Madness" (*The Male Muse*) might be typical of the poems that are forthright in their call for political organizing to take precedence over anonymous or public sex. Brass references the scenes of sex had by gay men in empty freight trucks at night in the Village. His poem suggests promiscuity and anonymous sex were damaging because they led to a constant search for pleasure ("a thousand masturbatory images / that cannot be fulfilled") (44-5). He urges, "dear brothers, / please get out of the trucks" (2-3) and instead face each other in the daylight, "hold hands" (6). The poem ends with the suggestion that the search for sex will take the gay man away from important "urgent insanity" (46) that comes with the "rage / and crazy kindness" (50-1) needed for true revolution. (I think Brass' poems *include* sex in that, just perhaps a politically minded, liberation theorized approach to sex.) Allen Ginsberg, as early as 1972, is

more direct in his interview from *Gay Sunshine, Volume 1*. He says “the gay lib [sic] movement will have to come to terms sooner or later with the limitations of sex.” He compares sex to a drug habit, warning against “sex as another form of junk, a commodity, the consumption of which is encouraged by the state to keep people enslaved to their bodies” (101). Ginsberg and Brass were not alone in these views.

But I want to stress that there was by no means a consensus on this issue. The very anonymous sex Brass calls out and Ginsberg warns against, other poets trumpeted as liberating in and of itself. For example, in the Broughton interview, Peters asks, “Can promiscuity be a way to salvation?” Broughton replies, “Certainly. It is the search for the divine in one’s fellow creatures. Cruising should be called *The Quest for the Holy Male*” (37). The rhetoric may be hyperbolic, but then again, so was much of the liberation theory that stressed sex as a salutary form of communication.

What does this mean for the poets of the time? There were poems being written, in fact, that implicate the poem itself (and its ability to facilitate direct speech) as an important variable in the debate. Take for example William Barber’s poems “The Gay Poet” (*Angels of the Lyre*) and “Explanation” (*The Male Muse*). In the latter the speaker is defiant in his project of speaking “directly.” The poem demeans anonymous sex (the closet is burned “in effigy”), and the speaker says “no more” to watching for police in public bathrooms and to “dark bars, ghettoed and ethnic” (9-14). The poem ends, “I love men. I tell them so directly. / Whenever we encounter, there are no categories” (15-16). The “explanation” seems to be as much about identity politics as it is the kind of directness Barber is arguing for in poetry

and in erotic interaction. In Barber's *Angels of the Lyre* poem, rather than arguing for the need for directions, he is simply and overtly critical of "The Gay Poet." In particular he criticizes this poet's use of the poem to bemoan the various pains ("gone obtusely mad") of anonymous sex: "in the amyl twilight"<sup>26</sup> his "fragile psyche" is threatened (8-11). In a reference to the hanky code that let gay men indicate sexual preference through the color and position of a hanky in their back pants' pockets, he writes that his "wrinkled ego [hangs] out of his back pocket / always two steps ahead of me" (13-14). The speaker, in a note of sad submission, envisions his future as dark, "waiting with my mouth in my hand / to show you the ways into my body/being" (16-17); the poem is as given over as the body is. The poem ends with the speaker now "totally insane" because "too many" anonymous lovers have left him, taking with them "all my reason / crumpled inside your tawny levis" (19-22). It is a stark repudiation of a kind of gay poem being written at the time, and yet neither of Barber's poems offer much in the way of a new literary direction, despite their call for an ambiguous 'directness'. That he uses a poem in the first place to construct this critique of other poems is telling. Barber's openness is not one of arousal or even celebration but of promulgating a specific strain of liberationist sexuality that wanted gay men to be whole sexual beings rather than stunted and psychically 'fragile' 'homosexuals' from an era of oppression.

Another example<sup>27</sup> is the kind of poem (see those cited in the epigraph) that argues that the "gay poem" must reflect something unique to gay experience and not simply warmed over heterosexual tropes (Cady), nor a mere representation of sex (Jonas), and indeed that a poet's political voice cannot be overtaken by his sexual

appetite (Iozio). Jack Anderson's poem, "A Lecture on Avant-Garde Art," in *The Son of the Male Muse* takes this idea a step beyond these poems and argues that gay life itself is politically progressive. What is in part a discussion of the paradox of art (it is not natural, but "it is also an imitation / of some process in nature: so art, too, is natural..." [7-8]), the poem makes the case that gay expression is by nature 'avant-garde'. He writes:

This form of expression, the gay life  
so maddening and unimaginable to some,  
necessarily involves a leap into the unknown,  
for its traditions, such as they are, are shadowy. (12-15)

Later he writes that the obscurity of gay lives means "gay lives must style themselves with craft, / with daring. Many fail. Even so, / some grow amazing and beautiful" (25-7). The poem ends:

And since such triumphs are typically achieved  
amidst general bewilderment and in defiance  
of academic theory, the gay life  
deserves to be ranked among  
the significant examples of art, past and present.  
And because it has disordered whatever may be  
the accustomed ways of seeing in its time,  
it is therefore avant-garde,  
naturally avant-garde. (28-36)

Such a poem is more positive than Barber's but equally ambiguous about *how* the gay life enables it to so powerfully 'disorder' dominant culture. (Does it have to do with sex?) Thus, the complicated and yet powerful nature of sex in gay liberation politics was complexly linked to how these poets understood their roles as poets.

But there are other poems, poems that wrestle more complexly with what gay sex can be, and that use the lyric form to take part in that struggle—questioning *how* sex means, and the role it plays in gay men's creative, social, and political lives.

