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**THE CENTER OF ALL BEAUTY:
RADICAL DEMOCRACY, MATERIALITY, AND THE POETIC SUBJECT
IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN POETRY**

by

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DISSERTATION

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PREFACE

Epigraph:

Autobiographia Literaria

When I was a child
I played by myself in a
corner of the schoolyard
all alone.

I hated dolls and I
hated games, animals were
not friendly and birds
flew away.

If anyone was looking
for me I hid behind a
tree and cried out "I am
an orphan."

And here I am, the
center of all beauty!
writing these poems!
Imagine!

(Frank O'Hara *Collected Poems* 11)

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INTRODUCTION

William Carlos Williams's famous dictum "no ideas but in things" appears three times in the short 1927 version of his poem "Paterson." There, it is an exhortation: "Say it! No ideas but in things" (Williams *Collected* 264). While the phrase has often been taken up as a stylistic or philosophical directive about how writers should aim for objective description of objects as a way to purify writing of romantic excess, that really only captures a way the statement can be taken to be synonymous with something like the ethos of Imagism, or with Ezra Pound's own rule, "direct treatment of the thing." In "Paterson," though, the concern is not how the writer should treat the things, but how ideas are in them. And while some of the things in "Paterson" are "snow and grass," the things are more precisely "in the pause between / snow and grass in the parks and at the street ends," they are a river that "comes pouring in above the city / and crashes from the edge of the gorge / in a recoil of spray and rainbow mists...and factories crystallized from its force" (263-64). These are things, in other words, whose ideas are in the way they exist at the meeting of natural and constructed, natural and social. Immediately after the third ringing of the theme, the speaker of the poem asks, "Who are these people (how complex / this mathematic) among whom I see myself / in the regularly ordered plateglass of / his thoughts," where "his" refers to "Mr. Paterson." The city, perhaps. Perhaps the poem. The speaker situates himself among the people who compose the thoughts of Paterson, who themselves are their own complex mathematic, in order to see himself. He sees himself as part of that thought, an instance of "the divisions and imbalances / of his whole concept" (265-66). Within the poem, "no ideas but in things" is an argument that the "I" of the poem can only really be seen when

understood as an expression of the material conditions that compose the social world within which the “I” is situated. To “say it” is to make this fact perceptible.

A casual reading of Frank O’Hara’s “Autobiographia Literaria,” the epigraph to this dissertation, might read the poem as having an opposite movement from that of “Paterson.” O’Hara’s speaker isolates himself from the material and social world around him, and in arriving at that point of isolation, begins “writing these poems” (O’Hara *Collected* 11). However, such a reading would render the poem inconsistent with the rest of O’Hara’s work, which is often most notable for how thoroughly aware it is of itself as being socially embedded, and especially embedded within an urban landscape. O’Hara is not a poet of isolation, which suggests that we should look for something else in “Autobiographia Literaria.” In removing himself from the material of his childhood, O’Hara’s speaker doesn’t free himself from a world around him that he had previously understood to be hostile. Instead, he changes his orientation within that system from a passive shielding of himself to a creative projection of himself. In “writing these poems,” he becomes “the / center of all beauty!” I would argue that the poem is an argument about how, through a process of creative subjectivization, the poetic subject’s situation within a set of material conditions becomes the perceptible subject of a poetics. The poet makes use of poetry as a way of training their self into an active stance toward the conditions of their existence.

It is in the pause between these two poems that this dissertation its point of inquiry. Between Williams’s “Say it! No ideas but in things,” as a procedure for making visible the ways in which the poetic subject is constructed by the material and social conditions of the world in which it finds itself, and O’Hara’s poetic subject’s declaration to be “the / center of

all beauty!” I argue we find the founding of a poetics based in making use of the activity of poetry as a way for the poetic subject to investigate the material conditions of their own existence. This investigation allows poetry to become a process for developing critical knowledge of the poetic subject’s material and social world, and in doing so, opens up the possibility of the poetic subject enacting a creative orientation toward those conditions. Poetry, according to this poetics, becomes a self-pedagogical tool. Poetry becomes part of a process for training the poetic subject to function as an active site for the production of critical knowledge about the material conditions of the poet’s existence, both as an individual self and as a part of an ongoing social world.

In the following pages, I make the case for a strain of poetics in twentieth-century American poetry that has made use of poetry as a tool for the self-pedagogy of the poetic subject toward a critical knowledge of life as a set of material conditions. This poetics entails a radically democratic project insofar as, in order to make poetry available as a tool any subject can avail themselves of for critical knowledge, it consistently aims to strip away or invalidate whatever qualifications are supposed to exist for an individual to have access to poetry as a practice. It is also materialist in that it understands poetry as a practice for engaging a subject in a materially situated investigation of the conditions of their own existence, a process that renders those conditions perceptible and therefore subject to critique, rather than aiming at any kind of transcendental or totalizing awareness through which a subject arrives at an elevated or ideal positive knowledge. Chapter 1 outlines how this radically democratic and materialist project takes shape in the poetics of Williams. Chapter 2 moves into the ways O’Hara’s poetics renders social relations visible as part of

this project's materialism, in his case as material for the critical investigation and creative articulation of an oppositional social formation. The poetics I outline holds poetry's value to lie in its use for generating a critical knowledge that arises from within the grounds of its own investigation, which makes poetry a site for developing critique that also functions very differently from a critique which begins by imagining the remove of an outside, potentially objective, critical position. In calling attention to the way this poetics is self-pedagogical, I mean to suggest that it understands poetry as part of a process through which an individual sets themselves in a particular relation to the material world they encounter such that the conditions for production of the self and the social become visible and thereby available for interrogation or critique. In chapter 3, this aspect of the poetics becomes especially pronounced in the 1970s poetry of Alice Notley, as she elaborates a poetry constructed with the relations that compose the domestic situation of her poetic subject, making visible the mystified demands for labor the situation insistently places her under. In chapter 4, likewise, I argue that a poetics focused on critical interrogation of the materiality of the poetic subject is necessary for understanding the political critique Amiri Baraka's early poetry begins to develop. The poetics I outline is self-pedagogical in that poetry as part of this process allows the poetic subject to reorient their position as an individual with respect to the sort of self the material conditions of their life has produced, which is the direction chapter 4 sees Baraka's later poetry moving, but ultimately I argue the value of this process is in the way it renders the relation of poetic subject to their material conditions available for critique, rather than in creating the possibility for arriving at a new or better integrated self. This poetics holds poetry to be valuable in its use for engaging in moments of critique—critical

knowledge not as positive value gained, but as a making visible of the constructedness of social relations under material conditions that are mystified or treated as unsuitable for investigation under ordinary conditions of life.

This study begins with the work of William Carlos Williams, particularly the poetry and poetics arguments of his 1923 book *Spring and All*. In taking this as its starting point, the study begins at the specific turning point of an argument within the development of American modernism, the significance of whose consequences, I argue, has been largely under recognized. *Spring and All* was written and published on the heels of the publication of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, a work that, as no shortage of critics have pointed out, Williams called "the great catastrophe of our letters" (*Autobiography* 146). While *The Waste Land* may have been the specific object of Williams's ire, it is indicative of a deeper ideological difference that was developing between Williams and his contemporaries like Eliot and Ezra Pound. Specifically, as I show in chapter 1, *Spring and All* stands in opposition to a poetics that seeks to justify its authority according to the sagacity of its author and the selectiveness of its qualifications.¹ To push against this, Williams developed an argument for, and attempted to enact a poetics that functioned by, undercutting the value of any claims to special qualification and of any extent to which poetry was supposed to elevate the poet to a special level of greater wisdom. The result is a poetry that is useful in demonstrating how the poetic subject can make use of poetry to deny the power of authority in determining what sort of self the subject might potentially resolve into.

As Walter Benn Michaels has shown, this project results for Williams in "a distinctively American aesthetic." But, also as Michaels claims, 'American' here means, for

Williams, “the mark of its existence as a ‘separate,’ ‘complete,’ ‘independent’ entity . . . by eliminating the appeal to any external criteria of justification” (76). That is, ‘American’ does not necessarily refer to any specific national attribute, but is a way of marking Williams’s poetics off from, of distinguishing its aim from, the poetics he aims to counter.² As an anti-authoritarian poetics, it entails the beginnings of a poetry that asks a reader not to treat the poem as a closed site of meaning they are supposed to subject themselves to in order to be given an authoritative understanding. Instead, the poetry stands as an activity the reader should use as a model, and by following this model the reader/poet is not supposed to gain a higher level of knowledge but can potentially realize a changed relation to the material of their poetic investigation.

When Williams writes about “[t]he universality of things” that “draws” his attention to the objects littered around his desk, or when he writes about “[t]he supreme importance / of this nameless spectacle” of what he happens to see when he drives his car around town one afternoon, in some ways the point is to justify the inclusion of each of these incidental images or objects in the poem, demonstrating the method by which he composed the poem (*Spring and All* 45-46). That is, they belong in the poem because they are what he happened to encounter when he decided to record his experience of a particular place and period of time. And that there is nothing else notable about the place or period of time indicates that their inclusion is justified entirely by his decision. The particular objects could just as easily be whatever else might have happened to be there, and it could just as easily have been any other person, in any other place or time, making the decision. To read the poem and understand its significance, the reader recognizes the possibility that they could perform

exactly this process if they were to make the decision to do so. In other words, while the poem is composed from each of these radical particulars, if the poem is *about* anything, it is about how Williams uses the method by which he composes the poem as a means to change his relation to the experience the poem records. The experience doesn't pass him by or form the background upon which a significant moment will play out. Instead, the experience becomes the activity of recording the experience itself, and his relation, as the poetic subject, toward the material of experience, becomes one of creative investigation. The way the poem matters for a reader entails the possibility of realizing that changed relation for oneself. To interpret the poems one both has to read them as self-justifying aesthetic objects, making an argument about the sufficiency of everyday objects and experiences for artistic investigation, and as something like poetic instructions, making a claim about how the poetic subject can make use of a method of attention for the purpose of attaining a level of freedom (as Williams would have it) or critical knowledge (as I would argue it's better understood) with respect to the material experience the poetic subject inhabits.

What has been overlooked about this, and what I aim to demonstrate, is the extent to which Williams's argument with his fellow American modernists results in a significant branching off of this poetic project into a specific direction. This turn opened up the possibility of the poetics my project describes in a way that was used and developed by later poets and that does not fall under previous definitions of modernism. That Williams was a particularly influential poet for later American poets has, of course, not gone unremarked. But what my project shows is that the specific ways this aspect of Williams's poetics was useful for the other poets I discuss here amounts to the development of a use for poetics as

a site of politics that we have to understand outside of the conventional narrative of modernist aesthetics giving way to postmodernist adjustments of that aesthetics. Ultimately, it is a poetics that aims for the actualization of a radically democratic site of critical discourse that needs to be understood on its own terms.

The element of Williams's poetics that marks the first step of this study, and that the other poets in this study refer back to, is the way it finds this active relationship between the poetic subject and the creation of poetry on the relationship of any individual to what they perceive about their own experience of the world around them. As Notley puts it in *Dr. Williams' Heiresses*, "It's because of Williams that you can include everything that's things . . . if you are only up to noticing everything that your life does include" (4). This is not a principle that revolves around being swept up in any kind of democratic spirit or sense of a historical moment in which the American, as everyman, is primed to take center stage in the drama of the world's soul. It is not even a celebration of anything. Instead, it's an argument that in poetry there is a democratic potential that comes from removing all qualifications surrounding how the poet is supposed to approach the world of things and asserting that poetry begins with the fact that the poet approaches a world. Whatever world whatever poetic subject encounters can be included, and in being included becomes an active site of poetic investigation. "No ideas but in things," but the things can be any things you have access to, and any things can be used to construct real ideas.

It is of course worth cautioning that this is a democratic poetics that is potential rather than actual, and the difficulties that arise from the dialectic between potential and actual make up much of the content of the final three chapters. But I argue the potential here is

thoroughly radical, and that this radical potential is the value of Williams's moment and the value of his poetics to later poets. Because of the ways Williams articulated his ideas in a loose, improvisational style, because of the time period from which his most relevant poetics writings were written, and because of the ways ideas like "freedom" and "equality" have been thoroughly absorbed and distorted by ostensibly democratic institutions and media, it would be easy to overlook the radically democratic potential at the heart of Williams's poetics. But I argue for the importance of emphasizing the radical potential here because it gives us a clear way of seeing just how this relation between poetic subject and material opens up possibilities for other writers at the same time that it helps us understand the significance of the limitations those writers encounter.

The other poets covered in this dissertation—Frank O'Hara, Alice Notley, and Amiri Baraka—all, in various ways, articulate a sense that Williams's poetry opened up the process of writing for them in this way. Additionally, Baraka and Notley both make similar claims about the significance of the work of Frank O'Hara to them. What Baraka and Notley take from Williams and O'Hara is the permission that they need seek no outside qualification in order to begin to make poetry out of whatever material they have at hand—the material and social world they encounter in their everyday life, the vocabulary that makes up the social and material conditions of their experience. But as these poets develop and make use of poetry as this self-pedagogical tool for situations and lives ever further from that of a highly educated, white, upper middle-class doctor like Williams, the poets have to learn to reshape this poetics in more sharply political ways. That is, Williams begins his poetic project occupying a subject position that allows him to move about his world without very often

having his qualifications called into question. So while his poetry functions by demonstrating how poetry can enact such a freedom for a poetic subject, he is subject to relatively little challenge to his claim to be qualified to speak. For the other poets this dissertation covers, the challenge of the poetics is partially in declaring an unqualified speech from a position whose qualifications are more actively in question in their everyday existence. For O'Hara, this is a matter of the extent to which he can claim a freedom to move within and interact with his world without restriction as an out gay man, and particularly how to construct a poetics from the material of an unabashedly queer, anti-heteronormative, sociality. For Notley it is a matter of how to declare an equal social footing that begins from her social status as the wife of an established male poet and the mother of their children.³ And for Baraka it is the problem of how to declare the possibility of speaking without qualification as a Black poetic subject engaged in the struggle for African-American liberation without seeking the invisible qualification that such a declaration should begin in an attempt to transcend or disavow Blackness. The upshot is that in these latter poets we see how this mode of poetry comes to function not only as a tool for participating in the further opening up of a kind of aesthetic democracy, but how it necessarily comes to entail an effort to make visible the material conditions that block such a theoretical openness from actually existing. And in Baraka's case, it becomes a matter of working out how to make poetry a tool for training the poetic subject into a potentially revolutionary subject.

Reading these poets in this way, for how they understand the work of other poets to have opened up possibilities for them and for how they work through those possibilities and, in running up against the obstacles of new material situations, have to rework their approach,

I am not reading the work to develop a critical interpretation of meaning. Rather, I am reading the work to try to tease out how the work participates in an ongoing development of a poetics. I take Barrett Watten's definition of poetics as instructive: "Poetics is a discourse of the making of the work in its condition of possibility" ("Poetics" 84). The poets and work this project considers are engaged in a tradition that thinks of poetry itself as producing a discourse that makes visible the conditions of possibility for participating in that discourse. Williams functions effectively as the place where this study begins because, as Watten writes, "for Williams . . . the world has always been the ground of its own transformation" (97). In articulating a process through which the writer brings their materially situated subject into a constellation of terms along with the material world they encounter, the language they have available to them, and the conditions of possibility for the production of poetry, Williams generates a poetics that he wants to function as the ground of its own transformation. This is a possibility each of the poets my project considers pick up, and the process of working through how their poetics might function as the ground of its transformation becomes the central problem I tease out in each chapter.

In highlighting the significance of this branch of American poetics in the twentieth century, I am participating in a current rethinking of the meaning and function of American modernist and postmodernist poetics and aesthetics. One line of this rethinking can be seen in studies highlighting the importance of pragmatism to certain American modernists, and the consequent difference of their project from conventional histories of the avant-garde. For example, Robin Veder, in *The Living Line*, highlights how, for the American Pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, "a successful aesthetic experience achieved physiological and

psychological integration” (316), and thus, for Dewey, one of modern art’s functions is to reorient a viewer or experiencer of art toward the increasingly strange and overwhelming material of modern life. “[A]rt appreciation,” then, “was a matter of kinesthetic training” that is supposed to train the individual’s body to feel fit, via a process of disorientation and then reorientation, for a world that is throwing ever newer and stranger experiences at them (317). For Veder, building out from Dewey, the modernist relation of art to experience tends toward an effort of reintegrating the subject’s awareness with their bodily experience as a way of undoing the damage of modern alienation from experience. This is likewise Lisi Schoenbach’s argument in *Pragmatic Modernism* about how modernism aims to reorient our experience of modern. Schoenbach argues that “the problem of habit” is at the center of what she calls pragmatic modernism, which holds that “our dependence on shock to stay awake, alive, and critically engaged has led us to become mere bystanders to history, waiting for outside forces to do the work of political reform that we should be doing ourselves” (30). The means to solve this problem, for Pragmatists, comes from trying to harness the potential of habit, since “[h]abit furnishes the necessary foundation of our identities and, far from being the enemy of creative thought, underwrites and enables all truly innovative thought and action” (6). The aim of pragmatic modernism is for the “reintegration or recontextualization of released energies back into the social fabric” (8). These efforts at rethinking modernism ultimately aim to highlight how some strains of modernist art and literature, rather than being concerned with representations of or embodiments of disorientation and alienation, have instead aimed to bring modern and contemporary subjects into a reintegration of experience and subjectivity. This is where my project differs most

significantly from the pragmatist critics. The poetics I outline ultimately tends, I argue, toward a critical knowledge of the material construction of subjectivity, a critical knowledge that both participates in an ongoing investigation and rearticulation of subjectivity within the material conditions the poet encounters and opens up the possibility of a creative resistance to determination or domination by those same conditions.

What precisely this critical knowledge amounts to differs in each instance. For Williams, as I show in chapter 1, the ultimate aim of this poetics is to be a means by which the poetic subject might arrive at a kind of freedom. Freedom, for Williams, means freedom from having one's ideas and experience dominated by the ideas or mediation of others—specifically, by authorities occupying positions of power or by the ideas of the past that have hardened into convention. Built into this idea is the understanding that the imitation of language and ideas serves to maintain the power of those who are attributed ownership of the ideas over those who are subject to those ideas. This is why it is important, to Williams, for the poetic subject to begin with one's direct or immediate experience as the ground for poetics—in Williams's thinking, to be grounded in immediate experience situates a poetics in relation to material that has not already been subject to the mediation of conventional ideas or authority. For a poetic subject to take any material at hand is a level of freedom from conventional or authoritative dictates about what the poetic subject is allowed to take up in poetic investigation, and to make use of the immediate language the poetic subject has access to is a level of freedom from how poetic convention or authority dictates the ways the poetic subject is allowed to speak. In Williams's thinking, from the point at which the poetic subject is able to realize their self in relation to the material of immediate experience, the poetic

subject might achieve a freedom to determine, for their own self, their relation to the material reality they inhabit. This is the possibility of a transformation of the poetic subject within the ground that subject arises from, and critical knowledge, at this point, amounts to a means by which the poetic subject can realize resistance to domination by authority.

The major development of this poetics I focus on in O'Hara's work is that he brings social relations into the purview of this poetics. That is, more than the individual poetic subject focusing on the material objects around them, O'Hara treats the social relations the poetic subject exists within as material for his poetics. In some sense, this is founded on a similar idea about how the material of immediate experience frees the subject from the dictates of convention or authority. O'Hara makes the kinship and queer relationality of his social world the ground of his poetics, which amounts to a challenge to the conventional or authoritarian demands about how social relations should look and function within a heteronormative, capitalist society. While this points toward the possibility of freedom from being determined by the dictates of convention or authority, because it is a socially embedded situating of this poetics, it ends up pointing toward something other than the autonomous freedom of the individual to determine their own situation. Instead, O'Hara ends up pointing toward a dependent, collaborative freedom, a freedom for the participants in a social formation to affect and determine for themselves the terms of their relationality. In order for such a relationality not to introduce or reproduce forms of authority, this relationality has to understand itself as fundamentally contentious, a situation of ongoing argument that can never be settled into a fixed form. Each member of the relation engages on equal footing, but the point is not to aim for synthesizing a consensus, but keeping the

relation open to ongoing dissensus. In this way, it can potentially operate as a social formation that is fundamentally oppositional to dominant or authoritarian levels of sociality at the same time that it refuses to resolve into a fixed political bloc. O'Hara's contribution to this poetics renders social relations perceptible for critical investigation and rearticulation, insisting on a poetic subject that can only be articulated as part of a system of social relations and that, in composing that articulation, is never determined by them but is creatively and critically engaged in their ongoing composition.

While this critical knowledge of the material construction of subjectivity, for both O'Hara and Williams, points to a potential freedom, Notley and Baraka both run up against limitations of that freedom. Notley, in her poetry of the 1970s, engages in a process that models itself closely after both Williams and O'Hara, attempting to define a poetic subject from the material of her domestic life, articulating a collaborative poetic speech composed from the relations between herself, her children, and her husband, the poet Ted Berrigan. However, where this would, according to the poetics of Williams and O'Hara, open up into possibilities of subjective freedom, the system of relations Notley specifically attempts to articulate her poetics through are not equal relations. The demands for domestic labor that are built into this system of relations are mystified, and the critical knowledge Notley's poetry arrives at amounts to a demystification of how thoroughly inflected by demands for unrecognized labor are the relations that participate in the construction of this subject. For Baraka, the situation is similar, though the particulars are different. Baraka begins his poetic career within a social and artistic milieu ostensibly open to collaboration. However, Baraka's investigation of the position from which he composes his poetic subject, that of an African-

American bohemian, pushes him to a point that he sees the need for the oppositionality that characterizes his bohemian milieu to take up a more revolutionary charge. He realizes there are historical and material systems engaged in the determination of his subject position that need to be attacked outright for their authority to be diminished. The potential freedom Williams and O'Hara are able to point toward is more definitively proscribed for an African-American subject, partly by the way, as he comes to see it, a prerequisite for participation in this social milieu for an African-American subject is an expectation that he should behave as if he has transcended the history of enslavement and domination that define Black history in the United States. Baraka understands the mandate for transcendence of history to be likewise a fundamental flaw in the Black bourgeoisie's program for liberation, and as he investigates the construction of a creative Black subjectivity more intensely, he begins to push toward a poetic subject who articulates themselves using the material of history rather than by trying to disregard it. Baraka begins to see his recognition of this fact, and his compatriots' resistance to it, as constitutive of the difference his poetic subject offers. Baraka's poetic project ultimately comes to center around the twin problems of how to bring a developed historical analysis into contact with a poetic subject constituted through the particulars of their experience, and how to make such an analysis function in such a way that it is within the immediate reach of any subject, rather than subject to the requirements of attaining a specialized vocabulary and level of training.

What we see as this poetics develops across the poetry of the poets I look at here is not, in the end, a reintegration of fractured subjectivity into a whole self. While it is a poetics that begins in the possibility of a poetic subject's creative freedom from domination by

authority, this is not a freedom that assumes a whole, integrated self. Instead, this poetics understands the subject to be at every instant composed within a set of material and social relations. And rather than redounding to an affirmation of the potential participation of ever more and different identities in such a poetic freedom, the critical knowledge of the construction of poetic subjectivity instead arrives at a critique of identity formation at a material level. At least, that is its potential.

Recently, several studies have taken the relation of literature and art to everyday life as their central focus in investigating modernism and postmodernism. Though the concern of everyday life is an important aspect of my project as well, my project differs from these first of all in that I consider the question of everyday life to be a part of the poetics I outline but not necessarily its central aspect. Secondly, these studies tend toward a similar trajectory to the one we see in Schoenbach's pragmatist project, toward the reintegration of a fragmented self. Such a trajectory directs Andrew Epstein's *Attention Equals Life*.⁴ For Epstein, Frank O'Hara's purpose in including mundane and day-to-day experiences in his poetry is an argument that "[t]he everyday is not only full of beauty and meaning; it is also the inescapable, natural foundation of human experience" (2). Epstein locates this tendency specifically in the post-1945 period "as a reaction to the rapid and dislocating cultural, political, and social transformations that characterize this epoch" (3). Similarly, Siobhan Phillips, in *The Poetics of the Everyday*, points to the sense that the modern world has introduced a split in "the link between a creative self and the world it inhabits," suggesting that the "postmodern culture, with its increased emphasis on contingency and indeterminacy, accentuates" this problem (3). Phillips argues that a poetics of "[d]aily experiences places

the personal rounds of habit and routine within the natural returns of sunrise and sunset” such that “ordinary behavior might stage a viable, secular, and democratic response to a dualistic split” (3-4). These approaches set up a poetics of what is understood as the everyday or the use of repetition and habit that is supposed to function by bringing the subject back to some kind of reintegration of self and experience. It is supposed to undo the work of disorientation and alienation that have suddenly exploded in a modern/postmodern world.

In justifying that aim, these approaches all entail the commonplace assumption that modern and postmodern experience has become increasingly fraught and disorientating. There is ample ground for accepting this as something of a consensus understanding of modernity’s relation to experience. Martin Jay begins his study of the category of “experience” in modern life by noting that “observers . . . speak darkly of a crisis in the very possibility of having experiences in the modern world” (2). He cites Benjamin, Adorno, and Peter Bürger, all pointing to concerns about the ways modernity has weakened our connection to experience, or has somehow got in the way of the possibility of authentic experience. Jay also quotes Giorgio Agamben as having more recently argued that “experience has likewise been expropriated” from modern people (2). As a background assumption, however, the lack of specificity in framing this apparent disintegration leads to a similar lack of specificity in precisely what the modern or postmodern desire for reintegration amounts to. Throughout Epstein’s *Attention Equals Life*, he resorts to terms like “devotion” or “desire to restore realness” (10) to describe the ultimate aim of what he calls everyday life poetics’ project of disalienation. He attributes what he argues is a pronounced rise in the predominance of this poetics to a recognition of the fact “that

audiences continually, and increasingly, long for depictions of unadulterated ‘real’ daily life in all its gritty actuality” (29). The historical idea that underlies this line of thinking—that of the increasingly disorienting contemporary world—ultimately ends up treating the effect (disorientation) as if it were the natural result of a phenomenon that is, at most, only tangentially understood as political: the increasing speed and mechanization (or digitization, or virtuality, or however the technologically new is being characterized at the specific historical moment one is talking about) of modern or postmodern life.

In my study, I privilege Henri Lefebvre’s theory of everyday life over other thinkers who have tackled the problem of everyday life and experience. As I demonstrate in more detail later in this introduction and in chapter 3, Lefebvre’s theory begins at a point of articulation of the ways capitalist ideology invents and reinforces an alienation between the subject and our material life. Whether the specific way we experience that alienation feels greater or more intense as the mechanization and computerization of work and life and communication increase, any attempt at reintegration or disalienation has to take into account how this alienation functions in the first place. Lefebvre shows us how capitalist ideology serves to alienate the subject, when operating in a position understood as at the level of everyday life, from both productive activity and historical awareness. It’s not fundamentally a disorientation due to a kind of experiential overload, or a disaffection that stems from a feeling that it’s hard to keep up. It’s precisely, to put it in Lefebvre’s terms, an alienation of the subject’s material, everyday experience from the level of experience that is understood as meaningful or in contact with a greater historical awareness. And this alienation initially serves to reserve the expression and knowledge of meaningful

experiences for the class of exceptional, private individuals who are able to transcend mundane reality, while insisting that the material experiences shared by the collective of ordinary subjects is empty.

