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## Reading Lines Forum

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## Reading Lines Forum

Paula Bernat Bennett

Of the various texts that led to my adopting a cultural studies approach to my field—nineteenth-century American women’s poetry—the two that affected me the most were *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, edited by Paul Lauter, and *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier*, edited by William Truettner. A revolutionary rethinking of the standard college textbook, the *Heath* (first edition 1990) radically altered the landscape of American literature as taught in classrooms throughout the U. S., since its emphasis on marginalized writers virtually mandated that teachers address the cultural work such literature selections did. Given the uncontested hegemony that the 1991 exhibition organized by the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American Art for which it served as catalog, represented an equally revolutionary intervention into its field. Overflowing with images whose ideological content was as undeniable as was their aesthetic appeal, the exhibit successfully argued the political role that even “great” works of art—landscapes by Thomas Cole and Alfred Bierstadt, for instance—could and did play in nineteenth-century American social life. Since the *Heath*’s importance to U.S. cultural studies is inarguable, I will focus here on why my reading of *The West as America* and art books like it, most published in the 1990s, was no less important in making me rethink my field, especially with respect to the relation between the aesthetic and the political in it.

During the same decade in which *The West as America* appeared, academic interest in poetry had reached its nadir. Despite all the evidence to the contrary accruing elsewhere in the culture—not least, the active role poets played in the

progressive political movements of the 1960s and 70s—poetry at the academic level was still as much in thrall to formalist assumptions, especially with respect to aesthetic issues such as transcendence and universality, as, since Kant, it had ever been. Academics drawn to analyzing texts for their social / cultural content wanted nothing to do with it as a result, finding solid support for their position in the writings of two of cultural studies’ most prestigious founding fathers—the Russian theorist and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin and the German social philosopher Jürgen Habermas.

For Habermas, who resorted to what the New Critics called “the heresy of paraphrase” in order to avoid denying poetry social value altogether, poems could be read aesthetically or as “everyday communicative practice,” but they could not be read as both at the same time (202). For Bakhtin, poetry’s basic monologism (to somewhat mangle T. S. Eliot, a voice speaking to itself or to no one) made it incapable of “any mutual interaction with alien discourse” (285). Neither “dialogic” in the Bakhtinian sense nor “intersubjective” in the Habermasian, poetry was left to languish in its own, aesthetically defined, space, separate from the social and from everyday language use at once. As Shira Wolosky observes in one of the most insightful and lucid essays I have read on this problem, understood thus, poetry and “history”—or what, more narrowly, I am calling “politics”—were like “the two halves of a brain unable to communicate with one another” (651). They had nothing to say to each other in any case.

But is this true? Turning to art history, where the domination of form over content was, if anything, even more entrenched than it was in poetry studies, it might well have seemed so. Judging, moreover, by the uproar caused by the opening of *The West as America* exhibition, most people, both inside and outside the profession, seemed to want to keep it that way. With good reason. For if the capacity for transcendence truly was the hallmark of “great” art as Kant claimed, then why take seriously the work of those artists whose lack of integrity led them not only to tout their historical ties but, far worse, to tout their political agendas as well? From congressmen to self-appointed art experts, everyone had something to say about the Smithsonian exhibition and almost none of it was good. (According to a recent, retrospective article in the *Washington Post*, critics “savaged” it as “effectively trash[ing] not only the integrity of the art it presents but most of our national history as well.”)

And in a sense, the critics were right. Aware that contemporary audiences would not see the social content of the paintings precisely because they had been *trained not to see it*, Truettner and his colleagues abandoned the safety of formalist aesthetics to tell it like it is—or, rather, like it was. Organizing the exhibit in thematic, not formal, categories (“Picturing Progress in the Era of Westward Expansion,” “Inventing ‘the Indian,’” etc.), they used the open space provided by the exhibition’s narrative component to point out how, ideologically, each painting fit in. Since the overarching theme of the exhibit was the way in which art helped naturalize the politics of Manifest Destiny, the curators’ narratives inevitably raised issues—such as the link between white supremacy and America’s early imperial ambitions—that most visitors and congressmen would have much preferred not to acknowl-

edge. What made the latter's reaction so ironic, however, is that Truettner and his colleagues, in what surely must be one of the most courageous acts ever committed by art historians on the government payroll, brought this house down on themselves by telling the "truth" about "national history," knowing all the while that it was just the sort of truth that "great art" was not supposed to deliver.

As one reads through *The West as America* and the host of other books on nineteenth-century American art that came out about this time,<sup>1</sup> one thing becomes abundantly clear. However threatened we may feel by art's (or literature's) collusion with politics, this collusion troubled nineteenth-century artists and writers not a whit. Quite the contrary. Reviewers of their day (Rufus Griswold, James Russell Lowell, etc.) believed heartily and volubly in art and literature's role as forgers of national character and destiny, and artists and authors, including poets—Lydia Sigourney and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, for example—were happy to oblige. Whether they drew their thematics from political or domestic life, they like their audiences saw their practice as integral to public life. They operated, that is, on an aesthetic of immanence, not transcendence, from the start.

On the basis of these books, together with primary and secondary texts in my own field, it now seems to me a most peculiar form of self-blinding that leads so many art and literary historians to ignore (or fail to acknowledge) the vital role that art and poetry played and still play in public life, choosing instead to let their roots hang, as Emily Fowler Ford said of Dickinson's verse, in mid-air. Yet, even as I write this, I know there are now scholars who are busily scrutinizing the Amherst poet's verse looking for precisely what for so long was thought not to be there—the poet's engagement with the "life-world," as Habermas called it, especially where the Civil War is concerned. Even more important to me personally, I also know that over the past eight years five full-length monographs on nineteenth-century American poetry, not counting my own, have appeared, while a sixth, *Options for Teaching Nineteenth-Century American Poetry*, which I co-edited with Karen Kilcup, will be coming out later this year from the MLA Press. All these books treat the century's poetry at least in part as socio-political discourse: Elizabeth Petrino, *Emily Dickinson and Her Contemporaries: Women's Verse in America, 1820-1885*, Janet Gray, *Race and Time: American Women's Poetics from Antislavery to Racial Modernity*, Eliza Richards, *Gender and the Poetics of Reception in Poe's Circle*, Mary Loeffelholz, *From School to Salon: Reading Nineteenth-Century American Women's Poetry*, and Angela Sorby, *Schoolroom Poets: Childhood and the Place of American Poetry, 1865-1917*. This is an impressive record for a field that until the 1990s barely registered on scholarly radar, and it does not include single-author studies, articles, encyclopedia contributions, web sites and so forth, not to mention innumerable anthologies devoted to the recovery of "lost" texts. It is the publication of books like the *Heath* and *The West as America*, going hand in hand with the evolution of cultural studies theory itself, that helped to make this explosion of interest possible. If this comes to some extent at the expense of aesthetics, that may be just as well, for form has never been more than part of what we go to poetry for. The rest has to do with ourselves.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Anderson, Nancy and Linda S. Kerber. *Albert Bierstadt: Art & Enterprise*. New York: Hudson Hills P, 1990; Rash, Nancy. *The Painting & Politics of George Caleb Bingham*. New Haven; Yale UP, 1991; Johns, Elizabeth. *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1991; Fryd Vivian Green. *Art and Empire the Politics of Ethnicity in the Capitol, 1815-1860*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1992; Miller, David C., ed. *American Iconology: New Approaches to Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1993; Truettner, William and Alan Wallach. *Thomas Cole: Landscape into History*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1994; and Lubin, David M. *Picturing a Nation: Art and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century America*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1994.

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## Michael Davidson

I have been working on two interrelated projects, one involving the cultural politics of disability and the other dealing with poetry in an era of globalization. The first has culminated in a book manuscript, *Concerto for the Left Hand: Practicing Disability Studies*, the last chapter of which deals with global disability. While

working on this chapter I began to think of how structures such as free trade agreements, electronic media, structural adjustment policies, and labor migration have had an impact on not only health care and social services for disabled persons but cultural forms as well. I became interested in how poets have registered the effects of globalization and how we, as cultural critics, might re-think poetics in a post or trans-national era. How is the lyric subject transformed when we consider it from the standpoint of citizenship or diasporic movement? How is literary innovation affected by the rapid increase of global electronic information? How do trade agreements and cross-border treaties create new frames for looking at literary community? Such questions have taken me well outside of my usual training as an Americanist—and indeed, well beyond poetry and poetics—toward work in anthropology, economics, political science, not to mention world literature. And although the texts I have been reading do not concern poetry, per se, they provide useful models for, as the subtitle to one of my books says, “thinking and feeling beyond the nation.”

One book that has definitely inspired my thinking along these lines is Amitava Kumar’s anthology *World Bank Literature* that features a number of authors (Cary Nelson, Barbara Foley, Manthia Diawara, Bruce Robbins, Richard Wolff et al.) who theorize ways that we might reconceive literature in the context of global economic and political forces. In his introduction, Kumar asks, “Where is the literature of the new economic policy? Where is the literature of the World Bank?” While Kumar’s queries are designed to be provocative, they address the fact that global economic institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have impacted the meaning of “world” in “World Literature,” making the pedagogical field of literary studies a much more contested arena. The book is not a manifesto for a new, subaltern literature nor is it a prognosis of new genres created in the shadow of Bhopal or the Genome project or migrant labor. Rather, the essays attempt to study the impact of development policies imposed by the IMF or World Bank upon cultural production internationally. Manthia Diawara, for example, looks at the effect of U.S. and European imposed currency devaluation (*dévaluation*) on francophone Africa. He notes that films by Souleymane Cissé or Sembene Ousman depict new social realities brought about by dependency on western capital development at the same time that they offer alternative interpretations of the free market options being promised by neoliberalism. Diawara points out that west African artists and intellectuals are building trans-national alliances to forge a “regional imaginary in Africa” not dominated by either the nation state or the World Bank. In the same volume, Claire F. Fox looks at recent detective fiction from the U.S.-Mexico border region based around transnational crimes—child abduction, organ theft, smuggling, and narco-trafficking—that are changing the shape of crime fiction in the border region. Here hard-boiled, noir literary traditions merge with real crime narratives pertaining specifically to the maquiladora commercial zones produced by NAFTA.

One of the problems raised by globalization is the fact that by definition it has no location or site, making its metaphoric representation difficult. Movements of capital, labor, and information do not conform to national boundaries, languages, or cultural traditions, and thus assume the shape of whatever interest is being served

at that moment. What models might we use to access the shape-shifting and rhizomatic qualities of global forces?

One early attempt to frame the problem is Raymond Williams' concept of "structures of feeling" (defined in *Marxism and Literature*) which he describes as the affective registration of social experiences "still in process, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating..." (132). Although Williams is speaking of national formations (Britain specifically), his concept applies to the way that within a global context, art and literature "are often among the very first indications that such a new structure is forming" (133). Williams' formulation has been adapted by a number of recent social theorists to the globalization debate as a way of locating social processes evident not in material reality but in affective and emotional states that live, as he says, "at the edge of semantic availability...."

If globalization is difficult to locate, it may be because it no longer relies on a single-point perspective, whether the Cartesian thinking subject or the post-Enlightenment citizen-subject. Arjun Appadurai's *Modernity at Large* deploys a theory of "scapes" to describe the multiple frames in which global modernity can be situated. His frames—ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes—emphasize both the spatial nature of modernity as well as the perspective from which any given social arena is seen. Applied to recent poetry, Appadurai's scapes allow us to look at work that is situated on the borders of genre and national citizenship. In the "Frontera" installations of the Mexican poet Heriberto Yopez, for example, a series of plexiglass signs are placed at various sites at the U.S.-Mexico border. These signs feature short, cryptic poem-epigrams that address the condition of border crossing and citizenship and allow viewers to situate themselves in various relationships to them (as shoppers, tourists, migrants, police, immigration officials). Using Appadurai's theory of scapes to explain these signs, we might speak of the way they foreground the vast mediascape of signage—civic, commercial, and instructional—that one finds in the border region. This signage implicates the ethnoscope of the border as a place where persons who cross from one country into another are interpellated as "aliens" going one way and "tourists" the other. At the same time, his signs exist in a technoscape defined by the unequal balance of trade between electronic components produced by underpaid workers in maquiladoras and sold in the developed metropole, an inequality reinforced by the financescape of neoliberal trade policies. Appadurai's theory of scapes recognizes that globalization does not exist through a linear narrative but must be conceived on several levels simultaneously.

Thinking of globalization as a series of overlapping sites or spaces corresponds to the evolution of a new type of global subject, whether the transnational CEO or the migrant agricultural worker. This new global traveler has been the subject of a number of recent books and articles that deal with cosmopolitanism. In its earliest formulation by Diogenes of Sinope (4<sup>th</sup> c. bce), the *kosmopolitês* is a "citizen of the world" without ties to communal responsibilities or solidarity—the Cynic version—or else, in the Stoic version, someone whose statelessness permits new alliances around subjects unmoored from national citizenship. Works such as Kwame Anthony Appiah's *Cosmopolitanism*, Martha Nussbaum's *For Love of Country?*,

Amartya Sen's *The Illusion of Destiny*, Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen's *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism*, and Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins's anthology *Cosmopolitics* define the pros and cons of global citizenship, national formations, and trans-national identities. Cheah and Robbins's collection offers a useful survey of what Aihwa Ong, in their volume, calls "flexible citizenship," formed less around national identity and more on displacements wrought by postcolonial civil wars, capital flows, and repositioning of global markets. Once again, these texts do not concern poetry, but they do imagine different forms that the Subject can take outside of traditional psychological or philosophical terms. Their speculation on new forms of global dislocation gives us an opportunity to re-visit modernist cosmopolitans like James, Wharton, Stein, Wright, Beckett, and Pound and to see how poets as different as Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Dionne Brand, Cristina Rivera-Garza, Linh Dinh, Lisa Robertson, Mark Nowak, and Kamau Brathwaite are defining new forms of identity based less around privilege and national citizenship and more around shifting regional affiliations.