These, I will argue, are the poems that I think are the richest and perhaps, not coincidentally, the most tied to the very questions about the lyric that I've been tugging at. One of the liberationist poems that stands out as most politically pointed but problematic is what John Giorno called quite plainly in one instance the "Pornographic Poem" (*Angels of the Lyre*). Within my taxonomy, however, there are poems that use lyric effect to a radical end and others that simply represent graphic sex as its own statement, without lyric complexity. If my taxonomy is useful, it suggests the difference lies in the poet's idea of audience. Giorno and others defamiliarize gay sex even more than it might already be to the (heterosexual or even homosexual) reader. The other more prevalent type of poem seems to begin with the assumption that gay sex is strange. I want to use this line of inquiry to trouble Keenaghan's view that these poems' "political significance rested precisely in rendering gay sex visible" (543).

Giorno has three poems in Leyland's *Angels of the Lyre* and a less interesting poem in Leyland's second anthology *Orgasms of Light*. I want to briefly examine the three poems in the first anthology. The poems are not necessarily, in my estimation, enduring poems or poems of especially high literary merit, but I think they are part of a liberationist project that uses poetry in more complex ways than simply to 'render gay sex visible.' In his "Pornographic Poem," the speaker recounts, in plain and direct language and in very clipped lines of only a few syllables each, a night in which he had an orgy with "Seven Cuban / army officers / in exile," which are notably the first three lines of the poem, setting a political rather than sexual tone.

The poem, however, immediately moves into a graphic and relatively unadorned description of the orgy itself.

But first, note the kind of sexual fantasy the poem posits: the men are described as still military but are living in exile. The category of masculine violence has transcended their national and geographical ties. And yet there is little to suggest the scene is not consensual; quite the contrary, the speaker is in ‘paradise’ by the end of the poem and there is no language that suggests violence of any kind. In fact, there’s a kind of tenderness in descriptions like “Once they put me / on the bed / kneeling” (49-50) and:

[they] rubbed  
their peckers  
on my bare feet  
waiting  
their turns  
to get  
into my can. (60-6)

Next, note how the descriptions’ plain language is mirrored in a kind of clinical approach to the scene. Only one figure is used—hair is “like wet coal / on their heads / and between their legs” (12-15)—with the poet using it to represent two things. While there are brief moments where the speaker admits this is all pleasurable (“I shivered...” [35]), the majority of the poem is spent in detailing the choreography of the orgy, who’s doing what to whom and how, and how many times the officers come. The speaker’s relationship to the body moves from vulgar (ass, asshole) to almost childish or euphemistic (“peckers,” “in the behind,” and “my can,” all decidedly unsexy), as if it is more important not to repeat a term than it is to turn the reader on.



The poem ends with these lines:

The positions  
we were in  
were crazy  
but with two  
big fat  
Cuban cocks  
up my ass  
at one time  
I was  
in paradise. (74-82)

We are left to imagine the “crazy” positions, and neither the speaker nor the Cuban army officers climax. The poem ends with a kind of transgressive pornographic cliché (double penetration) that is married to a pat and bland cliché of another kind—sexual pleasure as paradise. Thus, the transgressive and graphic nature of the sex is somehow made both familiar and tepid. Or, like the other poets I discussed, there is a purpose to this.

And this is why I think Giorno’s work is interesting: he labels this writing “Pornographic Poem” but in many ways it is written to frustrate sexual excitement and even to frustrate our notion of what a poem is. Or to look it another way, the poem is aware of and highlights its own limitations and failure to be ‘literary’. The title as a label is meant ironically in this reading. The most interesting thing about the poem is the embedded and mysterious political content, the soldier’s exile from a communist regime only to sexually dominate an American speaker, with sex bridging political and geographical boundaries as easily and unquestioning as the poem’s form. The homosexual nature of the sex *almost* becomes politically peripheral at a time still dominated by communist fear. Add to this the fact that the poem’s insistently short lines never allow for extension or connection in a poem that

seems to require a climax; and that the poem is almost wholly disinterested in figurative language; and that it seems to rely on the sexual nature of the content itself to incite arousal. Take this all together and this is all a way for Giorno to make a kind of self-reflexive statement: rendering sex visible at its base is not a radical act, and a poet who doesn't seek to marry the transformative nature of gay male sex with some kind of poetic complexity is implicated in his own failure. Giorno is using his *approach* to writing as a kind of critique: even the most graphic and transgressive sex can be rendered impotent in a poem. In fact, by setting the content in the form of a lyric, the generic expectations actually create the failure I'm discussing here, not unlike Wieners' sense of queer failure and O'Hara's use of the anti-literary. Unlike Cady's poem in which he argues for a new language, Giorno here does something actually radical and not simply rhetorical; he doesn't just articulate the need for a transformative poetics of liberation. He shows through poetry what the challenges must be, throwing down a kind of poetic gauntlet for his contemporaries: "See how easily even the most transgressive sex fails to 'liberate' anyone? Here is what you must overcome."