While I share Epstein's and Phillips's interest in the proliferation of what Epstein calls everyday life poetics across the twentieth century, ultimately I demonstrate how this poetics begins to function as a site for critical knowledge, by bringing the material reality of the poetic subject's everyday experience into contact with the activity of poetry, rather than as an aesthetic activity that aims to restore those who appreciate it to a kind of subjective wholeness. What my project contributes to the study of everyday life poetics is an understanding of disalienation that doesn't rely on the somewhat foggier notion of a desire for a holistic reintegration of experience. Additionally, if, as is generally assumed to be the case, there is a way in which this sense of alienation increases or becomes more pronounced in the latter half of the twentieth century, we might do better to figure this as the result of the increasing encroachment of work into what is supposed to be non-work time. When even our supposed leisure time, the time not at work that Marx argued is the only time "the worker feels himself" (326), is invaded by the requirements of work brought about by what Jonathan Crary has characterized as 24/7 capitalism, the intensity of a desire to bring the material of everyday experience into contact with activities that produce meaning and awareness might very well grow more acute. But this is a desire that grows from the material (and quite visible) imposition of work demands on ever more of our lives, rather than a desire to rediscover a prelapsarian self that has been disrupted by an increasingly strange world. This is a political, not a spiritual, problem.

My project begins with Williams, where the concern is not the increasing disorientation of the modern world, but how to push poetry to a place that, contra Williams's contemporaries like Eliot and Pound, it is theoretically a mode of experience available to any individual regardless of formal education or position within a social hierarchy—pushing against the notion of poetry as a discourse reserved for exceptional individuals. Additionally, the focus is on how, in order for this to be the case, poetry must be an activity that engages whatever material the poetic subject experiences using the language of the subject's experience. That is, at work in Williams's poetics is a fundamentally political argument, rather than an affective or existential effect.

To a greater degree than other studies that take up the problem of everyday life, my project treats the problem as one that is specifically the result of a capitalist orientation of experience. This enables us to see more clearly defined the parameters of what is considered everyday life and how the materials and experience of time that fall under that category are alienated from meaning. In turn, I am able to show how the poetics I investigate functions to develop a critical knowledge of everyday life rather than a reintegration of experience. My project does this by drawing out significant resonances with the theoretical works of Jacques Rancière and Lefebvre. Rancière's theoretical project is one of the most developed theories of radical democracy, one that also relies on an argument that the aesthetic is fundamentally a site for the contestation and disagreement that constitute politics. Lefebvre's theorization of everyday life comes at an earlier period in the development of critical theory, and though Lefebvre is more comfortable within a Marxist framework than is Rancière, I make use of his writing to supplement and clarify some points that Rancière's theory leaves

unsatisfyingly vague. Because the way I am using their ideas is so important to nearly everything that runs through this project, I am going to take a moment to articulate the theoretical framework I have drawn from them before moving on to a description of the coming chapters.

Rancière’s theoretical project includes a theory of radically democratic politics and a theory of the way aesthetics functions as politics, each of which rely on each other and share some of the same vocabulary, but which nevertheless are rarely treated as constituting part of the same system of thinking. I bridge together these two major poles of Rancière’s work in order to fully articulate what the radical potential of the poetics I am exploring is. And in bringing these together, I also articulate a way this poetics functions materially—in the life and ongoing subjective self-education of the poets I write about—that often appears as only the content or meaning of art and literature in Rancière’s own thinking.

Rancière’s political thought holds that an emancipatory politics—or, more properly, every moment of emancipatory politics—must rise from the baseline of recognizing the equality of any subject whatever. This equality does not refer to an equality of power, but it does not refer to an existential equality that power violates, either. This equality is entailed, in one sense, in a fundamental claim about the equality of intelligences, “that all sentences, and consequently all the intelligences that produce them, are of the same nature,” that, “[t]he same intelligence is at work in all the acts of the human mind” (*Ignorant Schoolmaster* 9, 16). According to Rancière, intelligence is an activity, the activity a subject participates in when they perceive an aspect of their reality and communicate their understanding of it

through some articulation that can be recognized by another subject as meaningful. There is no understanding a subject attains that cannot be attained by any other subject. He writes:

The same intelligence makes nouns and mathematic signs. What's more, it also makes signs and reasonings. There aren't two sorts of minds. There is inequality in the *manifestations* of intelligence, according to the greater or lesser energy communicated to the intelligence by the will for discovering and combining new relations; but there is no hierarchy of *intellectual capacity*. (27, emphasis in the original)

It is of course important to emphasize that this is not a claim about uniformity or that intelligence is experienced in the same way by every individual. Rancière's claim is that there are not superior and inferior intelligences, there are only differences in the way the activity of intelligence is undertaken by different subjects. It's perhaps best to understand this as a claim that overturns the grounds for any insistence that certain classes of individuals possess a level of intelligence which qualifies them to make assertions about understanding reality that other, less intelligent or sensitive or analytic individuals, must accede to for being beyond their grasp. For Rancière, the relation of a subject who has come to understand something to another subject is not to assume the attitude of a higher position that they must raise the other to, but to communicate "the consciousness of what an intelligence can do when it considers itself equal to any other and considers any other equal to itself" (39).⁵

From this assumption about the equality of intelligences flows the claim that any speaking subject is qualified to speak their understanding of the world. According to Rancière, "Everything speaks, everything has a meaning, to the degree that every speech production is assignable to the legitimate expression of a place," and there is "no speech that is not the expression of the life of a place" (*Names of History* 65, 74). Again, this is perhaps best understood as the argument that there are no grounds upon which the speech of any

class of subjects can be said not to be the legitimate expression of the place from which it is uttered, assuming the expression comes from the process of a subject willfully employing intelligence to construct a perception of their world into an honest articulation. There are no special individuals uniquely possessed of the proper sort of speech to describe their world in a way that is out of reach of other individuals, and there is no way of describing a world that is the proper way, invalidating any other form of speech.

It is out of an effort to facilitate the equality of intelligences and kinds of speech that Rancière argues our contemporary understanding of literature as a unique form of discourse comes into being. “Literature,” he writes, “is this new regime of the art of writing in which the writer is anyone at all and the reader anyone at all” (*Politics of Literature* 12). In his formulation, this is the result of how “the modernist paradigm of the arts . . . tries to anchor the autonomy of the arts in their own materiality,” and so inaugurates “[l]iterature, in short, [as] a new system of identification of the art of writing” (*Politics of Literature* 6, 7). In other words, in order for literature to become available as a practice for the speech of any individual, it has to cease to be understood as the domain of expression reserved for what is considered the proper thoughts and feelings of authorized individuals. Literature, as Rancière understands it, “provides a different sensorium, a different way of linking a power to perceptibly affect and a power to signify,” one that is different for whatever individual takes it up as a practice (14). According to this understanding of literature, it

is writing seen as a machine for making life talk, writing at once more mute and more talkative than democratic speech: speech written on the body of things, taken from the sons and daughters of the plebeians; but also speech that is not offered by anyone, that does not answer to any desire for meaning but expresses the truth of things the same way fossils or striations in rock bear

their written history. . . . It is the truth of things as opposed to the chatter and lies of orators. (14)

There's room to quibble with the historicity of Rancière's argument here, but that would be outside the concerns of both my project and his. If literature functions this way, it comes to be a tool theoretically available to any subject for the articulation of their experience—any experience—into an expression of intelligence.

This is how literature works as a contestation against what Rancière calls the distribution of the sensible. The idea of the distribution of the sensible is probably Rancière's most well-known concept, and because of that it's often understood as his most fundamental. He defines this concept again and again across his writing, so rather than pick a particular articulation, I'll paraphrase the idea. The distribution of the sensible is the idea that, in both aesthetics and politics, there are certain ideas, certain forms of speech, certain speaking subjects, that are understood as visible or articulate or sensible. Ideas, forms of speech, or speaking subjects that fall outside these limited sets of conditions are treated as inarticulate noise, or they are not understood to be visible. The distribution of the sensible is what is responsible for the appearance of inequalities: for the appearance that there are superior and inferior forms of intelligence, that there are certain forms of speech appropriate for describing or making demands of the world, that there are certain sensations or feelings appropriate for aesthetic or political consideration. The distribution of the sensible is maintained by the police, which for Rancière refers both to material institutions and classes of people that determine and reproduce the rules that govern what falls where within the distribution. While the pairing of the police and the distribution of the sensible may not be responsible for the material conditions that account for actual inequality of wealth and

power, they are responsible for the ideological and aesthetic justification of that inequality, the appearance that inequalities in wealth and power are legible as the product of inequalities in intelligence and abilities of speech. The upshot is that, for Rancière, moments of politics are moments of rupture in the distribution of the sensible, when those who fall outside the distribution speak without seeking authorization to speak, using the language of their experience untranslated into the language of the police. He writes, a moment of politics “consists in making what was unseen visible; in making what was audible as mere noise heard as speech and in demonstrating that what appeared as a mere expression of pleasure and pain is a shared feeling of a good or an evil” (*Dissensus* 38), or making “audible as speaking beings those who were previously heard only as noisy animals” (*Politics of Literature* 4). If literature is the space in which the writer is anyone at all, writing about whatever material is available to them, using whatever language they have at hand, then in this capacity it is fundamentally unbound by any distribution of the sensible. It is something held open for the expression of what has no place to be expressed. A poetics that functions this way is a poetics that functions, in Rancière’s terms, as an ongoing argument with the distribution of the sensible.

What this constellation of ideas gives us is a way to articulate how the category of writing classified as literature can be pushed to the point that, theoretically, it can better function to call into question any established distribution of the sensible. That is, once we have delegitimized any grounds by which an authority can claim some intelligences are naturally more suited to literature—because of a unique nature or because of some kind of superiority—and any grounds by which an authority could claim only certain kinds of

speech, about only certain kinds of material, can be understood as literary, we can insist on an understanding of literature as a site over which claims to authority are illegitimate. Literature becomes recognizable as a mode of discourse that operates without authorization. However, the theoretical possibility of this has to contend with all sorts of things— institutions that govern organs of publication, commercial restrictions of access to publicity and distribution, varying levels of access to the material necessities for production, etc.— that restrict it from actually manifesting itself materially as a challenge to authority. Rancière’s theory on its own does not do an especially good job of dealing with this reality. Instead, he is left making an argument akin to claiming literature can best realize this possibility as a kind of style. Balzac and/or Flaubert and/or Hugo invent a literary style such that “everything falls into it in egalitarian indifference, but also a whole society can be read there in all its truth through the fossils that society deposits without letup in its seedy underground shoals” (*Politics of Literature* 15). But still, these are exemplars of literary genius, whose value comes from having developed a style that people could be trained by critics to understand as egalitarian.

By highlighting resonances between Rancière’s theory and the way the poets in this dissertation understand poetry to function, I am twisting his theoretical framework into a poetics, which makes it more functional. That is, according to this poetics, poetry is the mode of literature that operates according to what Rancière calls the lessons of equality. But more than simply expressing or representing reality in this way, it does this by coming to be understood as a tool for a poetic subject to interact with material reality. This poetic subjectivization begins by declaring the fact of a poet’s existence as a subject to be sufficient

grounds from which poetic investigation rises. The poetic subject engages whatever material they happen to encounter, using whatever language is available to them, and this is a beginning of a process of individuation and collaboration with the social and material world they enter into. Importantly, anything that stands against the recognition of the validity of this process—from the gatekeepers of the public or academic worlds to romantic ideas about a literary need to aim for depths or intensities of emotion—is understood fundamentally as an obstacle that functions to maintain an appearance of inequality. They become problems to be solved and superseded, but their solution or supercession are not conditions for engaging in this poetics. This is not a literary style but the articulation of a procedure for a poetic subject, using the process of writing poetry, to realize a particular relation to their reality.

The other biggest problem we have to address about Rancière’s framework is that it does not provide a clear idea of how the inclusion of “everything” functions as a political disruption. As I will show in each of my chapters, this plays out differently for each poet, based on the material they find available to them and the relative position of the poetic subject with respect to those around them who should theoretically be available or collaboration. But I bring an important supplement to this poetics from Lefebvre’s *Critique of Everyday Life*. A major feature of a poetics that operates this way that is initially quite visible about it, and that at the same time might appear to situate it at a great distance from the political, is that it will present itself as a poetics preoccupied with everyday life, with mundane objects and moments. It would be a mistake to understand this as nothing more than the incidental outcome of where this poetics directs its poetic subjects’ attention, or,

worse, as something this poetics will have to endeavor to overcome in order to arrive at the political. Rather, that a poetic subject engaged in directing their attention to the material reality of their own immediate experience will appear preoccupied with everyday, domestic objects and moments, seemingly of no importance beyond the fact of their existence, is a demonstration of how the category of everyday life is constructed by bourgeois ideology.

In volume 2 of *The Critique of Everyday Life*, Lefebvre articulates a way of understanding social reality as having been ideologically divided into layers. At one level we have the layer of experience within which the progression of history and social meaning is understood to play out, the level reserved for those with special access to it: artists, politicians, scientists, etc. They are able to live out experience in this layer of reality by means of transcending ordinary, everyday life. The artist, for example, by attaining a certain freedom from material needs, or at least focus on some realm outside of the mundane, gains access to moments of exceptional experience. The ideological procedure that elevates these experiences to the transcendent and immaterial, in the same breath renders the layer of material reality as the level of everyday life—which is by definition excluded from art or history—separate from social knowledge. For Lefebvre, the layer of the everyday amounts to both a particular experience of time (whatever is cyclical, alienated from the production of historical time, and experienced in everyday contact with the rhythms of work or labor), and the material objects we encounter in our everyday existence (domestic materials, the materials of work or the objects of consumer activity, the materials used for the social reproduction of labor, etc.). Lefebvre argues that a Marxist “aesthetic” project aims for “a radical critique of art as an alienated activity (exceptional, allocated to exceptional

individuals and producing exceptional works which are external and superior to everyday life. . . .)” (330). Such a project entails the goal of “a society in which everyone would rediscover the spontaneity of natural life and its initial creative drive, and perceive the world through the eyes of an artist, enjoy the sensuous through the eyes of a painter, the ears of a musician and the language of a poet” (331). The result is that “art would be reabsorbed into an everyday which has been metamorphosed by its fusion with what had hitherto been kept external to it” (331). This would be the disalienation of the material of everyday life from the level of art and history.

For Lefebvre, a sustained investigation of the material of everyday life amounts to “critical knowledge of everyday life” (168). Equally importantly, poetic subjectivization undertaken through such a poetics of investigating the material of everyday life does not aim at the cultivation of a private, individual consciousness. Instead, as Lefebvre has it, such an aesthetic project would bring the poetic subject to a “realization [that] may be described equally as a deeper *subjectivization*—a more lucid awareness—and as an *objectification*, a world of material, controlled objects” (179). The aim is to bring the poetic subject, through a dialectical process of subjectivization and objectification, to an articulation of critical knowledge of their material reality.

In the case of Williams, this gives us a way to rearticulate “No ideas but in things.” More than something like an aesthetic directive against the extraneous in poetry, à la imagism, we can understand this as a push for a directly material investigation of the conditions of the poetic subject’s specific existence. The focus on material objects in Williams’s poetry can be understood—and I make the case for reading the poetic argument

of *Spring and All* along these lines—as a method for removing the practice of poetry from the influence of traditional ideas or the dictates of authoritative gatekeepers. More fundamentally, we can understand this technique for challenging the role of authority in determining what is recognized as poetry to take as its starting point a method of disalienating the material of everyday life from poetic speech. This necessarily entails an insistence that poetic speech is only authentic or useful when it seeks no authoritative permission, when it begins from the belief that the poetic is accessible to any speaking subject whatever, speaking about any material and in any language the subject encounters in their own experience. In the end, what Williams’s poetics does is hold the space of poetry open for what has not yet been recognized. Williams argues for a poetics that does not seek any traditional grounds to reinforce its own authority. Additionally, in directing his poetics’ focus on whatever material he encounters, and aiming to present the material as directly as possible without regard for how traditional poetics would dictate poetic material should be presented, Williams creates a poetry that holds the poetic field open to the validity of what isn’t recognized as coherent and to the potential inclusion of voices of dissensus.

In chapter 1, “‘Everyone should know EVERYTHING’: *Spring and All*’s Poetics of Deauthorization,” I make the case for understanding Williams’s poetics as a Rancièrian project of stripping away all potential grounds upon which any person or institution could claim the authority to decide what sorts of poetic speech are legitimate or not. I take a close look at the poetics arguments that make up the prose sections of *Spring and All* (1923), alongside the pedagogical ideas Williams collected in the posthumously published *Embodiment of Knowledge*, to articulate how Williams understands poetry as a tool for the

self-pedagogical development of a poetic subject freed from domination by authority. To clarify this, I read the two volumes in concert with Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, and argue that this helps us understand Williams's poetics to be fundamentally about using poetry as a staging ground for the political struggle against the legitimation of authority's power. In making this argument, I show how Williams's poetics of things should be understood to be more than the politically neutral search for contact with material reality that a major line of academic criticism of Williams has held it to be, a tradition that runs from J. Hillis Miller, through Carl Rapp, Donald Markos, and Ian Copestake. Furthermore, I demonstrate the value of differentiating Williams's ideas from the mainstream liberalism of the first half of the twentieth century it is often reduced to by critics like John Beck and Carla Billitteri. This differentiation helps us see clearly how Williams's poetics operates differently from a model of liberal consensus that ends up trying to articulate new grounds for a supposedly more legitimate authority. Instead, as I show, Williams's poetics aims to function as a continuous argument against the establishment of any kind of authority. Finally, as the functional basis for this continuous argument comes from the charge to always return to a poetic investigation of the poetic subject's immediate material existence, and in so doing to argue with prior articulations or representations of material reality, I make a case for understanding how Williams's poetics gives us a different definition of what constitutes "the new" in a modernist context. In Williams's poetics, this is not a drive for innovation or the invention of a novel present as the grounds for a new authority, à la Pound, nor is it merely a taboo against old forms. Instead, I argue that Williams's modernism is best understood as functioning according to what Adorno articulates in *Aesthetic Theory* as a constellation of

dialectical tensions, between the subject as radically individual or firmly situated within society, and between the artistic subject as expressive of an individual subjectivity or experimentally reflective of an objective reality. This activates Williams's modernism in a way that isn't captured by the conventional art- and literary-historical development of modernism into postmodernism, which helps make visible how for the postwar poets I cover Williams's poetics stands as a potential to be developed, rather than a historical progenitor whose influence needs to be overcome or undone.

Developing a poetics that bears the clear influence of Williams, O'Hara's poetry has often been taken to be preoccupied with moments of everyday urban life and experience—Epstein holds O'Hara up as the lodestar for a poetics of attention to everyday life whose history he traces in *Attention Equals Life*. However, it's not so much the everyday objects that sometimes appear in O'Hara's poetry that I am concerned with, as it is the way his poetics is interested in the everyday and ongoing rearticulation of relationships that makes up so much of his poetry. O'Hara's poetry becomes, on one level, a poetics of community, and in constructing the outlines of this community in the terms of the everyday communication of those in his orbit—including the slang and jargon of the queer artistic underground O'Hara was a prominent figure of in New York in the late 1950s and early 1960s—O'Hara's poetry represents this community self-justifying its own speech, explicitly challenging the terms of any authority that would insist on a certain decorum for any artistic formation to declare its legitimacy. At the same time, the poetics of community O'Hara's poetry expresses is fundamentally not an attempt to usurp authority and claim it for itself in the name of a defined artistic or poetic program. O'Hara's poetry insists throughout that the

terms of every relationship are always in a state of argument or rearticulation—of dissensus. While O’Hara is constantly endeavoring to bring those in his social world into a poetics of collaboration, the purpose of collaboration is never to establish and solidify a formal relationship, but rather to make the contestation and material struggle of any relationship perceptible for poetic investigation. Rather than the appearance of a consensus that would necessitate the mystification and suppression of hierarchical structures and disagreement, O’Hara’s poetics develops a dissensual community.

In chapter 2, “‘Only one of many responses’: Dissensual Collaboration in Frank O’Hara’s Poetics,” I begin by arguing that the value of social relationships as material for poetry in O’Hara’s work lies in how they can be articulated as a site of ongoing renegotiation of and argument about the terms of the relationship. Lytle Shaw makes the case in *Poetics of Coterie* that O’Hara uses coterie as a way of recoding artistic and poetic relationships into a form of queer kinship. Building on this idea, I look at how this kinship functions as a politics. The politics O’Hara builds is an anti-utopian politics, one that rejects the idea of relations between subjects ever resolving into a settled, conflict-free form, and instead establishes a process of ongoing articulation and argument as the only means by which relations stay alive. A significant current of contemporary criticism about O’Hara has articulated how “liking” things—expressing enthusiasm for things or simply enjoying them—functions in O’Hara’s poetry as a tool to free the poetic subject from authoritative requirements of artistic taste. Michael Clune, for example, demonstrates how “liking” something is a procedure every subject performs, requiring no special training or claim to authority, and arguing in a similar vein, Oren Izenburg argues that constructing a poetics

from what one happens to like allows O'Hara's poetics to function as a call to continuously open the poetic to new material. This chapter modifies these arguments by asserting that we need to also recognize how important "disliking" is in O'Hara's poetry. Noting this, I make the case that O'Hara's poetics functions to make the poetic field available as a communal site for the ongoing renegotiating of the shared and contested likes and dislikes of a collaborative poetic community. By focusing on the mechanisms of expressing preferences, like Clune and Izenburg I argue O'Hara's poetics short-circuits the grounds for a specialized critical vocabulary to be developed before a subject can participate in such a collaboration. In O'Hara's poetics, this is a collaboration in which subjects must also invest in the importance of negotiating what is liked and disliked. It is not a blank, ongoing opening up, but a mode of articulation that allows the collaborative community to differentiate itself as distinct from other groups, without allowing any authoritative grounds for any participant to dictate to others how the collaborative group must be defined. It is a collaborative community founded on an ongoing dissensual rearticulation of itself. Finally, I make a case for the importance of the period of O'Hara's work in the time leading up to and including his writing of the long poem "Second Avenue." This is a period of work that has been significantly overlooked in criticism, declared by John Ashbery in his introduction to O'Hara's *Collected Poems* and taken by Marjorie Perloff in the first monograph about O'Hara's work to be a period of immature muscle-flexing, or, at best, mere stylistic experiment. I show how throughout this period we can see the way O'Hara uses his poetry to constantly put pressure on those within his social milieu. In the work of this period, O'Hara is always demanding more of his friends, specifically in terms of the ambition of

their poetry and art, and in the extent to which they define their milieu against the larger social world they encounter. O'Hara's poetics in this period, I argue, amounts to an invitation, in the form of a challenge, for the artists and poets that make up his social world to treat their work as the site of an ongoing, difficult, contentious collaboration.

Explicitly modeling her early poetics after O'Hara and Williams, Alice Notley, in her poetry of the 1970s, builds from the everyday domestic material she encounters around her and from her relationships with her husband, the poet Ted Berrigan, and their children. Notley's poetry initially develops with the assumption that this procedure should be fairly straightforward. Notley emphasizes her subject position as a wife and mother, and by constructing her poetry from the everyday materials marked as domestic and from her household familial relations, she aims to disalienate such matter from the level of art or representation. However, as her poetry develops, the terms of this poetic investigation increasingly leave her frustrated. What should be available to her for open, equal collaboration turns out not to be freely available for her as a poetic subject. I argue that this has everything to do with the subject position she explicitly adopts as the position of her poetic subject. Even in a household as ostensibly countercultural as the one she shares with Berrigan, the domestic labor of a wife and mother—and, importantly, the construction of the relationships that continuously demand this labor of her—is thoroughly mystified. Though unavailable for a relatively straightforward project of disalienation, Notley's poetics of the material that construct a wife and mother's domestic life develops into a critical knowledge, a demystification, of the power relations and labor demands that define her subject position.

While much of Alice Notley's contemporary standing as a major feminist poet stems from the reception of her book-length poems of the 1990s and 2000s, in Chapter 3, "But he says I misunderstood': Alice Notley's Everyday Life Poetry and Mystified Domestic Relations," I focus on her poetry of the 1970s. Notley's 1979 poetics talk *Dr. Williams' Heiresses* is constantly being rediscovered and held up as the foundational inflection of Notley's feminist poetics, but the significant difference between the poetics Notley outlines in the talk and her later work is usually overlooked. When that difference is part of the consideration, as in Maggie Nelson's *Women, the New York School, and Other Abstractions*, it is used to articulate why Notley had to abandon that poetic mode and develop the mythic, hermetic poetics of her later career. This chapter argues that Notley's poetry of the 1970s is better understood when it is not treated as an aborted path but rather as a fully developed poetics that runs right up to the limit of its investigation. Notley does take away from Williams an attention to everyday materials, and from O'Hara an attention to everyday life, and when both of those procedures are held up against Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life* we can see rather easily how it should perform its disalienation. However, I make the case that Lefebvre's *Critique* needs the innovations of 1970s feminist Marxism in order to fully arrive at an understanding of how the domestic labor of women functions with respect to everyday life. The work of these Marxists brought into articulation how domestic labor functions as a mystified component of social reproduction. That is, it is not enough to understand it as necessary for social reproduction, but it has to be recognized as unwaged labor that contributes, in a mystified manner, to the wage of those whose labor it supports. With this awareness brought to articulation, we can see that the method of disalienation

Lefebvre outlines fails to address the relationship of domestic labor to everyday life. The relations and materials the subject encounters in her everyday life performing domestic laborer are not alienated from the realm of meaning and expression (childcare, for example, is supposed to be profoundly meaningful), but the way they function to contribute to the production of value is thoroughly mystified. I develop a close reading of Notley's poetry over the course of the 1970s, focusing particularly on her book-length, underappreciated poem, *Songs for the Second Unborn Child*. I show how her poetry over this time functions by making visible how the subject position she inhabits, in its constitution as a wife and mother, is constructed from relations that always make demands on her without ever being able to recognize the value she creates by fulfilling those demands. This leads to a situation where, though her poetics is supposed to bring her into a relation of collaborative negotiation and articulation of a poetic sociality, the terms of these relations are never available to her for open negotiation. The frustration her poetry of this period registers as the decade moves along amounts to a critical knowledge arrived at through the investigation of the materials of everyday life.

Getting his start as a poet in the same general milieu as O'Hara, Amiri Baraka develops a poetics out of very similar principles: the construction of a poetic subject from whatever materials he encounters around him, using whatever language available to him from his everyday life. However, like Notley, Baraka finds that the material and social world he would claim as collaborators is not available to him on equal terms. When he encounters an explicitly revolutionary subjectivity in Cuba in 1960, and as he watches the Civil Rights battles of the 1960s play out, he begins to develop an analytical framework by which he can

understand the historical and material construction of his subjectivity. Though he sees how this analytical framework makes visible the otherwise mystified relations that define the African-American subject in twentieth-century America as inadequate for producing authorized speech, and especially how it makes visible the need for a material struggle against the powers that reproduce and reinforce white supremacy, he also runs up against a social and aesthetic world resistant to the inclusion of material analysis as part of its expression of itself. In undertaking a process of disalienation, Baraka faces not just the task of elevating the everyday into contact with the aesthetic, but the converse problem of disalienating a historical analysis of the construction of subjectivity from the everyday life of the poetic subject.