There is an emerging literature on poetry and global realities. The most engaging that I've seen so far are Brent Hayes Edwards's *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* and Timothy Gray's *Gary Snyder and the Pacific Rim*. The former seriously updates Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* and looks at the intersection of political internationalism, translation, and race within modernism. Edwards is particularly interested in the discourses of black internationalism within literary culture in Harlem and in Paris and the problem of reading that internationalism only through anglophone sources. Gray's book on Gary Snyder offers a brilliant overview of links between American foreign policy toward Asia during the Cold War and the west coast counter-culture with which Snyder was associated. Both books suggest directions that might be taken in a cultural poetics that looks beyond national traditions to the sites and subjects being produced in a cosmo-political environment.

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### Heather Dubrow

One of the main influences on the new study of poetics is as predictable as it is powerful: the impact of the critics writing on the material conditions of production and especially on the workings of scribal and manuscript culture. Anyone approaching lyric from the perspective of cultural studies is deeply indebted to the extensive archival work in Arthur F. Marotti's major study *Manuscript, Print, and the English Renaissance Lyric* as well as to his emphasis on reading texts as material objects rather than aesthetic triumphs. And of course a younger generation has also done important work on these issues; witness, among a host of examples, Marcy L. North's *The Anonymous Renaissance: Cultures of Discretion in Tudor-Stuart England* and Wendy Wall's *The Imprint of Gender: Authorship and Publication in the English Renaissance*. Equally important is the Australian critic Harold Love's book: *Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England*. Before reading these studies, I would not even have asked some of the questions that shaped much of my recent work on the lyric, such as how catchwords and borders complicate the issue of what constitutes a lyric and why some of Samuel Daniel's title pages turn his printer into a rival author.

My respect for books like the ones cited above, however, does not preclude—indeed, encourages—taking issue with them in some significant ways. The revisionist, like other commanding officers, is better at torpedoing than building bridges, and in the case of some though by no means all studies of conditions of production published in the 1990s, the pendulum swung too far. The agenda of overthrowing older theories of the autonomous writer has encouraged a neglect of the types of authorial agency that do survive in scribal cultures; the aim of challenging a previous generation's putatively uncritical celebration of art has supported a demonizing of aesthetic considerations that do remain significant in their own right and also in fact intriguingly interact with material and cultural vectors. Happily, some recent materialist work has engaged in revising the revisionists on these and other issues.

In arguing as I have done above and in many other venues that cultural studies and the study of form are twin stiff compasses rather than polar opposites, I have been influenced, indeed invigorated, by Theodor W. Adorno's "Lyric Poetry and Society" and by Robert Kaufman's extensive explications and critiques of the work of Adorno and other Marxists (to cite one valuable essay among many, "Red Kant, or The Persistence of the Third *Critique* in Adorno and Jameson"). As Kaufman points out—thus demonstrating the value of reading the seminal texts of Marxism closely, in so doing expecting the unexpected—Adorno conclusively explodes the myth that the study of form is antithetical to, even inimical to, the interests of cultural studies. Especially valuable is Kaufman's own emphatic distinction be-

tween the aesthetic and aestheticization: he demonstrates that we need not throw out the beauty with the bath water. (The significance of Kaufman's articles, incidentally, is yet another sign we need to rethink the way our professional reward systems privilege single-authored monographs over all other types of intellectual achievement, including valuable essays like these.)

Surprisingly, two books that are samples, indeed paradigms, of the work of an older generation influenced my own dovetailing of materialist and formal questions. Sometimes explicitly and often implicitly, Helen Vendler's *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* challenges many assumptions of cultural studies, arguing against the social and cultural specificity of the lyric and postulating the relative insignificance of its ideas ("Lyric poetry, especially highly conventionalized lyric of the sort represented by the *Sonnets*, has almost no significant freight of 'meaning' at all, in our ordinary sense of the word" [13]). On one level, my intense disagreement with such statements has impelled me to take issue with some of its assumptions; for example, in my recently completed book on lyric poetry I argue that cultural conditions and the social positions of the reader both often at least complicate if not preclude the identificatory voiceability that Vendler considers normative. My own approach to the lyric is in part a reaction against approaches exemplified at their best and most influential in this volume. Equally important, however, her book, brilliant and incisive, demonstrates the continuing value of close attention to texts — and hence how much one can learn from imitating in some respects even or especially critics one opposes in others.

Initially published by Methuen in 1961 (though reissued with some revisions in 1979), John Stevens's *Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court* taught me a great deal, not least about cultural issues to which I was not alert when I first read it. This study — not unlike a surprising number of books from its own and earlier periods — manifests many characteristics of cultural studies *avant la lettre*. Poetry, Stevens demonstrates, was a counter in secretive games of love at court, and he explores the workings of social "play." This is not to say the book would not have been written somewhat differently today, but it warns us against a then/now, us/them history of the profession, and, in its juxtaposition with Vendler's study, which it resembles in its intelligence but radically differs from in its methodology, it also warns us not to generalize about criticism written by an earlier generation. (Witness too the connections between *King Lear* and the economic position of the aristocracy traced in 1974 by Rosalie L. Colie ["Reason and Need: *King Lear* and the 'Crisis' of the Aristocracy"], a critic generally classified if not pigeonholed as irredeemably formalist.) In other words, to benefit from the best of books like the ones cited in this feature while attempting to counterbalance their limitations, students of cultural studies should examine our own professional culture, or rather cultures, with the exemplary subtlety the movement has brought to so many other worlds. Doing so would crystallize and, one hopes, counter the twin pressures in the academy to read earlier studies too dismissively and those of one's own cohort too uncritically.

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### Rachel Blau DuPlessis

Once the topic is opened, there seems no end to the analytic potential of poetry studied with cultural studies approaches. Grouping the topics as the production of artists; the production of artworks; the socio-historical context and its impact on artists; poets' social and political commitments and their impact on, or expression through, art; the socio-cultural institutions of artistic practice; dissemination issues; and reception issues: critics might propose numerous of these topics to address. What's interesting is how interlocked and dialectical these topics are, how mutually suffusing.

In novels, there are artifactual characters, events, representation of social materials, positional debates encoded in character and event, and endings sometimes based on, or resisting that peculiar concept "poetic justice." Novels are therefore overtly easier to access as ideological systems than poems. In poetry, this move toward analyzing the artwork as an ideological system is harder and also more resistible, first because most short poetry is not stylized to represent an actuality as we know it, or as we believe we know it. This may be attributable to poetry's basis in metaphor. Or because poetry is closer to a language use inflected with the music of excess and the remainder, not the frames of information. Or because of poetry's naturalized investments in "the aesthetic," an aesthetic proposing itself as beyond, different, untouched, exempt from everything except formal analyses. It's also harder for some readers to see the artifactual character of a (humanist) poetry based on "I," sincerity, interior realizations, sensibility, epiphany. The "lyric" (and the inexplicable narrowing of all poetry to "the lyric" as the master genre), the transparency of

language as a critical (or uncritical) mirage that is produced as an ideology around diction—have all functioned as our contemporary “deceiving elf.”

That elf has now been called on the carpet. That’s why a good number of the readings of poetry oriented to cultural studies that have emerged in the past 10-20 years have been influenced (loosely, largely) by Language Poetry (in the plural) and its calibrated resistance to normative assumptions about what a poem is and how it operates. Other aspects of the critical cultural studies reading of poetry draw upon the examination of social identities and their impacts made in the 1960s on—ethnicity, gender, class, religious culture, national location, sexuality. Thereupon one needs such a concept as the “intersectionality” of these dynamic materials, a concept foregrounded by feminist criticism (the term was originated by Kimberle Crenshaw but is now naturalized in most of the sophisticated work with social location). To choose an example, hardly, for me, at random: a woman writing may have different relationships to the institutions of cultural practice than a man writing, but this plausible, though not categorical, finding is modified, inflected by, and placed in active relationships with materials other than gender—class, for example, may act as a force in subjectivity, or national position and language choice. None of these elements is static: all are in contestation; all are mobile. The material formations and practices around subjectivity in their interaction have had many cultural implications for all genres, including poetry.

A sense of authorial agency, although not heroic and not untouched by the critiques offered by post-structuralism, is now relevant. The artist does not function as a lone individual, but certainly an artist claims agency. One way of simultaneously dissolving and multiplying the “I” of authorship is to discuss and acknowledge cohorts fomenting individual production. Here are some activities of writers just beyond their desk and its struggles. Dialogue: letter writing, email, blog, polemic. Editing (Pound to Eliot’s *Waste Land*). Jockeying for position. Ambivalent engagement. Being inspired by. Being inspired by in misprision. Mis-prism, misunderstanding, renegotiating facets. Being provoked by certain writers above all others—never letting them go even when personal relations abrade in painful, even unseemly ways. (Oppen in relation to Zukofsky; Cullen in relation to Hughes.) Delayed, displaced, invisible dialogue (answers to another author, even occluded response, in reviews, in new work). Accusation, resistance, performed revulsions. Emulation, camaraderie, jealousy, defensiveness. Power struggles over means of dissemination. Proprietary claims in the guise of sincere help (H.D. and Bryher putting together Marianne Moore’s first book without her participatory consent). Leading questions claiming importance or priority (Pound to Moore—“didn’t I influence you, hmmm”). Ambivalence. Mirroring and self-description in the reception of others (Moore’s picture of H.D. looks like Moore; H.D.’s picture of Moore looks like H.D.). Identification of who is legible, what work is outside the bounds of the understandable or the interesting. All these, and many more, are social activities of authorship, both producing and produced by authors. And here I have not stopped to look at the politics, historical pressure, socio-economic facts of authorial life, but only at putative friendship or nexus relations among producers.

Authorship then is a site so geologically layered and then metamorphosed that

only simultaneous acknowledgements of the social-cultural and the aesthetic drives can do it any justice. Authorship is neither dead nor singular, neither all discursive mediumship, nor all individual craft. Authorship occurs in being possessed, not mystically, not sublimely, but precisely possessed by cohorts of sociality as part of a work's dissemination and reception, but more of its production. Furthermore the production of artists, in intricate interaction with the production of works, is never a simple or linear matter; biography is not made once and for all, but one's subjectivity is produced over and over, sometimes with different emphases at different life moments. For all these reasons explicit and implicit in the literary criticism of the past years, it is no surprise that what I have been reading recently are several books that reframe the author.

Several recent, energetic books have taken a cultural studies approach to the production of the author—like a life in letters that treat the social materials of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity in ways influenced by theorists of subjectivity. Brian M. Reed's *Hart Crane: After His Lights* takes on the single-author study with a kind of panache, making it not only a study of Crane but a way of “defusing, qualifying, or complicating the conclusions reached by more comprehensive, synthetic [read theoretical/programmatic] methodologies by directing attention back to the messiness, contingency, and hybridity of the individual case” (9). Reed pays particular attention to complicating (as they say) such rubrics as “American, queer, modernist” (11). This book features richly inflected, thick descriptions of poetic texts (among other things Reed is a lively prosodist), influenced by a McCaffery-“line” about a poetics of “general economy” of waste, of excess, and of mannerist features that are seen in general as “intellectual resistance” (92). “Verse provides an inestimable counterweight to the deadening generalities of bureaucratic thinking, mediaspeak, and academic jargonfests” (92) is a finding rather general, if also generally compelling, but such hopeful claims are enhanced by such particular peculiarities as the portrait of Crane's obsessive playing of 78 rpm records as backdrop when he composed poetry, leading to all sorts of speculation about homophonic constructions and allusions, translation of popular crooning into Crane's high baroque, technology, and poetry.

Similarly using a single author to probe a whole nexus of relations, but also to examine the production of an artist in and through cohorts is Lytle Shaw's *Frank O'Hara: The Poetics of Coterie*. This elegant book uses the term *coterie* both socially (as groupings and interrelationships among productive artists and poets), aesthetically (as “rhetorical, formal strategies” like repetition of the names of friends in the work), and as leading to issues around reception. Shaw has also notably, gratifyingly been influenced by feminist and gay criticism to trace with assiduity O'Hara's critique of hetero-normativity and his “thematization of temporary queer families,” and he presents O'Hara's investment in *coterie* as an “alternative model of kinship, both social and literary” (6). Shaw also provides informed readings of artworld cultural debates and O'Hara's role in them as well as O'Hara's resistance to the Cold War mainstream use of Pasternak as a figure of pathos, and he does a striking reading of the way O'Hara deploys Mayakovsky to call attention to “Soviet writing from the early 1920s that was at once formally inventive and socially radical” (140).

The analysis of geo-political, historical, and geographical location as a way of

contextualizing artists emerges in Timothy Gray's *Gary Snyder and the Pacific Rim: Creating Counter-Cultural Community*. The book opens with an intensely researched, illuminating political and cultural history of the concept of "the Pacific Rim," thus contextualizing Snyder in the political and ideological cross-currents around Asia, a reading that somehow changes one's views of the stylistic or intellectual choices artists influenced by Asian poetry and religion make—that is, hardly in isolation from geo-political trends. The use of "cultural geography" (32) as a source for a literary study, the historical narration of U.S. interests in Asia, and the ideological interface, divergences, or parallels in discourses between members of the ruling elites and "bohemian writers in San Francisco" (16) are a really interesting beginning to a book I am still reading, but (despite this) I wanted to register the connections Gray makes between political discourses and poets' explorations.

Some of the work that interests me a good deal is in the "marking" of masculinity in individual authors as an ideology and the study of modes of maleness as social or historical formations, mainly because maleness has, for many long years, gone unmarked by being considered the norm. Thus Michael Davidson's *Guys Like Us: Citing Masculinity in Cold War Poetics* interweaves ideological discourses and poetic expression in a succinct study of the diverse, but pointed materials of masculinity in the 1950s: heteronormativity, homosociality and aggressive male bonding that skirts gayness. At the same time the book also registers the subversive irruptions that certain positions offer (female masculinity for instance in Plath and Bishop—a very striking reading that puts Judith Halberstam's work to excellent effect). Davidson is also interested in the representations of Asian materials and discourses of orientalism. He is keenly aware of the conflictual tendencies in his materials; for example, he sees a text "as a site or matrix of competing tendencies—some progressive, some reactionary ..." (21). It is hard to avoid valorizing what we think of as progressive or emergent (in Raymond Williams's terms); this book speaks with an ethical flair.