But am I reading into Giorno an awareness of form that simply might not be there? The evidence of his other poems suggests the awareness is indeed there, and in spades. His other two poems, both "untitled," in *Angels of the Lyre*, aren't conducive to close readings but rather more pointed examples of experiments in form. For example, one of the poems contains this idea (here in non-lineated form): 'I reached under his waist and pulled his legs up as high as they could possibly go

and plunged my dick in up to the hilt.” However, the idea is never stated as such; the poet parses it out, repeating phrases before he can get to the next moment, e.g.:

and pulled  
his legs  
and pulled his legs  
up  
as high  
up as high as... (5-10)

The graphic homosexual message is momentarily lost or at best embedded in the poet’s experimental use of line breaks<sup>28</sup>, as if he is trying out the best way to articulate the scene. Which versions best create the tension he wants to evoke in a scene of sexual extremity? (The extremities: ‘as high as they could possibly go’ and ‘my dick up to the hilt’.) Furthermore, in highlighting the individual semantic pieces and trying out all the different permutations to see which is right, the poet suggests sexual representation and poetry do not ‘fit’ naturally (we feel that as we try we are frustrated by reading the poem out loud). However, poetry has the power for this very potential for a kind of athletic flexibility; just by the use of line break and repetition, a poem’s structure can torque and tangle meaning and create all sorts of semantic and syntactic tensions that complicate simple ‘representation.’ (The other untitled poem, with an even more transgressive content, takes this same tack but uses a more complex visual field: centered text split into two columns with a vertebra-like column of white space down the middle). In these experiments, I see Giorno applying a kind of poetic ‘trick’ to worry over gay male sex to the point that its absorbs poetic rhythms and semantic strangeness. Instead of the queer failure of “Pornographic Poem,” his two untitled poems are interested in forcing (thus, the trick of it all) the poetic onto the homosexually pornographic. He has poeticized gay

male sex, but the forced nature of the effect is something the poet is of course aware of. The homophobic reader must be tricked into reading the poem as a poem; the gay reader can find something in the poetic other than arousal—that is, that sex need not be a simple from x to z set of actions, that it can be complex, messy, with proliferations and positions aplenty.

Allen Ginsberg 1968's poem "Please Master" (*Angels of the Lyre*), a more famous example of the graphically sexual poem written around this time, works in similar ways. The poem's lines all begin with "Please master" and all involve some graphic sexual request from a 'slave' to his master (i.e. sadomasochism). While I won't close read the poem here, sufficed to say Ginsberg foregrounds in the poem how language builds and accrues meaning through repetition, how it changes, slips in and out of meaning, becomes just sound, becomes more than sound. At its most basic poetic level, one might argue he is attempting to represent the *experience* of sex through repetition, e.g. repeated thrusts. Perhaps. But the poem is also about the simplicity of the form and using it to transform sex into something that troubles us, that is troubled, that is resistant; the repetitive nature of the poem is so hyperbolic (as is the content in some respects—"Give me your dog fuck faster") that as we read it we feel the unnatural and artificial nature of the speaking subject. The poem also plays with artifice in its descriptions of the sex organs and the sex acts, with Ginsberg coining the kind of new language O'Hara sought, a kind of gay sex kening in some cases. For example, the anus is described variously as the "hairmouth" and the "self-hole."

The poet Chuck Ortleb, who founded *Christopher Street*, is an example of the competing directions a poet must negotiate when writing about eros and sex as a concept. Ortleb's two poems in two different anthologies are more *about* gay sex than they are interested in rendering an erotic scene. They are also both political in tone. His poem "Some Boys" (*Angels of the Lyre*) is a poetic discussion of the various types of "boys:" some innocent ("you can see how innocently / their cocks hang in their pants" [3-4]); some beautiful; some evil; some hypersexual ("they get hair-raising erections" [18]) or grotesque ("dead pubic insects fall from their groins..." [21]). But what makes the poem worth discussing is how Ortleb ends the poem. Riffing on the boys of sexual grotesquerie (who "take to sex like apes and monsters and their fathers"[17]), he writes:

The meat of rough alleys hangs in their underwear.  
The kind of meat you pull out of the pants of muggers.  
The meat in its American juice that lays in jeeps and B 42's.  
I mean the meat  
of all soldier boys who will bomb the hell out of heaven,  
the meat  
of all those high school cadets  
masturbating in the twilight as though they were landing a 747. (23-30)

Something remarkable and disturbing happens here. First, Ortleb's long lines suddenly break off, and the speaker isolates two lines, "I mean the meat" and "the meat." The metaphor (and sexual slang) of meat standing in for penis, suddenly requires an explanation of what the speaker really 'means.' The suggestion of course is that the speaker fears some confusion could arise or that he feels he must be very precise in his meaning. The second shortened line forces the reader to recognize what may have gone previously unnoticed, that the speaker has made the penis definitive; it is 'the' meat, the one that matters, not the indefinite and ambiguous.

Now, examine the trajectory of this metaphor. It begins perilously close to its own referent; it hangs like meat hangs in an abattoir and two lines later sits (simmer?) “in its [own] American juice.” With the references to war, the poem puts the metaphor at risk, to say the least, of losing its erotic charge. The “meat / of all soldier boys” (notice the sudden removal of the definite article from before “soldier boys”) could refer to the meat, the flesh, of the body. This is the ‘dead meat’ produced by war. This meaning is underscored by the subtle reference to the meat ‘lying’ motionless in its juice (blood) in vehicles of war. That level of meaning, of dead or obliterated flesh, is what the reader carries along to the final two lines, in which America’s future soldiers, high school cadets, are caught in a kind of liminal metaphoric uncertainty: they will die in war (*become* meat) but for now they masturbate their meat (the slang clearly embedded). The act of masturbation here, to further complicate things, is compared to flying a jet. By holding their dick in their hands, they are also holding the fate of hundreds of people in their hands. The erect penis, through this implied metaphor, is a 747’s phallic-shaped control column (think joystick). By the poem’s end, thus, the subtext of war and violence has made the “meat” metaphor either completely unstable as a mediating figure or has enabled several levels of meaning to exist simultaneously, depending on your point of view. The erotics of the poem are thus deployed as a kind of political critique, blasting a kind of masculinist view of sex and virility and youth that sees in their phallus a hyperbolic power and size. Ortleb has in a way used the erotic representation of the penis as a Trojan horse in order to suddenly and profoundly destabilize what male eroticism *means* in the first place. It’s transformative use of

figures (primarily 'meat') makes this poem about how closely linked sex and violence and power are in the American male. It's a striking example of the kind of poem the gay liberation poet can create by drawing on the ability to speak directly about the male body, about gay sexual desire. The poem begins in eros and ends in political critique.