In chapter 4, “‘Gradually we become history’: Amiri Baraka and the Cultivation of the Revolutionary Poetic Subject,” I begin by troubling the major heuristic around which nearly all of Baraka criticism has oriented itself: his split in the mid-1960s from the bohemian New York art scene for Harlem, and then Newark, where he restyled himself as a radical Black activist and artist. My aim is not to question the importance of this move. Instead, I argue that the way this move has functioned for criticism has been to exaggerate the difference between Baraka’s work before and after his split, and specifically the terms in which that difference has been understood. The effect of this heuristic has been to understand Baraka’s early work as fundamentally apolitical in its aesthetic, and, conversely, to understand his later work as operating in a mode of blatant, vulgar politics. I look at some of Baraka’s early poetry, and particularly his essay “Cuba Libre” and his book *Blues People*, in order to articulate how his work of this period has to be understood as having political

content. Throughout this period, in fact, Baraka sees his work and the work of his peers to exist in a continuum with the revolutionary politics he encounters in Cuba in 1960. What he finds in Cuba is not a formation he understands as fundamentally different than the New York world he is involved in, but instead as a more fully developed version of what he understands as struggling to come into articulation. Looking at the poem he included in his 1960 pamphlet for Fidel Castro, along with the essay “Cuba Libre,” I show that he first understood his social world as continuous with a revolutionary moment, and then, after encountering the more overt militarism of an actual revolutionary movement, began to understand his milieu to be in need of pressure into a more materially revolutionary mode. His confusion about his peers’ resistance to this reality is an important kernel for his argument in *Blues People*. Though ostensibly a study of the history of African-American music, from the sorrow songs through blues and jazz, this book also contains a serious argument about why Black artists in America, when they embrace an actual African-American tradition, are by definition politically oppositional to any sort of mainstream consolidation with the bourgeois artistic subject. While his decision to separate himself from the New York milieu is not the only possible outcome of this argument, the decision can be understood in these terms, as a step to allow him to more fully investigate the possibility of a politically revolutionary poetic subject. But more than the need to define himself as first and foremost a Black artist, what this study demonstrates for Baraka is the need to be able to bring a historical analysis of how his subjectivity is defined into contact with his everyday life. He finds his New York social world to be resistant to a poetics that treats historical analysis as poetic material, and so he leaves to try to bring himself into a Blacker everyday

life. His poetry of the late 1960s and 1970s can be understood as experimentation with how a historical analysis can be brought into contact with artistic and poetic material. I focus on the major work of his later career, *Wise, Why's, Y's*, published in 1995, a drastically overlooked work that I argue should be understood as a more fully realized attempt to bring his poetics in contact with a historical analysis. In this book, he articulates a historical framework that insists on a continuity of African-American life from the period of early enslavement to the artistic and musical culture of mid-twentieth-century African-Americans and on a continuity between the oppression of slaveowning America, the post-Reconstruction development of Jim Crow, the suppression of the Commune in nineteenth-century France, and early twentieth-century fascism. An African-American poetic subject in the late twentieth-century that is prepared to understand itself as having been constituted out of this network of historical realities will be better equipped to understand itself as engaged in an already existing material struggle for freedom. This is a way of understanding history not as an esoteric or abstract subject to be studied, for the subject to develop a more well-rounded knowledge. Instead, Baraka tries to articulate a way that a historical awareness is the ground from which a poetic subject must begin in order to make meaningful contact with the material world they encounter around them, and in order for that contact to result in a contribution to an already ongoing struggle.

In both Baraka's and Notley's poetic projects, we are left at a point at which the potential their poetics suggests has not quite arrived. The way Notley's poetics is constructed brings her up against the limits of what she's able to articulate: it amounts to an investigation of the ways the subject position she adopts is constructed by relationships whose

fundamental aspect is a disavowed debt of labor, and the affect her poetry embodies demonstrates how the mystified structure of those relations produces frustration and dissatisfaction. But her poetics at that point requires a step she never takes, which would involve beginning to understand those very relations as structurally determined and radically critiquing the construction of subjectivity as it is defined by these sets of relations. To take that step would invite bringing in a vocabulary and set of materials that, we might say, come from the level of experience where we find political and scientific analysis, which could potentially be done through many of the poetics procedures Notley employs (collage, the incorporation of multiple voices, etc.), but it seems that the way Notley constructs her sense of what counts as experience would disallow such a vocabulary. It's a reorientation Notley appears to have no interest in, as her poetics begins to shift instead toward a more radical, at times spiritual, interiority as its ground.

In many ways the problem Baraka runs up against is the same: how to bring in a developed and theoretically informed analysis that would inflect the poetic subject's use of radical particulars in such a way that the poetic subject can still be understood as operating in a manner as if it were any potential (therefore theoretically untrained) individual. It is possible to understand this as a problem of accessibility, which Baraka thinks in terms of the "little ones" and "the mature" whom he wants "to comprehend . . . w/o reference / or theory" in *Wise* (71). But it is also, more fundamentally, a problem of approach, of figuring historical analysis as material for the poetic subject to encounter at the same level of experience as their encounter with the radical particulars of everyday life, rather than locating the site of historical analysis outside of experience in a critical realm of meaning that transcends the

level of the material existence. Such a project of bridging these levels of experience is the *aim* of Baraka's poetics by the time of *Wise*, and he's successful to the extent that the project is given clear articulation. But, in the end, *Wise* is left casting this as a hope, a mode of experience whose parameters he's outlined but whose arrival remains on the horizon.

Lyn Hejinian and Barrett Watten have argued that a crucial branching-off point of Language writing from the New American writers that Language writers historically formed in the wake of has to do with the situation of personhood as identity in poetry. As Watten writes in the introduction to *Guide to Poetics Journal*, opposed to "the embodied subject of the New American poets," Language writing or "experimental poetics contests the normative account of the person, seeing it as a site of difference, nonidentity and conflict as much as identity" (26, 27). I would argue that the poetic subject Notley works out in her 1970s poetry very much is, in its construction, a site of difference, nonidentity, and conflict—the burdens and debts this subject operates under are in conflict with, because of its difference from, the freely collaborative identity she tries to claim but finds impossible to inhabit. The poetic subject Baraka constructs in *Wise* is likewise not a stable, embodied person—it's a subject woven together from disparate historical moments, historical and cultural figures, with no specific site or moment of enunciation or resolution. Still, for Notley this conflict stands as an irritant, and for Baraka everything is supposed to resolve in a future moment to come, a politically effective subject who hasn't arrived yet. The ideal of reintegration into a stable identity, or more complete self, floats over these two poets' work in a way that ultimately prevents their work from functioning as a full critique of how subjectivity is constructed under an ideology of bourgeois individualism.

But the difficulty, for Notley and Baraka, of really arriving at an all-out critique of the construction of identity might also be partially determined by the intensification of a neoliberal ideology of subjectivity. Another line of criticism of the poetics of the latter half of the twentieth century situates the rise of neoliberalism in the 1970s as an important inflection point.⁶ These studies bring to the fore the importance of understanding more thoroughly and specifically the changes that shifts in the capitalist world economy have brought to bear on the material conditions of life people experience, something that is necessary in order to keep sharp the way critique operates. While such a clarification is necessary, many of these studies share an assumption about the inadequacy of poetry as a means for critique of the system of which it can only be a symptom. As Jasper Bernes argues, “Activities that now fall under the purview of art were [in pre-capitalist life] intermixed with the productive activities now organized as labor, so one might argue that it is, in part, as a result of the capitalist consolidation of labor that the work of art and the related field of aesthetic activity emerge as distinct objects and discourses” (2). Bernes and others take from this starting point a sense that, therefore, any investment in the artistic object or the aesthetic as a distinct discourse is, at best, a naïve collaboration with the ideology of capitalism, a naivety or shame that requires the critical production of a desire for the dissolution of art and the aesthetic. Bernes states, “we understand cultural objects to be symptomatic, to reveal themselves as having been blind to what they really were, or what they could be,” and so the best we can do is “understand the desires and aspirations that formed them” (33). I would argue that the strictness of this understanding overlooks the multivalence of cultural objects or aesthetic activity in general. Just because we accept that the rise of capitalism was a

necessary condition in the shaping of the category of the aesthetic does not entail that this category of experience and thinking should be read as purely symptomatic or reinforcing of capitalist ideology—we might just as easily follow the ways the aesthetic opens up possibilities for critique that are afforded by the way it has been shaped by the conditions of capitalism. The latter is the direction his study follows.

What Watten identifies as an ideal for a critical reading of poetry, “one that does not end in the reader’s production of the author as site for subjective reinvestment” (introduction to *Guide to Poetics Journal* 29), is also a possibility strongly pushed against, in slightly different terms, under neoliberalism’s demand for ever greater investments by individuals in the self as human capital. That is, as Foucault argues in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, what distinguishes American neo-liberalism is its proclamation that the subject must become an “entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own product, being for himself the source of [his] earnings” (226 *sic*). Entailed in this is a pressure to direct all efforts of self-formation toward the optimization of the self as an “ability-machine” (226), one whose responsibility it is “first, to improve human capital, and second, to preserve and employ it for as long as possible” (230). That is, under neoliberalism, there comes to be a moral imperative to enable the self to be more productive and to continue being productive on an ongoing basis as long as possible. The problem for Williams might have been how to make a poetics that functions for the self-pedagogy of the poetic subject, one that resists any claims for such a procedure to result in the elevation of the poetic subject into a position of greater authority (or, worse, some kind of spiritual transcendence). But after the neoliberal turn, the terms by which a self is supposed to function within a material

economy shift significantly. The identity the neoliberal subject is supposed to cohere into is not one imbued thereby with authority, but one invested with the potential for ongoing and more efficient productive capacity. It might be that a critique of the art object as a site of value fails to account for a shift in the relation of author to product under the neoliberal turn. The way artistic production is supposed to function comes to fit more into the economic individual's self-investment in fashioning a self with an ever-increasing productive capacity. Investment in the author may no longer be a matter of trying to find the work's meaning or significance as guaranteed by the author's authority. Instead, the work comes to function as proof of the author's ability to develop productive capacity, to shape themselves into a self able to continue to produce poetic material. I would argue the work of all the poets I cover here is interested in using poetry as part of an investigation into how the subject is constructed, and in the case of Notley and Baraka the question becomes increasingly vexed over the development of the work I consider here. But Notley's and Baraka's ultimate hope for a reintegrated self that is freed from the limitations their critical investigation of subject formation uncovers does not necessarily entail a critique of the pressures neoliberalism places the subject under. It may be that what an investigation of the material construction of the poetic subject comes to need is a critique of what constitutes the relations between the author as individual productive capacity and poetry as a site of production.

One of the major fault lines in arguments about politically effective poetics since the 1970s has been along this problem of how to understand the subject's relation to poetic production. The tracing of that fault line is outside the scope of this project, but one contribution I make to an understanding of the origins of that set of problems is to

demonstrate how Notley's poetry of the 1970s shows us that a critique of the self is necessary for a poetics like hers to continue, and how Baraka's late-career work attempts to solve this problem by casting a politically effective but resolved self into a utopian mode, the politically revolutionary subject that he hopes will arrive someday. In Notley and Baraka we see how a poetics built around the anti-authoritarian self-pedagogy of the poetic subject must no longer aim at producing the freedom of the poetic subject, but at understanding the site of poetic production as a site of critical knowledge.

¹ See Bob Perelman, *The Trouble with Genius*, for a more developed discussion of how the idea of the sagacious poet underlies the poetics of Pound and Eliot.

² As Michaels further states, Williams "might, in other words, have been committed to the account of poetic identity that I describe him as holding without being committed to the account of national identity that I describe him as also holding" (165 fn. 141). Michaels does not entirely follow up on the former as he is more interested in drawing out the consequences of the latter.

³ This is fleshed out more fully in chapter 3, but a quick note about referring to Notley as a "wife and mother" here and elsewhere. I do this not to suggest that these are unproblematic designations, but precisely because they are the very fraught terms Notley repeatedly and consistently claims in her 1970s poetry. In her poetry, and in in *Dr. Williams' Heiresses*, she much more pronouncedly claims to be speaking from the position of "wife and mother" than she does to be speaking from the position of a woman. Her claim is not (nor is mine) that "wife and mother" is more essentially the position of a woman than any other female position, nor is that "wife and mother" describes a stable, clear self. But these are not incidental descriptions of her relationship status, either—"wife and mother" is specifically the position upon whom domestic labor falls within the heterosexual household capitalist ideology produces, and they are also positions that introduce specific challenges to the qualification of such a subject. There is a challenge in Notley's repeated claim to speak from this position, and I repeat her use of these terms to indicate the specificity of that challenge, which is different from the claim to speak from the position of a woman. There are all sorts of questions to be asked about how her claiming of such terms relate to larger feminist issues, and some of that makes up the content of chapter 3.

⁴ Along with Epstein and Phillips, whom I discuss here, see also, for example, Liesl Olson's *Modernism and the Ordinary*; Michael Sayeau's *Against the Event: The Everyday and the Evolution of Modernist Narrative*; and Lorraine Sim's *Virginia Woolf: The Patterns of Ordinary Experience*.

⁵ Another way of stating this would be to point out that it is fundamentally about how meaning is produced, and the question of intelligences is a consequence of this. For any

statement to be meaningful, it has to be understood (or made meaningful) by an intelligence that comprehends it as meaningful. Rancière's argument is that there isn't any such thing as a meaningful statement that is meaningful in such a way that only specially superior intelligences could ever theoretically comprehend it. If a statement is meaningful, then any intelligence that can comprehend meaning could attain the vocabulary and facility to acknowledge its meaning.

⁶ See Christopher Nealon's *The Matter of Capital*; Joshua Clover's "Autumn of the System: Poetry and Finance Capital" in *Journal of Narrative Theory*; Sarah Brouillette's *Literature and the Creative Economy*; Stevphen Shukaitis's *The Composition of Movements to Come: Aesthetics and Cultural Labor after the Avant-Garde*; and Jasper Bernes's *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization*.

CHAPTER 1 “EVERYONE SHOULD KNOW EVERYTHING”: *SPRING AND ALL*’S POETICS OF DEAUTHORIZATION

Introduction

Published in 1923, the year after T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, *Spring and All* can be read as William Carlos Williams’s attempt to correct what he called “the great catastrophe of our letters” (*Autobiography* 146).¹ Against a poetics whose ultimate purpose Williams thought to be the establishment of the poet in a position of sagacious authority over the mass of humanity, Williams articulated a poetics that begins, instead, in the denial of any establishment of authority. A central contention of this dissertation is that the direction this disagreement ends up leading Williams, the ways he articulates a counter poetics, results in the inauguration of a major tendency of American poetics in the twentieth century. This tendency operates under the condition that poetry should be understood as a radically democratic, self-pedagogical method for the training of the poetic subject. Poetry, according to this poetics, must function in such a way that it is potentially available for anyone to use in developing a critical knowledge of their own material existence. The task of this poetics is to work against any tradition or any site of authority that would mark poetry as useful for only specialized forms of knowledge, for only special sorts of situations. The significance of this tendency doesn’t fall easily within the various paradigms of modernism and postmodernism that have dominated the critical reception and understanding of Williams’s work. This is not to say that conventional ideas of modernism—or more recent revisions of modernism—are wholly inadequate to understanding Williams, but that the focuses they bring have contributed to looking past this vital aspect of how *Spring and All* marks itself

off from the poetry of Williams's contemporaries, and in turn the importance of this development for American poetics in the twentieth century as a whole.

In this chapter, I outline a way that Williams's poetics, particularly as he describes it *Spring and All*, is meant to function as a tool for the poetic subject to use in arriving at a point of freedom from which it is possible to "act in whatever direction his disposition leads" (92). What Williams means by this freedom is something Alice Notley will articulate later as the freedom to notice and "include everything," and in so doing to "sound entirely new" (*Heiresses* 4), to bring poetry to bear on situations it had previously been held away from. I argue that what Notley—and other poets—pick up on from Williams is part of a larger way that his poetics functions as a politics, following Jacques Rancière's understanding of politics as an argument against the distribution of the sensible. Rancière's politics of literature and of aesthetics holds that the distribution of the sensible is the means by which what kinds of speech are understood as articulate and what sorts of subjects are authorized to speak are policed. In the end, Williams's poetics aims at pushing towards an argument about what sort of subject is allowed to speak and what sort of speech is recognized as suitable for poetic investigation or considered to be poetry.

I contend that this poetics begins by treating the poetic process as a process for training the poetic subject to be able to perform this basic point of freedom, in so doing, reading *Spring and All* alongside Williams's posthumously published *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, a collection of writings on education. Reading these texts alongside each other allows us to more clearly see Williams's theory of knowledge and his own pedagogical thinking. From these sets of ideas, it becomes clear that Williams's idea of freedom is based

on an understanding of how the individual can constitute itself by means of resistance to tradition. By recognizing it as a practice of this type of resistance, I argue that Williams's constant urging in *Spring and All* to break free from old forms into new is not as simply about the familiar modernist trope of defamiliarization, but, using Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, can be seen as a way of treating the practice of poetry as a materialist interrogation of the poetic subject. Amplifying similarities between Williams's thinking and the pedagogical theory Rancière outlines in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, I argue that, in order for his poetics to move toward its potential as a politics, the site from which this materialist interrogation comes has to be recognized as adequate for any individual without qualification. That is, the properly poetic subject of Williams's poetics is nothing other than the subject that has realized its status as an individual, both radically particular and equal to any other individual. Finally, I argue that this in turn amounts to the elimination of all grounds for the authorization of poetic speech. In Williams's poetics in *Spring and All*, we find the deauthorization of all poetic speech to be the necessary prerequisite for any legitimate free poetic creation. By operating under this continuous deauthorization, poetry becomes available for the poetic subject to use as a tool for the initiation of politics and for the development of critical knowledge of their own material situation.

1. Williams's Theory of Knowledge

Spring and All, could arguably be considered the work that is most individually responsible for our contemporary understanding of Williams as a poet. Or, rather, *understandings*—because *Spring and All* houses the writings that have led to a few quite different understandings of what Williams means for the history of American poetry. On the

one hand is the oppositional and liberatory Williams, who, in the experimental prose of *Spring and All*'s opening pages, attributes to poetry the power create Spring, to annihilate history and remake the world anew, who closes his prose argument at the end of *Spring and All* by declaring poetry's power to "liberate the man to act in whatever direction his disposition leads" (92). This version of Williams is the version celebrated by self-consciously experimental practitioners of American poetry. Alan Golding, for example, has traced the lineage of Williams's importance in the development of Language writing, outlining the importance of Williams to Robert Grenier's essay "On Speech," published in the first issue of *This* magazine in 1971, co-edited by Grenier and Barrett Watten. Paraphrasing Bob Perelman, Golding argues that "what is often taken as an inaugural manifesto statement of Language writing rests on a repetition of Williams" ("What about All This Writing" 267),² and he goes on to show how these writers have repeatedly pointed to Williams as a model for the freedom of formal experimentation and focus on the materiality of language. On the other hand, there is a more conservative understanding of Williams as a master practitioner of an understated imagism, the poet who is supposed to have reined in American poetry from the excesses of Pound's and Eliot's modernism by emphasizing the American vernacular and the quiet epiphany of everyday moments.³ The further along we go in this latter tradition, the more it understands Williams to reach back to the Transcendentalism of America's nineteenth-century poets, as his poetry is seen to demonstrate the clarity with which ordinary language can communicate direct access to the world of things, which allows contemplation of the ideal content objective reality can reveal to us.⁴

If we read these two understandings of Williams against each other, we note that they make use of two distinct aspects of his poetics in looking to claim his usefulness. The experimental line on Williams has largely been understood to focus on his use of language, both in the way he incorporated American vernacular as the base of poetic language and in the ways he emphasized an experimental, defamiliarizing form. The other tradition has focused primarily on Williams's use of objects and image in his poetry, understanding the poetry to work as a way of bringing the poetic subject into closer contact with the material world. As Golding outlines it, for Language writing Williams stands as an exemplar of

linguistic self-reflectiveness; attention to the materiality of written language; the self as constructed in and by language; a cultural politics of oppositionality, and especially opposition to 'Literature'; a Marinetti-like view of words in freedom, allied to the embrace of readerly freedom; the problematics of signification; generic hybridity enacted through various forms of disjunction and parataxis. (265)

As Golding traces Williams's influence in various documents of Language writing, the focus is on Williams's importance as a formal precursor, for "*Spring and All*'s emphasis on constructedness and defamiliarization, or in Williams' recurrent terms from that text, 'design', 'composition' and 'detachment'" (268). The other critical tradition is less concerned with language itself, and much more with how Williams's poetics theorizes a kind of contact with reality, and the spiritual or philosophical benefits of that contact. By the time we get to Ian Copstake and Wendell Berry, this take on Williams has come to see him as a bridge to American transcendentalism. However, earlier in this tradition, in J. Hillis Miller's *Poets of Reality* (1964), Miller analogizes Williams's fixation on things to the gesture of modern art par excellence: "An abstract expressionist painting does not 'mean' anything in the sense of referring beyond itself in any version of traditional symbolism. It is what it is,

paint on canvas, just as Williams' wheelbarrow is what it is" (9). Rather than a throwback to romanticism, Miller argues that Williams's poetics goes "beyond romanticism" (287), that Williams is after an "obliteration of distances" (291), where rather than the romantic separation of words and things, he assumes a consciousness that has reached a "place which is before language" (290), where ideas and things are the same.

There is another way Williams has been read that I want to highlight, and which, though it does not represent a happy middle, bears an interesting relationship between the two views. Alice Notley and Rachel Blau du Plessis have both explored a distinct way Williams has been important for women writers. In *Dr. Williams' Heiresses* (1980), Notley writes, "It's because of Williams that you can include everything that's things—& maybe everything that's words, is that going too far?—if you are only up to noticing everything that your life does include," going on to argue that this charge to include everything means "you could use him [Williams] to sound entirely new if you were a woman" (4). In *Pink Guitar* (1990), du Plessis summarizes two ideas from *Spring and All*: "write down that which happens at that time" and "to practice skill in recording the force moving," and she argues that these ideas gain a particular charge "when the writer is a woman" (111).⁵ In each of these cases, Williams is important both for the way he shows how language can be treated as material and for the type of material that can be treated with language. Like Language writing's Williams as outlined by Golding, attention to the materiality of language opens up the possibility of a kind of oppositionality, but it is an oppositionality with a specific charge that is derived from the position of the poetic subject to a dominant culture, in this case, a woman writing into a patriarchal writing community. Like Miller's Williams, there is a move

to situate the poetic subject on the same side of language as the objects the poetic subject makes her focus, but unlike Miller, this simultaneity of subject and object gains a political charge because of its specific relation to language. That is, while Miller's fantasy was a sort of blankly philosophical arrival at an unmediated awareness of reality, Notley's and du Plessis's point of investigation is how subject and subject matter can be situated on one side of the medium of language in order to demonstrate (and work against) the ways that medium has been constructed to deny their particular form of speech and activity.

What Du Plessis and Notley both articulate about Williams's poetics has to do with the way it functions as a method for training the poetic subject into a sort of freedom that wouldn't be allowed the poet if they learned their practice by trying to cultivate an understanding of what sorts of experiences and objects qualify as poetic. In order to understand precisely how Williams understands poetry to function as a tool for the poet's self-training and emancipation, it useful to get a grounding in the theory of knowledge Williams works with. Williams is never especially programmatic in laying out his theory, but when he is working through his thinking about learning and making use of knowledge he is fairly consistent across the volumes of *Spring and All* and *The Embodiment of Knowledge*. His theory of knowledge is much less concerned with what knowledge is than with the individual's relation to knowledge, and how the individual can come to realize the immediacy of this relation. He believes first of all that knowledge—any or all knowledge—needs to be conceived of as residing within immediate proximity to the individual who encounters it, rather than thinking of knowledge as something off in the distance to be slowly worked into and through. For this reason, the role of education or training is to help the

individual come to a realization of their own proximity to knowledge so they can make use of it by actively engaging it on their own. And finally, he believes that knowledge is not made of individual segments that must be built upon in a prescribed order, but that all knowledge can lead to all other knowledge.

In *Spring and All*, for example, he writes that, ideally, “Education would begin by placing in the mind of the student the nature of knowledge—in the dead state and the nature of the force which may energize it” (75). The force he mentions is his particular idea of “imagination,” which here fulfills its function as the innate intellectual energy the individual makes use of for engaging knowledge, and he believes the only role of education should be to enable the individual to engage knowledge with the imagination. For Williams, this basic form of the individual’s encounter with knowledge is all that is necessary for an individual to be taught. Along these lines, he writes in *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, “It should be possible to give a student, or one interested, an accurate, simple and concrete view of all knowledge in a few words, extremely plain (as the greatest abstractions are), of the world and of its parts and the various divisions of knowledge which he may undertake. Not a summary. This is a clarity” (48). If any knowledge is approached in the same basic way, by first recognizing that it is within reach, waiting to be activated by the imagination, all that is needed by the individual is not a summary of what can be known, but something more like instructions for the individual in how to find their own way to knowledge. Williams writes that imaginative engagement with knowledge results in “the emplacement of knowledge into a living current” (*Spring and All* 77). The substance of knowledge for the individual when the imagination is engaged functions like nodes on a circuit, and to develop greater

knowledge is to place knowledge into an active system so the imagination is able to flow across new and different nodes and to circulate more freely. According to this conception, the relation of the individual to any bit of information or knowledge they encounter is always the same relation, and all knowledge must be understood as potentially within the immediate reach of any individual who encounters it: “All knowledge must be conceived as within the scope of human understanding; that is, any human understanding” (*Embodiment* 41).

In its ideal form, this might seem overly simplistic or exaggeratedly easy, but Williams believes the difficult task for individuals is to free themselves from bad ideas and bad forms of education that have made the simplicity of this relation appear to be out of reach. At a fundamental level, Williams sees traditional Western pedagogy as not only failing to develop the individual’s activation of knowledge by the imagination, but of actively discouraging it by creating a false distance between the individual and knowledge. He writes in *Spring and All*, “But at present knowledge is placed before a man as if it were a stair at the top of which a DEGREE is obtained which is superlative” (75). Williams sees this as a problem because it consists “in dissection and a knowledge of parts” (76), or dividing knowledge up into categories or discrete bits of information that have to be taught to an individual piecemeal by someone who has previously mastered the knowledge in the same way. In *Embodiment*, Williams writes of the “mistake” of “placing a mythical end to research at some remote future—toward which striving was inaugurated—comparable to a very identical ‘heaven’ of mystical understanding....So anxious are we to know something of everything, we have forgotten that all that can be known is the same in every category carried-clearly-to its end” (50). As a result of this structure of learning or research, the

dissection or division of knowledge into separate pieces locates knowledge farther from the individual, somewhere off in the future and only immediately accessible to the individual in increments. Knowledge, under this system, can only be conceived sequentially, and each separate unit of knowledge can apparently only be related to any other unit of knowledge unidirectionally, rather than in a dynamic circuit. All of this results in the diminishing of the individual's creative or imaginative role in their own investigation of knowledge.