There are a lot of other good books to read—many on other of the topics I outlined in my first paragraph.<sup>1</sup> For instance, something to signal about dissemination and reception is Peter Middleton's *Distant Reading: Performance, Readership, and Consumption in Contemporary Poetry*. But if I start on other topics, I will have to continue past the deadline.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Here I'd like to mention, but not discuss, Barrett Watten's nuanced "What I See in *How I Became Hettie Jones*" in Ronna C. Johnson and Nancy M. Grace, eds. *Girls Who Wore Black: Women Writing the Beat Generation* (Rutgers UP, 2002): 96-118. (This was originally published in *Poetics Journal* 10 [1998]). There is also my study of Pound, "Propounding Modernist Maleness: How Pound Managed a Muse," *Modernism/Modernity* 9. 3 (September 2002): 389-405, included in *Blue Studios: Poetry and its Cultural Work* (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2006).

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In 2006-07 Rachel Blau DuPlessis will have published *Blue Studios: Poetry and Its Cultural Work* and republished *The Pink Guitar* (both with Alabama); published *Torques: Drafts 58-76* with Salt Publishing; and seen the reprint of *The Feminist Memoir Project* (which she coedited with Ann Snitow) come out from Rutgers. She will be in residence at Bellagio to write more *Drafts* in early 2007.

### William J. Harris

I have been working on the relationship between words and music for many years. The music I specifically focus on is jazz but, as I and the cultural theorists I will discuss maintain, jazz is blues-based and therefore our examination regularly moves back and forth between these two African American expressive forms. Blues is basic because it has provided the primary vernacular articulation of the African American working class, the most historically distinctive black group. I will briefly discuss pivotal works by Ralph Ellison, Albert Murray, and Nathaniel Mackey—preeminent writers who have prodded my thinking about the connection between words and music. Even though each has his own distinctive response to these media, all three are creative writers and African Americans, and I want to argue that this gives them an advantage. Since the New Critics, scholars have tried to silence writers. Like Eric Porter in *What Is This Thing Called Jazz?*, I assert that artists have important insights into their cultures and arts that we cannot afford to ignore. Simply put, they write about a culture that they know first hand and from the perspective of a craftsman. This does not mean that non-African American critics do not provide valuable insights into this culture and that black writers are not influenced by non-black writers and intellectuals. (I'm not trying to bring the Sixties back.)

Ralph Ellison's classic essay on Wright's autobiography *Black Boy*, "Richard Wright's Blues" (1945), here taken from *Living with Music: Ralph Ellison's Jazz Writings*, an invaluable collection edited by Robert O'Meally, shows Wright as a blues writer. Even though he is shaped by the Western literary tradition—in particular, Joyce and Dostoyevsky—Ellison observes, "These influences, however, were encountered only after these first years of Wright's life were past, and were not part of the immediate folk culture into which he was born. In that culture the specific folk-art form which helped shape the writer's attitudes toward his life and which embodied the impulse that contributes much to the quality and tone of his autobiography was the Negro blues" (103). Ellison's epigraph for the essay is the signature formula used by blues singers at the end of their performance: "If anybody ask you / who sing this song, / Say it was ole [Black Boy] / done been here and gone." In essence, Wright is a blues singer telling his black tale, transforming the near tragic blues feelings into words. Ellison says, "The blues is an impulse to keep

the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it" (103). What is often forgotten in this famous quotation is that it is not about the abstract human condition as such but the specific hardships of African American life. In another essay in the collection, "Remembering Jimmy [Rushing]," Ellison says the blues is "an assertion of the irrepressibly human over all circumstance" (48) and "they also tell us who and where we are" (49).

Albert Murray's "Bearden Plays Bearden," from his collection *The Blues Devils of Nada: A Contemporary American Approach to Aesthetic Statement*, helps us understand words and music by talking about Romare Bearden's use of jazz in his painting and collages. Significantly, the section that this essay is from—it is the only essay in the section, in fact—is entitled "The Visual Equivalent to Blues Composition." Murray finds that the key to Bearden's jazz approach to visual expression is improvisation, an aspect of jazz that many writers have trouble talking about. Murray argues that Bearden is involved with "on-the-spot improvisation or impromptu invention not unlike that of the jazz musician" (117). That is, like the jazz musician, Bearden works with what he finds before him, no pre-conceived ideas. For example, instead of starting out with the idea of drawing a garden he draws a random shape on the canvas that reminds him of a garden, and he then subsequently transforms this shape into a garden. Bearden says, "I just played around with visual notions as if I were improvising like a jazz musician" (130). Murray adds: "It is the aesthetics of jazz musicianship that has conditioned him to approach the creative process as a form of play and thus disposes him to trust his work to the intuitions that arise in the course of creating it" (138). This is a very fruitful way to think about improvisation. "But obviously," Murray wisely and unromantically states, "he did not learn to paint by listening to music. He learned to paint by looking at and responding to many paintings" (123). Furthermore, he learned how to apply jazz design to his work from a white American avant-garde painter, Stuart Davis. "Davis," Murray continued, "made him realize that the jazz aesthetic was applicable to visual statement" (125). Davis concretely showed Bearden how one could translate Earl Hines's piano technique into jazz paintings. But even though he learned from the white avant-garde like many black artists did, he was still committed to story telling and the particulars of African-American experience. Clearly this essay helps us find a verbal equivalent to blues composition.

I want to close with a discussion of Nathaniel Mackey's essay "Paracritical Hinge," from his collection *Paracritical Hinge: Essays, Talks, Notes, Interviews*. The essay, at least, begins as a talk at an academic conference on "Collaborative Dissonances"—a very scholarly talk—but after his introduction he finds the best way to address the questions of the conference is to read from his latest novel, *Atet A.D.*, the third volume of his serial epistolary novel, *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*. Mackey wants to break down the distinction between criticism and art. In fact, his entire artistic project is about "boundary crossing and its implied ... critique of categorization" (209). In his desire to destabilize categorization, the idea of pure genre is challenged. Mackey also does not trust straightforward expository prose—it never quite gets the discrepant nature of reality, and that



is one reason why his expository prose seems both esoteric and mocking. Mackey is committed to “writings which blur the line between genres, bending genre in ways which are analogous to musicians bending notes” (210). Mackey says of his ongoing epistolary novel, “It wants to be what I call a paracritical hinge, permitting flow between statement and metastatement, analysis and expressivity, criticism and performance, music and literature, and so forth. It traffics in a mix—a discrepant, collaborative mix—of idioms, genres, registers, dispositions” (212).

Now, I turn to a delightful scene in the *Atet A. D.* he placed at the end of his essay. The time is the present; we are witnessing an avant-garde jazz band playing in Seattle. The drummer, Drennette, and the oboist, Penguin, have had an almost relationship. The music they play is fueled by their broken hearts, transforming a love song into experimental art. As Penguin plays about his “erotic-elegiac affliction,” cartoon balloons come out of the bell of his oboe. The balloons describe the relationship in explicit words—that is, the instrumental art of jazz speaks words but they are cartoon words—thus, both serious and self-mocking. However, Penguin plays on and his new balloon becomes a “much more literal” one without any writing on it, showing that in music “words were beside the point” (221). And this is of course a central position of Mackey’s vision and why he must move beyond mere criticism.

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### Meta DuEwa Jones

The following text annotations reflect my current meditation on the related challenges and rewards of the intricate dance between cultural studies and poetics.

Perloff, Marjorie. *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2004.

What happens when *Poetry* invites *Cultural Studies* to dance? The answer

depends on which partner leads. Marjorie Perloff's *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy* suggests that poetry should lead, that the 'poeticity' of the poem should take primacy in an analysis of its poetics. In the essay, "Writing Poetry/Writing About Poetry," Perloff concludes *Differentials* by noting that she possesses "more talent for the 'critical' rather than the 'creative' essay" (258), yet this collection's most compelling explications of poetry stem from a creativity manifest in a balance between attentive, textually-specific reading—a.k.a. close reading—and contextually specific analysis—a.k.a. cultural studies. Making a case for cultural studies' animating contribution to poetics, Perloff remarks, "at its best, the alignment of poetic and cultural practices has given literary study a new life." Thus, for example, "[f]rom the perspective of the new cultural studies ... Ulysses is more properly read as an examination of the dynamics of race, power, and empire as these play themselves out in the colonial Ireland of the early twentieth century" (11). At its worst, however, cultural studies downplays the "uniqueness of the artwork" so that, in Perloff's view, "in its more extreme incarnation, cultural theory can dispense with poetics altogether" (12-13). This, of course, renders the "cultural" in cultural study a reductively negative approach to a literary text, yet it need not, and should not, be so. To return to our footloose metaphor, *Differentials'* theory and praxis of poetics is at its best when both partners, "close reading" and "cultural studies," tango in unified tempo. Contemporary poetics scholarship has benefited greatly from this approach. Thus, Perloff consistently attends to the distinctive materiality of each individual poem, its formation and deformation of syntactic units, variant uses of stress, line breaks, caesurae, semantic and morphemic play, cacophonous white space, extralinear temporal movement—in other words, its abundant artful devices, or devised artifices. As Perloff asserts, "the poem's meanings are never quite paraphraseable, never univocal—numbers of alternate readings are possible.... [T]he only way to *get at* the poem is in fact to read it, word for word line by line" (246). This "privileging of the poetic function," in Perloff's treatment, doesn't imply "that knowledge—of the poet's life, milieu, culture, and especially his or her other poems—is not relevant" (xiii). Instead, as she insists, "we cannot separate a close reading of the poem from at least some reading of the poet's culture" (xiv).

If "close reading" moves readily between poetic detail and larger cultural and historical determinants" (xvii), what determines how these determinants are asayed? *Differentials* resists the reduction of the poem to one pre- or over-determined answer. In exploring the second stanza of William Carlos Williams's "The Young Housewife" —

Then again she comes to the curb  
to call the ice-man, fish-man, and stands  
shy, uncorseted, tucking in  
stray ends of hair and I compare her  
to a fallen leaf. (xi)

—Perloff asks, "What was the role of wives in pre-World War I America? What sort of decorum was observed between men and women, and when was it violated? ... Did British poets of 1916 write this way? ... What historical constraints and

cultural markers were operative?" (xvii-xviii). In sum, *Differentials* demonstrates that the questions can be as revelatory as the answers. To phrase my original question differentially, what happens when *Cultural Studies* and *Poetry* dance? The answer lies in who extends the invitation; it rests on if they join together on the floor. As the maxim marks it: "it takes two to tango."

Mullen, Harryette. "Poetry and Identity." Originally published in *West Coast Line* Spring 1996. Reprinted in Mark Wallace and Steven Marks, eds. *Telling It Slant: Avant-Garde Poetics of the 1990s*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama Press, 2002. 27-31.

"Publication, Poetry and Identity": this triad reframes the poet and scholar Harryette Mullen's binary title, for her essay is a "meditation on the various experiences of inclusion, exclusion, and marginality of a 'formally innovative black poet'" (27). More manifesto than meditation, it decries the dichotomy writers, editors and critics make between "avant-garde" or "formally innovative" poetry and "Black" or "African American" identity. Her exploration uniquely contributes to the debates surrounding cultural studies, identity politics, and identity-based poetics in the diversification of university canons and curricula. Publishers "seeking to incorporate [Mullen] into an African American poetic tradition" sought only work that "seemed markedly inflected by race, class, gender, culture, and region" (29), while readers of her prose poems, *Trimblings* and *S\*PeRM\*\*K\*T*, failed to perceive them as "typical of a racial/ethnic group" or germane to "the emphatically ethnic poetic 'voice'" of her first collection, *Tree Tall Woman* (28, 29). The diasporically referential and formally experimental poetics of *Muse & Drudge* attempts to challenge and bridge the perceived division between "representative blackness," "feminist," and "regional" poet on the one hand and "aesthetic innovator" on the other (28, 31). "I felt that my latest poetic experiment must be successful," Mullen writes:

when selections from *Muse & Drudge* were chosen to appear in *Callaloo* and *Muleteeth*, as well as in mainstream publications seeking diversity and journals devoted to racially unspecified 'avant-garde.' It's also encouraging when my work is solicited for new literary magazines and student-edited publications by young African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, and other members of racially diverse editorial collectives. (30-31)

The material conditions and cultural politics of inclusion or exclusion are nowhere more visible than in the realm of anthologies and textbooks, for these, Mullen notes, "continue to be the primary means of reaching the broadest audience of people who read poetry" (27). Her keen awareness of the institutional dynamics and importance of the material conditions requisite for poets to gain access to a public, visible, and diverse cultural and professional field results from her position as a writer outside the mainstream. She asserts, "my marginality as a black artist teaches me important lessons for my survival and integrity as an aesthetic innovator" (31).

In the decade since the publication of "Poetry and Identity," Mullen's movement from the margins to the mainstream has been substantial. Her most recent book, *Sleep-*

ing *With The Dictionary* (2002), was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, the National Book Award, and the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize, and a plethora of interviews, scholarly articles, and book chapters explore her work. Nonetheless, Mullen's major concerns seem as urgent today as they did a decade ago. She cautions:

Excluding or ignoring the unconventional tends to homogenize the canon, marooning those divergent works that might be equally (or more) alien to the mainstream. Nor are such unanticipated works always likely to be embraced immediately by an 'avant-garde' that might also view blackness as 'otherness,' even as, in making its own claim to diversity, it adopts the innovative artist of minority background as an exceptional comrade. (30)

Other dynamically innovative African-American poets who have found their creative work largely marooned from poetry and poetics scholarship include Russell Atkins, Norman Pritchard, Elouise Loftin, Will Alexander, Ed Roberson, Erica Hunt, Cecil Giscombe, and even the poet and critic Mullen identifies in the essay as her primary model of black poetic innovation, Lorenzo Thomas. One hopes Mullen's essay will encourage editors and critics to fill the lacunae in the cultural study and formal analysis of divergent streams within black poetics, whether idiosyncratic or iconic.

Hunt, Erica. "Notes Towards an Oppositional Poetics." *The Politics of Poetic Form*. New York: Roof Books, 1990: 197-212.