But compare that to Ortleb's poem "Militerotics" (*The Son of the Male Muse*), which even in its title tells the reader it will also link erotics and a critique of militarism. The long poem, which interestingly won the 1976 Fels Award in poetry (Holland 16), can be boiled down to several lines (found in its first section):

force and sexuality  
go together  
like men with men  
on horses,  
like whips with marriages.  
Force seeks sexuality,  
sexuality seeks out force.  
There is all you need to know. (39-47)

Though the poem makes more specific critiques and is radical in its representations of the horrors of war, torture and male cruelty (men are "...castrated / and forced to eat / their own erections" [15-17]), its overall effect is much like the mixing of similes in the above example—forced and confusing. Also, unlike "Some Boys," the political critique here is a forced expression of 'knowledge' that the speaker knows and assumes the reader must be taught. The liberationist politic emerges not from a unique perspective on sexuality, gender and powerlessness, but instead relies on didacticism, directness (as opposed to openness), and facile figures. It is an example of the poem that misunderstands where artistic power emanates from and assumes

eros can radicalize a poem simply by being transgressive in its use (i.e. simply linking sex and war):

Normandy was erotic.  
Pearl Harbor was erotic.  
Hiroshima was erotic,  
but too quick, like  
premature ejaculation. (26-30)

The comparison of the atomic horrors of World War II to ejaculating too soon is somehow both facile and confusing. How does the comparison illuminate or complicate the horrors of the bombing? Ortleb as a unique case study sets up a kind of continuum of how the liberationist poet encounters, articulates and transforms (or doesn't) gay sexuality in the post-Stonewall era.

### **Part 6: A Conclusion**

This is a story, but it's not a complete picture. Nor is it the only story. It is a beginning, perhaps of just one story. All of the permutations have not been considered, cannot be considered, without more work uncovering the poems that have gone unstudied, assumed to be of 'minor' importance, or even lost to some archive or attic shoebox somewhere. All the connections have not been made, cannot be made because the histories have yet to be fully fleshed out. There are still theories to accompany the narratives and the readings, theoretical foundations yet to come that will be able to create a framework for a literature of sex and sexuality that understood these terms in ways we perhaps cannot yet fully process—not as Foucauldian discourse and power, not as wholly social constructions, not as politically wielded acts. Such a theoretical framework will have to meet the poets on



their own terms, and perhaps we might come to a new understanding of what sexuality meant for these men.

What may be missing from the standard narratives of liberation theory is the idea of gay sex and desire as having not simply political power but creative power. If I were to propose a new frame with which to examine the interplay between theory and praxis, it would be along the lines of what Charlie Shively argues in his 1974 article “Indiscriminate Promiscuity of as An Act of Revolution.” He writes, “Our desires—to suck cock for instance—are creative, they are the road to creation, to the modification of reality” (526).<sup>29</sup> (One thinks of Broughton’s “The Quest for the Holy Male.”)

Patrick Moore explores this wider idea in his 2004 book *Beyond Shame*. He writes that “in the 1970s gay men used sex as the raw material for a social experiment” (xxv) that he likens to art. He writes these men “were using flesh and sprit and sexual energy as [metaphorically] artistic tools” (13), that they had “a willingness to live a life where one’s sexuality was used as a tool for radical change” (xxiv), and that they “took the radical step of removing the line between life and art, insisting that the performance not wait for the audience to arrive” (13). Could the best of the poems of this time be arguing for a new definition of liberation era sex that was just as creative an act as the writing of a poem? Is this why these poets link the two acts, just as O’Hara, Spicer and Wieners had? Might these poets have, like the men Moore talks about, understood that sex in poetry could be a ‘radical tool for change’ only when those poems were tied directly and complexly into the creative life of the imagination? Might they have understood that neither political nor poetic

power comes solely from public rendering, from graphic representation, nor even in extremity and transgression? Did they see the poem of sex becoming something more than an assertion of visibility, of agency, or validation? And did they understand that the sex expressed through formal invention and experimentation could reflect homosexuality's *difference*, its radical critique (à la Altman's theories), and, yes, perhaps even social trauma? Yes, these are my contentions. What I hope I've shown is that gay poets, at least some of them, were theorists of liberation sexuality in their own rights, and that their praxis was to find the poetry in pornography and the pornographic in the poetic. Or to be more precise, the best of these poems finds a radical gay sexuality not in the 'openness' of the graphic but in the 'openness of meaning' a lyric poem achieves through formal invention and experimentation. If these poems fail (and certainly we must be clear-eyed that many do), could it be that the others we might assume fail in fact simply require a reader more open to seeing sex as creative, as revolutionary, as polymorphous? In this way, perhaps the poetry of liberation is like the movement—it requires a community more open to the ideals its theorists imagined.