According to Williams's thinking, this model of pedagogy and learning remains in place primarily because it serves to maintain the power of those who are allowed access to elite levels of knowledge. He writes that scholars "segregate" knowledge, reserving it for "the function and the delight of the scholars" (36), and by doing so they create a bureaucracy or priesthood. "The Aristotelian," Williams writes, "the Aaron, the priest of knowledge, the select—the good, the true and the beautiful—do not exist. . . . They may establish a bureaucracy, a priesthood, a 'sacred grove,' but not without the cost of befoozlement" (38 *sic*). Here, "befoozlement" or confusion is the direct result of segregating knowledge. The self-aggrandizement offered in this process of segregating knowledge into a hierarchical bureaucracy Williams acknowledges as a "narcotization [*sic*]," but Williams condemns this as "a stupidity, not an achievement" (38), and he writes that it is "disastrous...for the human mind to be shadowed by something which seems to supercede it, as knowledge in the mind of 'the great' seems to do" (37). Hierarchical knowledge, then, or more precisely the separation of people into those to whom knowledge properly belongs from those who are too ignorant for it, functions to restrict the proper flow of knowledge from its liberation into the creative capacity of any individual. "Science and philosophy," or those forms of

understanding that divide up knowledge, that, as Williams puts it, anatomize it, “come between men and men, men and women,” as “[s]lowly for hundreds of years the ones above have sought to suppress the ones beneath” with this restriction of access (26-27). These ways of enclosing knowledge, such as the church or the academy, trick us into “lead[ing] through a maze to an outlet where we already, without that knowledge, stand and have always stood” (38). For Williams, this form of pedagogy is a smokescreen that disguises the enforcement and perpetuation of a socially constructed inequality as a form of training necessary for the proper acquisition and spread of knowledge.

Because of this, Williams believes the first step in the emancipation of the individual’s intelligence or imagination is a sideways step, escaping the relation of domination between master and student. At the outset of *Embodiment*, he praises what he calls the “virtue of deception,” which he describes as the student “double-crossing the teacher from within, [and which] is the only thing that saves the child’s mind at all” (5). In a subsequent parable about a young boy suffering through an education system in which learning is a process of seeking to gain the approval of the instructor, Williams attempts to articulate the importance of the “position of intelligence” (9). The parable describes a “boy, seventeen, having resided in France for a year, [who] returns to school to finish his course” (8). This scenario results in the boy’s actual knowledge of how to use French getting in the way of his success in the course, as the instructor expects him to memorize certain “catchwords and idiomatic phrases which a Frenchman might not know and yet be able to speak the language perfectly” (8). The boy sees little usefulness in this memorization as his actual facility with the language is not improved at all by it.

This is a simple parable, but Williams uses the figure of the boy to demonstrate what he calls “the characteristic American position of intelligence” (9). “American” here is, in Williams’s thinking, to contrast with a more traditional European position of intelligence, a “European medieval aspiration toward a peak, aristocratic striving” (9). The ‘American’ or ‘European-ness’ of the contrasting positions, though characteristic of Williams’s thinking, is not as important for the moment as recognizing the difference between each position of intelligence. The position that traditional education puts the intelligence in is one of aspiration or striving through a system that controls proper access to knowledge; in the parable the boy can only be recognized as having learned if he is able to reorganize what he knows into a prescribed order. What Williams argues is the better position places “the individual superior to authority. No, external to it” (9). The hesitation in this phrasing is important. At first Williams wants to characterize it as a simple overturning of the position of individual and authority. He corrects this, though, to cut authority out of the triangle, avoiding merely reordering a system of domination. By theorizing the individual external to authority, Williams emphasizes that what he understands to be the proper position of the individual to knowledge requires no third mediating figure. He describes this position “toward a useful body of knowledge made to serve the individual who is primary” (9). By emphasizing that the individual “is primary,” what Williams is after more than an expression of individual will is that knowledge is only useful—only valuable really—when it is up to the individual to engage directly with it. By theorizing the individual as primary, Williams puts the individual in a position that makes obvious the contingency of authority with respect to the use of knowledge. According to this formulation, authority has asserted itself into the

picture in order to naturalize a system of domination—making it appear as if in order for learning to take place, one must first acquiesce to this system—but, as Williams figures it, the system itself does not have to be dismantled in order for the individual to attain a direct connection to knowledge. Instead, the individual must resist allowing the shape of their imaginative engagement with knowledge to be determined by the dictates of authority. This resistance is the basic unit of freedom, which is all that Williams believes is necessary for the individual student to learn in spite of the education system, and is also what his poetics is geared toward helping them realize.

2. The Individual's Resistance to Tradition

The way Williams sees the individual's investigation of the world as taking place outside the classroom finds a parallel structure in the way his poetics figures the role of the poetic subject. Traditional aesthetic forms and accepted poetic language hold the same relation of authority over the poetic subject, determining what sorts of thoughts and forms are allowable. Williams's poetics in *Spring and All* is an attempt to articulate how the poetic subject can make use of poetry as a tool to sidestep that relation of domination and attain the basic unit of subjective freedom. At the outset of the book, Williams sets up a pair of problems he wants to address: "There is a constant barrier between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world" (1). The barrier Williams refers to is not simply a limit to knowledge's reach but is actively in the way, something with positive rather than purely negative content. He writes, "the whole world is between: Yesterday, tomorrow, Europe, Asia, Africa,—all things removed and impossible, the tower of the church at Seville, the Parthenon" (1). In other words, what is between, the barrier that keeps

the self from consciousness of immediate contact with the world, is made out of the world, made out of everything. The problem Williams is trying to articulate can be made clearer if we look to the next page, where he presents his second problem: “The reader knows himself as he was twenty years ago and he has also in mind a vision of what he would be, some day. Oh, some day! But the thing he never knows and never dares to know is what he is at the exact moment that he is. And this moment is the only thing in which I am at all interested” (2-3). Here Williams repeats the situation of “the reader” finding “himself” without awareness of something. This time “consciousness of immediate contact with the world” becomes “what he is at the exact moment that he is,” while memories of the past and fantasies about the future stand in the way of this awareness as the barrier—the spatially expansive world that made up the barrier in the first articulation of the problem becomes temporally expansive. In yearning for “what he is at the exact moment that he is,” an awareness that would only be possible by shutting out memories and projections—as he characterized the obstacles before, “the whole world”—it could be possible to assume Williams is expressing a desire for a sort of total knowledge of an autonomous unified self as it exists prior to or outside reality—in other words, a transcendental self. This is a mistake. If we let “what he is at the exact moment that he is” be clarified by Williams’s first statement of his problem, the content of this self is “consciousness of immediate contact with the world.” It is, in other words, created in the point of contact with the world, in the single instant of the immediate present. It only exists inasmuch as it is differentiated from everything else, and Williams’s concern is not with any content it has prior to that contact. This is not an autonomous self,

but a self that can only be understood by its embeddedness within and simultaneous difference from the world.

Returning to the earlier articulation of the problem of the barrier, Williams writes, “nearly all writing, up to the present, if not all art, has been especially designed to keep up the barrier between sense and the vaporous fringe which distracts the attention from its agonized approaches to the moment. It has been always a search for ‘the beautiful illusion’. Very well. I am not in search of ‘the beautiful illusion’” (3). He explains that rather than this, his writing is addressed “[t]o the imagination” (3). The imagination, Williams explains, is the “single force” that is able “[t]o refine, to clarify, to intensify that eternal moment in which we alone live” (3). When Williams picks this line of thinking up slightly later in *Spring and All*, his focus turns to how the adherence to tradition stultifies imaginative engagement, and language and thought becomes “layers of demoded words and shapes” in which “meanings have been lost through laziness or changes in the form of existence [*sic*] which have let words empty” (19-20). Just as authority, in the traditional (or ‘European’) model of education, inserted itself as a gatekeeper between the individual and the use of knowledge, so can traditional thinking or forms of thought come to be used as an obstacle between the individual and understanding, as the poetic subject is encouraged to focus on repeating tradition rather than imaginative engagement with the immediate moment. As these obstacles are extraneous to the relation between the individual and knowledge, however, the solution, for Williams, is for the individual to constitute itself by means of resistance to these things, to realize itself in a relation to the moment that is outside of authority and tradition.

Because Williams never really defines precisely what he means by the word ‘imagination,’ and because he uses it in a manner that is different from the way it is commonly understood, his repeated invocation of imagination throughout the prose sections of *Spring and All* has sometimes given readers a bit of trouble, but the idea of imagination is central to Williams’s thinking.⁶ The imagination as Williams invokes it is the fundamental capacity involved in both the creation and experience of poetry or art. He describes it not as a property that dwells within a person, but as a function a person performs upon an object (aesthetic, scientific, physical, mental, etc). He writes, “the imagination is an actual force comparable to electricity or steam, it is not a plaything but a power that has been used from the first to raise the understanding of—” Williams cuts this thought off in order to assert “it is, not necessary to resort to mystecicism [*sic*]” and then approaches imagination again:, “The value of the imagination to the writer consists in its ability to make words. Its unique power is to give created forms reality, actual existence” (49). While imagination is the capacity a person uses when creating poetry or art, the way it is involved in giving “created forms reality” also has to do with its use in understanding or experiencing art. As Williams writes, “[T]heir meaning and worth can only be studied and understood in the imagination—that which begot them only can give them life again, re-enkindle their perfection” (53). Williams gives to imagination a seemingly fundamental function, writing that “the individual [should] raise to some approximate co-extension with the universe. This is possible by aid of the imagination” (27). Here the use of the imagination is what brings the individual to actual contact with reality, “co-extension with the universe,” and this point of

co-extension should be recognized as the point of having sidestepped whatever term has inserted itself, as mediator and authority, between the individual and their object of study.

For Williams poetic activity is a self-pedagogical activity the poetic subject participates in. It is a way for the poetic subject to continuously reassert their particular imaginative capacity, producing an individual awareness by using whatever material they encounter for their own understanding. The poetic subject, operating in this way, creates new forms in order to express or articulate their new understanding, to differentiate it from what they took in. This process is the poetic version of what Williams understands as the basic situation of any individual activity within a system of knowledge. For Williams, the most difficult aspect of all of this is coming to realize that one's immediate proximity to any knowledge flows simply from one's existence as an individual. Achieving a greater understanding of anything is always just the continuous exercise of one's individual imaginative grasping and making use of or clarifying one's own imaginative understanding of what one encounters. Since this relation flows from the realization of one's separate existence as an individual, without any other qualification, any individual should be able to realize their own immediate proximity to any knowledge. For this reason, confusion of understanding can only ever result from something inserting itself in the way of the individual's realization of this. This is in a major sense all it means for Williams 'to know,' and this is behind Williams's statement in *Spring and All* that "in any civilized society, everyone should know EVERYTHING there is to know about life at once and always" (76). Williams claims "confusion" is something that should not be "permitted," emphasizing the idea that, according to this thinking about learning, confusion is the product of a particular

system of hierarchical training that functions to enforce confusion. Any system that would claim the need for an insertion of some intermediary or gatekeeper between the individual and their imaginative use of knowledge is not necessary for knowledge. It only serves to undergird a hierarchical system of domination, so the construction and perpetuation of such a system is something that should be recognized as contingent. It should be disallowed, deauthorized.

We might bring Williams's thinking into greater relief by setting it against some of the pedagogical/poetic ideas of his contemporaries, particularly Ezra Pound. In *Learning to be Modern*, Gail McDonald explores Pound's ambivalent relationship to academia. Pound had experiences with universities that lead him to believe the academy as it was constituted was too restrictive of its students and junior faculty. Yet, his response does not form a critique of the hierarchical form of the university so much as it replicates its hierarchical assumptions, placing the poet at the top of the hierarchy rather than a professor or bureaucrat. McDonald writes, "Because these modernists [Pound and Eliot] portray poetry as a non-discursive form of knowledge, the poet, though staking a claim to a place in the world of affairs, is elevated above merely professional standards, endowed with gifts—prescience, wisdom, transformational magic—associated with the sage" (140). So, while devoted readers of the *Cantos* might come away with a great deal of knowledge they did not have before—that is, while reading the *Cantos* might in some ways be a process of genuine learning, and while "[o]ne purpose of the *Cantos* is to motivate further study" (139)—the poet, Pound, necessarily always retains his position of superiority over the reader, as the process of learning is most properly a process of learning what Pound already knows or what

Pound explains to us. But the structure of the relationship—Pound as sage and master to the novice reader—remains, and Pound’s poetic form enforces this structure. As Bob Perelman notes in *The Trouble with Genius*, even as Pound believes he is demonstrating in the *Cantos* “information [that] is vital to society . . . it is vital for his [Pound’s] own status that it remain separate” (58). Pound keeps this information separate by mentioning information “in the most elliptical manner,” which makes it so that “[i]f one doesn’t already know what Pound means...reading it won’t help much” (58-59). Here we might recall Williams’s prohibition against confusion in noting an example of a pedagogical poetics that is based on maintaining a confusion established by a hierarchical distance between poet and reader as its basis. Furthermore, Alan Golding holds that Pound’s poetics demonstrates an “obsession with the widespread circulation of a highly selective canon,” specifically, Pound’s canon (88). While there is certainly an element of Pound’s poetics that means for poetry to be a tool for educating people beyond or in addition to the education available to them from institutional forms, where Williams’s pedagogical poetics most demonstrates its fundamental difference from Pound’s is by the fact that Williams’s poetics entails the necessary critique of hierarchy-based pedagogy, whereas hierarchy—with himself at the top—is constitutive of Pound’s pedagogical poetics.

The distinction from a modernist poetics like Pound’s is fairly sharp, but some of Williams’s thinking about pedagogy can potentially come across as not too dissimilar from contemporaneous ideas about education reform, especially those associated with John Dewey. This is essentially the premise of John Beck’s *Writing the Radical Center*. Beck explicates many aspects of that thinking as present in *Embodiment of Knowledge* and *Spring*

and All, particularly emphasizing that ultimately, “Williams is calling for a democracy of knowledge, a recognition of difference without hierarchy” (74). Likewise, Beck explicates the way this democracy of knowledge is not an ideal of every person understanding the same knowledge, as “[w]hat is important for Williams is not so much what the material of knowledge is, but the process of knowing, the ‘nature of the force.’ Once this force is known and grasped, any material may be utilized,” (62). But Beck stops short of helping us see what is most distinct and potentially useful in Williams’s thinking along these lines. In attempting to situate Williams historically by drawing parallels between his ideas and the general thought and expression of liberal democracy in early twentieth-century America, Beck overhistorizes Williams to the point that his thought cannot be seen as anything other than the general set of ideas about liberal democracy in that period.⁷ The problem with reading this way is that it tends to weaken the charge of what Williams argues, missing what is distinctive about it. To note one example, after emphasizing that for Williams to argue for recognizing the democracy of knowledge is more about the capacity of any individual to process knowledge through the imagination, Beck goes on to summarize the thought: “Like Dewey, for Williams education is about learning and critical intelligence” (62). But this is too vague, and misses how fundamental the idea of resistance against received thinking is for Williams.

Another problem with Beck’s reading of Williams flows from the first and results in a significant misunderstanding. Beck outlines the terms of what he takes to be a major problem in reconciling the pedagogical aspect of Williams’s work to his belief in a real democracy of knowledge:

[H]e claims common speech as the ground for a democratic poetry, but common speech rendered as poetry. This may not result in poetry in any traditional sense, but it is poetry and, egalitarianism aside, often ‘difficult’ poetry. So Williams counters by arguing that the mass must learn how to gain access to the materials contained in this difficulty. But how? By learning how to read. And who will teach this skill? The democratic poet. So it goes on...” (7)

The conundrum, as Beck sees it, is that Williams cannot help but set up himself—the American poet par excellence—as the leader who would guide the masses carefully through knowledge. Developing this idea, Beck draws out similarities among the educational thoughts of Pound, Eliot, and Williams, concluding that, “Pound, Eliot, and Williams, in different ways, promote the poet as an agent of culture building; in McDonald’s words, they claim ‘to reform poetry so as to re-establish its authority and to re-authorize poetry so as to reform civilization’” (59).⁸ There is certainly room to critique Williams for the way his thinking about the individual often betrays assumptions about a pretty traditionally middle-class suburban American psychology, but by mistaking that critique for the assertion that Williams’s educational ideas merely reproduce the authoritarian structures of the educational system he criticizes, with the poet now as the authoritative individual at the top, we miss out on an important aspect of Williams’s thinking, which I will now turn to, about the relation that readers and writers have to established written works, which in turn plays a significant role in Williams’s poetics.

While the poetic subject, in the process of constructing poetry for the investigation of knowledge, does not necessarily face the institutionally supported hierarchy of education that a student faces, the way authority injects itself into and perpetuates itself through this process is more subtle, and perhaps even more intractable because of it. A major concern

throughout *Spring and All* is the problem of writing in thrall to the language and aesthetic forms and clichés of the past, but Williams articulates the way he understands this problem especially clearly in a section of *Embodiment of Knowledge* describing the situation of a writer who is “[a]fraid lest he be caught in a net of words” (105). The fear Williams describes here has to do with a sort of double difficulty caused by the net of words, which refers to the abundance of language and written works by other writers that surround the mind of any writer. First of all, there is the difficulty that arises from feeling, as a writer, the conviction that something one has come to understand must be written down, but that out of “fear for his lack of skill at words” the writer finds himself “attempting to strike straight to the core of his inner self, by words. By words which have been used time without end by other men for the same purpose, words worn smooth, greasy with the thumbing and fingering of others” (104-5). The greasy, worn out words, Williams suggests, will be unable to strike at this core of inspiration, and the fresh inspiration particular to this writer will, rather than being made present to the world, be hidden behind the smooth easy language of repeating past forms.

The other, related, difficulty stems from the power these past works seem to have over the present. Williams writes:

And these other books, the great philosophies, the endless treatises of science, the books of religions and the lives of other men—the biographies, the histories—what are they? They are part of the very oppressive, stupid, aimless, ignorant world which has driven him to shelter, to prison within himself, to defeat from which he must escape. HE must escape, weak, comparatively unlettered, by himself. (105)

In this scene, the relation of the reader (wishing to be a writer) of the present to the past is expressed as an unequal relationship, as the present feels cowed when it encounters the writing of the past. Williams develops this idea: “there is an antagonism between the ages.

Each age wishes to enslave the others..... [sic] It is not even a wish. It is an inevitability. If we read alone we are somehow convinced that we are not quite alive, that we are less than they—who lived before us” (107). Here, the reader of the present encounters the works of the past as if he were in a relationship of slave to master. The relationship comes to seem the natural result of something else, though, as the reader loses sight of the actual present one resides in, as “[w]e feel that something has died but we are not quite sure what. Finally it seems to be the world, the civilization in which we live... Actually we are enslaved. It is necessary to overcome that” (107). For the reader in the present, it seems as if the feeling of being on unequal footing to the writing of the past is a natural result of the past seeming more whole and more alive than the present. But Williams wants to make clear this is a mystification of what is really nothing more than being convinced of the need to apprentice oneself to the masters of the past, a conviction which the poetic subject has to unlearn.

To overcome this is not about asserting the present’s superiority to the past, any more than Williams’s solution to the American education system’s pedagogical situation had to do with flipping the relation of authority. Instead, Williams wants the writer in the present to recognize herself outside the system of domination, as an individual to whom the ideas and writing of the past are all in the same immediate proximity. After writing that the writer must escape the slavery of these other books, Williams concludes, “Then, when he is whole and only then will the wisdom of the ages be decipherable” (105). He expands on this a few paragraphs later:

These things represent men who lived and felt the desire to write just as he does, who wrote fresh from the whole body and who went on living after. Something hard has remained. It is desire. To live cannot be learned from the

writings of others. It is the life of writing that comes from inside. The classics prove it. (106)

And later: “If one writes it will be, then, like the classics, of an inner conviction common to all men of his existence, to make it comprehensible, or more comprehensible—as another might do it with his hands alone” (106). The approach to the classics in a way Williams sees as most useful, in other words, is to approach them as if on equal footing with the writers of the past, out of a recognition of something shared in common with another individual. This is a rejection of a master/slave relation, even of a relation of a knowledgeable master guiding a novice who needs to be shepherded through the writing, and instead emphasizes that the relation reader and writer share to writing, to understanding or knowledge, is fundamentally the same relation. As Williams puts it, “WE are at the center of the writing” (107).

3. Resisting Tradition through Contact and Particularity

There are moments when Williams seems to privilege the intelligence he associates with manual or agricultural work. The third poem in *Spring and All* begins by describing “The farmer in deep thought,” concluding by naming him “the artist figure of / the farmer—composing / —antagonist” (16-17). In the prose following this poem Williams praises the “farmer and the fisherman who read their own lives” (19). Here Williams analogizes the activity of manual work to the work of the artist, or to the work of reading, and this is similar to a passage in *Embodiment of Knowledge* where he writes that when a person “has achieved what in effect is understood by a poem...[i]t is exactly the same, and I mean exactly, as that achieved by a peasant or a seaman” (36-37), and that knowledge for the scholar must be understood to have a “purpose [that] is exactly the same as that of a peasant or a violin maker or a husband or a horse-breeder” (37). It would be a mistake in reading into this bit of

infatuation with manual work the belief that it is somehow more authentic than intellectual activity, but it is important to understand more clearly what Williams wants to accomplish by fixating on this kind of work in this way. First, this should be understood within Williams's thinking that all knowledge has the same accessible relation to the individual using it and that for the individual all knowledge shares an equal relation to all other knowledge. So the intellectual knowledge of scholars or poets might be "a human achievement—though not necessarily so since the same state may be imagined as achievable by animals and plants—which the special word-skill of some man has cornered in that way," but, importantly, it is special only in the sense of being specific, as "[o]thers do it with stone, colors, etc. Love, chemistry, mathematics, astronomy, philosophy—These things lie on a par, each with the skill of anyone who goes through his adjacent or chosen material to that clarity which is the liberating desire of all" (37-38). In other words, it is important for Williams that manual work and intellectual and creative activity are fundamentally the same in their use of knowledge, so long as they are approached by the individual through imagination. Williams continues, "Thus on such a basis knowledge becomes humanized or is seen to be always human—differing in scale from every other human thing and not above or below it" (38).

Still, Williams has another point in making use of these lists of manual work beyond the equality of types of knowledge, which is that Williams believes them to be in an important way potentially less susceptible to being wrangled into the distorting hierarchy of formal scholarly education. Again, this should not be understood too simply as a matter of authenticity, or even simply contact with the material world. Williams believes the "farmer

and the fisherman who read their own lives...have a practical corrective for” the tendency for intellectual work to fall into patterns of reproducing tradition (SA 19). For Williams the danger of purely intellectual work is that when it begins to reflect only on other intellectual work, that is, when the individual engages with creative or intellectual work purely in terms of fitting it into traditional forms, it has no choice but to acquiesce to the enslavement of the present by the past. Instead of, for example, recognizing the sky as the sky itself, for the individual:

the sky is recognised as an association
is recognised in its function of accessory to vague words whose
meaning it is impossible to rediscover. (19)

Williams sees the advantage of nonintellectual work in this instance to be that in order to perform it, individuals necessarily have to deal with material outside of themselves, and material that, because it is located in a precise location and moment of contact with the individual, can be experienced without the mediation of tradition. When individuals encounter this material, even if they do so at first with nothing but received knowledge, they have to adapt that knowledge to accommodate the new unique material they encounter, which resists them. This adaptation, this interplay between knowledge and particular material, is a fundamental aspect of what Williams means by the process of imagination. What we have in this, then, is a way that use of knowledge is the domain of the individual, outside of tradition and authority, engaging directly (and, using imagination, antagonistically) with external material in order to create new knowledge.

Manual work is instructive due to the way it necessitates working with material reality, but ultimately, for Williams, poetry’s advantage lies in its possibility for imaginative

creation in the more malleable material of language. Poetry's—or art's—superiority as an imaginative activity comes when it is composed by means of operating in a dialectic between contact with external reality and the imaginative creation of new aesthetic forms and new language out of response to that contact. As in the school setting, where Williams emphasizes the importance of the individual's recognition that they are primary—without need of the mediation of school or teachers, and capable of grasping any knowledge they encounter and composing their own connections—for the same reason it becomes important that poets must train themselves in attention to their immediate surroundings, which necessitates resisting the idea that certain places, or certain kinds of situations, are appropriate for the poetic imagination, while others are not. For Williams, any immediate proximity the poet or artist observes must be understood as equally suitable for imaginative focus as any other. In what is recognizably a reaction to the infatuation with European cities by many of his American modernist contemporaries, Williams writes, “Cosmopolis be damned. Cosmopolis is where I happen to be.... It is the local that is the focus of work—everywhere available. It is (the local—with myself present in it) cosmopolis” (*Embodiment* 23-24). Williams here invalidates any hierarchical valuation of one place over another, declaring the equal poetic potential of any poetic subject anywhere with any other poetic subject in any other place. Ultimately, for Williams, the relationship of any individual to their locality is the fundamental relationship for the work of the imagination. Williams argues “that the local in a full sense is the freeing agency to all thought, in that it is everywhere accessible to all: not in the temple, of a class, but for every place where men

have eyes, brains, vigor and the desire to partake with others of that same variant in other places which unites us all—if we are able” (22).⁹

Williams’s argument is not that the particular or local represents a manifestation of the universal ideal, but rather that the relationship between an individual and their particular locality is a fact for every individual, unique but equal, and the importance of the imagination lies in its use to create unique knowledge out of this relationship. This is the “universality of things” Williams writes of in “The Eyeglasses” (SA 45), a “universality” demonstrated by the poet’s poetic inventory of what he notices as his eyes move across his desk: “candy / with melon flowers” (45), “the favorable / distortion of eyeglasses,” “A letter from the man who / wants to start a new magazine / made of linen,” (46). This universality is a universality of equality; that is, this particular place and these particular items, when the poet engages them with his imagination, are just as suitable for imaginative thought as any other, and for being imaginatively refocused into a new form that creates a new moment. Again, in “The Right of Way” (the poem that immediately follows in *Spring and All*), the poet’s description of what he sees while driving on a particular (but unimportant) day—“an elderly man,” “a woman in blue,” “the man’s half / averted face,” “a boy of eight,” etc.—leads him to note, “The supreme importance / of this nameless spectacle” (46-47). This “supreme importance,” like the “universality” of the last poem, is the importance given it by the recognition of its particularity, a particularity which is at once unique to the moment and equal to any other particularity in its uniqueness. Like Williams’s famous “so much depends / upon” (74), “universality” and “supreme importance” in these poems serves to make the relation between the poetic subject and the particulars the subject discovers in immediate proximity the point

of the exercise of the poem. In that moment of imaginative focus, and through the process of the imaginative creation of a new particular form for only that moment, Williams believes the poetic subject demonstrates resistance to tradition in such a way that creation of the poetic object can be the creation of a new object that does not reproduce the definitions or hierarchies of the prior world, and is instead a new object, a disagreement with the adequacy of the world's prior forms up to this point.

4. Williams's Materialism

While Williams's poetics is insistent that poetry should always be about creating new forms, this position should be distinguished from a more commonly understood modernist privileging of 'the new' or innovation. As Fredric Jameson notes in "The Poetics of Totality," his chapter about *Paterson* from *The Modernist Papers*, the celebration of innovation as criterion for what makes art good "is ideologically complicitous with the whole teleological theory of the modern itself," and certainly there are times when Williams can be seen to write symptomatically about innovation in just this way (5). The trick is how to go about valuing originality without simply reproducing this ideology of innovation, which Jameson attempts to do by reference to the way Adorno spins originality in *Aesthetic Theory*.