Erica Hunt's assertion that language is one of the "primary vehicles of socialization"(203) suggests that language functions simultaneously as a container and conveyor of meaning within the social order. For Hunt, considering "for whom new meaning is produced" first, and the subject second, "runs directly across the grain of some sense of writing as a private act done in dialog with one's materials, with the art body, an art public" (204). Hunt's essay compels the reader to consider the public nature of writing as well as the politics and poetics of language, yet she pushes her exploration further:

[R]ather than simply negate that threshold sense of writing as an autonomous specialized art form, I would suggest that it is important to think how writing can begin to develop among oppositional groups, how writing can begin to have social existence in a world where authority has become highly mobile, based less on identity and on barely discerned or discussed relationships. (204)

The theme and title of Hunt's talk were sparked by a magazine article which declared that the post-World War II "period marks the longest interval of peace in several hundred years" (197). "What the article omitted," Hunt continues, "is the fact of a New War, its violence dispersed in dozens of places throughout the world." Opposing such rhetorical sleight of hand, she analyzes the structural conditions, in literature and in life, that make such "disappearing acts" possible. Thus, both the title of the essay, "Notes Towards an Oppositional Poetics," and the title of the talk it

evolved from, “The Possibility of an Oppositional Poetics,” emphasize the possible, not the definitively proven.

Hunt’s resistance to narrative and authoritative closure registers how she eschews the linguistic authoritarianism that mirrors societal stratification; as she reframes the adage, “There is a place for everyone, even the subordinate, if they know their place” (203). For Hunt, sometimes places should be out of place. Out-of-place places potentially place the reader in new positions of power by destabilizing dominant modes of discourse and social relations. These relations are at the heart of what the author characterizes as a dialectical relationship between conventional and oppositional poetics. “Poetics,” as Hunt explains, “is derived from philosophical and structuralist studies of literature, descriptive of the way sounds, words, phrases and sentences form literary units,” but we might also view conventional poetics in terms of mainstream ideological imperatives disguised through normalizing rules of language. Language organization prefigures and parallels social organization and control, as “master narratives are threaded into the text, in content and in genre.” Thus, the distinctions made between “fiction and nonfiction, objective and subjective voice, definite and indefinite register ... mirror official ideology’s predilection for finding and supplying, if necessary, the appropriate authority” (199):

[D]ominant modes of discourse, the language of ordinary life ... use convention and label to bind and organize us. Much of how they operate to anesthetize desire and resistance is invisible; they are wedded to our common sense; they are formulaic without being intrusive, entirely natural—“no marks on the body at all.” (199)

Although there are no “marks *on* the body,” the body is marked through language that describes and circumscribes:

These languages contain us, and we are simultaneously bearers of the codes of containment. Whatever damage or distortion the codes inflict on our subjectively elastic conception of ourselves, socially we act in an echo chamber of the features ascribed to us, Black woman, daughter, mother, writer, worker and so on. (200)

For Hunt, resistance to such linguistic and cultural domination entails a renovation of ordinary language, an invocation of “oppositional frames of reference” that “are the borders critical to survival,” especially, thought not exclusively, “in communities of color” (200).

How might these “oppositional frames” appear to renovate the rooms housing our historical understanding of poetics? According to Hunt, “an expanded sense of poetics, a more fluid typology would favor plural strategies to remove the distance between writing and experience, at least as it is socially maintained by the binaries of fact and fiction, of identity and nonidentity” (199). Her reframing of poetics through “narrative invention” counters institutionalized forms of linguistic domination through a serious form of language play that engages in constructing alternative, anti-hegemonic origins for, and creative approaches to, words, ideas, and

relations for writing of and through identity—expressive culture as politics. In Hunt’s view, then, “oppositional poetics and cultures form a field of related projects” that include the engagement of “language as a social artifact, as art material, as powerfully transformative” and take as an “explicit goal the use of language as a vehicle for the consciousness and liberation of oppressed communities” (203). Hunt’s essay makes a novel contribution to the relationship between cultural studies and poetics because it argues for—and provides—a culturally situated study of poetics. She presents the rhetoric that we must resist, oppositionally, for our survival: the grammar of our lives.

Meta DuEwa Jones is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Texas at Austin. Her work has appeared in journals such as *Callaloo*, *Souls*, and *African American Review*. She is currently coeditor (with Cherise Smith) of a *Callaloo* special issue on “Visual Culture and Collaboration,” expected in 2007. Her book, forthcoming from University of Illinois Press, is entitled *The Muse is Music: Jazz, POetry, and Gendered Performance*.

### Warren Liu

I’ve been lately much interested in boredom and repetition. Perhaps this is because summertime in Oberlin is rather too placid—the outside world doesn’t much intervene—but it must also have something to do with the material I’m currently working on, which might roughly be described as Asian American experimental poetry. This is not to say that such poetry is, by nature, boring and repetitive. Quite the opposite: reading the works of (relatively) well-known poets such as John Yau, Mei Mei Berssenbrugge, Myung Mi Kim, and Tan Lin—whose work could be described as representative of the first, second, and second-and-a-half generation of contemporary Asian American experimentation—has been, and continues to be, a consistently challenging and productive activity, as are the encounters with several younger, lesser-known poets who may eventually come to constitute the third (or is it second-point-seven-five?) wave of Asian American experimentation. Recent titles, such as Geraldine Kim’s *Povel*, Sawako Nakayasu’s *So we have been given time Or*, and Shanxing Wang’s *Mad Science in Imperial City* attest not only to a continuing interest in experimenting with poetic form but also to increasingly varied and innovative responses to the formal investigations of earlier generations. Wang’s text, in particular, is a fascinating and (forgive me) maddening combination of science textbook and schizoid pastiche. Likewise, Kim’s “povel” interrogates autobiographical form through its integration of the mundanely confessional (think of an irresistible weblog) and the extravagantly verbose (think of that same blog, but much, much longer). And yet, thoughts of boredom and repetition persist, to which a reasonable question might be: Why? Although I don’t really know the answer, I at least have some possible questions—at least two of which immediately come to mind, each inextricably linked to the other. The first has something to do with how we currently think about Asian American texts in general; the second is more specifically about the relationship between Asian American literature (as it’s currently theorized) and experimental form.

In any attempt to understand how a text might be understood as Asian American, one is led almost invariably back to a question—perhaps *the* question—that

has, as yet, not been satisfactorily answered (or, better yet, not been comprehensively asked): what *specifically* marks a text as Asian American? Indeed, this question seems to be the driving force behind much of the recent work in Asian American literary criticism; one might even claim, somewhat pessimistically, that the primary topic of Asian American literary criticism these days is whether or not Asian American literature actually exists. Does the literature exhibit a set of formal properties that are identifiable as uniquely Asian American? If so, what are they? If not, is a text Asian American because it exposes or interrogates the historical, cultural, and sociological matrices through which Asians in America have long been imagined and represented (by Asians *and* others, I would argue)—in which case, could one then feasibly claim, for instance, that Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha* is an Asian American text? It is, after all, a text that imagines Asian subjectivity, produced and popularized by an American, in America. If the answer is no—impossible!—is this simply because Golden is not (as far as I know) an Asian American, or is it because there are (unspoken and mysteriously enforced) “correct” and “incorrect” ways to imaginatively frame these issues? Or is it perhaps that, now more than ever, *any* nation-bound conception of literature is rather too fragile a means with which to read our contemporary moment? While these are certainly interesting questions (at least to me), I do often wonder: how often, and in how many guises, can we repeat them before others stop listening? Thus, *repetition* has been much on my mind....

While most critics of Asian American literature are understandably reluctant to claim a simplistic link between authorial identity and literary form, it remains unclear how this link can be severed without doing damage to the very category of Asian American literature itself. This leads to my second question, which I think rather obliquely has to do with the fact that even though I've used the term Asian American literature repeatedly in the paragraph above, what I should have more accurately written was Asian American narrative fiction. Even the quickest glance through the primary works of literary criticism that have helped shape the Asian American canon (for instance, Elaine Kim's *Asian American Literature* or Sau-ling Wong's *Reading Asian American Literature*) will reveal a strong imbalance between the attention paid to prose and that to poetry. Although there are encouraging signs that this focus on narrative fiction is beginning to wane, there is still ample evidence indicating the novel's privileged place within the canon of Asian American literature and literary criticism—indeed, it is only within this past year that we see the publication of the first academic work focused wholly on Asian American poetry (Xiaoqing Zhou's *The Ethics and Poetics of Alterity in Asian American Poetry*). The problem, I think—if there is one—has less to do with the focus on fiction *per se*, and more to do with the fact that Asian American literary critics have historically focused on literature as socio-cultural artifact, such that readings of Asian American literature (be it prose *or* poetry) are often conflated with readings of Asian Americans themselves. Another way to state this is to note that readings of Asian American literature tend to emphasize recognizable content—it is, in fact, through certain repeated narrative tropes and motifs that such stories come to be marked as Asian American, and it is the relationship of these tropes to the socio-

logical, historical, economic, and cultural conditions of their making that links such work to Asian Americans themselves.

What to do, then, with a poet like Tan Lin, whose most recent work, *BlipSoak01*, gleefully demolishes and “samples” (borrowing a term from electronic music) from such tropes, creating a pseudo-narrative that loops, repeats, and becomes, indeed, slightly boring? One would expect—or at least, I certainly expected—that reading such experimental work against the more “traditional” forms of Asian American literature would lead to an explosive, or at least novel, re-thinking of the category itself. And certainly, the reading experience itself is quite unique. But paradoxically, the dilemmas that arise from such encounters are strikingly similar to the issues already raised above, if from a slightly different angle. (A word of warning: the following questions may sound familiar.) What, specifically, would allow one to theorize Lin’s work as an Asian American text, given that there are no recognizable themes—and few traceable narratives at all—to latch onto? Is it simply, because Lin himself is an Asian American, his work must thus necessarily be so? Lin’s earlier work, *Lotion Bullwhip Giraffe*, hinted (barely) at a similar intentional toying with tropes of Asian American subjectivity, in poems such as “Eastern Rotation” and “So-Long Singapore,” but also included lines such as “Three chairs a fairy. Goof pajammers? Sandwich a la hammer!” (from “Eastern Rotation”) (83), which, while delightful, don’t seem to give much away in terms of ethnic subjectivity. Perhaps a better way to put it would be to say that Lin’s work, in its very resistance to such tropes, provides a negative correlate to the kinds of questions raised above. Thus: it’s not about ethnicity *per se*, but it’s also not *not* about ethnic subjectivity; it’s not readable (not meant to be read?) as socio-cultural factuality, but that doesn’t mean that the socio-cultural conditions from which it arises are simply tangential either. That leaves us with the following: What precisely might allow us to understand such work as an Asian American text?

Bored yet? I hope so, since I’ve become convinced that it is precisely to such repetition and boredom we should more actively attend. Two recent texts have guided me to such conviction, and although neither one is specifically about poetry or poetics, both provide useful models for re-thinking the ways that poetics informs cultural practice, and is likewise informed by cultural production. Thanks, then, to Elizabeth Goodstein, whose vast and somewhat daunting book *Experience without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity* creates something of a paradigm-shift for how to think and write about boredom. Goodstein dismisses claims that boredom is best understood mainly as a universal, timeless product of human nature or primarily as a symptomatic response to the material conditions that constitute the rise of modernity. Instead, Goodstein views boredom as a discursive structure through which both these “ideal” and “material” interpretations function as “complementary aspects of a single language of reflection on the subjective significance of modern developments” (20). Goodstein’s work provides a productive model for thinking through what she identifies as “the aporetic relation between scientific and humanistic modes of self-understanding that is a fundamental feature of modern thought” (16). As such, boredom speaks the “aporia” between the ideal and the material, exposing the error of assuming, for instance, that “the boredom of the



factory worker is different in kind from the poet's" (23). Reading Lin's work in this context, we might note an equal aporia between the "scientific" and "humanistic," insofar as while it's impossible to excise the socio-cultural conditions from which the work arises, it's also unrealistic to claim that it is those conditions alone that make the work worth reading. Indeed, it may be that this aporia itself opens up a space for an interplay between form and content that holds both in productive tension, such that, on the one hand, *BlipSoak01* might be read as an indictment of Asian American "tropes" of identity, while on the other, as a text that poetically enacts the continuing repetition and recurrence of such tropes within larger structures of power, as formal experiment. As Lin puts it: "Beauty is over-appreciated; boredom is not" (*BlipSoak01* 11).

Thanks, also, to Robert Fink, whose recent title *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice* provides a radical new way to think about "repetition" and cultural production. Exploring the material/historic conditions that occur in conjunction with the rise of American minimalist music, Fink notes that "most recognizably 'minimal' contemporary music is actually maximally *repetitive* music" (ix) and suggests that it's thus possible to read minimalism as "the sonic analogue ... of a characteristic repetitive experience of self in mass-media consumer society" (3). Of particular interest is Fink's effort to deconstruct the binary between traditional readings of Western music as wholly teleological versus interpretations of minimalist practice as aggressively anti-teleological and anti-libidinal (and even anti-human). Repetition, he suggests, is actually a "recombinant teleology," one that plays both with and against essentialist conceptions of the telos/anti-telos divide. Fink's modeling of *formal* repetition as both material condition and anti-essentialist practice seems to me useful, too, for thinking about imagined representations of ethnic subjectivity, since our critiques of cultural production might also themselves be read as ingrained cultural practices. Could it be, for instance, that the questions about Asian American literature raised above are themselves a form of "recombinant teleology," tracing patterns and repetitions of the micro- and macro-political upheavals that continually shape and re-shape the presence of Asians in America? Could these repetitions in fact be illustrative of a continuous, disruptive formation and re-formation of Asian American literary production as anti-teleological, anti-essentialist practice? Reading Myung Mi Kim's most recent work, *Commons*, as an example of "recombinant teleology" might help explain both its focus on specific material histories—suggestions of the Korean war, for instance, in the enigmatic lines "War is there and travel / The same is my sister, brothers, and mother"—and its conflation of those specific histories with more general lines that suggest repetition and recurrence, such as "The fundamental tenet of all military geography is that every feature of the visible world / possesses actual or potential military significance" (32). Such a reading would, by necessity, have to account both for the demands of material history *and* the resistance to equating such histories to traceably stable subjects.

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### Jerome McGann

A great deficiency has always dogged historicist and cultural studies of imaginative works, especially poetry. This is a tendency to discount the dominant feature of these communicative forms—their aesthetic elements. Resisting that danger has been perhaps the chief concern of my work since 1983. It was the explicit focus of *Social Values and Poetic Acts*, where Blake's work served to organize the rhetorical strategy.