### **And a Coda**

Bruce Boone's 1979 article on Frank O'Hara, "Gay Language as Political Praxis," is the only writing that I've found that takes a more theoretical approach in examining the poetry from the post-Stonewall time. The essay is over thirty pages of analysis on O'Hara, but Boone fascinatingly concludes the essay with several pages that try to diagnose how internal political pressures and the sudden ability to write

from an openly gay perspective were effecting poetic expression in the mid-seventies. While some of Boone's ideas may be outdated (he seems to naturalize a monolithic "gay language practice" and doesn't interrogate terms like "a unity of experience" in gay poetry), his essay represents the initial (and sadly, still, the only) theoretical application to the poetry of the early to mid-seventies written by gay men. For this reason, though, we can use it to gauge what was most urgent and relevant for a scholar only a few years removed from his subjects, to shed light on the issues that may yet require analysis.

First, we must break down the essential component of his argument. Boone's essay focuses on "internal conflicts" or "contradictions" amidst what he calls the "post-assertive" gay community, a highly politicized community, which showed differences in how the leadership and the community approached liberation. For his purposes he focuses on the conflicts in "language practices" and "the conflict in praxis that it registers in literary documents" at a time when "political practice has given gay language the option for openness." Boone argues these internal conflicts in language use "express the more general problems of minority groups, as they arrive at a stage of legitimating." Drawing on Fanon, Boone argues the gay community, like other minority groups, attacks the dominant *other* (e.g. the colonialist in Fanon's example) but "also [that] they internalized *other* within was to be overthrown" (87). This creates a community that is "polarized as it tries to negotiate its relationship to dominant language codes" (88).

Boone uses British sociologist Basil Bernstein to discuss what can be compared to competing language codes (his "elaborated" vs. "restricted" codes) to

help contextualize and understand the poetry of the time, a time of political and social emergence. He explains that Bernstein defines “elaborated” language codes as:

...essentially the codes of middle-class and educated groups. Linguistically they tend to be analytic and individualistic, independent (to the extent that this is possible) of non-language contexts such as para- verbal aspects of speech like gesture and socially conventional behavior forms that imply solidarity with others. Non-concrete and non-specific, they become then the vehicle for typically abstract or theoretical discourse. (88)

This sounds a great deal to me like the activist poetry in my taxonomy, more interested in rhetorical directness and more invested in developing a praxis for the “option of openness.”

As for “restricted” codes, these are:

...essentially the codes of the community itself, the social group as such; such codes characterize for Bernstein the ordinary discourse of the working class, and are opposed to hegemonic discourse. Relying primarily on the context of speech, with its conventionalized non- or para-verbal cues, these restricted codes express themselves immediately as a social solidarity. They are situational and cannot be understood outside of a situation. (88)

Boone uses O’Hara as an example of a “restricted” code, because his poetry “cannot be understood outside of a *situation*” (88). This sounds more like how we might generally view the origins of a specifically minority poetry, whether gay or ethnic, in which “the context of speech” is paramount to giving the speaking subject agency over his or her own expression.

Thus, the struggle between these two codes is the internal conflict Boone speaks of, one that reflects “the contradictions of community praxis.” Audience is indeed what seems to be at the heart of these competing codes, though Boone doesn’t stress that until he provides examples from poems. The issue becomes “how

such writing integrates a linguistic code” in terms of its relationship to its own community. Of the examples that use elaborated codes, Boone writes, these poems illustrate a “stance that speaks *to* rather than *from* the community. Its real audience can in fact be only other highly politicized gay men, already conceiving of themselves as a leadership.” His other example, of a restricted coded language, speaks “from within the community, as a traditional language.” The poem he cites, from Joe Brainard, has “obvious qualities of gay language as community experience in a popular or ‘restricted’ fashion that makes the poem accessible to large numbers of gay men as their own and as a common experience” (89). Again, it is the relationship to audience that defines the language practice, and by implication in my view, dictates the poem’s political character and perhaps even literary sensibility to an extent.

What seems to underlie Boone’s argument, though he doesn’t say it explicitly, is that poets of the time took ‘the gift of openness’ and experienced expression in two very different ways. First, what may underline the elaborated codes is a poet that views openness as a means to assert political leadership (power) over the community; he opposes the dominant ideology but does so via codes that played into existing discursive power structures and that risked polarizing the community. Perhaps even, in my view, this poet produces a poetry unable to be effective in its opposition *as poetry* because it *reproduces* existing dominant language structures.

Second, what may underlie the restricted codes is a poetry that views openness as way to *create* community as a shared experienced, one that no longer requires a masking or an ambiguity (other kinds of codes) but that can speak in its

own tongue, name its own artifacts. This may be “less progressive” (89) and may at times even produce an ‘alienation of nostalgic removal’ (see Joe Brainard’s *I Remember*) as Boone asserts, but I am not convinced this kind of poetry is “less successful.” (Boone does not explain this view.)

In fact, O’Hara, Spicer and Wieners can all be said to be invested, albeit problematically and in very different ways, in writing poems that want to invoke community, even if to trouble the idea, to critique it (Spicer) or to show the lyric’s failure to serve it (Wieners). These three now-major poets can be seen as early examples of poets who sought openness before it was gifted and produced what we now deem highly “successful” poems. Perhaps this opens up a new criteria for us to examine those who followed in their footsteps in the “post-assertive” years: what is the poem’s relationship to community? And does it seek to make openness an invitation to a communal praxis rather than an entryway to just another kind of discourse of hierarchicalism, one likely (history seems to tell be telling us) without the political efficacy of the dominant it might seem to be aping. What’s more, what if this approach also entailed examining how the poem sought to position sex, sexuality and expressions of desire (perhaps and potentially the most radical use of ‘openness’) to create community, to suggest a shared experience? Might this give credence to Moore’s idea that gay men saw sex as a creative expression and communication? I think so.