What Jameson likes from Adorno is that he

reformulated the drive to innovation . . . in terms of taboos and negatives: what drives modernism to innovate is not some vision of the future or the new, but rather the deep conviction that certain forms and expressions, procedures and techniques, can no longer be used, are worn out or stigmatized by their associations with a past that has become conventionality or kitsch, and must be creatively avoided. (5)

Jameson uses this idea as a way into *Paterson*, detecting the feature of Williams's poetics that is deeply concerned with avoiding any repetition of tradition. But if we dig a little deeper

into *Aesthetic Theory*, there are ways Adorno can be even more useful for recognizing what is at stake for Williams in trying to shake loose of tradition by conceptualizing a poetics that places utmost priority on engaging with each particular in a new, unique way. The way Jameson glosses Adorno's argument for a stigma against past procedures and techniques attributes it to a mandate to avoid what "has become conventionality or kitsch" (5). This does articulate it in a way that avoids buying into an ideology of innovation for innovation's sake, but there's a further charge to Adorno's idea. The taboo against the past is something more than an aesthetic disapproval of or boredom with tradition.

Adorno's discussion of the new comes early on in *Aesthetic Theory*, in the section titled "Situation," which is concerned with the way art can be theorized to relate to the material development of history (history as the changes in the conditions of production over time). Adorno believes art's taboo against the past, when it is productive, arises out of this historical development. For Adorno, the role of art in thought has to do with the unique way art—as opposed to "rational knowledge"—is able to work on reality. Adorno allows that "discursive knowledge is adequate to reality, and even to its irrationalities, which originate in its laws of motion," but even still, "something in reality rebuffs rational knowledge" (18). Art's potentiality lies in the possibility that it can go after that something in a way that is not accounted for by culture's ordinary reflection of the conditions of production, making it a necessary complement to rational knowledge. But material reality and rational knowledge of it both undergo historical change. If art continuously discovers in its present a still inadequate world, to be effective, it must change to address what is newly required of it. The need for a taboo against the past arises then because to repeat the forms of the past would

amount to an art that has lost the charge to address what there is in the present that requires it, an art that simply repeats gestures of a past moment as if the point were those gestures rather than the historically specific reality those gestures were meant to address.

For Adorno, the reason this drive to avoid the gestures of the past becomes so notable an aspect of modernist art, where it is not simply a mirror of the capitalist drive for innovation, is that this capitalist drive results in increasingly rapid and severe changes in the conditions of production, changes that bleed out more and more into the subjective experience of reality even as they appear more naturalized:

The substantive element of artistic modernism draws its power from the fact that the most advanced procedures of material production and organization are not limited to the sphere in which they originate. In a manner scarcely analyzed yet by sociology, they radiate out into areas of life far removed from them, deep into the zones of subjective experience, which does not notice this and guards the sanctity of its reserves. Art is modern when, by its mode of experience and as the expression of the crisis of experience, it absorbs what industrialization has developed under the given relations of production. That this modernity is more than a vague *Zeitgeist* or being cleverly up to date depends on the liberation of the forces of production. Modern art is equally determined socially by the conflict with the conditions of production and inner-aesthetically by the exclusion of exhausted and obsolete procedures. (34)

For Adorno, this is a dialectic that operates between the social sphere's conflict with the conditions of production and the semi-autonomous efforts and demands of the aesthetic, a dialectical tension whose shape continuously changes as historical conditions change. But the dialectic should not be conceptualized as just a natural process, and the new cannot simply be the result of society's reflection of historical development because it would then either be nothing more than historical inevitability or it could become a fetish, "[i]n accord with its model, the fetish character of the commodity" (22).

This is where the role of the individual, “the vehicle of the new,” comes into play in Adorno’s theory (21). In working to articulate how this dialectic is supposed to function on a practical level, Adorno stresses that it comes to be constituted between the individual and society. The individual, or more properly the artistic subject, is the site where the active search for the new takes place: “In the new the knot is tied aesthetically between individual and society” (21). Adorno stresses that the artistic subject he refers to should not “be attributed to subjective convictions or the psychological character of the artist” (23). That is, at least in theory, Adorno pushes against celebrating the heroic artist innovator. Instead, the artistic subject should be understood as something in its own dialectic tension with processes of experimentation. Along with the individual, experimentation is the process that creates the new, and from moment to moment in the historical course of artistic thought the pendulum can swing between preference for anti-subjective procedures that might seem to allow art to “divest itself of its subjectivity and become the illusionless thing in itself” (24), or it can be “thrown back on the dimensionless point of pure subjectivity, strictly on its particular and thus abstract subjectivity” (29). To settle into either extreme is to stagnate, but the interplay between the two ends, the artistic subject selecting or ratifying the results of experimentation, or experimental procedures interrupting and stepping outside of the supposedly continuous flow of the psychological subject, is the dialectic process by which the new appears in art.

All of this helps us establish a little more firmly the stakes of what Jameson wants to highlight as the taboo against the traditional in modern art, and particularly the way something very much like it motivates Williams. More than a stylistic tic aimed at avoiding

becoming bored with the same old artistic ideas or appearing out of date, what Jameson detects in Williams's avoidance of tradition can be more productively understood as part of how Williams articulates a poetics that should endeavor to always operate from a (re)positioning of the poetic subject within a unique and particular moment at every articulation. Like Adorno, Williams understands this as a process that must necessarily play out between an individual and the world that individual is embedded within, a process that requires both terms of the dialectic to function. Williams emphasizes in *Spring and All* that the poet cannot simply "let the imagination have its own way" (43)—as he believes he did in his earlier *Improvisations* to their detriment—nor should the poet mistake the necessity of engaging with experience for a command to simply record experience as it comes, which in Williams's conceptual setup would amount to being kept slave to experience. Rather, he argues that poetic practice should be "[t]o perfect the ability to record at the moment when the consciousness is enlarged by the sympathies and the unity of understanding which the imagination gives, to practice skill in recording the force moving, then to know it, in the largeness of its proportions" (48). In accomplishing this,

the writer of imagination would find himself released from observing things for the purpose of writing them down later. He would be there to enjoy, to taste, to engage the free world, not a world which he carries like a bag of food, always fearful lest he drop something or someone get more than he,

A world detached from the necessity of recording it, sufficient to itself, removed from him (as it most certainly is) with which he has bitter and delicious relations and from which he is independant—moving at will from one thing to another—as he pleases, unbound—complete. (50, *sic*)

If the extreme at either end is a poetic subject that follows its own pure subjectivity or a poetic subject that surrenders itself completely to recording experience, here imagination is the term that facilitates the productive conflict between the two terms. The outcome of this

process that becomes Williams's focus is a separation of the individual from the world: the individual fixes pieces of experience within imaginative focus, is then able to perform a sort of poetic selection of those pieces that are important for the particularity of that moment, and in so doing the individual realizes release or detachment from the world of their observation that amounts to a recognition of the (in)dependent existence of both external world and the poetic subject. Williams continues, "Nature is the hint to composition not because it is familiar to us and therefore the terms we apply to it have a least common denominator quality which gives them currency—but because it possesses the quality of independent existence [*sic*], of reality which we feel in ourselves" (50). The separation the subject is able to recognize from the world within which it is embedded is thus also a recognition of a sameness or kinship that the subject shares with the world in their independence, and this recognition is a prerequisite for any analysis appropriate to the particular situation the subject encounters. It is a kind of independence that can never be pure autonomy for either term, as the independence is constituted out of recognition of each term's relation to the other.

While it is certainly true that Williams's articulation of all this does not make use of the historical materialist vocabulary that Adorno employs, still, to an important extent Williams's poetics is predicated not on a reification of the transcendental individual and the lionization of the poetic subject in its peak form but on articulating a materialism of the subject's relation to the world. His poetics attempts to articulate how poetry can be a tool for the individual to more clearly understand their own relation to the world from which they have sprung and to recognize that their status as an individual subject is to that precise extent

separate from the world. This recognition can be the grounds from which the freedom to shape one's actions against the dictates of tradition grows. He expresses this most succinctly in the closing paragraph of the book: "The word is not liberated, therefore able to communicate release from the fixities which destroy it until it is accurately tuned to the fact which giving it reality, by its own reality establishes its own freedom from the necessity of a word, thus freeing it and dynamizing it at the same time" (93). Just as the composition frees the word, this dynamic freedom that comes from the awareness of the poet's independent reality is able "to liberate the man to act in whatever direction his disposition leads" (92). Rather than feeling trapped behind a barrier the way Williams described the reader at the beginning of *Spring and All*, when the subject is able to make use of imagination to recognize the mutual contingency of every object in reality, not to spring across the barrier but to recognize the equal standing or co-extension of those objects, and when the poet is then able to create compositions that have their own contingent reality, that stand as their own new term in the composition of the situation, this awareness of contingency, for Williams, amounts to freedom.

While Adorno's concern is not exactly freedom, he certainly is concerned with trying to articulate how aesthetics might be seen as an autonomous sphere of culture capable of its own insights and ends without simply reifying the idea of art as absolutely free of or transcendently autonomous from the material development of history. Similarly, we can rethink along these lines what Williams articulates as the freedom "to act in whatever direction [one's] disposition leads." Because Williams has been careful to stress the way this freedom arises out of recognizing a contingency in the individual's relation to the world of

their experience, this freedom is better understood as a kind of dialectical freedom, and the stakes are ultimately the potential for the individual to contribute something new to a situation that would otherwise be bound on all sides by determining factors. This is essentially the same gamble that Adorno wants to make on the possibilities for art to offer its own productively new composition or analysis to the situation. And while Williams's emphasis on the individual as the most important site of this struggle might seem potentially regressive, especially if we insist on taking his individual to be simply a repetition of the bourgeois individual or the transcendental subject, there is something to be gained by picking up his individual and running with it. Because Williams treats the poetic subject and self-educating subject as analogous, we can better see the way institutions or other sites of power use tradition as a tool to reinforce and preserve hierarchical authority over individuals, and by extension over the processes of knowledge seeking and making knowledge available to society and its participants. This also allows us to see where Williams articulates one aspect of the problem more fully than Adorno. Where for Adorno tradition would seem to perpetuate itself in aesthetic activity according to something like the law of momentum, for Williams tradition is shepherded through the development of aesthetic activity over time by the "traditionalists of plagiarism," those who seek to reify their own authority by marking themselves as masters of a form. Williams's focus on how the poetic subject constitutes itself by resisting the way it would be defined by adherence to tradition thus articulates something important about the relationship between the individual and the power that maintains tradition which is never quite clear in Adorno's theory. That is, the fundamental poetic step

of resisting tradition is an unmasking of one of the means through which authority perpetually reasserts structures of domination.

5. The Radical Equality of the Poetic Subject

Considering *Spring and All* and *The Embodiment of Knowledge* together brings out the way that the poetics Williams outlines in *Spring and All* functions as a tool for the self-pedagogy of the poetic subject in the emancipation of the individual's relation to knowledge. I would now like to outline how, if we take that to be the starting point of Williams's poetics, we can begin to see a way that Williams's poetics comes to operate as a politics. I am here using the idea of politics the way Jacques Rancière theorizes it, as the site of conflict around questions of whose speech is sanctioned and how speech is treated as recognizable or coherent speech, rather than mere noise. In order to demonstrate how treating Williams's poetics as a politics helps us understand the unique value and shortcomings of Williams's articulation of a politics of poetics, it is worthwhile to develop a few significant resonances between Rancière's theories of the politics of aesthetics and his articulation of a kind of pedagogical politics and Williams's poetics as I have described them.

In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière places pedagogical thought at the base of his political philosophy. Rancière tells the story of Joseph Jacotot, a French educator in the early nineteenth century who developed a pedagogical method built around the idea that it was unnecessary for a teacher to know anything about the subject they are charged with helping their students learn. Rancière explains how this pedagogy developed from Jacotot's realization of a fundamental fact that we all realize, but rarely acknowledge: namely, that any individual is capable of learning anything that any other individual has learned. For

Rancière, this leads to *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*'s central idea: "The same intelligence is at work in all the acts of the human mind" (17). Rancière's claim here, after Jacotot, is not a romantic claim about intelligence as universal spirit. Rather, it is the axiomatic statement Rancière believes most clearly expresses the idea that every thinking human being is capable of learning, and that learning is a function of the same process, the same intelligence. In other words, intelligence is not a substance or a property of a person; intelligence is a faculty or operation everyone performs. Rancière says this awareness is central to "emancipation," the realization that "there is no hierarchy of intellectual capacity" that divides humanity (27), and so the imperative is to recognize in every human an "intellectual subject participating in the power common to all intellectual beings" (33).

The initial payoff of this idea for Rancière's political philosophy is that it opens up a way of recognizing the idea of intellectual inequality as an invention of institutional structures. To explain what he sees as the importance of Jacotot's pedagogy in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière develops a critique of traditional Western pedagogy, which he argues functions in the first place by assuming a fundamental distance between master and student, where the master is assumed to possess understanding that the student is supposed to need to acquire. The authority that determines this relationship establishes a situation in which "[b]etween one and the other an opacity has now set in," an opacity summed up by the word "understanding, and this word alone throws a veil over everything: understanding is what the child cannot do without the explanations of a master" (6). Having conjured a master on one side of this opacity, and the student/child on the other, Rancière argues, "To explain something to someone is first of all to show him he cannot understand it by himself"

(6). Rancière says that in establishing this the master performs a “double inaugural gesture,” “he decrees the absolute beginning: it is only now that the act of learning will begin. [And] having thrown a veil of ignorance over everything that is to be learned, he appoints himself to the task of lifting it” (6-7). Rancière calls this “myth of pedagogy, the parable of a world divided into knowing minds and ignorant ones” (6), and he believes this myth of the intellectual inequality separating student from master is then extrapolated outward onto society in general, creating a society characterized by an absolute belief in inequality separating intellectual classes, those who know and lead and dictate, from their inferiors, who must be told what to do and protected from their intellectual inferiority, or carefully and skillfully guided from their inferiority by those blessed with superior intelligence. Masters always already reside in the realm of understanding, and this separation determines every interaction between master and the ignorant apprentice. Under such a division of intelligences, the danger for the ignorant ones lies in the notion that without their superior guides, they will only learn like “a little animal who, bumping into things, explores a world that he isn’t yet able to see and will only discern when they teach him to do so” (11).

In order to undo the myth of inequality, Rancière argues for a realization of equality that begins from the point of recognizing “that all sentences, and consequently all the intelligences that produce them, are of the same nature” (9), which leads to the recognition that “the power of intelligence that is in any human manifestation” is the same intelligence: “There aren’t two sorts of minds. There is inequality in the manifestations of intelligence . . . but there is no hierarchy of intellectual capacity” (27). It should be noted that, for Rancière, this equality is not to be thought a goal, a consequence of working to overturn extant

inequalities or to reform pedagogical practices within institutions in order to maximize their effectiveness. Instead, the recognition of this fact of equality is the inaugural point of politics. “[E]quality is declared and is never programmatic,” writes Alain Badiou, rephrasing Rancière’s central contention (42), or as Peter Hallward puts it, for Rancière, “equality is not the result of a fairer distribution of social functions or places so much as the immediate disruption of any such distribution” (141). Any such distribution, writes Rancière, is to be recognized as fundamentally the result of belief in inequality: “Inequality works out to the extent that one ‘believes’ it. . . . Inequality has to be performed by those who endure it as their life, as what they feel, what they are aware of,” and the initial political gesture of declaring the recognition of equality works as “the subversion of that performance of inequality” (“Afterword” 276). By making visible the intellectual equality of any individual to any other individual, Rancière hopes to inaugurate the

dream of a society of the emancipated that would be a society of artists. Such a society would repudiate the division between those who know and those who don’t, between those who possess or don’t possess the property of intelligence. It would only know minds in action: people who do, who speak about what they are doing, and who thus transform all their works into ways of demonstrating the humanity that is in them as in everyone. (*Schoolmaster* 71)

This recognition of equality makes the structures of society that enforce inequality immediately visible as such. For Rancière, all politics proceeds from this point, the visible truth of equality, and the logically simultaneous recognition that structures which create and reinforce inequality do so in the first place by claiming to reflect a fundamental inequality within human society which they in fact create.

In finding a basis for the inauguration of politics at this point of intersection between the individual and institutions or structures that police the individual's relation to knowledge, Rancière articulates a position for the individual that is, in an important way, analogous to how Williams envisions it. That is, for Rancière, the position for the individual from which emancipation begins to be possible is one in which the subject recognizes itself as possessing the same relation to all knowledge—a relation of access without qualification, mediated by one's own capacity to employ intelligence, a capacity that is the same for any individual—and in which the subject consequently recognizes the activity of hierarchical structures or procedures for conveying knowledge to consist actually of policing individuals' employment of their own intelligence. From this position, such structures or procedures becomes visible as a means by which inequalities are created and maintained. For Williams, imagination is a capacity that provides the same function as Rancière's intelligence, in a relation of the individual to knowledge that is essentially identical. In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière focuses on how this all becomes manifest through traditional pedagogical methods, and the site of Jacotot's intervention is the classroom or student workshop, but Rancière's discussion of this problem implies that it should be understood to take place in any situation where the individual must accede to subjugation by a master—one who understands—before being trained in the appropriate employment of intelligence. We can see by looking at *The Embodiment of Knowledge* and *Spring and All* the position of the student with respect to learning and institutions of learning to be parallel to the position of the poet with respect to understanding and systems of tradition. So a key to understanding how Williams's poetics functions as theory of politics is to pay attention to the way his poetic subject, in constituting

itself by means of resistance to tradition, is able to recognize that the perpetuation of tradition functions to police the poetic subject's employment of the capacity of imagination. This brings into sharp relief the extent to which poetics or systems of poetics that are based on establishing or perpetuating regimes of tradition, or on enshrining the poet in the position of master to the reader/student, function to establish or maintain inequalities.

When Williams emphasizes the importance of recognizing that any particularity in any location is suitable for imaginative focus, the equality at play here is very similar to what Rancière has called "the equality of style," or "literary equality" (*Politics of Aesthetics* 53, 55). Literary equality means "the play of language without hierarchy" (53), and it involves, first of all, a literature in which "there is no subject at all, that the combination of actions and the expression of thoughts and feelings, which made up the kernel of the poetic composition, are in themselves indifferent" (*Politics of Literature* 10). This equality, in contrast to the romantic mode of elevating certain events, objects, and emotions far above the mundane, rests in a recognition of the suitability of any subject for literary treatment. Furthermore, literary equality "is a matter of knowing if absolutely anyone can take over and redirect the power invested in language" (*Politics of Aesthetics* 55). In Williams's declaration of the local's accessibility to everyone—since every individual is necessarily local—we see even more clearly how the radical implications of the equal treatment of every particular are bound up with the equal ability of any individual to engage the imagination with the local. Williams invalidates any hierarchical valuation of one place over another, declaring the equality of any individual anywhere with any other individual any other place. For Williams, this is not just about a democracy of subject matter, but a democracy of

subjects enacted by the freedom to engage with whatever matter makes up the subject's locality.¹⁰

The way Williams's poetics sets itself up in opposition to traditional or scientific definition of individuals presents the last resonance with the ideas of Rancière that I would like to highlight. Rancière writes in *The Names of History* of the way the concept of "culture," or scientific history, works to deny what he calls heresy, to restrict the ways we are able to understand historical subjects to interact with reality. "Disciplinary thinking . . . makes time a place that encloses and defines those who are in it" ("Afterword" 282)—in other words, the historical subject according to this way of historicizing is limited to the definitions of the realms of culture and history. By heresy Rancière means the expression of something a totalizing historical understanding would deny as incoherent or impossible, speech seen as out of time or place. Heresy is the transformation "into something visible and utterable, what had no place to be distinguished and was heard only as inarticulate noise" (*Names* 93). I would argue that something like this is at stake in Williams's poetics of the imagination. For Williams, the goal of exercising imagination is the possibility of cleaving the "world of fact" from the "impositions of art" in order that the artist or poet might "act in whatever direction his disposition leads" (SA 92). The claim here is that the full use of imagination removes an individual from the restrictions history or culture would enclose them within. This individual who, by means of imagination, is constituted by the equality of relation to the local, not superior to but outside the definitional domination claimed by history or culture—this individual thus finds themselves poised for the possibility of what

Rancière would call heretical speech. Williams’s poetics of equality is perhaps, seen this way, potentially like a way of forcing heresy.

For Rancière the recognition of heresy, the possibility of heresy, is fundamentally political—the axiomatic method of equality amplifies heresy by asserting the equal footing of expression against any disciplinary thinking, and heresy, coming out of a recognition of equality, interrupts and denies the smooth functioning of politics as usual. But, as Kristin Ross observes, for Rancière, “Politics is an event that cannot be predicted any more than its end can be apocalyptically announced” (29). This is a place where Peter Hallward finds fault with Rancière’s ideas, noting that the effects of Rancière’s politics “are unabashedly sporadic and intermittent. Rancière himself is the first to emphasize this point: political sequences by their very nature are rare and ephemeral” (111). If Williams’s poetics of radical equality begins with each individual’s process of subjectivization through resistance to the definitional totality of disciplinary thinking, there could be a way that this poetics hopes to insist on a recognition of equality that would not be so sporadic. But trying to read Williams in this way raises a more difficult problem: in *Spring and All*, Williams explicitly states that the goal of this process of resistant subjectivization is liberation. If achieving freedom is Williams’s goal, what is the political content of that freedom? This might open a space for heretical speech, but Rancière’s heresy, again, is fundamentally political in that it always makes equality visible to society, bringing to light the falseness of inequality. This does not really entail (nor deny) the sort of freedom Williams is after in his poetics, but it raises the question of what is the relationship of Williams’s freedom, of a poetics of equality, to a politics of equality?

6. Conclusion

For Rancière, politics functions around what he calls a partition or distribution of the sensible. This distribution partitions those subjects who are understood to participate in the commons from those defined, according to the distribution, as capable only of inarticulate noise. Politics, according to Rancière, happens when those defined as fundamentally inarticulate according to the distribution of the sensible assert their right to speak—they speak when they are not to speak, partake in what they have no part in (*Dissensus* 32). The basis of this action is Rancière’s axiomatic equality—those who are not supposed to be able to be understood do not wait for the distribution of the sensible to grant them speaking status, instead they go ahead and speak, and in the act they make visible the illegitimacy of the distribution which denies their equality. The politics of literature, according to Rancière, lies in its capacity for disrupting and redefining the distribution of the sensible by making visible what had formerly been invisible, by making perceptible what had been understood as only inarticulate noise. Literature ultimately has to function out of the recognition of equality—its political work along these lines lies in recognizing and making visible the inarticulate noise that is already happening. One way Williams’s poetry could be argued to sometimes enact this is in those moments where his poems seem to approach the most purely imagist. That is, for example, the frustration readers often feel when encountering a poem such as “The Red Wheelbarrow,” which so flagrantly raises the question of what it is that depends upon the objects mentioned in the poem without offering any suggestion of an answer, might arise from the refusal of explanation. Rather than using the poem as a moment to try to assert the poetic subject’s explanation of the meaning of these objects in this moment, the poem

instead evokes the idea of the moment of ‘co-extension’ shared by poetic subject, by the objects, and by the reader. Importantly, this is not a staging of a moment of understanding. And the resistance of giving an explanation of understanding is, I would argue, one of the important ways Williams’s poetry functions.

I want to read another less famous poem from *Spring and All* as an even more striking example of this:

O tongue
licking
the sore on
her netherlip

O toppled belly

O passionate cotton
stuck with
matted hair

elysian slobber
from her mouth
upon
the folded handkerchief

I can’t die

—moaned the old
jaundiced woman
rolling her
saffron eyeballs

I can’t die
I can’t die (62)

In this poem, what is most explicitly staged is the inarticulateness of the old woman. We first see her tongue, but the tongue—rather than being the source of speech as we might expect—is figured immediately in the second line as a purely physical thing, engaged in the

possibly unconscious action of tonguing a sore on the lip. The whole mouth is made excruciatingly physical, and it's broken and sick. In the fourth stanza we have slobber rather than words coming out of this woman's mouth, before we finally hear the woman speak—but her speech, even, is inarticulate or carries no force, expressing an absolute impossibility. After this first instance of speech we're once again faced with the woman as a physical object—where the eyes are normally figured as a place for interpersonal connection, here the eyes are jaundiced and they roll, demonstrating no connection to us or to the speaker. But the poem then ends with the woman's speech, repeated twice. So the speech stands by itself. In a sense, we have a repetition of the last line of the farmer poem from earlier—the speech makes an antagonistic, impossible claim against reality. But here the speech confronts us in its antagonistic, inarticulate, impossibility.

What I want to argue is that it is in the very inarticulateness the poem depicts that it stages a politics. The poem is trying to hold itself open in order to somehow become a space in which the old woman's actions and speech are visible—a medium through which we are forced to recognize this speech as speech. I can think of two ways a poem like this might fail. The first would be for Williams to try to over-explain to us the woman's position, to try to present to us an imagined subjectivity for the woman that would make her more easily understandable, that would give us the supposed world in which the woman's impossible statement makes a sort of sense, to encourage us toward a predetermined understanding of what that sense might be. But this would place our (or the speaker's) ways of understanding in the way of the woman, so we would understand a traditional way of understanding rather than let the impossible speech confront us in its own terms. The poem becomes an object

that confronts us with the barrier of the distribution of the sensible itself—we are forced to recognize the equal footing of the speech, we acknowledge its existence and without placing ourselves in a superior position to the woman we have no legitimate grounds for explaining the speech away. But in the same moment we also are forced to recognize that the impossibility of our understanding also lies precisely in the fact of equality. Here we have a kind of speech, a claim or an assertion or an expression of desire, solidified here as poem, given a form of objective reality, but it makes a claim we have no meaningful way to grant. Because, in fact, in order for poetry to function as a grounds for politics it has to give up its claim to translate into understanding. In order to recognize the equality of its subjects and objects, it has to begin with inarticulateness. And in this forced recognition of the reality of this speech, and in the simultaneous acknowledgment of misunderstanding, failure, impossibility, I would argue, Williams stages the poem as a beginning of politics.

But if that is one way of thinking of Williams's poetry as a staging ground for politics, there are a few different ways we can approach the payoff to thinking about Williams's poetics—poetics as a way of training the poetic subject in the imaginative creation of poetry, rather than as a way of reading poetry—as a theory of politics, and I would like to conclude by focusing on two that seem particularly important to me. The first has to do with the extent to which Williams's poetics is concerned with theorizing the freedom of the poetic subject to speak. This entails both theorizing the validity of creative activity coming from any individual poetic subject in any position, and also the absolute freedom of the poetic subject to speak any utterance in any form, free of the constraints and demands of tradition. This freedom or liberation is not about a right to free expression,

however. That is, it is not freedom from restrictions to expression. It is an attempt to articulate a point at which the poetic subject realizes liberation from the demands to shape knowledge into pre-existing aesthetic forms, ideas, and language. For Rancière, the position from which such a subject engages in politics is a subject position excluded from the recognized community of speakers, and the emancipation of Rancière's thinking is this subject's claiming of the right to speak without authorization. Williams's poetic concern is ultimately more about shaking loose of the requirement to conform to traditional aesthetics, which, for an excluded poetic subject would amount to invalidating the demand that to be recognized as a properly poetic subject they must submit to shaping their speech into an authorized form, and such speech would amount to a moment of disagreement with the dominant order. But for a poetic subject starting from a point of inclusion, it is important to articulate exactly what such an emancipation means.