I mention this matter because Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* would be, in my view, the work of first importance for anyone wanting to investigate poetry in an historical and cultural frame of reference. Understanding Blake's masterpiece at every level—as a material object of graphic design; as a critical investigation of the most powerful of all ideological forms, religion; and as a performative experiment in an imagination-based critical method—seems to me an unevadable demand.

Next in importance would be Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, a book written to put the critical mind through a severe test of its powers and pretensions. As the *doppelgänger* of all professional study, nonsense writing provides an essential corrective to forms of thinking—like literary and cultural criticism—that aspire to authority and enlightenment. Carroll's book is particularly splendid for the depth and variety of the challenges it puts to the critical mind.

Perhaps on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday one should read Carroll's book, and on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday turn to Alfred Jarry's *Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, Pataphysician*. Jarry will throw every form of critical pretension, every enlightened "person presumed to know," into a useful, comic perspective. And

then, finally, we shall make Sunday what it should be, the Lord's day. "Close thy Goethe—thy Coleridge, thy Pound and Eliot, thy Derrida, thy Foucault, thy Zizek, thy Kristeva—Open thy Maldoror!" Lautréamont's immortal *Chants* are the keys to the kingdom of literary heaven, especially Chant VI—that instruction manual for how even the scholar might rethink the mind and art of poetry.

Guided by these works, we can return with confidence to our quotidian scholarly affairs and profitably take up any number of critical studies, from the best of them (Hugh Kenner's *The Pound Era*, Marjorie Perloff's *The Dance of the Intellect*, Steve McCaffery's *Rational Geomancy*, Jeffrey Robinson's *Radical Literary Education: A Classroom Experiment with Wordsworth's "Ode"*) to the worst (which shall remain nameless).

Others I have personally found most useful would be Veronica Forrest-Thomson's *Poetic Artifice*, Susan Howe's *My Emily Dickinson*, and Charles Bernstein's essay "The Revenge of the Poet Critic; or, The Parts are Greater than the Sum of the Whole" (printed in *My Way*, a book that is also to be recommended *in toto*). As "poet critics" themselves, Forrest-Thomson, Howe, and Bernstein give decisive importance to the aesthetic dimension of their critical work.

Finally, let me recommend two other works: the essays and parts of essays gathered together by Jerome Rothenberg and Steve Clay in *The Book of the Book*, where the socio-historical importance of the material work is exposed in a variety of ways; and Rob Pope's *Textual Intervention*, where a socio-historical critical perspective is nicely tied to a set of pedagogical exercises. The selections in Rothenberg and Clay's anthology supply a generous selection of ways we might negotiate the many languages—linguistic and bibliographical—that every book is always speaking in. Implicit throughout is the demand that readers frame their acts of attention in a scholarly attitude, where judgment comes as something more than an opinionated view. As for Pope's smart, practical, and modest book, here is the rubric under which it stands: "The best way to understand how a text works ... is to change it" (1). In fact, every act of interpretation and scholarship alters the object of attention, as Pope knows very well. His book gets its special force from its insistence that we train ourselves to pursue understanding in an awareness of the changes we bring, and hence an awareness of the limits, and limitations, of our understandings.

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### Philip Metres

My entry into the world of poetry scholarship was more haphazard than most, since as a graduate student I took only one poetry course after Shakespeare. As a result, I had to grope around dark stacks, raid syllabi from friends, and pester faculty whose courses suggested an affinity with poetry. But perhaps scholarly work necessarily proceeds rhizomatically, as we follow the root webs of intriguing leads—whether quotations in conference papers or entries in bibliographies. The following works were particularly formative for my developing sense of poetry as both cultural product and cultural process—that is, both speaking from within a cultural matrix, while articulating some differential stance to that culture. In particular, in my forthcoming *Behind the Lines: War Resistance Poetry on the American Homefront since 1941*, I work through the ways in which American war resistance poetry enacts that negotiation on the level of poetic address—that is, how does the poet who resists war address both the nation at large (of which she is a part) and the resistance movement in particular (in which she participates as well)? Such a proposition—that poetry both reflects and refracts the wider culture in complex ways—has been around for a while, at least since Plato's famous expulsion of poets from his Republic, though it crystallized for American poetry criticism in Roy Harvey Pearce's foundational *The Continuity of American Poetry*. (One final note: in order to focus narrowly on resistance poetry, I'm excluding the whole range of fascinating and useful scholarship addressing experimental writing from an oppositional or avant-garde viewpoint—in particular, the works of Charles Bernstein, Marjorie Perloff, Jed Rasula, and Barrett Watten—that have been important to me as a scholar.)

Paul Fussell's literary account of the First World War and its soldier poetry in *The Great War and Modern Memory* anticipates the turn to a cultural studies of poetry, as it illuminates "the simultaneous and reciprocal process by which life feeds materials to literature while literature returns the favor by conferring forms on life" (ix). Fussell shows 1) how the premodernist worldview promulgated in litera-

ture led to the terrible ironies of the Great War, and 2) how the literature forged in the crucible of the Great War utterly changed the way we see and remember war. Examining the war through disparate lenses of circumstantial irony, trench life, dichotomies, mythologies, literature, pastoral tradition, and homoerotics, Fussell argues that the First World War effected the change in consciousness that is sometimes called “modern,” marked by its sense of cruel ironies and lost innocence. Reading poems by Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and others alongside the institutionally cramped post cards sent by soldiers back home (in which soldiers might fill in the briefest of sentences to articulate their current condition) returns us to the cultural situation that might find Owen and Sassoon—in their frank, physical imagery and richness of tonalities—so explosive. As with all important scholarly works, there is much to argue over; perhaps the number of critiques a work engenders sometimes suggests, perversely, its importance? Crucial feminist and postcolonial critiques by Lynne Hanley and Miriam Cooke have noted how Fussell’s articulation of the archetypal war story exalts and sanctifies the victim-soldier, thus effacing the way in which war (and the Great War in particular) affected whole civilian populations, and had global implications.

Cary Nelson’s landmark reexamination of modern American poetry, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945*, is both generous and generative—bringing back into conversation the rich range of poetries from the modern period, with a particular attention to the lost Leftist poetry of the time, while at the same time initiating the kind of recovery work that is one of cultural studies’ great legacies. Finishing Nelson’s book—as he proposes that we do in his preface—in a single afternoon, I felt a kind of Whitmanic invitation to participate in a scholarship of the potential, to echo Alistair Fowler, and suspend my notion of the scholar as canonical judge. Examining, for example, the way the *I.W.W. Song Book*, a collection of radical songs sung to traditional melodies, used traditional forms to oppose bourgeois culture, Nelson invites those of us bred on New Criticism to take a second look at the way we read and privileged certain kinds of poems over others—and how the very reading protocols of the New Criticism are freighted with political implications. With its full color reproductions of samples from this lost poetic history, the book oscillates between nostalgia for a lost past and a tempered optimism, asking us to shift our question from “is this poetry?” to “what has poetry now become?” (133). Advocating looking at journals and individual collections, with special attention to material presentation, such as cover illustrations, Nelson proposes a materialist poetry criticism that expands poetry’s meanings—and its cultural work—to include a whole range of material and social contexts that we have ignored too often.<sup>1</sup> Still, in the end, each scholar (and reader, for that matter), has to articulate for him- or herself what it means to shift the question from whether a poem is “good” (in the ways New Criticism might articulate excellence) to what cultural work a poem accomplishes—and what we mean by “cultural work” at all.

Postcolonial scholar Barbara Harlow takes her title *Resistance Literature* to describe the poetics of national liberation movements from Ghassan Kanafani’s study of Palestinian literature; for Harlow, resistance literature “calls attention to itself . . . as a

political and politicized activity ... involved in a struggle against ascendant or dominant forms of ideological cultural production” (28-29). Despite our skepticism about oppositional poetry, poetry, Harlow argues, can be “an arena of *struggle*” (33) against foreign domination, as it acts as a “force for mobilizing a collective response to occupation and domination and as a repository for popular memory and consciousness” (34). No doubt, Harlow’s arguments on behalf of this poetry at times feel forced or unconvincing; for example, hailing a resistance poetry aesthetic that values the absence of punctuation or the use of free verse as a “radical critique of standard, uniform patterns” (36) lacks usefulness for the ongoing discussion of the politics of form in the American poetry context. However, read alongside American-focused poetry scholarship, such postcolonial takes as Harlow’s and Mary K. DeShazer’s *A Poetics of Resistance: Women Writing in El Salvador, South Africa, and the United States* set in stark relief the ways in which many of our presumptions about the cultural meanings and uses of poetry are culture-specific—and that we should be careful about universalizing our claims about those meanings and uses. Further, DeShazer’s study, with a partial focus on resistance writing in the United States, articulates the ways in which the U.S. is not a homogeneous cultural space. Finally, these works together suggest that oppositional poetry in the U.S. written in solidarity with Third World national liberation movements needs to take care not to erase the very voices it purports to speak on behalf of—which has been the fate of much identificatory lyric poetry written from the center of empire.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Nelson is at least partly to thank for the profusion of such poetry recovery projects as Schweik, Susan. *A Gulf So Deeply Cut: American Women Poets and the Second World War*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1991; Bibby, Michael. *Hearts and Minds; Bodies, Poetry, and Resistance in the Vietnam Era*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1996; Van Wienen, Mark. *Partisans and Poets: The Political Work of American Poetry in the Great War*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1997; and Sullivan, James. *On the Walls and in the Streets: American Poetry Broad­sides from the 1960s*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1997.

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## Aldon Lynn Nielsen

We all grew up with serial fiction (in print, on the radio, on those television sets that still had knobs on them); many of us came of poetic age with serial composition; some of us practice seriality in music. I'm not sure, though, that we've ever had a term for the sort of serial cultural critique that Ron Silliman is currently practicing at his blog site with a series of instigating observations about Charles Olson and his significance for subsequent American poets. The entries make full use of the technology of the blogosphere and are generally accompanied by photos from the Olson archives. One shows Olson staring straight through the window of a store under a sign advertising puppy dogs. The glass sheen of the window front reflects Olson's own image back to him and to us, making some, or at least me, hear a voice singing, "How much is that poet in the window?" You can visit Silliman's work in progress at <http://ronsilliman.blogspot.com/>. I don't know if Silliman plans one day to gather all this together and publish it in print, or even if it's all been written and he's simply laying it out for us in segments. There are, of course, print precedents, including Nathaniel Mackey's extended essay on Gassire's Lute and Robert Duncan, which was originally spread over successive issues of *Talisman*. What I do know is that this mode of critique gives a sense of immediacy not available to us in quite the same way in the print world. We can watch this work grow day by day and we can interact with it as it unfolds. Silliman is advancing a number of hypotheses about both what has become of American poetry in the years after Olson and what has become of Olson in American poetry.

Meanwhile, back in the world of bound volumes, the first book of poems by Deborah Richards, *Last One Out*, joins the work of other writers including Claudia Rankine, Fiona Templeton, and I might say Ron Silliman too, that shows us ways in which poetry can be an exacting and revealing form of cultural studies. Maria Damon and other critics have duly noted how often cultural studies in the academy has made an appeal to a cultural poetics without ever actually producing such a poetics. All the while, some of our most interesting contemporary poets have been demonstrating how poetic space can itself be a locus of cultural critique without falling prey to endless arguments about the Birmingham School model. A book of great innovation just at the level of poetics, *Last One Out* also delivers readers the sort of cognitive remapping that explodes the givens of our ideologies. In "Parable," for example, a longish prose poem, the persona drifts through memories of classic cinematic moments, linking them together in mind in such a way that they become a wholly new genre of critical race studies. Pinky wins her case while losing the law. A woman loses a man in black and white. We learn with Judy Garland that "talent is not enough," and throughout, we see a powerful groping through the bounds of narrative and thought. All of which does make one wonder, why is it that poetry is never included in accounts of resistant readings of popular culture?

Few engage the cultures of poetry so acutely as Michael Davidson. First in *The San Francisco Renaissance* and then again in *Ghostlier Demarcations*, Davidson explored the poetics of writers' communities more assiduously than have most other critics. Now, in *Guys Like Us: Citing Masculinity in Cold War Poetics*, Davidson has done something for readers that reaches well beyond most other

studies of Cold War cultural politics. Despite reflex assertions of ineluctable links between, say, abstract expressionism and the co-option of radical politics, very few critical observers ever get to aesthetic questions in quite the way Davidson brings us to. Now I'll admit to a history of allergy to masculinity studies. Since I am in fact a guy, some will no doubt ascribe this to my inherent patriarchal protective mechanisms. I prefer to see it as a revulsion from clichés. But no cliché can exist long in the analytical atmosphere of Davidson's writing, and so this book that describes itself as a "study of masculinity in an age of consensus" does in fact measure the ruptures in cultural consensus, demarcating the strange attractors at work between "Pale Faces" and "Red Skins," as more than one critic described the camps at the time. And come to think of it, you'll encounter Olson here, too, along with both Amiri Baraka and Percy Dovetonsils.

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### Carrie Noland

I am feeling a bit sheepish as I attack this assignment from the *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*: "What am I reading?" You mean, beyond teaching? You mean, other than memos from the Dean? Not much (at least in the area of contemporary poetry), and so I am delighted when my French publisher, Florent Fajole, invites me to the *Expoésie* festival in Périgueux to check out what is new and hot in the field of French poetry. I am moving to Bordeaux for the year, so early July in the south of France is perfect. "Recently I've been neglecting contemporary poetry," I tell Florent, "unless you count Emmanuel Hocquard and Claude Royet-Journoud." Florent looks suspicious; apparently these two are by no means contemporary enough. They are already a generation away from the crowd represented at *Expoésie*, one of the most prized venues for distributors of experimental poetry in France.

Florent leads me through the tight grouping of tables in the Place St. Louis, the heart of medieval Périgueux. It is 33 degrees centigrade under the tents where the vendors sit quietly displaying the fruits of the young and the new. Seventy-two different presses are represented; over a period of six days, readings, dance performances, and concerts will entertain what turns out to be a disappointingly small audience of confused vacationers and loyal poetry enthusiasts. Saturday, when I arrive, there are only a handful of visitors wandering vaguely under the tent. This attrition is not due to the heat alone; July 1 is the date of the soccer semi-final match between France and Brazil. Now honestly, given a choice, would you sweat under a hot tent fingering volumes of experimental poetry, or would you be in an air-



conditioned bar, installed before an icy *pression* and a large-screen TV?