But, to return to Boone for a moment, what’s most enticing about his analysis is his suggestion that a “newer version of a traditional poetry” was emerging that (by implication) doesn’t seem to fit into elaborated or restricted codes. He describes

this new poetry as one which in “the narration of community relates simply a set of linguistic artifacts in which the community is invoked as the possibility of an individual erotic reverie of language itself.” He adds, “At the limit then, the traditional gay language style may become a production of language-objects to be consumed, and dream the community itself as an artifact” (90). He doesn’t provide examples. Though Boone for some reason moves away from the importance of eros<sup>30</sup>, I want to argue that even so, here we have what may be where the future of this scholarship lies, in how the liberationist gay eros (as experienced as a radical creative act) becomes *the* expressive force that can transform poetic language, that propels the poem beyond both abstract rhetoric as well as simple attempts at ‘liberated’ speech. The graphic poem of sex, fascinatingly, may somehow speak both to and from the community, may represent subjective desire as easily as it invokes communal political aspirations. I hope my readings bear out the potential of such a direction.

One recalls the invocation of community and the utopic reverie of Mariah’s metatextual moment in which he writes:

and I had to get  
out of bed to write it  
so you would know  
the size of it  
and we can go on  
gently, lovingly.

The size of the fist, the size of the poem—these two meanings merge to create a new meaning, an “it” that is ambiguous and unknowable because it represents a new political possibility. That moment when Mariah slips out of the poem and out of the specificity of a subjective experience (when he re-imagines its creation), that is the

moment when the poem comes closest to” an individual erotic reverie of language itself.” It dreams its communal future (“we can go on”), but one perhaps not yet unified—the I, the you, the we, remaining isolated on their own lines. It is a future that can be accessed by imagining the horizon as: an unreachable extremity, a verge, a coming...a poem.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Fisting is a sexual act most often practiced by gay men that involves one man slowly inserting fingers into the other man's anus until he can insert his whole fist. *The Oxford English Dictionary* lists the 1972 use of the term in Bruce Rodgers' *The Queens' Vernacular: A Gay Lexicon*: "Fist fuck, the extended process of inserting a fist to the elbow anally."

<sup>2</sup> Henry Abelove's worthy goal in this essay is to show how poets like O'Hara influenced the political thinking of activist groups like the Gay Liberation Front. But the essay can also suggest at least one reason why, perhaps, the poetry of the Liberationists is understudied. He writes that the "mode of social history that came of age in America in the 1970s, and grew to maturity and achieved many fine successes in the era following, has made little room for writing as a productive force" (72).

<sup>3</sup> Though I do include a poem of Ginsberg's as part of my close readings, I've refrained from spending too much time on poets who may have formed, before the late sixties, their political views on the political power of visibility. I hope this enables me to better focus on and interrogate how Liberation era politics may have 'catalyzed' poets and to probe what that means for how they used the lyric form. This is why I don't include in this chapter further discussion of O'Hara and Spicer (who were in fact dead before the more radical changes began) nor Wieners, Thom Gunn, Edward Field, Harold Norse, Jonathan Williams, or Paul Goodman, since they had careers that pre-dated, often by decades, the Liberation years of 1969-1974.

Interestingly, in his interview in volume one of *Gay Sunshine Interviews*, Ginsberg is asked if gay liberation influenced him. He admits to some influence in terms of language use (specifically the word “gay”) and is attracted to how “personal” the ideology is, but he doesn’t seem to have felt much influence on his poetry. (118).

<sup>4</sup> Gregory Woods argues post-Stonewall:

...is the point in cultural history after which, at last, we can unproblematically speak about a certain kind of text as ‘gay poetry’: that is to say, poetry about being gay, by men who identify themselves as being gay. It was then--in the industrialized West at the end of the 1960s—that a systematic renaming occurred, and ‘queers’ and ‘homosexuals’ became ‘gay.’ [See the note above regarding Ginsberg’s interview.] In much the same way as, shortly beforehand, ‘negroes’ had become ‘black.’ Such redefinition at street level, of course, cannot fail to have its impact on the cultural forms that use language as their primary matter. (gltq.com)

Woods is a pioneer in the field and would most likely use different language and revise this idea if he were writing about the era’s poetry today. This is one of the problems that arises when studying the writing from this time. What little criticism that does exist, even from pioneer like Woods, is out of date theoretically. In this case, of course, Woods turns Stonewall into a pivot point before which a gay man writing poetry could not possibly see himself in a positive light. It also makes ‘gay poetry’ a monolith birthed all at once and doesn’t allow for any narrative of progression. Lastly, it seems to suggest there is post-Stonewall poetry and pre-Stonewall poetry, which is clearly shown to be false.

<sup>5</sup> See the discussion in section 4 about what I call the question of failure in this regard, and see also section 5 for what I *have* found in terms of productive use of the figure.

<sup>6</sup> Bronski cites a 1982 essay, “A Definition of the Beat Generation,” by Ginsberg, in which the famous Beat poet perhaps unsurprisingly “credits the Beats with launching the radical women’s liberation, Black Power, and gay liberation movements; promoting sentiment against the war in Vietnam; igniting an interest in Eastern religions and philosophy; and fostering the idea of free love” (chap. 10).

<sup>7</sup> I cite here from the electronic version of this text, specifically from chapter ten, “Revolt, Backlash, Resistance.”