For one, the way Williams theorizes it, it is not clear what should come about from the freedom to speak any utterance in any form. We could potentially construct an argument, again using Rancière, that this freedom is a way of, essentially, increasing the likelihood of making heretical statements that speak emancipatory truths which are incompatible with the official state of things, or what Rancière calls heretical speech. That may be one potential of this poetics, but there is nothing about Williams's formulation of it that ensures this potential. Instead, Williams participates in such a quarrel with traditional authority almost solely by way of an attack on any understanding of aesthetics as a politically neutral means of authorizing speech. This is perhaps the one kind of participation in an argument with authority that is available to a poet like Williams, operating from a subject position so

recognizably the default of the dominant culture. What Williams's poetics actually accomplishes is the articulation of one means for the deauthorization of all grounds by which poetic speech can be sanctioned, because poetic speech under this poetics is sanctioned solely by the poetic subject's imaginative self-recognition of its own absolute particularity. This in turn effectively makes visible the ways that any attempt to formulate such grounds are fundamentally arguments about power (or defenses of authority)—arguments about restricting and preserving the subject position(s) from which poetic activity is permissible—even when they are expressed as aesthetic arguments. Perhaps in its most political form, this poetics is a charge to perform creative activity in such a way that it continuously attacks the aesthetic regime of the dominant culture while simultaneously resisting the inauguration of a new aesthetic regime. It is precisely this attack that I believe is the best version of Williams's modernist legacy.

There is another direction that Williams's poetics leads in that Williams is unable to see because he theorizes the individual poetic subject as the only site of a struggle against the forces of tradition. The individual poetic subject, in its resistance to tradition, can only offer the counter of its absolute particularity, a step that has to be taken as if from a new starting point again and again. This leaves no real means of navigating the ways individuals are policed more often as members of a class than as individuals. There is no possibility of contributing to anything like a counter-tradition, or even of recognizing in others (or the work of others) similarities that would mark a shared position with respect to authority. But recognizing the denaturalization of the aesthetic of the dominant order can begin to open up ways for expressions of counter-aesthetics to operate in conscious awareness of their own

function as quarrels with seats of authority. That is, it opens up ways for poetic subjects to speak from positions that would traditionally be disallowed from poetic activity, not by training themselves to mimic aesthetic forms in order to match the masters in their mastery, but by speaking, without seeking authorization to do so, using aesthetic forms justified only by their imaginative investigation into the particularity of the position from which they speak as unauthorized subjects. In other words, this deauthorization is the beginning point from which a counter-tradition can declare itself simply by recognizing and articulating its own exclusion from an authoritative tradition. What I will explore in the following chapters are a few different ways the poetics of various groups among or associated with “New American” poetry stage their arguments about the authorization of poetic speech, not by deauthorizing aesthetics wholesale, but by employing poetics as a tool to articulate and define countertraditions against the dominant aesthetic regime.

¹ See Walter Benn Michaels for a thorough explanation of the ways an argument against *The Waste Land* is threaded through the entirety of *Spring and All*, which Michaels investigates all the way down to a verbal level.

² We could go back a little further still, to Frank O’Hara’s statement in “Personism” (1959) that “only Whitman and Crane and Williams, of the American poets, are better than the movies” (498), or we could note that Ginsberg’s *Howl* (1955) was published with an introduction written by Williams.

³ The generally academic version of this tradition stretches back to Miller’s *Poets of Reality* (1965), continued through Rapp’s *William Carlos Williams and Romantic Idealism* (1984) and Markos’s *Ideas in Things: The Poems of William Carlos Williams*. (1994), and is maintained into the present by Copestake’s *The Ethics of William Carlos Williams’s Poetry* (2010) and Berry’s *The Poetry of William Carlos Williams of Rutherford* (2011).

⁴ By the time we get to Markos, for example, this interpretation of Williams begins to hold Williams up as something of a representative argument against poststructuralism’s denial of poetry’s direct access to reality, a trend that is even more pronounced in the recent work of Copestake and Berry. Copestake does not just offer a conservative understanding of Williams, but argues that Williams must be understood as intentionally bringing the transcendentalist vision of Emerson into a modern(ist) world that was beginning to insist on the fractured self and the undecidability of interpretation. Berry, likewise, insists on the old-

fashioned romantic power of Williams's poetry as an antidote to our contemporary lack of connection to objective reality (particularly the natural world). To be sure, there are critical counterexamples of this tendency, which would include Davidson (1997), Golston (2008), North (1994), Pickard (2010), and Schuster (2007), all of whom read Williams in different ways as a figure of opposition to the conservative transcendentalism and romanticism of American poetry that came before Williams.

⁵ Golding makes note of this passage from Blau du Plessis, and also mentions Notley's stated debt to Williams. But though Golding mentions these as part of his lineage of Williams for Language writing, I believe their presence in the list has more to do with poetic affiliation—I see something different in the way these two women writers point to Williams than in the rest of Golding's lineage.

⁶ A pair of poets as different as Ron Silliman and Wendell Berry, for instance, in writing of their appreciation of Williams's *Spring and All*, both note the centrality of the idea of imagination, but come away with very different (and characteristic) ideas of what the term means, Silliman deciding that "imagination, as William Carlos Williams employs the term, can only be language," and Berry writing that "in [Williams's] understanding of imagination he brings to rest upon the assumption that we are eternal creatures, living only in the 'eternal moment,' to which only imagination can awaken us" (Silliman; Berry 138-39).

⁷ More particularly, Beck's basic strategy in his book is to outline parallels between Williams and John Dewey, a strategy he takes so far as to frequently gloss their ideas as with the attribution "Williams and Dewey," even at the expense of being clear whose thought is which. That Williams was a product of his time is obvious, and so of course it's not surprising that Williams would sometimes sound similar to other liberal and progressive thinkers, but while Beck notes that Williams was pretty adamant in his disgust about some of his writing in *The Embodiment of Knowledge* being compared to Dewey by his potential publisher, Beck basically chalks it up to protesting too much (58). I would argue there is something valuable in looking for what there is in Williams that might hold a more radical edge than the comparison to John Dewey indicates.

⁸ As he does with Dewey and Williams, Beck here combines the voices of Williams with others too much, quoting McDonald on Pound and Eliot as if he were quoting McDonald on all three of the writers.

⁹ This should be kept in mind when we come across moments where Williams might seem to argue that America possesses some kind of exceptional character making it more suitable for poetic engagement. While this could be mapped onto notions of American exceptionalism, or an idea of America as the modern successor to Europe, these are not ultimately what is important for Williams about America. Williams opens one small section in *Embodiment of Knowledge*, "Beginning: Nothing less is intended than a revloution [*sic*] in thought with writing as the fulcrum, by means of which—and the accidental place, any place, therefore America—one like another, therefore where we happen to be, our locality, as base" (98). Here, America is the potential site for this revolution in thought simply by means of its status as a specific thing to fill the category place or locality. The process requires engagement with a place, and America, by virtue of the accident that it is the place of Williams's writing, satisfies that requirement. If Williams does have an idea that something about America makes it more suitable for this poetic process than another place,

it is down to “the precise position America, as a nation, occupies toward the classical culture of Europe or the East today” (139), that is, because (in Williams’s thinking) America is less weighted down by tradition than those places with a more direct connection to classicism.

¹⁰ If equality of imagination/intelligence necessitates a recognition of the equality of particularity/locality, which is manifested by literary equality, the understanding of individuality Williams presents—the individual that requires imagination’s engagement with the local in order to learn—can become somewhat problematic. Part of the problem here is that once again Williams can appear to be relying on an untroubled conception of the individual as a whole subject in a way that in the twenty-first century we have been thoroughly trained to disallow. This fact has in its own turn led to certain conservative readings of Williams. This is certainly at play in Copestake’s book mentioned above, but it also, I believe, can be seen in Carla Billitteri’s castigation of what she sees as Williams’s argument for an aristocratic revolution in art. This revolution, Billitteri argues, can be seen in Williams’s “rather grandiose celebration of the figure of the artist as the ‘universal man of action’” (51), which Billitteri ultimately attributes to Williams’s “extreme profession of individualism” (53). Though less severe in his casting of Williams into a conservative mode, Bob Johnson likewise attributes Williams’s resistance to wholeheartedly throwing in with the communists or socialists during the 1930s to the fact that Williams found himself “caught between an enduring belief in American liberal individualism on the one side and sympathy for communism on the other “ (195), “caught between the Pluribus and the Unum, in a Hegelian struggle to locate the transcendental in the actual wherein a precise particular would speak for the American universal” (199). Johnson ultimately concludes that we should “read his [Williams’s] politics as profoundly ambivalent and inconsistent” (195). While there is nothing necessarily problematic about reading Williams’s politics as inconsistent (what person’s politics aren’t, to varying degrees, inconsistent?), in both these cases the jump to align Williams’s notion of individualism to conservative or neoliberal individualism misses out on an opportunity to understand how Williams might see the individual as an important site of resistance. More than that, Williams’s individual might be more properly said to be fundamentally constituted by resistance: resistance to forms of thought that would determine the individual by her conformity to tradition, or what Rancière calls forms of “[d]isciplinary thinking . . . [that] make time a place that encloses and defines those who are in it” (“Afterword” 282).

CHAPTER 2 “ONLY ONE OF MANY RESPONSES”: DISSENSUAL

COLLABORATION IN FRANK O’HARA’S POETICS

Introduction

The first issue of *Social Text*, published in 1979, marks an important point of departure for our critical understanding of Frank O’Hara’s (1926-66) poetry, with the publication of Bruce Boone’s “Gay Language as Political Praxis: The Poetry of Frank O’Hara.” Boone’s essay addresses a moment in which Frank O’Hara’s poetry was just coming to be recognized by the critical establishment, both acknowledging that this recognition was overdue—in terms of how significant O’Hara’s poetry already was for practicing poets—and calling attention to the way this recognition was coming at the expense of an understanding of how it specifically functioned as what Boone calls a gay language practice. In Boone’s account, the gay language of O’Hara’s poetry operated as “the consciousness of an oppositional group,” spoken in the language and affect of a gay community that, in the late 1950s, could not be out in the open—as such, “this language often resists recognition” and “the oppositional content of its language inevitably is ‘coded’” (65). The critical establishment of the late 1970s, Boone argues, in bringing O’Hara’s poetry to official recognition, could only do so in ways that could not see, or otherwise overlooked as trivial, the elements of O’Hara’s poetry that engaged in both this sort of coded opposition and constitution of community.

Boone’s essay was by no means overlooked, and as developments in feminist and queer theory have worked to force open the critical establishment into greater recognition and understanding of queer and gay culture, it is no longer a critical secret that O’Hara’s poetry

makes use of gay language practice or that we should read it as a function of a gay community speaking to itself. But there is another aspect of O'Hara's poetry that Boone's essay makes visible that has largely gone undeveloped by critics since the essay was published. This has to do with the way, as Boone argues, in order to understand the oppositional aspect of texts such as O'Hara's, we have to "remind ourselves of its violence and the importance of violence . . . in the formation of group awareness of struggle" (71). Boone acknowledges—as Jose Muñoz develops more completely in his reading of "Having a Coke with You" in *Cruising Utopia*—that there is an element of O'Hara's poetry, particularly in his love poems, that makes use of feints and misdirection to open up the possibility of a utopian queer futurity, a space outside of and no longer subject to the damage of the hostile dominant culture. But this is always done in the context of a poetry that understands itself as necessarily functioning within a present moment. More than that, O'Hara's poetry recognizes itself as speaking as part of a community whose existence is constantly under threat, and so in speaking within a present moment it is also always working to reconstitute itself, to reassert the materiality of its ongoing present existence. As Boone writes, O'Hara's poetry "speaks its language as a story that unfolds in time, not eternity" (85).

The major contention of this chapter is that, in order to understand how O'Hara's poetry functions as the staging of an oppositional politics, we have to understand how it insists on making visible an ongoing present of sociality, and how this sociality is constituted not from consensus but out of ongoing discussion and disagreement, the engines of an oppositional sociality that is living and loving. As has been widely noted, one of the key elements of O'Hara's poetry for twentieth-century American poetics is the ways it seems to radically open up poetry

for the inclusion of elements the dominant aesthetic regime would keep out or refuse to recognize as appropriate for poetic investigation. This is what O'Hara picks up from Williams's poetics,¹ but, as I show in chapter 1, where for Williams this primarily expressed itself as a repeated site of the poetic subject—as a pre-subjective radically particular individual—reconstituting itself from the material it encounters around it, for O'Hara this becomes a fundamentally social activity. The material O'Hara's poetry encounters is the material of a sociality through which the poetic subject is not a radically individualized node, but is part of a community that makes use of poetry as part of its process of reconstituting itself. This is an oppositional community, partly because of the situation O'Hara's gay community finds itself in with respect to the dominant community of the 1950s, and partly because of how O'Hara's poetry figures this sociality not as a community that aims to overtake and become an establishment, but as a community that continuously reassert its ground in order to be functionally political in an always changing present. Thus, agreement, or the eventual settling into established and defined relations, is, for O'Hara, never a goal. I argue that O'Hara's poetry aims to make visible as both subject and content an ongoing present of dissensus through which its community is materially constituted. As O'Hara writes in a poem to his younger lover Vincent Warren, "Hate is only one of many responses / true, hurt and hate go hand in hand / but why be afraid of hate, it is only there," and "don't be shy of unkindness, either / it's cleansing and allows you to be direct" (*CP* 333-34). This push for directness, and valuing of unkindness, is something that has been largely left out of our contemporary understanding of O'Hara's poetry, but it is essential in order to understand how O'Hara's poetry functions as a prodding of

his community to continue participating in an ongoing dissensual collaboration. In this way, as O'Hara writes, "out and out meanness, too, lets love breathe" (334).

1. Future, History, and the Social Present

One of the most often commented upon features of O'Hara's poetry is the persistent thread of motion, dynamism, and focus on the present moment in his poetry. However, this is often understood as solely an aesthetic feature of the work, or, at best, as demonstrating a philosophical tendency. Marjorie Perloff establishes the centrality of this to critical understanding of O'Hara in her seminal *Poet Among Painters*, where a major contention is that O'Hara's poetics should be understood as improvisatory in the way of action painting—a record of an unfolding present. This reading fits O'Hara's poetry easily into the mid-century aesthetic Daniel Belgrad outlines in *The Culture of Spontaneity*. More recently, critics have called attention to how O'Hara's focus on an ever-changing present puts his thinking in line with American pragmatist philosophy. Andrew Epstein, for example, emphasizes how what he calls O'Hara's "Emersonian Pragmatism" leads O'Hara to a belief in the importance of cultivating "idiosyncrasy and self-reliance" as "a profound element of his aesthetic outlook" (192). In his chapter on O'Hara in *Beautiful Enemies*, Epstein argues that O'Hara's pragmatist devotion to an ever-changing self is in constant tension with his desire for friendship, as "the human self must be seen as forever in motion, dissolving any such bonds" of friendship (87). Similarly highlighting O'Hara's resonance with pragmatist philosophy, Michael Magee argues, in *Emancipating Pragmatism*, that this plays out in a poetics of sociality that, rather than representing a tension with a commitment to change, comes to see poetry itself as a site for something like jazz group improvisation, an interplay between writer and reader through which "one *loves* (becomes entangled with) what one does not *know*" (156). Thus, a poetry

situated among members of a social relation allows for a way of loving each other that takes in the ever-shifting self as part of its construction. In this chapter, I argue O'Hara's concern with an ongoing present is not only an aesthetic concern, nor a matter of a personal philosophy of self-fashioning, but is a matter of how his poetics stages itself as a politics, specifically a politics that resists lapsing into utopian longing. In this section, I explore how the past, present, and future figure in O'Hara's work in order to enter into a consideration of how these ideas compose part of the political thought it functions as. In developing a poetics of an ongoing present, and at the same time by figuring his poetry as a site for a community to enter into a mode of politics, O'Hara's poetry gives us a politics that is non-utopian, constituted in an ongoing present of rearticulation.

In many of O'Hara's poems, we find the speaker ambivalent or anxious about an imagined future, especially when it is a future imagined *with* one of his friends or a member of his social world. The 1954 poem "To John Ashbery" provides a good example of the way O'Hara's poetry figures a relation to a future social world:

I can't believe there's not
 another world where we will sit
 and read new poems to each other
 high on a mountain in the wind.
 You can be Tu Fu, I'll be Po Chü-i
 and the Monkey Lady'll be in the moon,
 smiling at our ill-fitting heads
 as we watch snow settle on a twig.
 Or shall we be really gone? this
 is not the grass I saw in my youth!
 and if the moon, when it rises
 tonight, is empty—a bad sign,
 meaning "You go, like the blossoms." (CP 211)

The poem begins with the speaker conjuring a future, a sort of poetic utopia or after-life of creative output shared with his friend and separate from the rest of the world, a place where

they “will sit” after they are gone from this world. While the utopian idea itself and the speaker’s desire for it are clearly present, the poem not only undercuts the real possibility of such an idea at every turn, but even refrains from straightforwardly expressing the wish. The double negative in the first line functions logically as a positive expression, almost equivalent to the phrase “I believe there is,” but the colloquial “I can’t believe” that kicks the poem off also functions as something like a further reversal—“I can’t believe it!” is commonly uttered as an expression of shocked acceptance that something *is* the case rather than the explicit refusal to believe that it is on its face. So from the outset of the poem the utopian dream is conjured as a thing that does not exist. In imagining the two poets in the place of the figures of historical Chinese poets, the utopian wish is parodically mapped onto an orientalist fantasy of timeless ancient poets, undercutting the seriousness of the wish. After this series of denials of the wish at the heart of the poem, the final third closes the door completely. The phrases “Or shall we be really gone?” and “this / is not the grass I saw in my youth!” void the contents of the wish in a couple of ways, first by asking whether such an other world isn’t really death, and secondly by proclaiming the actual difference between that future and the wish in terms of the future’s disappointment with itself by comparison to the former wish. The poem closes, then, with a classically romantic expression of the beauty to be found in the temporary bloom of life. This final line echoes the closing lines from a poem O’Hara wrote earlier in 1954, “Lines While Reading Coleridge’s ‘The Picture,’” which ends, “knowing that each successive / flower’s more beautiful / the more passionately short-lived” (*CP* 188).

This poem is emblematic of the attitudes O’Hara’s poetry generally demonstrates when conceptualizing the relation of the present to the future, especially when this relation is

considered as an aspect of a social relationship. First of all, to the extent that O'Hara does express a desire for a future, it is a future whose sole positive content is one of continuous articulation, in this case the eternal reading of "new poems to each other." We see this in some of O'Hara's other occasional poems for his friends. For example, "John Button Birthday" closes with a slightly satiric dream of their future relationship:

And in 1984 I trust we'll still
be high together. I'll say 'Let's go to a bar'
and you'll say 'Let's go to a movie' and we'll go to both;
like two old Chinese drunkards arguing about their
favorite mountain and the million reasons for them both. (CP 268)

O'Hara repeats the trope of the pair's ironically orientalized future selves to again drive home the unreality of the future. To the extent that there *is* content to this future, the content consists of the two friends continuing to negotiate their friendship—each articulates a different desire and they negotiate a resolution (notably a resolution that isn't a compromise of either)—and of "arguing" about the relative merits of some objects they discuss together. In order for there to be a reality to any suggestion of a future, it only exists as an unresolved future relationship, in which the friends are just as engaged in continuously articulating their shared experience as they are at present; it is not a future in which the participants have arrived at a wordless consensus.

This resonates quite strongly with Lee Edelman's contention in *No Future* that "queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one" (17). So, we might say that in this way O'Hara only accepts a future that is understood as an ongoing disturbing of identity among its participants. However, for Edelman, this aspect of queerness necessitates its removal from politics entirely. He argues, "Politics . . . names the struggle to effect a fantasmatic order of reality in which the subject's alienation would vanish into a seamlessness of identity at the

endpoint of the endless chain of signifiers lived as history” (8). Thus queerness, for Edelman, stands as a refusal to participate in the sociality of politics in order to preserve its working as resistance to the definition of identity. For O’Hara, on the other hand, it is precisely this resistance to identity, or refusal to slide into a seamless and settled order, that constitutes the ground of sociality itself, and, therefore, I would argue, politics.

We see this clearly at work in the more well-known “Poem Read at Joan Mitchell’s.”² The poem famously demonstrates a certain ambivalence about Jane Freilicher’s decision to marry Joe Hazan (the party in celebration of which marks the occasion for the poem), but the final section of the poem finds O’Hara articulating his desire that the marriage will not affect their friendship. He writes that the “poem goes on too long because our friendship has been long . . . long as art is long and uninterrupted,” analogizing what he desires about the friendship to art in the sense that it be endlessly iterated, “uninterruptable” (*CP* 266). “I hope there will be more,” he continues, and goes on into two short lists of activities he hopes there will be more of, each of which begins with a list of mundane activities like trips and eating at restaurants, and each of which closes with a wish for continued discussion, “more discussions in lobbies of the respective greatneses of Diana Adams and Allegra Kent,” and “more arguments over Faulkner’s inferiority to Tolstoy while sand gets into my bathing trunks” (266). He goes on, “let’s advance and change everything, but leave these little oases in case the heart gets thirsty en route” (266). The ambivalence at the heart of the poem is not that their friendship will change. In fact, he writes that he welcomes the possibility of advance and change, as long as “these little oases” of argument and discussion remain. This focus on discussion, on disagreement, on uninterrupted argument demonstrates the importance of relationships continuing in an

unresolved state in order for O'Hara to really accept the value of desire for a future. When he reaches the end of the Mitchell poem, he evokes the future solidity of Freilicher's and Hazan's relationship as a married couple: "you will live half the year in a house by the sea and half the year in a house in our arms / we peer into the future and see you happy and hope it is a sign that we will be happy too, something to cling to, happiness the least and best of human attainments" (266-67). While this is by no means dismissive of their potential future happiness, there's a definite whiff of condescension here, as if the best to hope for from the resolved future-oriented state of the married couple is a happiness one can only "cling to."

O'Hara's ambivalence about Hazan's and Freilicher's marriage reappears in "Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul," written a couple of years later, in the third stanza where "Jane Hazan continues to be Jane Freilicher (I think!)" (CP 329). Masking it in a slightly ironic tone and with the jokey switching of her last names, O'Hara demonstrates a mild anxiety that Jane has not actually continued to be herself. This is the real danger for O'Hara of fixating on the future as a resolved state, that there will be no possibility of continuity between fluid present and settled future. Here Jane is one in a list of people and places that 'continue,' a list O'Hara introduces, "the only thing to do is simply continue / is that simple / yes, it is simple because it is the only thing to do" (329). While there's something of an existentialist-by-way-of-zen tone to the notion of 'continuing' that marks this section of the poem, the idea fits into O'Hara's poetry well as another way of expressing the importance of uninterrupted iteration as the only form of reality. O'Hara sets up this section of the poem with the statement, "we are all happy and young and toothless / it is the same as old age" (CP 328), but rather than articulating an idea of circularity in life, since O'Hara moves on immediately from this

expression to his riff on “simply continu[ing],” the sameness is better understood as the sameness of a continuous present. Old age and being “young and toothless” have the same form of existence.

Elsewhere, in the 1954 poem “Anacrostic,” O’Hara writes “over your shoulder I watch the future like a virtuoso / nearing, in the dawn of crowded voices, its piano” (*CP* 176).³ This is a good articulation of how O’Hara conceives of the actual continuity between the present and the future. It is not a goal to be met or a fixed form the present should aim to shape itself into; instead the future approaches in order to play the present, or becomes, as he goes on, “witticisms dropped into a well, soon / gone, like each succeeding breath of air.” In this conception, the future has no manifestation except that it is given momentary articulation in the present, after which it is gone. Articulation here takes either the form of a piano played by a virtuoso or of easily discarded witticisms (two forms of articulation that were each dear to O’Hara), so the point is not necessarily to emphasize some existentially weighted importance to the impermanence of the present. He articulates a freedom that persists in the possibility of the future arriving at and improvising the present, rather than the present identifying a potential future form and endeavoring to reshape itself to correspond to that.

Such a freedom is important to O’Hara as a way of usefully understanding the becoming of the present, as well as for handling what he calls in “Joe’s Jacket” (1959) the “indiscriminately hitched-to past” (*CP* 330). In this poem, written soon after meeting Vincent Warren, and largely a meditation on the moment of moving into that new relationship, the specific past O’Hara refers to is “the forceful histories of myself and Vincent [which] loom / like the city hour after hour closer and closer to the future” (330). In response to this anxiety about the force of history, “Joe

the “wings of an extraordinary liberty,” and unusually for O’Hara, this embrace of a metaphysical concept like liberty is not undercut with some kind of dismissal or irony.⁵ The point here is how O’Hara articulates a way the past can seem to function against the poetic subject as bonds, and how the founding of a community as a base for poetic speech allows for the possibility of freeing oneself from the bonds of the past.

Which isn’t to say O’Hara’s poetry demonstrates commitment to an idea of the freely articulated poetic subject as a kind of absolute liberty. As he writes in 1961’s “For the Chinese New Year & For Bill Berkson,” “the strange career of a personality begins at five and ends / forty minutes later in a fog the rest is just a lot of stranded / ships honking their horns” (*CP* 392). Here, rather than a birth, the personality’s moment of freedom comes at the end of the work day, but it’s a momentary freedom, not an arrival at permanent actualization. Note that here, by emplotting the idea in the narrative of a daily cycle rather than a lifetime, this idea of a personality lives out its momentary career repeatedly, so it is rearticulated daily rather than picking up from a prior moment and continuing down a course. O’Hara goes on to conclude the poem, “no there is no precedent of history no history nobody came before / nobody will ever come before and nobody ever was that man // you will not die not knowing this is true this year” (*CP* 393). While the tone of this poem is for the most part obliquely teasing or flirtatious when it seems to direct itself to Berkson, to conclude this way indicates a sort of effort on the poet’s part, through his relationship with the younger poet, to achieve a realization of the illusory existence of the past.