Florent (who must be there to sell books) and I (completely incapable of understanding soccer) soldier on. We are chagrined to learn that Henri Chopin and John Giorno, the major attractions of the festival, are scheduled to perform at 9 p.m., the hour when the France/Brazil match begins. In principle, though, they have been given the choice spot on the program. It strikes me as odd that while Hocquard and Royet-Journoud seem to be too established to stimulate interest, Chopin, who is 84 and now uses a wheelchair, still receives attention. Bernard Heidsieck, too, is well represented, many of his early works having just been reprinted (or printed for the first time) by the prestigious Al Dante press. Obviously, this festival favors Sound Poets and those who make typographic and multimedia experimentation a feature of their style. A surprising number of volumes come with their own CD, or employ a complex *mise en page* rendering it impossible to read them aloud. It seems that “reading” experimental poetry has evolved into a practice requiring what André Leroi-Gourhan would have called a “mythogrammatic” sensibility. The buzzword of the festival, “*transversalité*,” captures what is at stake: reception practices associated with reading, listening, and viewing must all be activated simultaneously, not simply so that experimental poetry can compete with popular forms of multimedia entertainment but, more importantly, so that it can restore an awareness of how textuality intersects with or denies other modalities of perception informing our practices of interpretation.

A young vendor for the Maison d’Édition Bleu du Ciel explains to me that transversal works are a specialty of her press. The crossing of media can take place in a variety of ways. First, she hands me two slender tomes produced through collaboration, one a collection of images by the photographer Jean-Christophe Garcia, the other a volume of poetry by Marie Borel. Although published under separate cover, Garcia’s *Le Partage des eaux* and Borel’s *Trompe-Loup* were produced during a voyage they made together down the Gironde estuary. Their joint project, a postface tells us, was to find “*matière à traduire la frontière*,” that is, a medium-specific manner of “translating” the point where one thing becomes another, where the river flows into the sea, where one river bifurcates into two, where myth and history differ, where text and image part ways. Garcia’s *Le Partage des eaux* contains somewhat blanched digital photos of industrial and rural riverbanks. Borel’s volume, of the same dimensions, is more intriguing. Her poetry is prosaic, unwinding the days of the voyage around a few central themes—the state of the water, the business of the sailors, the direction of the wind, the story of Moses. Something peaceful and intimate emerges from the pages, the rhythm of languid boredom alternating with sudden discovery or storm. One does not need the photographic accompaniment, but the muted colors, nonetheless, seem to capture Borel’s tone.

The vendor then points out another example of “*transversalité*,” the collaborative work by Didier Arnaudet, poet, and Jacques Perconte, digital composer, entitled, a bit tongue-in-cheek, *A surveiller de près, à punir parfois* (To Discipline Often, To Punish Sometimes). But if one is hoping to *hear* the sound of the tongue in the cheek on the shiny pink CD that comes with the text, then one will be sadly disappointed. All the recorded sounds including those emanating from the author’s

vocal chords, are clean, as chiseled as the electronic rhythm track and the synthetic chords that serve as accompaniment. The poetry speaks a good deal about the body, but what we hear is a body disciplined into cyberspace, addressed textually as angst but registered digitally as immaculate poise. One misses the scratchiness of the audiotape used by Heidsieck, whose multi-track, echoing “*partitions*” are clearly at the origin of this experiment.

Leaving *Le Bleu du Ciel*, and confronted with an overwhelming variety of offerings, I ask Florent to help me select a few. Steering clear of *Licenses*, a review aiming to “probe our relationship to the *interdit*” (all very Bataille, *Tears of Eros* kind of stuff), and ignoring several tempting volumes covered with lace or flashing like neon, Florent judiciously chooses three other works: Frédéric Léal’s *mismatch* (the first of a trilogy put out by the promising Éditions de l’Attente), Christophe Tarkos’s *Ma langue* (from *Al Dante/Niok*), and Éric Suchère’s *Fixe, Désolé en hiver* from *Les Petits Matins* (which also recently published Cole Swenson’s *Nef*). Léal’s *mismatch* is obviously the most graphically challenging of the three. Here, the typographer has employed different scales of the same font (but without varying the font), organizing the mismatched fragments of text with slashes, boxes, and dotted lines that evoke a map of bureaucratic hierarchies or a chemical formula. References to biology (“*acides aminés*,” “*la chlorpromazine, récepteur de l’acétylcholine*”) alternate with snippets of a conversation among chums (“*je vais me faire tranquillo un Mac Donald*”). Unexpected associations flash out like sparks until one feels that Mallarmé’s “*démon de l’analogie*” is truly in charge. In fact, the volume begs to be read as a kind of millennium rewrite of “*Un coup de dés*,” even if the contents seem to be drawn from the most diverse sources—the bedroom, the street corner, the lab.

Éric Suchère is a relief after the visual combustion of Léal. *Fixe, Désolé en hiver* is a beautifully crafted meditation on a winter landscape in which the bodies of two protagonists meet and separate. Suchère writes in two or three word fragments, separating each with a comma, thereby recreating the rhythm of stuttering, of Morse code. These word clusters—sometimes syntagms but often aborted openings (“*Pèlerinage jusqu’à*”—“Pilgrimage to”)—zoom in to a detail of the scene, preparing for a narrative (as usual, a man looking at a nude woman) that never manages to begin. It is as though something right before one’s eyes were broken; the text is a heap of discourse shards that an archeologist must one day assemble. As the short postface by Joseph Mouton indicates, Suchère has made parataxis into a way of seeing, a “pointillisme” that nonetheless refuses coalescence into something “*fixe*.” The allusion to winter in the title (“*hiver*”) resonates in images of desertion and solitude, which together evoke the extreme bareness of thought escaping the fluff of predication.

The sensibility of Tarkos’s *Ma langue* is entirely different. Boxed together in this elegant beige edition are three satirical/lyrical volumes: “*Carrés*,” “*Calligrammes*,” and “*Donne*.” The second volume, as one might expect, is a send-up of Apollinaire’s work of the same name, containing a series of interchangeable blob-like shapes boasting distinctive, non-interchangeable titles, such as “*mes couilles*” (“my balls”) and “*la bouche ouverte*” (“the open mouth”). The third volume—all text, no pictures—magically scrambles the word order of sentences so that they seem like they could make sense (if one

tried hard enough to set them right) but they never actually do: “*je me si de besoin est perdais le donner veux-tu/perdrais-je plaisir qui tu sais j’étais toi je moi*” (“I me if of need is lost the to give do you want/would I lose pleasure which you know I was you I me”). The first volume (my favorite) opens with “*Manifeste chou*,” an affectionate expression of exasperation with the current state of poetic production. The rest of the volume contains the real gems, the compact squares of language (the “carrés” of the title) comprised of feverishly obsessive self-examinations, like chunks of consciousness cubed. This, I conclude, is experimental poetry at its best: a sure hand, self-indulgence subjected to the strictest routines, a use of humor that does not lead to math or transcendence. With text alone still imposing its presence, for me the festival ends with Beckett, the Beckett who can find drama—gestures, costumes, groans, everything—here, in black marks on a paper support. The intermedial and the transversal may indeed be the future of contemporary French poetry, but it is still the master of textuality who receives the last word.

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### Marjorie Perloff

Monroe, Alexei. *Interrogation Machine: Laibach and NSK*. Foreword by Slavoj Žižek. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT P, 2005.

NSK, the acronym of *Neue Slowenische Kunst*, the radical collective that emerged in the small Adriatic republic of Slovenia in the wake of the breakup of Yugoslavia after Tito’s death in 1980, has been billed as “the last true avant-garde of the twentieth century.” However controversial its artwork, posters, performance pieces, and “manifestations,” NSK IS a genuine avant-garde and hence should be of great interest to readers of this issue. Representing a nation only born in 1995—a nation that had for most of its history been divided up and colonized, first as part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, then by the Germans to the North and Italians to the South, and subsequently by the Nazis and the Soviets—NSK, and its most radical

division Laibach, which is primarily a musical group, defines itself by its “playful and provocative *dance* or flirtation with a series of regimes and processes that is never ‘consummated.’” It interrogates, in other words, both the Nazi and the Russian Communist art with which Slovenia was most familiar, introducing ironic and contradictory elements that force the reader/viewer to confront the subject in question. “We take a part of this and a part of that ...,” declares an NSK manifesto. “We steal here and there and transfer all appropriations into new relations.” Such “retrogardism” uses “retroquotation” to blend the mass-industrialist energies of the avant-garde and its socialist realist negations. NSK has been criticized for adopting the very totalitarianism it claims to call into question; it uses violence and shock effect, ostensibly to attack Western Capitalism as well as Soviet Communism, but sometimes Laibach posters look frighteningly like the real thing. At its best, however, NSK adapts earlier Duchampian and Fluxus models to make the case for a collectivist art, theatre, and poetics: its paintings, for instance, bear the signature of its various subgroups like Laibach and Irwin rather than those of individual artists. As such, it offers an interesting perspective on a U.S. poetry still mired in self-expression and the delicate little insight. Monroe’s chapters (which, he says, can be read in any order) provide the necessary historical/political background and discuss many interesting exemplars of NSK art-making. This is advocacy criticism—as is Zizek’s preface—but advocacy criticism of a very high order.

Lautréamont avec Arthur Aeschbacher. *Viel Ocean*. Paris: Edition Traversière, 2003.

Book artist Arthur Aeschbacher has taken two short passages from Lautréamont’s famed *Chant de Maldoror* (1869)—Chants premier, strophe 9, and Chant deuxième, strophe 13—and produced one of the most beautiful and intriguing artist’s books I’ve seen in a long time. The Lautréamont text itself alternates with blue-black visual constellations on the word *ocean* and its cognates. Anagrams (on *viel océan* and also on the name *Lautréamont*), *paragrams*, *reversals*, and *metatheses*: Aeschbacher’s collages create a seasick delirium, fascinating in its complexity. *Viel Océan* gives new life to a nineteenth-century classic, sending us back to the original even as its appropriations and inventions are very much of the twenty-first century. It serves as a reminder that “poetry” in the expanded field is no longer a series of self-enclosed, discrete “poems.” And the Baudelairean parody on the flyleaf is especially apt:

... mer hypocrite, image de mon Coeur ...

Gallo, Rubén. *Mexican Modernity: The Avant-Garde and the Technological Revolution*. Cambridge: MIT P, 2005.

This is, as Gallo says in his Introduction, “a book about the other Mexican revolution: the cultural transformations triggered by new media in the years after the armed conflict of 1910 to 1920. The new revolutionaries were not soldiers or bandits but artists and writers: they did not fight with weapons but with cameras,

typewriters, radios, and other mechanical instruments.” We tend to think of the technological revolution in early twentieth-century poetry and art as emanating from Italian Futurism and French-German Dada. But such Mexican avant-gardists as the photographer Tina Modotti, the poet Louis Quintamilla, and the novelist Jaime Torres Bodet had a style of their own and their work provides a new—and not uncritical—perspective on the murals of Mexico’s best known “realist” artist of the period, Diego Rivera. Mexico’s Utopian radiophony, Gallo shows, inspired as it was by Apollinaire and other European poets, is markedly original. Most important: Gallo’s study deterritorializes the avant-garde, showing how its peripheries are often as interesting as its centers. And in devoting chapters not to individual artists or even artistic groups but to materials and built environments—cameras, typewriters, radio, cement, stadiums—Gallo points the way for future critical studies. The book’s layout, moreover, is that of an art book rather than a critical monograph. Here, to paraphrase Beckett on *Finnegans Wake*, form is content and content form.

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### Joan Shelley Rubin

My forthcoming study of the uses of poetry in the United States between 1880 and 1950 concerns readers more than poets and emphasizes the importance of sites for reading to the meanings of texts. In part, my focus reflects the influence of literary scholars who, over the last twenty-five years or so, have developed a more inclusive, multivocal account of American literature than we had previously possessed. But my approach also derives from my reading in two areas that may not be as familiar to those who come to the subject of poetry from cultural studies: the history of the book and the history of musical performance.

The history of the book encompasses efforts to situate print at the intersection of the material conditions, social structures, and cultural values that, in different times and places, give the written word its forms and meanings. Within that framework, I have been especially drawn to the consideration of reading practices, because such research promises both to illuminate the intellectual and emotional lives of ordinary people and to clarify the way a culture works. Some contributions to this relatively new field have already become classics: notably those of the French historian Roger Chartier. For those unacquainted with his writing, *The Order of Books* and *A History of Reading in the West*, co-edited with Guglielmo Cavallo, would be a good place to start. Chartier insists not only that “readers remake texts” but also that meaning arises out of the dialectic between the reader’s interpretive freedom and the cultural preconceptions constraining that freedom. Above all, Chartier argues that reading is “always realized in specific acts, places and habits” (Cavallo and Chartier 2). That phrase has virtually become a mantra for numerous other historians who have explored the reading activities of Americans—particularly women—in the past (see, for example, the essays in Barbara Ryan and Amy M. Thomas, *Reading Acts: U.S. Readers’ Interactions with*

*Literature, 1800-1950*).

From Chartier and David D. Hall, editor (with Hugh Amory) of *A History of the Book in America, vol. 1: The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*, I have also learned to be wary of an idea that has enjoyed uncritical acceptance in some cultural studies circles: the equation of social class and cultural hierarchy. Hall and Amory instead postulate the existence of a middle ground where the “high” and the “low,” the “elite” and the “popular,” coexist and commingle. Although at first glance it may seem far removed from the analysis of poetry, Hall’s *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment*, a study of religion in colonial New England, rests on a set of broadly applicable assumptions about the dynamic tensions that characterize culture. Hall reveals how clergy and laity shared beliefs in the power of magic and ritual; how the reading practices of ordinary people challenged ministerial authority; and how printers and booksellers played crucial roles in breaking down hierarchical distinctions. In my own research, I have come to see in similar terms the interventions of the anthologists and popularizers who sought to widen the audience for modernist poetry, and to appreciate the circulation of verse outside of mainstream commercial channels. I have been interested as well in the permeability of the boundary between the sacred and the secular, as when campers at nondenominational services turned schoolroom verse into prayer.