<sup>8</sup> Other important historical texts that specifically zero in on the liberation years are: Bronski’s *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility* and *The Pleasure Principle: Sex, Backlash, and the Struggle for Gay Freedom*; Ian Young’s provocative *The Stonewall Experiment*; Martin Duberman’s more narrative-minded *Stonewall*; and the lesser discussed Margaret Cruikshank’s *The Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement* and Jeffrey Escoffier’s *American Homo: Community and Perversity*. For collections of writing produced during or soon after the early seventies, see volumes one and two of Winston Leyland’s *Gay Sunshine Interviews* as well as the two collections of miscellaneous articles, reviews, and more, entitled *Gay Roots*. See also Karla Jay and Allen Young’s anthologies *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation* and *Lavender Culture*. Escoffier’s giant compendium *Sexual Revolution* also contains a chapter on gay and lesbian documents from before, during and shortly after this era. For the years leading up to the radical break with past political movements see what is perhaps the single most important mid-century history on gay politics, John D’Emilio’s *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority*

*in the United States, 1940-1970.*

<sup>9</sup> Bronski notes, “The term ‘coming out’ had not been in common use before; previously the metaphor had been about coming into the homosexual world” (chap. 10).

<sup>10</sup> Red Butterfly first published Wittman’s “Manifesto.” For easier access to this piece, see Karla Jay and Allen Young’s anthology *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation*.

<sup>11</sup> Bronski recounts how Mattachine was the “only viable gay political organization that existed in New York” when Stonewall occurred. They saw the event “and the highly public political activities that ensued as a disruptive departure from their political process.” In an amazing example of irony, on June 28 the members of Mattachine, in hopes of stopping further public violent actions, posted these words on sign on the closed bar: “WE HOMOSEXUALS PLEAD WITH OUR PEOPLE TO PLEASE HELP MAINTAIN PEACEFUL AND QUIET CONDUCT ON THE STREETS OF THE VILLAGE—MATTACHINE,” thus drawing themselves into the public sphere as they attempted to draw back from it (chap. 10).

<sup>12</sup> On the GLF’s origins, Bronski notes:

A coalition of disgruntled Mattachine members, along with lesbians and gay men who identified with the pro-Black Power, antiwar New Left, called for a meeting on July 24, 1969. The flyer announcing the meeting was headlined, ‘Do you think homosexuals are revolting? You bet your sweet ass we are.’ This radical change in rhetoric was indicative of fiercely antihierarchical, free-for-all, consensus-driven discussion. Out of it emerged the gay liberation Front.

This embrace of the idea of the power of radical difference and the play on language to make this point, I think, is figured in each of the poets I study in prior chapters, but most forcefully echoed in O'Hara's claiming of the 'ruining' of American poetry.

<sup>13</sup> Bronski notes, "The split between the pragmatism of GAA and the idealism of GLF echoed the earlier division within Mattachine and can be traced back to nineteenth-century political discussions of suffrage, free love, labor reform, and anarchism" (chap. 10).

<sup>14</sup> The GLF, says Bronski, did, however, have "a more lasting impact on the formation of gay and lesbian youth groups across the nation" (chap. 10).

<sup>15</sup> Perhaps it's not surprising that the liberation ultimately failed when the gay movements turned to the ethnic/minority models that sought to join the system through lobbying for specific rights. See Ian Young's chapter "The Revolution is Over" in *The Stonewall Experiment* for a stark and unforgiving take on the movement's failure.

<sup>16</sup> But if sexuality is used as a political tool, a sharply wielded wedge in fact, does the theory hold within its own paradox: sex must be 'free of any' utility, but to make that point we must use it politically?

<sup>17</sup> As I discuss in this chapter, historical work is hard to come by. Gregory Woods, in his entry on the reference website [gltbq.com](http://gltbq.com), provides a helpful timeline that suggests the movement was made of several important events that when viewed together:

...constitute a significant, even major, development.... In 1969, the poet Paul Mariah founded *ManRoot* magazine and the ManRoot press in San Francisco.

In 1970, also in San Francisco, Winston Leyland founded *Gay Sunshine* magazine. In 1971, the Boston gay liberation Front established *Fag Rag* magazine, and then, in 1972, the Good Gay Poets publishing house. In 1973, Ian Young's pioneering gay poetry anthology *The Male Muse* was published. In 1974, Andrew Bifrost founded *Mouth of the Dragon* ("A Poetry Journal of Male Love") in New York. In the same year *RFD* ("A Country Journal for Gay Men Everywhere") was established in Tennessee. New York's *Christopher Street* followed in 1976. In 1977, the novelist Felice Picano started the Sea Horse Press. Meanwhile, back in 1975, Winston Leyland had published the poetry anthology *Angels of the Lyre* under the new imprint of the Gay Sunshine Press; it was followed by a second anthology, *Orgasms of Light*, in 1977. In 1983, Ian Young followed up *The Male Muse* with *Son of the Male Muse*, a collection of much younger writers than had appeared in the earlier book.

Young and Leyland, in their respective anthology introductions, also provide brief comments on publication histories. The message seems clear. This was perceived as an important history to record.

<sup>18</sup> Keenaghan writes, "For the more politically minded, the publishing of poetry was especially important, as it seen [sic] the gay poetry journal *Mouth of the Dragon*, as well in the lists of poet Paul Mariah's ManRoot Press and Winston Leyland's Gay Sunshine Press"(542).