The poem “Vincent and I Inaugurate a Movie Theatre” (1961) more directly thematizes O’Hara’s ideas about the way the present can resist the persistence of the problems of historical

past. The poem begins with an exclamation of happiness about a new movie theater and what seems at first like a rebuke for Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky for the way their orientalized dream of an other place blinds them to important pleasures available in a present here and now:

Now that the Charles Theatre has opened
it looks like we're going to have some wonderful times
Allen and Peter, why are you going away
our country's black and white past spread out
before us is no time to spread over India (CP 399)

Notice that here the movie theater, the occasion for a social experience of a film, allows for a way of spreading the past out "before us" all at once. This is important, because, as O'Hara goes on to describe the 1935 film *Alice Adams*, the tone moves from the excitement of a movie theater to disgust. He describes "Allen and I getting depressed and angry . . . while Vincent points out that when anything / good happens the movie has just flicked over to fantasy / only fantasy in all America can be good" (CP 400). This is mostly due, it seems, to the race relations portrayed in the film, and the poem concludes, "no wonder you want to find out about India take / a print of *Alice Adams* with you it will cheer them up" (400). Ending the poem this way accomplishes a couple of different things. For one, O'Hara resolves his complaint about Ginsberg's orientalist fixation by reconfiguring it as a strategy for allowing the present to resist the bonds of the past. O'Hara sees a way that it might not necessarily be an escape to a place outside of history, but a way of occupying a place in which the American Ginsberg would be able to renegotiate his own relation to (American) history. Secondly, after a poem that descends into depression at the thought of the race relations portrayed in the film, O'Hara again asserts the film itself as a tool for performing resistance against the depressing power the past might hold over the present, as he ironically urges Ginsberg to bring a print of the film as a way of

bringing cheer: the joke that the film could cheer ‘them’ up (presumably by demonstrating how awful America is/was) works by insinuating a distance between Ginsberg and the past objectified and “spread out / before” them. So while the possibility is there of becoming depressed by being implicated into the history the movie portrays, it is also possible, by treating the movie as an object, or the movie theater as a social place in the present to be celebrated, to deflect that implication, and to make that deflection productive. The film objectifies history, making it available for the social world of viewers to discuss or mock, that is, to rearticulate their relation to history rather than accepting its dictates.

2. A Politics You Can’t Join

While Andrew Epstein and others have done a thorough job of describing the streak of pragmatism that runs through O’Hara’s work, especially visible in his commitment to mobility and motion, Epstein’s focus is primarily on this commitment to motion and to constant reinvention as a personal philosophy. For Epstein, to be committed to this brand of individuality is to be left trying to live in the tension between the constantly shifting individual self and the converse stability of a social unit. Epstein helpfully articulates how O’Hara’s fluidity functions as a way of resisting “anything that would confine the inherently fluid self into limited categories, definitions, or identities—a survival tactic that is linked to O’Hara’s navigation of the homophobic, repressive cultural environment of the 1950s” (94). But the result of the way Epstein would have us navigate this is that O’Hara’s work seems impossibly “torn between self-reliance and community,” as we see it “return again and again to the idea that the human self must be seen forever in motion, dissolving any such bonds” of community (87). This schema is too simple, though, and it misses the way that, for O’Hara, relationships only remain active when

they exist as a constant negotiation and discussion. As O'Hara describes the value he finds in his friendships, we see that this tension is the motor which allows a social formation to continue. This is especially visible in moments where O'Hara's work is far more concerned with describing (even demanding) a social existence that refuses resolution than with working out a philosophy of the self. Often in O'Hara's poetry, the fluidity of the self is not incompatible with a theoretical stability required by the social, but rather the self is only able to maintain its fluidity through continuous negotiation with another person. The danger lies in losing the life maintained by this negotiation by giving in to a belief in a resolved future state, or by remaining stuck in the defining grip of the past.

It is necessary to understand how this conception of the social functions in O'Hara's work in order to understand the way his poetics functions as a politics. First, I want to turn to a way O'Hara's poetry is sometimes thought to be apolitical. In a short piece about O'Hara written soon after his death, John Ashbery writes, "Frank O'Hara's poetry has no program and therefore cannot be joined. It does not advocate sex and dope as a panacea for the ills of modern society; it does not speak out against the war in Vietnam or in favor of civil rights; it does not paint gothic vignettes of the post-Atomic age: in a word, it does not attack the establishment. It merely ignores its right to exist" ("Frank O'Hara's Question" 81). This statement was immediately taken by some to be a celebration of an anti-political strain in O'Hara's work. It sparked a comment from Louis Simpson in the April 24, 1967 issue of *The Nation* in which Simpson derided Ashbery for having "complimented [O'Hara] on not having written poetry about the war. But it was not amusing to see a poet sneering at the conscience of other poets" (521). In trying to clarify his position in a letter to the editor of *The Nation*, Ashbery writes:

It should be evident from the foregoing that I was not ‘sneering at the conscience of other poets,’ but praising Frank O’Hara for giving a unique voice to his own conscience, far more effective than most of the protest ‘poetry’ being written today. All poetry is against war and in favor of life, or else it isn’t poetry, and it stops being poetry when it is forced into the mold of a particular program. Poetry is poetry. Protest is Protest. I believe in both forms of action. (674, 692)

While here Ashbery is defending his own position, not trying to articulate O’Hara’s, it is safe to say that the ideas here are often taken to be, more or less, the sort of ambivalently anti-political position of New York School poetry in general, especially when they’re misread as making a claim for the absolute division of poetry from the realm of politics in much the way Simpson did. It’s worth the time, though, to read more closely into what Ashbery actually writes *about O’Hara* in this brief exchange. First of all, in his letter responding to Simpson’s complaint, Ashbery’s argument that O’Hara’s poetry is “far more effective than most of the protest ‘poetry’ being written today” is not a purely aesthetic claim: he is specifically claiming that O’Hara’s poetic strategy is more effective at “giving a unique voice to his own conscience.” His argument is not that poetry and *politics* are separate, but that poetry and *protest* are their own behaviors, different and unique “forms of action.” The idea here seems to be that conscience is the basis of politics, and that there are different forms of action one can perform in the service of that conscience, different behaviors that function differently. One thing that differentiates poetry from protest is that poetry cannot follow a “particular program.” In this idea, Ashbery is rehashing an idea from later on in his original piece on O’Hara’s poetry, in which he writes, “unlike the message of committed poetry it incites one to all the programs of commitment as well as to every other form of self-realization—interpersonal, Dionysian, occult, or abstract” (82). In other words the unique way poetry functions is by remaining open in its commitment, which isn’t an argument outright against poetry being committed politically, but rather a claim

that poetry can be involved in a greater range of commitments than only protest, and in order to maintain that possibility it can't be narrowed down to a particular form of commitment.

The importance of retaining this openness is the most important idea behind Ashbery's claim that O'Hara's poetry "has no program"—to be committed to a program would force poetry into a narrow form of action it's not suited to. Furthermore, because of this refusal of a program, his poetry "can't be joined," but it should be noted that in articulating what is valuable about O'Hara's poetry, Ashbery emphasizes its importance for other poets; that is, the argument that it can't be joined is an argument that making use of O'Hara's poetry as a model requires a particular form of following, one that is unique from the action of joining. Ashbery writes at the conclusion of his piece that "O'Hara was the first modern poet to realize that the question was there" (83), casting O'Hara in the position of a groundbreaking progenitor, presumably with others coming after who have continued in the realization that this question was there. Similarly, in his introduction to O'Hara's *Collected Poems*, Ashbery writes that O'Hara "has opened up poetry for today's generation of young poets," particularly in the way his poetry is open to "words and colors that could be borrowed freely from everywhere to build up big, airy structures unlike anything previous in American poetry and indeed unlike poetry, more like the inspired ramblings of a mind open to the point of distraction" (ix). For Ashbery, more than anything it is openness to taking from everywhere that characterizes the value of O'Hara's poetry, a commitment to which he sees as composing O'Hara's legacy. This is the type of principle which, as Ashbery puts it, can't be *joined*, and especially can't be joined even by those wishing to emulate it. This logical situation can help us understand an especially important part of how Ashbery initially argued O'Hara's poetry functions when he writes that "it does not attack the

establishment. It merely ignores its right to exist” (81). While this is partially a celebration of a kind of free-spirited anarchy exhibited by O’Hara’s poetry in its rejection of rule-following, it can also be followed through to a further conclusion. In ignoring the “right to exist,” of the establishment, Ashbery’s claim is not only that O’Hara’s poetry rejects the specific rule of the present establishment, but ignores the right of an establishment to exist at all. A major consequence of operating under this attitude, of course, is that if it functions as a progenitor of something, it must do so in such a way as to refuse becoming a form of establishment in its own right. That is, this poetics does not seek to establish itself as a new order that will stand in the place of the old one, but operates by ignoring the right of the old establishment to grant authorization and by refusing to establish itself in the place of the old order.

While Ashbery’s statement could easily be read (and I believe has often been read) as a statement of the need to separate art and politics and a defense of O’Hara’s having done so, it should rather be understood as an explanation of the different form of politics O’Hara’s poetry performs. Poetry, by this way of thinking, is capable of ignoring the established order. When this idea operates within a poetics that is as focused on the social aspect of poetry as O’Hara’s often is, it naturally has an effect on the way those social relationships must be conceptualized. For one, the focus on the continuous present as the site of the social, not only in terms of the fluidity of the self but also through an understanding of the social as being alive only when it is in a state of continuous negotiation, is a means by which sociality can be embraced without insisting that relationships must be hardened into a new establishment, or that the political form of relationships must allow itself to be defined by established ways of political being. This is what we start to see more clearly when we trouble the simplicity of the tension Epstein sets up

between an embrace of the fluid self and a desire to be ensconced in a social formation. Focusing on a kind of sociality that ignores the past and the future in its commitment to continuous discussion and argument, a sociality that remains unconstrained by the bonds of old forms and refuses to force itself into a new future program, allows O'Hara's poetics to operate in a social world that has no need for establishment. Furthermore, this way of resisting establishment plays a major role in the way O'Hara's poetics functions practically as a kind of politics.

3. Liking, Choosing, and (Re)negotiation

The poetic subject in O'Hara's poetry thus finds itself in a constant state of renegotiating its relations with the world, and it is important here to articulate a distinction between this state of continuous renegotiation and a state of denial or rejection of history or meaning. When this poetic subject looks at its own history, the history is externalized as a way of resisting the power that history would have to define it. Similarly, this subject treats social or political history as something it has the power to accept or deny as it feels fit to do, in a way that resists the power of social or political history to bound its existence.

For one thing, objectification of relations and bonds as allows for the dynamic self-declaration of belonging within a poetic or artistic lineage that marks much of O'Hara's poetics. As Lytle Shaw helpfully articulates, O'Hara's repeated expressions of an alternative canon function to enable a queer relationality to the poets and artists of the past (and present) that he claims amounts to rejecting the patrilineal model of poetic lineage. Shaw argues that we should not understand the way O'Hara uses names like Mayakovsky as a declaration of a debt owed to that writer, or as a claim to belong to a lineage sprung from that writer. Instead, we have to understand the way O'Hara uses names in his poetry to destabilize our ordinary relationship to

those names. For example, writing about O'Hara's reference to Khrushchev in "Poem (Khrushchev is coming on the right day!)" Shaw argues, "if it asks us to associate these framing contextual attributes [knowledge of world politics] with that proper name, the poem's ultimate gesture is precisely to destabilize the broader set of attributes we are taught to associate with a world leader," leading to a "rejection of a kind of normative context for the proper name Khrushchev" as a way of "appropriating and personalizing what we might think of as the operative associations that are supposed to govern our understanding of public figures" (28). O'Hara performs a related sort of destabilizing of the names of the past authors he refers to. For example, Shaw points us the poem "Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul," which includes the names of many of his friends alongside the names of some of his favorite French writers, "as though by rubbing the two sets of names against each other O'Hara could effect a sort of temporary, improper canonization of his own friends" (28). But Shaw's point is not that O'Hara only seeks to elevate his friends to an improperly canonized status, but that in calling into question the situation of his friends with the writers of the past O'Hara is able to "recode kinship structures." O'Hara, Shaw writes,

recodes alliances by replacing the organic and fixed social model of the family with a contingent and shifting association of friends. He recodes filiation not merely by refusing to produce offspring but also by refusing to be one. O'Hara's attempt to exit the filiative model of the Great Tradition is coincident both with his cultivation of obscure, often campy, genealogical precedents and with his frequently heretical readings of canonical authors. (29)

In this way, O'Hara destabilizes the filiative model of tradition in order to produce a new sort of productive relationship between himself and those writers he admires, "oppos[ing] the idea of literary paternity . . . with a more fundamental refusal to acknowledge paternity itself—and, in fact, with a positive, experimental model of affinity that would stand outside it" (50).

Importantly, this operation does not deny the history of the world it comments on, but it claims its own ability to define the meaning of that history for itself. O'Hara's claiming of a specific world of French surrealist and Russian poets, and his constant association of himself with painters and artists rather than with established literary figures, is a way of situating himself outside the traditional Anglo/American poetic canon. This is a move that comes from being aware of and interested in the meaning of associations. Rather than understanding these associations as functioning cumulatively and building on each other, allowing one to cement one's own existence within a given history, it understands these associations as continuously available to be claimed or rejected at any given moment, unbound to past associations whose usefulness may have changed or disappeared, and always open to rearticulation in future situations.

It would be useful here to articulate the difference between performing this operation with an awareness of history and performing it by rejecting history. The latter idea ultimately informs Michael Clune's explanation of the way 'liking' works in O'Hara's poetry. In "Everything We Want: Frank O'Hara and the Aesthetics of Free Choice," Clune argues that O'Hara's poems "dramatize the particularity of personal experience slipping through the grip of liberal subjectivity and expanding into a collective subjectivity" (182). Against the liberal subject that is supposed to be an autonomous whole who makes rational decisions, Clune argues that O'Hara's poems repeatedly present "representations of personal choice as whatever one happens to like" (183). This model of choice undercuts postwar American investment in rational choice because it provides "no causal account linking choice to the interiority of the subject" (184). This basic level of making choices based on whatever one happens to like at any given

moment not only undercuts the idea of rational choice; it also constitutes a different sort of subjective relationship to reality and society. Where rational choice would suggest that the choices we make are constitutive of the inner reality of the subject, with “beliefs, tastes, interests, or personality predefining or circumscribing choice,” the free choices O’Hara depicts replace the importance of a cultivated inner reality with “a desire that surfaces in a spontaneous engagement with a given array of options, a given environment” (184). As Clune argues, this constitutes a different sort of relationship between a subject and the world. Whereas the rational choice model insists on a hierarchy of values, allowing the cultivated subjective whole to make claims to have developed better reasons for choosing than a less cultivated subject might, “O’Hara submits these heterogeneous objects, drawn from different spheres of life, differently invested with social value, to an identical organizational principle: does he like it when he sees it?” (185). The result is the constitution of a “new relation to the collective subject” (186). Clune argues, “In choosing without knowing why, O’Hara enters into a direct relation with society. The apparently random, trivial choices of the speaker (buying a strap for his watch, picking out a charm) conceal a powerful utopian claim. When I am thinking only of whatever strikes my fancy, ‘one person out of the 8,000,000 is thinking of me.’” (187). This collective, rather than the ordered and supposedly meaningfully hierarchized society of rational choice, is a “desiring and desirable body” (188).

One thing to note here is that the subject Clune imagines at work in O’Hara’s poetry is, in the end, very close to the neoliberal idea of the subject as consumer. This subject makes its spontaneous decisions to like things from within a theoretical moment where history has been vacated. The choices thus essentially happen without any external meaning; they signify nothing

more than their own free expression of a choice. Srikanth Reddy makes a similar mistake, arguing that the freedom O'Hara's poetics aims at comes from divorcing expression completely from meaning or subject matter, as his poetry "only confers identity upon subjectless images" (23) and in so doing creates a freedom to "imagine what a person might be in the abstract, freed from the constraints of subject matter" (24). This is as if Reddy wants O'Hara to be operating under strict devotion to something like Clement Greenberg's dictate to pure abstraction in painting. I would argue that while O'Hara's poetic subject does understand itself to be able to create a certain amount of freedom in the way it makes its own choices, unbound by the dictates of history, this freedom is not the ground from which the subject makes its choices. Rather, it is a freedom fought for through the process of making these choices. And the possibility of this freedom actually relies on these choices having meaning. It *matters* for O'Hara's poetic subject to define its poetic world as being made up of French and Russian poets, and in so doing to reject definition by a literary establishment, to like Melville and not like Lionel Trilling, because those sets of associations, articulated in those moments, define a particular space within a political field.

Oren Izenberg brings us significantly closer to understanding how the operation of "liking" functions meaningfully in O'Hara's poetry. Izenberg makes use of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of a literary field, which he glosses as a set of "aesthetic positions (formalism, realism, 'engaged art,' or 'art-for art's sake') that correlate with social locations (the academy, the fireside, or 'bohemia) and, through various complex mediations, with economic interests" (125). But where strict adherence to Bourdieu's theory risks thinking as if there is something potentially like a one-to-one correlation, where *this* preference corresponds precisely to *this*

position, Izenberg argues that in O'Hara's work preferences like these do not show up as seemingly free decisions made in a literary field but which merely correspond to their economic or social positions, but instead that "preference appears *everywhere* in O'Hara" (127). That is, O'Hara expands the field of things that can be treated with the act of what appears to be expressing a preference, so "what O'Hara displays in his totalizations of liking and disliking and in his conflation of different categories of liked and disliked things is his refusal to allow the field to 'refract,' or even to remain a field" (127-28). For Izenberg, this is how O'Hara's poetry works toward a utopian possibility, denying the restrictive boundaries of a specific field within which the universally available action of having a preference is appropriate. O'Hara's "restriction to a single vocabulary—that of 'liking and disliking,' for example" (129), pushes beyond something like a Kantian expression of literary taste, which, as Izenberg notes, everyone knows is not as free of social and economic determination as it would like to be. For Izenberg, it then follows that this "elevat[es] valuing as such in order to demonstrate that *that* is an activity that is not bound by particular histories or restricted to particular communities" (129). Once we're at the place where we see this as an activity we all share in common, "the function of translating the various criteriological demands of a plurality of worlds (or fields) into a single 'literary' world is to imagine the replacement of socially divisive distinctions by a universally sharable affect or enthusiasm—a libidinal blush that reconciles the difference between any local colors" (130).

What Izenberg helps us see is how O'Hara's emphasis of "liking and disliking" as the mode of discourse effectively invalidates illusory bars to participation, as the activity of expressing preferences requires no special training. Where we should hesitate in accepting

Izenberg's analysis, however, is in the way this move becomes a way of perpetually breaking down social barriers and encompassing more and more people into the same field—that is, it points toward greater and greater inclusivity, always against division. But this does not leave us with a very clear way of understanding in what ways disagreement and negotiation function in O'Hara's work. The preferences expressed in O'Hara's poetry are not only enthusiasms, after all. The sort of negotiation and discussion O'Hara values is often an expression both of dislikes and likes, or a sort of ranking where someone is greater than someone else. While to a certain extent it is often this activity itself, more than the specific preferences expressed, that is valuable—this is how relationships are able to continue, in the continuous discussion and negotiation of preferences—it is not simply a matter of adding enthusiasm to enthusiasm in order to bring (potentially) everyone and everything in. That is, it's not just about including more and more, but about disagreeing about preferences, and in so doing making it so disagreements are expressed in a single field, such that one cannot resort to a level of discourse of the supposedly disinterested (therefore stakeless) critical realm. Instead, disagreements have to meet head on. Alliances are formed and friendships cemented in the acceptance of this give and take, in the willingness to participate. This is something like what Reddy, building on Shaw, is after when he writes about the function of gossip for this community. Reddy writes of the way that, “During the *bell époque* of the New York School, participation in gossip signified one's membership in a particular coterie of artists, intellectuals, and socialites who defined their group in relation or opposition to various other circles,” and quotes Shaw to the effect that this participation in a coterie could amount to a “critique of literature's frequent rhetoric of universality” (18).

To return to Izenberg briefly, even after we modify the emphasis of this analysis in order not to leave out the simultaneous significance of *disliking* things for O'Hara, there's one other way I want to push Izenberg's analysis. He writes, "For O'Hara, a community is not a place where everyone who is the same value the same things, but where everyone is the same insofar as they have made the commitment to find value" (133), so that the utopian goal of O'Hara's work is "not a world in which there is no difference between loving persons and loving poems, but in which the world recast as 'literary history' universalizes the opportunity to exercise the capacity to value" (134). To exist in this world is to realize in oneself and with others the shared "susceptibility to value and to be valued" (134). Here, Izenberg weirdly makes the individual self the most important site of this valuing. O'Hara's poetry acts as a model for us to open up our own perception of valuing and being valued, and the idea of a community formed in this way is strangely enough a community of individuals acting in parallel fashion, but ultimately with no real need for the others in order to successfully realize this individual susceptibility. Izenberg does recognize the importance of ongoing discourse for O'Hara, as he emphasizes that O'Hara's "refusal to believe that an afterlife could look any different than the life he actually leads—a life that consists of poetic exchange with friends. . . . is the form the poet's metaphysics takes" (134). But it is important to understand the difference between a poetics that aims at constituting community and a poetics that aims at self-actualization. I would emphasize the role of the former in O'Hara's poetry over the latter, because when we pay attention to this aspect of his work—and its impact—we can begin to understand how his poetry comes to function as a site for the ongoing instantiation of politics, or as what I would like to call the ongoing rearticulation of a dissensual collaboration.

We now have the elements of an understanding of how the sociality in O'Hara's work functions as a site of politics. I call this a politics of dissensual collaboration, borrowing the term dissensus from Rancière, to emphasize that this is a nonutopian form of political thought, operating by inviting moments of dissensus rather than aiming for articulating consensus. For Rancière, an act of politics is "always a mode of expression that undoes the perceptible divisions of the police order by implementing a basically heterogenous assumption, that of a part of those who have no part, an assumption that, at the end of the day, itself demonstrates the sheer contingency of the order, the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being" (*Disagreement* 30). An act of politics is a demonstration by those discounted by the police or the dominant order that their utterances are articulate, making visible that the denial of their utterances is nothing more than naked domination by the police. But every establishment of an order, even one that initially began in a genuine eruption of politics, necessarily hardens into another violation of the principle of equality. Rancière writes, "A political demonstration is therefore always of the moment and its subjects are always precarious. A political difference is always on the shore of its own disappearance" (*Dissensus* 39). In Rancière's thinking, every order is always going to run up against another world, another conflicting partition of the sensible: "Equality turns into the opposite the moment it aspires to a place in the social or state organization" (*Disagreement* 35).

Importantly, this theory of politics runs counter to consensus-based political thought, the idea that the process of rational argumentation is directed toward an eventual just equilibrium in which all politics will be settled. Further even than this, Rancière argues that the forms of political thought built on consensus are effectively the denial or fear of politics, as the prospect

of consensus “presupposes the disappearance of any gap between a party to a dispute and a part of society. It is the disappearance of the mechanisms of [political] appearance” (102). It is, effectively, a police function that insists all proper ways of being are already known or can be known, that the present partition of the sensible is structured such that it can potentially take note of any possible articulation, or, in other words, that all possible subjects can be brought in to live under the developing liberal order. According to Rancière’s schema, consensus is the logic of the police masquerading as politics.

As opposed to consensus, Rancière argues for an understanding of politics as dissensus, as the recognition of unresolvable differences among participants in a social world that don’t resolve into a structured hierarchy. In this understanding of politics, acts of politics are not projected toward a utopian end, but are momentary: they occur in a specific present moment as eruptions or forced recognitions of equality against an established order. That politics in this sense is based in equality does not mean it is a momentary glimpse of a true or transcendent idea that can only ever be approximated in the material world but toward which politics must always strive. Equality, in other words, isn’t a goal, or even a guiding principle, for politics. Acts of politics occur in a moment when the fact of equality violates the ongoing order of things. In this sense, then, politics is not a utopian project, structured in such a way as to bring society ever closer to an ideal world, but is an insistence on recognizing an actual, already existing world. Secondly, in this understanding of the operation of politics, politics must not be mistaken for a continuous opening up of the common to include more and more people. Rancière makes this explicit in his critique of the concept of the multitudes, writing that “the multitude manifests a phobia of the negative, of any politics that defines itself ‘against’” (*Dissensus* 86). The

understanding of politics as a sort of continuous opening up and bringing in of more and more subjects ultimately amounts to taking the charge out of politics. This is because, Rancière argues, “[p]olitics always involved one people superadded to another, one people against another” (85). There is always “a gap with respect to every idea of the people” (85), and any attempt to erase that gap by defining ‘the people’ as all people is either the establishment of an order that, in insisting that it counts everyone, denies the existence of those it does not count, or it is the dilution of the political subject to the point that it becomes a meaningless concept, like a platitude or a truism. In other words, politics is an operation performed by those opposed to the present order of things, by those who according to the present order of things are not properly speaking subjects or performed in a form of speech not recognized by the present order of things as proper speech. But the result is not simply the added recognition of more subjects by the police order; the result is a redistribution of the sensible, which like any distribution of the sensible remains in its own way susceptible to eruptions of politics. Hence, for Rancière, the essence of politics is dissensus.

In describing O’Hara’s poetics as the articulation of dissensual collaboration, I want to highlight how O’Hara’s poetry functions in this nonutopian mode, inviting participants into an activity that doesn’t build into a consensus but insists on the importance of ongoing disagreement. It’s not a critical poetry, or a philosophical poetry (necessarily), nor an argumentative poetry, but the particular ways O’Hara entangles his poetry into a social world, and the ways he encourages that social world to operate, result in a poetry that functions in this mode of politics. O’Hara’s celebrations of his relationships with his friends celebrate them as sites for ongoing argumentation and discussion—they have no legitimate form except as foci of

multiple continuous presents, and to harden into forms directed toward a decided future or to succumb to the narrative demands of history is to change into something that O'Hara treats as a kind of death. Likewise, O'Hara consistently casts the definition history would assert over the present as something to try to escape from, while he also resists replacing the traps of history with hope for a settled future. The present is the only time his poetry understands sociality to live. And since it is a present constituted by discussion and argumentation, rather than a present that develops ongoing settlements into agreement or declarations of official alliances, his poetry takes the form of a setting for politics—or dissensus—to take place.

4. The “Second Avenue” Period: Brass Knuckles Sociability

Frank O'Hara's longest poem, “Second Avenue” (1953), is perhaps most notorious for also being the poet's most difficult or obscure poem. At least as far back as Marjorie Perloff's *Poet among Painters*, critics have focused their discussion of the poem on its obscurity in order to declare it a failure, or, at best, as Ashbery implies in his introduction to O'Hara's *Collected Poems*, an example of the “early, muscle-flexing period of his work” (viii), something that O'Hara would eventually grow out of. But there is evidence to suggest that O'Hara and many of the artists and poets in his New York milieu felt strongly that the poem was more important than that. Lytle Shaw notes that when O'Hara was preparing the manuscript of *Meditations in an Emergency* he wrote to his editor that “Second Avenue” was his favorite poem in the collection, although he suspected it would not be included in the book due to its obscenity (*Coterie* 166). And, at least circumstantially, the fact that it was not published in its entirety until 1960 suggests that O'Hara maintained at least enough pride in the poem seven years after its composition to want to see the poem presented to the world whole. Additionally, even as Perloff

asserts her skepticism about the poem, she acknowledges that her dismissal does not match the attitude of O'Hara's friends about the poem. Kenneth Koch, for instance, held the poem in high regard, writing in response to it that "Mr. O'Hara is the best writer about New York alive," and that the poem "is evidence that the avant-garde style of French poetry from Baudelaire to Reverdy has now infiltrated American consciousness to such an extent that it is possible for an American poet to write lyrically in it with perfect ease" (qtd. in Perloff 69). Perloff also paraphrases for us Grace Hartigan's opinion that the poem is "an amazing feat . . . a groundbreaking poem, a kind of lyric *Who's Who*" (71). Additionally, the notes to the poem provided by Donald Allen for his edition of O'Hara's *Collected Poems* contain Larry Rivers's assessment of the poem as "marvelous" (qtd. in *Collected* 529), and the inclusion in *Collected Poems* of O'Hara's note of explanation about the poem to the literary editor of a magazine hints at a certain distinction of the poem in the bulk of O'Hara's work. All of this suggests that, even if the poem represents the culmination of O'Hara's immature early writing, that assessment hardly helps us understand why the poem remained so important for O'Hara and for so many of his closest friends and most careful readers. It is useful to note this difference between how the poem appears when trying to subject it to a critical appraisal and how the poem is appreciated by those who want to signal their part in the coterie of those who recognize its greatness.