As my foregoing comments imply, the best studies in the history of the book understand the reception of print as a social act. This precept applies even to individuals engaged in solitary, silent reading. It is especially germane, however, to the public recitation of verse. To gain greater insight into the social sources and meanings of poetry as performance, I have lately embarked on a foray into music history. Two examples of recent scholarship have been especially helpful thus far. One, Joseph Horowitz’s *Classical Music in America: A History of Its Rise and Fall*, corroborates the position of Chartier and Hall; it contains a compelling refutation of the idea that “high” and “low” culture grew increasingly segregated in the United States by the late nineteenth century. Henry Lee Higginson, the benefactor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, was not, Horowitz notes, purely a member of the Brahmin elite; neither, as the scramble for rush tickets and the democratic atmosphere of Symphony Hall attested, was Higginson bent on social control. Horowitz likewise argues that the worshipful attitude American concert-goers exhibited toward classical music in the 1890s was a response more to the style of performers and to aesthetic dictates than to an upper-class program of “sacralization.” (Horowitz nevertheless identifies the post-World War I period as the moment when sacralizing tendencies coalesced into a cult of “dead European masters”—a claim worth further examination.)

A second recent study, my colleague Celia Applegate’s *Bach in Berlin*, is an exemplary account of the ways in which cultural developments can converge to shape the staging and reception of a particular musical (and, by extension, poetic) text. Applegate chronicles the 1829 revival, under the direction of Felix Mendelssohn, of Bach’s *Passion According to Saint Matthew*, an event that restored the previously neglected baroque composer to his current stature. The *Saint Matthew’s Passion*, Applegate shows, resulted in part from the role of print—specifically, the creation of influential aesthetic treatises and new outlets for music journalism—in

making musical taste an essential element of an emerging German nationalism. The concerts were the culmination as well of a revitalized and institutionalized tradition of serious amateurism, linked again to a public enactment of “Germanness.” The concluding sections of *Bach in Berlin* zero in on the separation of sacred music from liturgy in a modern musical marketplace and on the significance of Bach’s Gospel setting for a public commemorating the Protestant Reformation. All of those forces were in play for Mendelssohn’s audience in 1829; all were preconditions for reception. Although I do not want to minimize Applegate’s emphasis on the history of nation-building, her lapidary method has much to teach those of us interested in the social resonances of literary performance. My own preliminary investigation into early twentieth-century American “community sings” that included musical settings of verse suggests that acquiring some facility in musicology may permit greater grasp of the role of composers as mediators between poet and audience—a project I hope to pursue in the future.

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### Juliana Spahr

I’m always trying to figure out what is going on outside the fairly intimate relationship I have with various factions in the U.S. experimental poetry scene. This is a list of some things I’ve read recently that I’ve been moved by and also some of my all-time favorites.

As I’m cursed by myopia in my institutional life—I write mainly about contemporary U.S. literatures and teach in an MFA program—I’ve found some of the anthropological writing about poetry in other places really helpful. Contemporary

U.S. poetry cultures are thriving and interesting, but most of them are haunted by the same disconnection from the general culture. However, reading about poetry in Papua, New Guinea via Steven Feld, or in Egypt via Lila Abu-Lughod, or in Yemen via Steven Caton, shows that there are places where poetry is still a big part of almost everyone's everyday.

Feld's *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression* is a fieldwork-based study of the songs of the Kaluli people of Papua, New Guinea. Feld is, among other things, a musician and his interest is primarily in the art of the song. This book is about aesthetic decisions made by the Kaluli in how they make their songs (and reading of this sort should be a part of any prosody course). At moments it overwhelms the non-musician with details. (If I had to pitch this in Hollywood it would be Roman Jakobson-meets-Clifford Geertz). In addition to really complicated musical descriptions, it has a wonderful discussion of how birds show up in Kaluli lament and which birds and how they get represented.

Abu-Lughod's *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in Bedouin Society* and its gender-opposite parallel, Caton's "*Peaks of Yemen I Summon*": *Poetry as Cultural Practices in a North Yemeni Tribe*, both remind of how poetry has a long history and rich tradition of being more than just aesthetics and how it remains rooted in everyday modes of conversation in some locations. Abu-Lughod's book is a story of living with a community of Bedouins in the Western Desert of Egypt. While her book concentrates on the ghinnawa, a poetic form that is most associated with personal expression, she is less interested in formal and structural issues than Feld and concentrates instead on how the Bedouin women and young men use poetry to say things that violate moral codes—to say things that can't otherwise be said. Caton's book is a study of poetry in Yemen. He spends more time on various poetic forms—the balah, the zamil, and the qasidah—and how they mainly get used by men to uphold tribal authority.

These three books are studies of very located and local poetics. But another version of the reminder that poetry has a relevant role to play is in those classic discussions of poetry and political education such as Roque Dalton's *Poetry and Militancy in Latin America*, Vladimir Mayakovsky's "How Are Verses Made?" and Pablo Neruda's "The Poet's Obligation."

Recent literary criticism around poetry that I've found transformative would include Brent Hayes Edwards's *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* and Walter Dignolo's *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, & Colonization*. Both are studies of what happens when local literatures meet various internationalisms. And Edouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*—this book has a stunningly beautiful beginning—has never stopped being useful, and I've read it many times because I keep using it in courses. I also find Kamau Brathwaite's writing about poetry, from his 1984 *History of the Voice* to his recently self-published two-volume *MR: Magical Realism*, unusually transformative and eye-opening.

I also keep having this fantasy of teaching to MFA students a course that I imagine titling "Writing of the Last 10 Years that is Not About Poetry but that Poets Should be Reading Anyway Because It Might Change What They Are Writing



About.” The twelve-week course as I envision it would include: Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*, Pascale Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters: Convergences: Inventories of the Present*, Jared Diamond’s *Collapse*, Mike Davis’s *Planet of Slums*, Samuel Delany’s *Times Square Red*, *Times Square Blue*, Greg Dening’s *Islands and Beaches*, Joanna Drucker’s *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity*, Michael Hardt and Antoni Negri’s, *Empire*, John Holloway’s, *Change the World without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today*, Subcomandante Marcos’s *The Word is Our Weapon*, Michael Taussig’s *My Cocaine Museum*, and Peter Weiss’s *The Aesthetics of Resistance*. (Ok, I’m cheating a little on this last one which was published in German in 1975, but the translation into English is within the last ten years.) The books in this course change for me from week to week.

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### Mark W. Van Wiene

Since on or before September 11, 2001, the United States—for most readers of this journal, *our* nation—has been in a state of war. In 2005, the Modern Language Association—for most readers of this journal, *our* professional association—named Diana Fuss's *The Sense of an Interior* as winner of its James Russell Lowell prize, awarded to the best book of literary criticism published the preceding year. Is there any connection between these events? Ought we look for one?

For me, as a recent reader of Fuss's book, the answers to these questions are, respectively: I hope not. And yes. I know that the writing of a scholarly book, especially a book as thoughtful and thoroughly researched as Fuss's, unfolds over many years; portions of the book appeared in print in the mid-1990s, long before the destruction of the World Trade Center. Also, I do not particularly fault the selection committee for this award, given their no-doubt reasonable criteria focused upon the intrinsic merits of the various books nominated. What concerns me is that Fuss's book, with its commendation from the MLA, may represent a trend in contemporary literary scholarship during troubled political times. The state having descended from incompetence to outrage, the literary critics turn inward to find meaning. *The Sense of an Interior* explores the relationship between the writing lives and the bourgeois houses inhabited by Emily Dickinson, Sigmund Freud, Helen Keller, and Marcel Proust, as the book cunningly approaches the problem of the vanishing point of human consciousness not by delving further into the depths of the subject but by skating upon the surface of its constitution, turning to "the senses," which "stand at the border of what is inside and outside consciousness" and "breach the boundary between literal and figurative space" (17). This is an exciting direction, especially when Fuss references the writers' rooms as bourgeois and cites Benjamin and Adorno, but the payoff as Fuss imagines it in the social world is not nearly so dynamic as one might have hoped: "these authors offer blueprints for the renovation of human subjectivity, models for the reappraisal of the risks and pleasures of living deep inside one's self" (21).

I have a particular gripe with Fuss's book as well as the more general concern. *The Sense of an Interior* almost entirely occludes one of the abiding passions of Helen Keller's external life, her lifelong involvement in radical political movements. This activity is merely alluded to in Fuss's mention of Keller's "lifetime devoted to the production of lyric poems, political essays, public addresses, spiritual testimonials, and personal memoirs" (109). Are Keller's socialist commitments so embarrassing that they must be tactfully concealed? Does Fuss take them to be *that* irrelevant to the "renovation of human subjectivity"? In any case, the turn away from wider social relevance cannot be missed, particularly for a writer whose earlier publications on essentialism had concluded by emphasizing the formation of collective political identity. But as I say, Fuss's book is less important in itself than if it marks a trend, which I fear it does. Fredric Jameson—also, incidentally, a winner of the Lowell award back in 1992 for *Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*—once remarked at an academic conference that he felt himself one of the few genuinely Marxist critics left in the world. Yet in his latest work, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*, the closest Jameson can come to locating a utopian, liberatory space is through the interior of the subject. To be sure, Jameson's exposition upon the subject leads eventually outside it; he speaks of a "momentum that cannot find resolution within the self, but that must be completed by a Utopian and revolutionary transmutation of the world of actuality itself" (136). Yet his interest as a critic is directed not upon the "immense new social forces, political suffrage and the growth of labor unions and the various socialist and anarchist movements" but upon the Modernist artists whose only real link to those movements is a subjectivity whose lack betrays a "longing ... for some new existence outside the self" (134, 136). Whereas Fuss seems content to "renovate" the bourgeois self, Jameson seeks its "transfiguration." In both cases, however, the process is an intensely interior one in which the writer's or critic's relationship to external political action merits little attention.

My recommendation to counter the trend evident in Fuss's work and Jameson's begins with our offering a fuller account of the specific relationships between progressive writers, social movements, and political organizations. Some of the possibilities for such scholarly work are suggested in Alan Wald's ongoing trilogy on Communist-affiliated writers of the United States. Wald's first installment, *Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth-Century Literary Left*, includes extensive discussion of the relationship between avant-garde poetics and Left politics. In effect, Wald's argument critiques and partly remedies the separation between artistic Modernism and progressive politics that Jameson posits, for Wald shows the success of committed Left poets (such as Herman Spector, Sol Funaroff, and Alfred Hayes) in employing experimental Modernist modes. At the same time, he insists upon the limits of experimental Modernism, its difficulty in moving beyond fragmentation, decay, and ennui—a view that challenges Jameson's conviction that utopia might be glimpsed through the self-loathing of the bourgeois artist. But Wald's project does much more than enter into the debate over the politics of Modernism; it recreates in detail the genuine diversity of writers on the American Left, compassing the variety of writing they produced, the different ca-

reers they shaped, their individual paths into (and in some cases, out of) the international socialist movement. Wald individualizes writers who have heretofore tended to be typecast as belonging to a rigid, ruthlessly standardized collective.

In general, however, American literary criticism needs more work upon literary *collectivity*—the connections of poets with one another and of poets with the social—and less upon artistic singularity. Here American poetry and American poetry criticism may lead the way, notwithstanding the lyric's reputation as a mode of, shall we say, interiority. Criticism following this path need not limit itself to writers forming an intentional political community, as Edward Brunner's *Cold War Poetry* strikingly demonstrates. Indeed, Brunner shows convincingly the social ramifications of lyric forms that might have seemed most highly resistant to such significance, including domestic poetry and even the sestina. Not only does Brunner explore manifestations of repressive post-World War II culture in American poetry—the degree to which the horror of war was naturalized in postwar anthologies, for example. His *Cold War Poetry* also argues that certain forms of poetry served as collective modes for resisting, through coded language, the absurdities of the McCarthy witch-hunt and for offering anxious meditations upon the Bomb. Here—at least—there is some common ground between Brunner's and Fuss's interpretations, as Fuss reads Helen Keller's paranoia about the destruction of her home by fire as contiguous with her condemnation of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But whereas for Fuss such connections are a matter largely of the individual artist's special sensibility, for Brunner they are demonstrably the fears of a whole generation of poets, for whom poems attempting to console children (futilely, for the most part, and therefore all the more anxiously) became a virtual subgenre of the lyric, in spite of the many ways such poems violated the impersonality, obliqueness, etc., prescribed by the New Criticism.

While for Brunner the poets tapping into this subgenre may well be unconscious of its cultural work, the conscious effort of American poets to connect with one another in shared cultural and political enterprise is the subject of Cary Nelson's *Revolutionary Memory*. The first half of Nelson's book takes much the same approach to Left-affiliated writers as Wald does, emphasizing individual biography as a means to humanize poets whose radical affiliations have been stereotyped and dismissed. (Fuss, in contrast, explores biography but conceals such affiliations.) Then, in the second half of the book, Nelson emphatically asserts the shared cultural and political projects of Left-wing poets of the 1930s, and not only by detailing the social commitments of Tillie Olsen, Alvah Bessie, Langston Hughes, and other modern poets but also by showing how the 1930s poetry of the Left, produced by scores of poets, comprises a "poetry chorus." The collective vision of a radically transformed society is so coherent and unified that Nelson can cut and paste dozens of poems—he does this quite literally—and assemble them into two coherent, compelling, collage poems, the first exclusively by American poets from the 1930s, the second an elegy for Federico Garcia Lorca by an international cast of Spanish Civil War poets. Another recent, major publication by Nelson, his *Oxford Anthology of Modern American Poetry*, facilitates further work in this area, as he includes a generous share of radical poets among his selections and notes the

progressive political commitments held by many of the canonical poets. That poetic collectives have been the work not only of the Left is shown, moreover, by two amazing groups of poems in Nelson's *Anthology*: haiku by Japanese-American poets interred in detention camps during World War II; and poetry written between 1910 and 1940 by Chinese immigrants detained on Angel Island, San Francisco Bay, while awaiting entry into (or deportation from) the United States.