<sup>19</sup> Pustianaz writes:

What changed dramatically in the 1970s was both the activist refusal to collaborate with institutional homophobia and the positive assertion of a counter-culture. Out of this radical break with the past emerged the first conscious attempts to write homosexual desire back into the history of Western culture, and therefore the first outspoken affirmations of the need to bring back to light a homosexual tradition in literature. If homoerotic writing had, it seemed, existed for a long time, what was still lacking was a literary and political criticism that was committed to witness and 'out' that tradition. What set apart early gay literary studies from previous occasional glimpses of recognition...was the sense of a collective purpose behind the affirmation of an oppositional counterculture to its political subject. Gay literary studies were inseparable from gay political practices and broke decisively with what (little) homosexual discourse could survive within institutions. No wonder

that gay literary studies around the Stonewall era grew mainly from outside academic spaces. (146-7)

<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, Bifrost saw the name of the journal as a way to make a statement about its politics and its difference from earlier gay poetry. According to Brass, when they were coming up with names, Bifrost said, “I want something harder, more direct, ...meaning something that referred to the strength and ballsiness of queer poets....” Explains Brass, “he wanted a name that referred to the ferocity of our ideas, desires, and aims, showing we were not defenseless ‘pansy poets,’ a constant reference in older, more tight-assed literary circles to gay poets” (15).

<sup>21</sup> It is worth noting that, as far as my research has found, the only critical work on *the poetry of the gay liberation years* can be found in summative reference works, many of which I’ve cited in an effort to lay a groundwork for further study. See also Joseph Cady’s entry “American Literature: gay male, 1900-1969” which talks about O’Hara, Wieners, Goodman, and others.

<sup>22</sup> Earlier in his entry, Bergman gives us this interesting connection:

In the years directly after the 1969 Stonewall Riots, a number of books---more journalism than literature---appeared that mixed autobiography with reflections on the political and cultural changes gays were experiencing. The most noteworthy were John Murphy’s *Homosexual Liberation: A Personal View* (1971), Donn Teal’s *The Gay Militants* (1971), and Arthur Bell’s *Dancing the Gay Lib Blues: A Year in the Homosexual Liberation Movement* (1972). Each of these books suggests how important literature was to the authors’ senses of what it means to be gay. Indeed, Bell writes how an important leader in the Gay Activists Alliance, the largest gay liberation organization of the time, missed the first meeting so that he could hear Allen Ginsberg read his poetry.

<sup>23</sup> The 1973 poem “Surgery” by Kenneth Pitchford (*Columbia Anthology of Gay Literature*) takes this very issue for its content. Pitchford writes that the forces of

the dominant culture “tried to cut something out of us” and “have counted ever since on the quarrel that got set up / between those they damaged and those who escaped what they meant / to do.” In defiance typical of the era, he concludes the poem this way:

the only way they might have succeeded is if  
they could have cut out of my body  
the whole universe infolded there under amnion like  
a bud or a tumor.  
No wonder they failed. They wouldn't even know what the universe looks  
like, much  
less how to spell it.

<sup>24</sup> David Bergman has noted that the poets of these years may have in fact been ahead of the curve politically. He writes:

If novelists and poets did not immediately respond to political changes, it was not because they were unaffected or uninterested in them, but rather because in many ways they had anticipated the views that were taking political shape. Nevertheless, gay critics at the time were frustrated by the range of American gay male fiction even as they applauded the breadth of American gay male poetry.

Poems like these and others suggest, however, this may not be always the case. An exception to this may be Robert Duncan's "Sonnet 1," which uses Brunetto Latini from Dante's *Inferno* to offer a subtle critique about social opprobrium and its effects on how gay men love ("a joining that is not easy"). The poem is included in *The Male Muse*.

<sup>25</sup> Duncan, again, is perhaps the best at somehow being both universal and specifically and political gay. See his poem "5 Pieces" (*The Male Muse*) in which he writes, "All the bodies we cannot touch / are like harps. Toucht by the mind / a



sound trembles upon the string // carnal impermanent celestial / tones of  
nakedness / invade our nerves.” (20-25)

<sup>26</sup> Amyl nitrate is the name for what gay men colloquially called ‘poppers.’ It was a  
drug taken before sex to make the experience less painful and more intense.

<sup>27</sup> Holland also points to Morse’s “Dream of the Artfairy” as “a classic mix of the  
political ode and an invocation to the new radicalism of gay identity” and says Walta  
Borawski’s “Live Free or Die” and “Power of One” make “powerful statements about  
the formulation and assertion of individual gay identity” (16).

<sup>28</sup> Of course, this is not a new technique. One thinks of Williams’ “To a Poor Old  
Woman.”

<sup>29</sup> This was first published in a joint issue of *Fag Rag* and *Gay Sunshine* (summer  
1974). See also Shively’ “Cocksucking as an Act of Revolution” (*Fag Rag* 1, June  
1971).

<sup>30</sup> Boone uses the poetry of Dennis Cooper to illustrate his point, but he doesn’t  
focus on its radical erotic qualities. Rather, he uses the poems to show how they  
“cite the language of movie magazines and Hollywood gossip....a language which,  
when consumed by gay men, is lived as an experience ‘always elsewhere.’ He goes  
on to argue the poems:

ideologically regressive language is still to be found in every shoddy movie  
theater and porn magazine in which gays are unprotestingly exploited in a  
commercialized, ersatz community experience. It appears in every alluring  
gossip column or movie magazine story about TV idols or punk rockers or  
other packaged artifacts. But it is a utopian language that doesn't yet  
disengage itself from gay dreams. (90)

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