Poetry about U.S. concentration camps and American hostility toward new immigrants takes on special relevance in the current political and social climate. It would be surprising if new chapters in the history of American poetry were *not* being written today in the Guantanamo Bay camps and in Hispanic-American communities on both sides of the U.S.-Mexican border. The possibility that poetry might function as a channel for national grief and an outlet for anger was also displayed in the many public recitations, web pages, and print publications that accomplished these tasks in the months after 9/11. More controversially, the First Lady's naive understanding of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson as non-political provided an opening in early 2003 for Sam Hamill and other poets to use National Poetry Day as an occasion to express collective, poetic outrage against the U.S.'s impending invasion of Iraq. Some of the productions of these poets are collected in print in *Poets Against the War*; many thousands of others were entered into the congressional record by sympathetic legislators. Such gestures of resistance suggest that we may not yet have re-entered an era in which dissent must be encoded, as Brunner asserts about Cold War poetry. To keep this so, however, we need more poets like those organized by Poets Against the War, now an organization as well as a publication venture. Their kind of collective protest literature is what American critics should be discussing—and themselves producing.

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## Barrett Watten

In the most provocative new writing on poetics, there is a sense that the form as well as the content of critical writing must be informed by the agency and the cultural moment of the work it takes up. In a shift away from the discursive epistemes and reception aesthetics that have dominated Cultural Studies, we are witnessing a valorization of cultural agency that identifies possibilities of intervention, as Charles Olson wrote, with “radical structural means.” The resulting opening to a poetics of criticism has been a long time coming: after the major tradition of writings on poetics by modernist and postmodern authors (from Laura Riding, Robert Creeley, Amiri Baraka, to Jackson Mac Low) who incorporated statements on poetics as part of their rethinking of literary form, and later with the three-decades-long development of language-centered poetics. At this juncture, however, the increasingly populated field of poetics is faced with some serious questions about the nature of its specific genre. What kind of literary and cultural work does poetics do, if it is not simply confined to the defense of poetry or the valorization of authors? Do we see a coherent methodology or reproducible pedagogy developing from this genre, beyond the bicoastal centers of poetic activity modeled after the traditional avant-garde? Finally, what are the larger intellectual stakes of a move to more producer-centered, radically formalist, and ideologically critical engagements that take as their models the forms and social formations of the contemporary avant-garde? The authors under consideration here, each represented by their first books, show that the poetics of the avant-garde does lead to new modes of critical agency, if it is willing to take up larger cultural arguments.

Sianne Ngai’s *Ugly Feelings* is first and foremost a contribution to the booming sub-field of “affect theory,” after Sylvan Tomkins, Brian Massumi, and Eve Sedgwick, even as it sees its reflection on the nature of the affections as tied directly to its series of examples, ranging from Melville and the Harlem Renaissance to Hitchcock, Claymation animation, and, by no means least, the language-centered avant-garde. Indeed, it was the exemplary negativity of Language poet Bruce Andrews that led Ngai to an early formulation of the centrality of the affect of *disgust* in his work, identifying a “negative passion” that traditional aesthetics, from Kant to Adorno, explicitly bracketed. For Ngai, excluded negativity has proved to be the royal road to the affects — rather than any simple positive description of the major or “minor” passions in the long tradition after Aristotle (which is still invoked at moments of contrastive relevance). Following the lead of Adorno’s valorization of displeasure for aesthetic form (especially atonality and the refusal of closure), Ngai identifies a series of punctual or continuous negative passions around which she constructs critical interventions into the nature of cultural agency. It is important for the payoff of her arguments that her phenomenology of minor affects (namely *tone*, *animatedness*, *envy*, *irritation*, *anxiety*, *stuplimity*, *paranoia*, and *disgust*) is taken up in relation to ideology, race, and gender as much as aesthetics — either traditional or avant-garde. The affects are neither positive nor equivalent in nature, and Ngai makes no claims to a comprehensive account of the nature of affectivity per se, as if the affects could be divorced from their specific instances or contexts. Something like a counter-hegemonic formation of affects is the result, in which the

linking of negative and minor passions opens a space for a more comprehensive critique. The negative and minor passions, it turns out, are important for a politics of the ways in which deformed ideologies—the “damaged life” Adorno described in mass-culture America—are experienced in embodied terms.

Affect, then, is the site of inscription of ideology; the evidence is in the diversity of its examples, in which each affect, so described, is characteristic of a “cultural logic.” In Ngai’s account of *tone*, for example, a baseline or ground of sensory, affective experience becomes the carrier frequency of ideology itself—analyzed through a brilliant reading of the discontinuities and simulacra of Melville’s *The Confidence Man*. The questions that begin Ngai’s investigation—“How does one go about creating a ‘fake’ feeling? And to what uses might an artfully created feeling be put?” (38)—might be addressed to radical postmodern poetics just as much as to the manipulations of the Culture Industry. The figure of the Confidence Man, as endless fabulator of empty content and non sequiturs, turns out to be the problem of democracy in its will toward crypto-authoritarianism. At the same time, it is the aesthetic “amplification” of the underlying pathology of the Confidence Man’s refusal of content that does the real ideological work; Ngai sees a common strategy here for all tricksters of language, whether aesthetic or political. But rather than denigrating the aesthetic as merely the avoidance of the political, Ngai shows that it is precisely through such deformations of sensed experience in mediated forms that ideology is to be countered. In unlinking the metaphysics of presence, as may be reinvested through “sympathy” and “projection,” Ngai turns the negative dialectics of the avant-garde to political use. Her examples, then, continue to be those affects in which some form of discomfort, uncertainty, misidentification, projection, overload, or dissociation are presented to conscious experience; rather than being merely “minor” passions, such unsettling aspects of experience are the sites where ideology can be known in its effects. As is true of irritating radio programming, “the hits keep coming,” leading to one revelatory unmasking of negative states of feeling, in and as cultural logic, after another—ending with a grand explication of that most common of all negative affects, *paranoia*, which Ngai describes in terms of its gendered politics through the hyperattention to language of contemporary avant-garde women writers. Example comes full circle here, in the production of the legitimating discourses that produce the deformations of exemplarity.

Fred Moten’s *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* is a magisterial book-length account of a single negative affect: the inscription of racial violence onto cultural forms that can only represent it *in absentia*. As with Amiri Baraka’s concept of “the changing same,” Moten’s study—a series of essays on aspects of the African-American avant-garde ranging from Duke Ellington to Nathaniel Mackey and Adrian Piper—is a worked demonstration of cultural logics seen through a series of changes. As such, the various components of his account, much like the counter-hegemonic forms of Ngai’s study of affects, reconstitute a unified affect of emotional solidarity through the latitudes and dissonances of its engagements. Much like the kinds of jazz improvisation that form the baseline affective continuity of Moten’s deconstructive critique, the work hovers around the “break” between one form, genre, sonic or visual register and another. This

break becomes the site of inscription of ideology in the moment of violence: the organizing anecdote of Moten's retelling of the founding moment of Aunt Hester's scream from Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*. A curious distance marks this retelling, as Moten quotes an analysis by Saidiya Hartman that is several times longer than the original passage, and then elaborates even more fully on it. It is this drawing out of the sound of the retelling of what originally was a visual moment—the traumatic witnessing of the beating for the young Douglass—that gives the operative rule for Moten's further elaborations, which like a saxophone solo by Albert Ayler keeps on repeating until we get it, until we *hear* that what we are *seeing* is not adequately to be understood as such, the extent of injury is so much more profound. In the single most moving account of the book, the discussion of the murder and disfiguring of Emmett Till, the photograph of Till's corpse is worked as a cultural moment until we can only feel what its absence cannot represent. "And so this photography—or, more precisely, the natural and unnatural fact that is photographed and displayed—cannot be simply used as an inarticulate denial of an always and necessarily false universality" (209). The particularity of affect substitutes for a failed acknowledgment of human Right.

It should be perfectly clear, from the discussion of both Ngai's and Moten's work, why the aesthetic—and more particularly, the poetic—is necessary for any political claim, either the overarchingly singular one of racial denial or a constructed series of relations between class, race, and gender (and Ngai and Moten both work between these poles). I want to specifically focus here on the ways in which the exemplarity of the avant-garde—the many instances of language-centered writing in Ngai; the black avant-garde tradition centered primarily on improvisatory jazz for Moten—is necessary as well. For Ngai, the avant-garde's necessity is the way in which, often contrary to its stated intentions, it creates affects that may be read as political indices. Gertrude Stein's boast to write a history of "everyone who was ever living" actually yields an affect of what Ngai calls "stuplimity" in the excessive overload of her massive prose, and this is the real conveyor of its ideological power. The critic, then, is a necessary complement to avant-garde practice in drawing out the politics of feeling it performs, the way it sites its refusal. Moten's tack is to more clearly identify as critic with black cultural production, but at the same time to take on its burden of being caught within emotional logics it did not entirely create—else it would have to admit being the cause of its own violence, which is nonsense. The black author (poet, soloist, performance artist, media figure as well as critic) is thus caught in a labyrinth of feeling; it is his or her responsibility to comprehend this feeling as the moment in which the other is brought forcefully into the self (the moment when Aunt Hester is being beaten). Nathaniel Mackey, of course, has written precisely on this moment in his "Other: From Noun to Verb," citing the remark of a jazz improviser that, in his music, he was so "outside" he was not really sure if he was there anymore. Something like a ventriloquism of the outside characterizes Moten's most inspired writing; working through cultural figures who have anything but common cultural sources (Shakespeare, Heidegger, Derrida, Joel Fineman), he extends his discussion—even at times to the point of breakdown or overkill—to the point that its alienating otherness just is the elaboration of the



denial that concerns him. This is truly the moment where *ekphrasis* becomes sound. Performatively, this is a hard act to pull off and be convincing, as it is here: the felt extension of his elaborations is Moten's figure for a temporally unfolding, heroic counter-discourse.

Ben Friedlander's *Simulcast: Four Experiments in Criticism* is one of the few works of literary criticism to have been produced over the past half century that may be claimed to be entirely radical. It is, as well, unique—there has never been a book like this, and there may never be another one. Where Friedlander departs from the lineage of poetics that inspired him—Olson's *Call Me Ishmael* and Robert Creeley's *A Quick Graph* as well as Susan Howe's *My Emily Dickinson* and my own *Total Syntax*—is his deliberate turn to regression and inauthenticity, and his use of a range of “minor literatures” unimaginable by his forebears, as sites for intervention. This is a project that takes the notion of postmodern construction to a deliberate extreme, often fabricating out of whole cloth or plagiarizing from readily traceable sources the shape of arguments that could as easily be ripped out of one context as authored out of another. The poetics of cultural othering as an enactment of authenticity in Moten's work is inverted and parodied here: Friedlander attempts, in the name of literary tradition, to overturn anything remotely resembling Ezra Pound's canonical figure of “a man standing by his word.” He may, in this sense, be doing the dirty work of his forefathers in concentrating the force of his inauthentic critique on the writings of his immediate predecessors, but this too becomes part of a cultural logic in which “a map of misreading” is the only possible form of cultural transmission. What connects Friedlander to Ngai and Moten is his use of negativity as a constructive device, used to fabricate a vehicle for postmodern agency, but his negativity is in the space opened up by the flagrant use of appropriation and pastiche as strategies for both generating and denying new meaning. But that is not the end of Friedlander's cultural logic: at stake is the poetics of literary transmission, the father-to-son hierarchy that generates Symbolic Order but also the fear of castration common to all plagiarists.

In the first of his four literary experiments, “The Anti-Hegemony Project,” Friedlander reprints (in a non-proportional junk typeface) a series of e-mail messages to the Poetics Listserv, complete with unreadable headers and intrusive carets, that were originally posted as a hoax, and which tended to parody or discredit members of the poetics community, especially those with a certain degree of “rank.” “‘It's that damned old boys network,’ says Education Minister Susan Howe. ‘Not that I have anything against old boys. But enough's enough’” (87); “This time he has a reason to leap. / Watten, the killer whale made famous by the film ‘Free Barry,’ is heading toward a new home in Michigan and eventual freedom, his owners announced yesterday” (94). One can only speculate on the results of this method being applied to Gertrude Stein or T. S. Eliot; something of postmodern authorship seems destined to end in Friedlander's willful dismantling, in which the deliberate emptying out of authority must accompany any reconstruction of the author. This emptying out of the true vessel of literature and refilling with simulacral contents (identified as “the American tradition” and “the contemporary scene”) continues in Friedlander's next two experiments: the rewriting of Edgar Allan Poe's literary re-

views and “Literati of New York City,” published in *Godey’s Lady’s Book* in 1846, by mapping them onto reviews and personal accounts of the Language scene, focusing on San Francisco in the 1980s. Framed by a preface in which all aspects of his decision structure are dotingly elaborated—by which the source text is transformed, sentence by sentence, into a send-up of one member of the community or another—Friedlander trades on real-time humiliation and vendetta for the “gold of time,” which can only be known in its effects. In real time, however, words still have their affects: these pseudo-reviews scarcely mask their often vicious competitive investments in the regressive pleasures of the game. One can only compare the stakes of Friedlander’s literary theft with Moten’s improvisation as a cultural logic: for Friedlander, the empty undermining of both present and past is the risk that must be posed for anything genuine to come next, while for Moten there is a direct claim of a cultural politics in the avant-garde tradition. The capstone of Friedlander’s game is the final project, a rewriting of Jean Wahl’s *A Short History of Existentialism* as “A Short History of Language Poetry” that maps Wahl’s account of Heidegger, Jaspers, Kierkegaard, and Sartre onto key players of the Language school. As I am one of them, and since I helped bring into print an earlier version of the essay in an issue of the Berkeley journal *Qui Parle*, it would be the height of simulacral indulgence to comment further. I will merely state for the record that, however truly irritating this project seemed to me, however open to the vagaries of human vanity with no guarantee of amelioration, it is brilliant work. It also by far the best account of the inner workings of Language poetry to be written by one who was not a direct participant, even more remarkable granted the aleatorical method. The Pandora’s Box or self-critical abyss that it opens is entirely the author’s inheritance, and since this is what he hoped for all along, we can only hope that his next work will either redeem or damn to hell the misbegotten temerity of his hubris. In Friedlander’s pastiche, the poetics of empty signification has clearly reached a culminating point—founded as it is on a culturally conservative logic of guilt for generation.

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