"Second Avenue" might strike some readers immediately as obscure or difficult, but we should understand the obscurity of the poem not as an obstacle to reading it but rather as functioning at once as a defiance of those who would be inclined to reject its sort of play and as an invitation extended to those who want to get behind what the poem does, or what it stands for. Additionally, if we look at "Second Avenue" in the context of the other poetry O'Hara was

writing around the same time, which will be my main focus in what follows, it's possible to pick up a sense that O'Hara's particular ambitiousness at this moment of his writing was not only a sense of personal ambition. Along with the intensity of verbal play his poetry from this time engages in, poetry of this period often displays a pointed investment in pushing the ambition of the poets and artists around him, along with frustration—sometimes accompanied by harsh critiques—that the subjects of his poems aren't pushing themselves enough.

When critics have focused on the more difficult aspects of O'Hara's poetry, they have mostly done so by interpreting it in terms of philosophical seriousness. In *Statutes of Liberty*, Geoff Ward engages with deconstruction to provide a reading of O'Hara's project as, if not exactly deconstruction *avant la lettre*, then fundamentally sympathetic to the aims of deconstruction. O'Hara's poetry, Ward argues, is “sharply prescient of deconstruction. . . . so much so that literary theory, at least in this form, has little to contribute to a reading of poetry that has reached that stage of prescience through developments in its own separate tradition” (69-70). The most emblematic aspect of Ward's deconstructive O'Hara can be found in O'Hara's 1956 poem “In Memory of My Feelings,” which finds O'Hara demonstrating his debt to surrealism by foregrounding “an emphasis on the openness of the self, its multiplicity” (70), and by using surrealist metaphor, which extends the “*différance*” traditional metaphor “always . . . contain[s] finally by the overall aptness of the [metaphoric] phrase” (73) such that “[s]urrealist figuration achieves its strange resonances by oscillating undecidably between metaphor and metonymy” (74). These techniques allow O'Hara to write a poem that “is about how to be open and violated, *and* panic, and get through it somehow with nothing of the hero, that lemming to his own appalling stoicism, but with some more flowing quality like an idea of

democracy” (81-82). For Ward’s deconstructive O’Hara, then, what presents as difficulty in the poetry operates as a philosophical move to depict an open, undecided self that is not able to closed into “our cherished fiction of a whole subjectivity” (69).

Working in a similar philosophical tradition, Ian Davidson provides a couple of different ways O’Hara’s poetry can be read to use language in a way that subverts the dominant social order. Davidson reads O’Hara through Kristeva’s *Revolution in Poetic Language* to demonstrate how O’Hara, in his early symbolic poems, “wants to work within a broad range of possible ways of making meaning” (“Symbolism” 800). Davidson argues that O’Hara uses “symbolic references [that] are made more complex by his use of slang or codes of the homosexual subculture” (800) in order to “challenge and subvert” the “oppressive nature of the symbolic order” that would try to insist those codes remain underground and hidden (801). Here the obscurity of O’Hara’s symbolism would function to keep the meaning of those codes open so they are available to become empowering against their forced disempowerment by the dominant symbolic order. Elsewhere, in *Radical Spaces of Poetry*, Davidson argues that O’Hara consistently destabilizes the meaning of place in his poetry, so that “the poems produce a variety of places . . . from which the speaking subject can critique the normative assumptions of mainstream American culture” (73). Here, again, O’Hara’s poetry functions to destabilize or keep open the subjects of his poems, in this case their places, in order to “demonstrate that although a place may be familiar, it is never normal. It is always reproduced by each new visit” (73). The perpetual state of undecidability O’Hara gives to places provides him room for “even greater flexibility in maintaining varieties of political perspectives without revealing himself, and a poetic in which the poem itself becomes the place in which he can hide from, yet also

critique, American culture” (87). The deconstructive O’Hara that Ward and Davidson demonstrate for us thus uses language in his poetry in such a way that it continuously pushes against determinations the dominant American social order would have language and poetry resolve into. While these approaches bring us a recognition of how important linguistic play and resistance to defined meaning are as features of O’Hara’s poetry, they also miss out on the important ways O’Hara’s poetry invokes and casts itself into a social milieu. The poetry might *perform* a deconstructive action, it’s still something that happens solely on an abstract plain.

The period leading up to the composition of “Second Avenue,” the poetry O’Hara wrote after his move back to New York from Ann Arbor, is one in which O’Hara is very invested in developing his own ambitions and the ambitions of his friends. It is fair to say the poetry from this period most strongly satisfies Ashbery’s quip about “trying out different pairs of brass knuckles,” as we can see O’Hara moving through a wide range of forms, and trying to push various stylistic quirks. The poetry of this period is especially experimental in those terms. While such an observation might be hard to quantify, the idea that he is pushing the ambitiousness of his work makes it to the surface of his poems in a few cases. In addition to his own personal ambition, I argue that particularly during this phase of his writing, O’Hara uses the explicit sociality of his efforts not simply to invoke a poetic sociality, but specifically to needle his compatriots into a greater sense of group ambition.

The pointed sociality of O’Hara’s poetry is so often such a strong feature that it almost seems redundant to point it out, but even as there are numerous treatments of sociality as a textual effect in his poetry, there has not been much attention paid to how it evolves as a practice over the course of O’Hara’s writing career. A thorough exploration of this evolution is outside

the scope of this chapter, but I want to quickly plot out a few points in order to suggest some important aspects of the way sociality is at work in O'Hara's poetry leading up to the production of "Second Avenue." To do so, I'll first turn to the relatively light 1952 poem, "Beach Party":

Later the pewter listeners disappeared
 into the saffron lake which was Sun
 swallowing Rascal. The rattlers all
 serenaded each other, rapping upon realizing
 their loss some miniscule sipper's louse.

Rendering unto the sinking its Lie,
 its paraphrase of the biblical camp,
 the Making, we practically created a
 Musical Comedy, arms entwined and skipping,
 like *The Jazz Singer* in reverse.
 The four of us seemed quite awful
 at the picnic to all those New York friends
 who'd just wangled an invitation. But we
 were the ones to start hating, weren't we?
 Ssssss. The sun, the Sun! didn't refrain
 its random capsule to escape us or let
 them off.

Going down into our blood
 like the last day of our sweet nearing lives
 it cried "Kill! Kill!" and folk from the City
 were there to massage the altar of
 our fear, forgotten as we ranted and shook,
 so golden leeches, leaping and scarlet into the sea. (96)

In spite of the easy and frivolous scene suggested by the poem's title, the poem rides a rather hard edge, threatening to teeter into either hilarity or anxious panic while never resolving into either. The sharp ambivalence of the poem's tone is rather characteristic of O'Hara's poetry of this period.⁶ At the center of the poem, O'Hara invokes a social group, "the four of us," who are set apart from the larger scene of "all those New York friends" for "seem[ing] quite awful." There are two things I want to focus on about the idea of sociality this presents. First of all, here we see that O'Hara conceives of "us" as a smaller group set apart from a larger

scene, and this dynamic is a feature of O'Hara's conception of his social world that takes shape during this period of his writing. While earlier poems written to suggest a social subject, such as "A Note to John Ashbery" and "A Note to Harold Fondren" from 1950, do so by using a "we" to imply a special affinity between poet and addressee while announcing a shared ambition, the ambition of the group is focused on realizing certain qualities or making its mark on a waiting world: for example, from "A Note to Harold Fondren," "We seed / the land and its art without being prodigal / and are ourselves its necessity and flower" (34). In the slightly later poem "Brothers," O'Hara has moved from a private communication between poet and addressee to a mode of announcing by public address his compatriots, each named individually as they're made part of this familial group: "'Are you dishing art?': John's most sophisticated, / Jimmy seriousest, Kenneth large, locomotive, laughing like Midas of the Closed Fist. / When to the silent generousities I stumble home" (75). Poems such as these suggest a playful camaraderie paired with a friendly push toward a greater ambition, and in "Brothers" O'Hara deflates the most overblown expression of the group's talent—applied to Kenneth Koch—with the self-effacing closing line, a move designed to be endearing. "Beach Party," however, does not announce a future ambition, but rather demonstrates that the ambition of the "us" to stand out is already taking place, because they seem awful to the others around them. The group is formed both by the linguistic bond of being pronounced an "us," and by being set apart from the members of a larger scene.

Secondly, this state of being set apart is certainly the goal, but it is expressed in terms of the group's exaggerated antagonism to those it is set apart from. The precise way O'Hara does this here is worth exploring more closely. While in the poem to Fondren O'Hara writes of

“seed[ing] / the land,” in “Beach Party” O’Hara twists the expression of fertile creativity into “the Making,” as “we practically created a / Musical Comedy.” The capitalization of “the Making,” and of “the Lie” two lines prior, are markers of a tone I’m tempted to call, using O’Hara’s phrase, “biblical camp”—it allows him to get away with simultaneously announcing a serious level of ambition while using language or tonal markings that suggest irony. This looks somewhat like irony, except the irony here doesn’t undercut the claim it expresses. Like camp, there’s a seriousness underlying the expression that is made opaque to straight-serious discourse by giving it a mock-serious tone. Writing about O’Hara, Andrew Ross argues that “camp has to be seen as an imaginative conquest of everyday conditions of oppression, where more articulate expressions of resistance or empowerment were impossible” (374). I suggest there’s something even more forceful going on with O’Hara’s biblical camp, as O’Hara uses it to articulate an expression of empowerment in a way that normative discourse would find impossible to comprehend as a straightforward claim. What has this “us” achieved that is “like *The Jazz Singer* in reverse” and tantamount to “the Making”? Whatever it is, it makes this little clique seem awful to the larger scene. The smaller group not only embraces this judgment from the larger scene, it turns it around on them: “But we / were the ones to start hating, weren’t we?” (96).

Hatred—and anger (or spleen)⁷—is an under-explored force in O’Hara’s poetry, and “Beach Party” was written during the same summer as the longer poem “Hatred,” which gives us a clue of how important for the poetry of this period the idea of trying to harness hatred is for O’Hara. In “Hatred” we see that hatred in these poems represents a potentially transformative force when it is directed against both a larger hostile dominant national identity and against the poetic subject’s self and own social world. He writes, “I’d retch up all men. I would give / up

America and her twenty twistings of my years,” and later, “I have resisted my comrades and their parties” (117, 119). Here the subject of the poem is imbued with an impulse to dissolve and resist established and past social and political relations. In a similar vein, he reports:

I have hounded myself out of the coral mountains
when my flesh quivered controllably upwards
into the chimneys of a black horde
which were the liberty to work beautifully.

I hounded and hounded into being born
my own death and the death of my country (118)

Here the work toward dissolution simultaneously includes the death of the self and of the self’s country, but this ‘hounding’ after dissolution is also a way of pushing the self, as part of a horde, into a place of liberation, a place where, freed from self and from a previous social world and from country, the poetic subject realizes a “liberty to work beautifully.” Elsewhere, in the face of all this dissolution and death, the speaker allows, “Yet I hold myself to you. I have the jangling nerves / of legendary people who box each other’s ears. . . .” (119). As with the earlier hordes that enable liberty and beauty, here, where the speaker expresses a social relation that is maintained or clung to the result is at once discomfort—“jangling nerves”—and a sort of heightened success achieved by haranguing each other. Such an opposition comes out again, somewhat more clearly:

I bleed through a pose of cautious elephant riding,
am caught in brambles fancy as myself as prisoner
of Chillon. It is against this self that I hasten
towards a higher malady in which you appear starred

as aspiration and regret. (119-20)

Here, again, the subject overcomes a cautious and imprisoned self by setting out in aspiration toward a new self—this new self representing at once something higher and malady, both

aspiration and regret. The overcoming is necessary, but it is not an overcoming that entails arriving at a settled better version, a moment of resolution. Likewise, the higher malady arrives with the reintroduction of ‘you,’ of another member of the social unit. Approaching the conclusion of the poem, he writes:

As martyr I am able to whip the crowd into shape,

a coronet of renegades dangling gold in the sky
like fountains and arenas on which feasts the cruel azure
of the holiday immediately succeeding the comradeship
of battle (120)

Here, the death of the poetic subject has political force, is a martyring that enables him to spur on the others, moving them all into a space of comradeship recognized through having participated in a shared antagonism. None of this resolves very satisfyingly in “Hatred.” Hatred is a force that runs in all directions in the poem, but, significantly, it is not something to be feared or resisted. It opens up new possibilities for social relations by insisting on dissolution and antagonism. And in spite of all the death and violence that make up the explicit content of the poem, there is no whiff of tragedy or mourning. Instead, hatred allows for the past to be overcome, to be forgotten forever, and the poem concludes:

I shall forget forever America,
which was like a memory of an island massacre
in the black robes of my youthful fear of shadows.
So easily conquered by the black torrent of this knife. (120)

The valence of hatred in “Hatred” suggests that in “Beach Party” when O’Hara uses the emotion, reciprocating and augmenting the disapproval of the larger scene directed at his smaller group, it is a way for the tension to be productive for the smaller group. The behavior they exhibit, expressed in a language of their own, is not a politically neutral expression of kinship, but

amounts to hating—leaving behind, moving beyond, ignoring—the form of belonging to the larger scene on its terms. It is a political hatred in that it composes an argument with this larger group, making their not belonging visible. And, as “we / were the ones to start hating,” this is not a reclamation of pride after an initial rejection for membership by the larger scene. The initiative is with the poem’s smaller group, who launch into their musical comedy not to impress but to attack.

Though I read “Beach Party” as an act of sharpening the focus of distinction between O’Hara’s “us” and the larger scene, it would be a mistake to think this necessarily entails a sharpening of solidarity. The contemporaneous poem “Day and Night in 1952” is also built around a series of ins and outs, but they form a more complex set of relationships. This poem begins with the command, “Be not obedient of the excellent,” an expression that renders the supposedly qualitative assessment of “the excellent” as registering a relationship of potential domination to be denied (93). The poem then runs through a sequence of distinctions. First, there is a speaker who makes a prototypically modern declaration about his own difference from the past: “The ancient world knew these things and I am unable to convey as well as those poets the simplicity of things, the bland and amused stare of garages and banks. . . .” (93). Next, the “I” becomes a “we,” and though the distinction remains one of the present to the past, the quality of what makes up those differences is given a further turn: “We do not know any more the exquisite manliness of all brutal acts because we are sissies and if we’re not sissies we’re unhappy and too busy” (93). While the first note of distinction, in which the speaker declared himself “unable to convey as well as those poets of the past,” could be just as easily construed as a lamentation for the decline of the present, the new set of terms, contrasting manliness to sissies, begins to

suggest that the language of disapproval that belongs to the past is being adopted and embraced as a self-description. This isn't standard empowerment by appropriation, however. That is, the formula isn't, "We are sissies and we're proud of it," it's "we are sissies and if we're not sissies we're unhappy and too busy," which is more difficult to parse. This rhetorical move opts out of the old relation of domination by taking a tack other than reversal.

From here, the poem adopts a tone of instruction to the (group/individual) audience, as the speaker advises, "I don't want any of you to be really unhappy, just camp it up a bit and whine, whineola baby. I'm talking to you over there, isn't this damn thing working? You're just the one I'm talking to. Don't you understand what's going on around here?" (93). Here, explicitly, camp is a way of appropriating qualities that seem (or are expressed as being) negative, to appear as what the old order believes to be a problem, but not to "really" be that. The interpolative address is not definite, at once to "any of you" and specifically to "just the one" the speaker addresses, and the key to receiving this call is to realize a shared understanding—or perhaps more properly to realize one's subject position on the verge of understanding—"what's going on around here." Now that the poem has taken the form of a speaker addressing (interpolating?) an audience, it becomes a back-and-forth of questioning the desires each has for the other. The speaker first references his desire for the audience, but rather than making it as a positive statement—"I want you to do this"—he only denies the potential misconceptions of the audience, saying, "It's not that I want you to be so knowing as all that, but I don't want some responsibility to be shown in the modern world's modernity" (93). If this is an interpolative address, the addressee is put in the position of still negotiating this relation. This is also true of the reverse, as the speaker asks, "What do you want of me? or my friends?"

or all the dopes you make demands on in toilets, there's no gratuity for you in it" (93). This relation is constituted by the recognition of a shared world, but what makes it active is a process of negotiating, of questioning. The aim of the negotiation, however, isn't to arrive at an agreement, as the speaker explains, "If we were some sort of friends I might have to bitch you; as it is you can have whatever you want from anyone else and whatever somewhat inaccurate cooperation you may care to have from me" (93). Friendship, then, is a place for unhidden disagreement, while this stage of getting-to-know-you is a negotiation to arrive at a mutually acknowledged misrecognition.

At this point, the poem takes a major turn, abandoning the allegorical framework and appearing to address the real-world situation of O'Hara's immediate social world. Beginning by acknowledging "I'm not this way with people I know. And they're not with me" (93), the speaker then runs through a list of people he knows, each listed by first name: John, Jimmy, Jane, Larry, Grace, Kenneth, the other John. Each person is given a capsule description of the tenor of their relationship, but contrary to a commonsense expectation that in writing about his friends O'Hara praises them, what's most notable about this series is that O'Hara seems to zero in on a troubled aspect of each relationship, with perhaps the most pointed directed at Larry Rivers, "who really resents the fact that I may be conning him instead of Vice and Art" (94). Here, O'Hara makes a declaration of just who his closest friends are at the moment, but rather than solidifying those relationships, each one is invoked by bringing its troubled core into visibility. To be part of this social world of "people I know," set apart from a larger scene by the "way" they are with each other, is not to recognize a shared set of ideas or common goals and to provide mutual aid to each other, it is not even to solidify each other's position as part of a

class. Instead, O'Hara makes participating in each other's disagreement the means by which the social group exists. His poetry can't be joined, it has to be argued with.

As the most self-consciously long poem of his oeuvre, and as a poem that notably pushes the aspects of verbal play and explicit obscurity as far as he could, "Second Avenue" stands as the banner of this period of O'Hara's work. I won't attempt anything like an exhaustive reading of the poem here, as I don't see that as necessary for my purposes, and anyway, it's a poem that can probably not be exhaustively read.⁸ But I want to suggest that—especially at this moment of social formation—the poem maximalizes O'Hara's attempts at rendering poetry in the language of a poetic subject that invents its own authorization from the social world O'Hara is making visible—specifically from aspects of it the established poetic order would think seem awful. The slightly earlier poems "Easter" and "Hatred" are probably the most similar sorts of poems in O'Hara's oeuvre, in that they are both fairly long for O'Hara, and that they both use that length to push beyond the sensation that there is a single voice or scene or argument driving the poem, there are important differences. "Easter" is significantly more focused on a mode of vulgar excess, while "Hatred," as I have noted, develops a sustained overcoming of familial/national bonds. Both of these are present in "Second Avenue," but this poem exhibits a much broader and more varied scope.

According to Perloff, Grace Hartigan reported to her that she considered "Second Avenue" to be "'Frank's greatest poem, one of the great epic poems of our time.'" She loved the poem's endless transformations: "It has everything art should have. It has imagery, emotional content, leaps of imagination, displacements of time and place going back and forth, flashings of modern life and inner feelings. Name it, name anything, and it's got it" (70). Along similar

lines, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, in a critical appreciation, describes the poem as “the pleasurable poesis of a really intent plethora that won’t give up” (“On Frank O’Hara, ‘Second Avenue’”). So here is one thing that “Second Avenue” gets out of its self-conscious length, the appearance of a never ending excess of things. In these sentiments, Hartigan and Blau DuPlessis both echo O’Hara’s own stated hope about the poem that it be like works by Mayakovsky and de Kooning that are “as big as cities where the life in the work is autonomous (not about actual city life) and yet similar” (CP 497), and it is easy to see why the relatively expansive nature of the poem would lend itself to such an ambition. It’s not only the poem’s length that points in that direction, however. Part of what has made this poem seem so uniquely difficult in O’Hara’s oeuvre is that it is difficult to read it as having any bearing on a writing subject. While there is an “I” to be found at certain points in the poem, it is an “I” that is first of all exceedingly difficult to trace throughout the poem as if it were meant to represent a writing subject, and that is secondly replaced at various points in the poem entirely by other voices, even by instances of third-person narration of unrelated scenes, such that it seems as everything in the poem, even its “I,” exists almost completely as a textual function or for textural effect. All of this adds up to a poem about which O’Hara can reasonably claim he “hope[s] the poem to *be* the subject, not just about it” (497). If the poem itself functions like a city, in its autonomy and its bigness, and if the poem is able to be the subject rather than reflect a subject, in the context of O’Hara’s work from around this period “Second Avenue” shifts the level of O’Hara’s argument, as if the point here is to articulate the ground upon which his poetry has decided to play. The argument comes to be more specifically about what sort of speech is authorized as poetic speech, rather than the sort of poetic subject who is authorized to speak. “Second Avenue” announces that it is establishing new space

for the life of a poetic world, rather making room within a larger world that already exists, and those who recognize the language of “Second Avenue” as uniquely vital feel themselves invited to participate.

In *Infidel Poetics*, Daniel Tiffany argues that poetic obscurity should not be regarded as anti-social, but instead “needs to be regarded . . . as the very ground, or medium of negative sociability” (12). Tiffany’s argument is, in a sense, simple:

a basic anatomy of obscurity’s social configuration must then acknowledge from the start two basic orientations to the phenomenon: the first—a position of dramatic communal responsibilities—is that of the initiate, the one who speaks or understands ‘cant,’ the secret tongue; the second position is that of the stranger, the outsider, for whom the secret tongue sounds like gibberish. (5)

But this basic division should not be understood to divide the social world up simply into those who understand an obscurity and those who do not, because there are a variety of responses available for both those who understand and those who do not, including the possibility that “both the initiate . . . and the stranger . . . may participate in powerful social and expressive networks based on the secret tongue” (5). Tiffany further argues that the default position of literary criticism toward obscurity has tended to figure it as “difficulty,” which treats obscurity as “a condition always susceptible, in principle, to the restoration of meaning,” but this treatment of obscurity fails “to come to terms with the phenomenology of unknowing, of unresolvable obscurity” (6). Tiffany suggests that “unresolvable obscurity” constitutes a sort of ontological baseline of the lyric, which requires us to “[focus] not so much on a poem’s composition or construction . . . as on its *reception* by the reader” (7). The social configuration of obscurity develops out of this, as the experience of lyric obscurity “offers a blueprint for monadic communities which are at once inscrutable and reflective, discontinuous and harmonious,

solipsistic and expressive” (12). Tiffany alters the term “monadic communities,” stating “the monadic constellation is not so much a community (since that word implies communication) as a *mass* of elements unified by expressive correspondences” (12). In other words, this might take the form of a ‘community’ constituted out of its recognition of similar responses to a (more or less) obscure text.

Where Tiffany argues obscurity splits its audience into those who understand a secret cant and those who are outside of this, the poetry of O’Hara’s “Second Avenue” period does not so much function along these lines of secrecy. Instead, we can read O’Hara’s poetry as functioning with an awareness of an audience who would accept and embrace poetic action of this sort and an audience who would reject it—and this poetry is especially interested in turning up the intensity of both of these responses. This is where Boone’s analysis of gay language practice is particularly useful. He argues:

this language practice is not simply ‘alternative’ but, to choose another word, *oppositional*—having for its particular target male supremacist privilege, founded on the subjugation of women and effeminate men. And for this reason alone, gay male language is traditionally violent; the situation after all is *objectively* violent. (71)

If this is a community O’Hara’s poetry tries calling others into, it’s a community constituted in a simultaneous recognition of the need to push itself into a more oppositional mode. His call is at once an invitation and a challenge issued by making itself visible as a community continuing to exist within a larger situation that demands its subjugation, even death. Rather than trying to invent a social situation that can survive by accommodating itself to the demands of subjugation by dominant society, however, or trying to resolve itself into a solidified political entity that might declare itself a potential rival for authoritative force, O’Hara’s poetry insists it can’t be

joined. The beginning of this social world is the shared recognition of the need to overcome—through hatred and forgetting—the past, which consists of the demands the dominant order makes on the subjective community to abide by its authoritative definitions of them. And the end is not resolution but is instead its ongoing rearticulation through discussion, disagreement, and contention, or dissensual collaboration.

¹ See Magee for a particularly developed discussion Williams’s influence on O’Hara’s poetry.

² The two poems were composed within one month of each other, “Poem Read at Joan Mitchell’s” in February of 1957, and “John Button Birthday” in March.

³ The poem is an acrostic of the name Elaine de Kooning.

⁴ Gooch relies heavily on this poem as a backbone for his opening chapters about O’Hara’s childhood, a fact which highlights how uncommon it is that autobiographical events from his past figure elsewhere in O’Hara’s work.

⁵ It is telling, perhaps, that the poem apparently once contained one more concluding line, “Am I that poet? And the mirage has disappeared,” so what seems like a slightly out-of-character embrace of the possibility of liberty is actually what’s left over from an even more potentially overblown expression of himself, the poet, as the site of this liberty.

⁶ Boone develops a strong reading of the ambivalence and violence in much of O’Hara’s poetry as constituting a vital element of it’s gay language practice. About which, see below.

⁷ See 1954’s “Spleen,” *CP* 187.

⁸ For a developed reading of the poem (as a particularly intense engagement with abstract expressionist painting), see Shaw 166-79.

CHAPTER 3 “BUT HE SAYS I MISUNDERSTOOD”: ALICE NOTLEY’S EVERYDAY LIFE POETRY AND MYSTIFIED DOMESTIC RELATIONS

Introduction

The politics of Alice Notley’s poetry are difficult. At this stage in her career, she has been lauded and celebrated as an important feminist poet, but she herself has always resisted the term on the grounds of the importance of avoiding labels and remaining true to her idiosyncratic self. And even as her reception as a feminist poet has grown, she has moved toward more pronounced isolation in her life and work, even explicitly so: one of her most recent works is titled *Culture of One*, which could in some sense raise the question of whether her poetry even allows for politics. But if her work sometimes risks adopting a stance of blank, contentless opposition—something one of her more influential books, *Disobedience*, could be argued to point toward—my argument in this chapter is that in Notley’s work of the 1970s she attempts to work in a mode whose politics is substantively different than that of her work in the 1990s and later.¹

In her 1970s poetry, Notley attempts to construct a poetic language from contact with the objects and situations she encounters in her everyday life as a wife and mother. In this work, she uses an poetics of attention to her everyday life and to her immediate surroundings and relations in an attempt to develop a collaborative poetic subject. She constructs this poetic subject primarily by collaging together the voices of herself, her children, and her husband, and mixing together references to incidental moments from her domestic life and the world outside her home, from snippets of language from what she is reading and that she encounters around her. The larger social world she is involved in as a practicing poet—in

the 1970s she was very much an active member of the social and aesthetic world of the second generation of New York School poets (which included, among others, her husband Ted Berrigan, Joe Brainard, Ron Padgett, Bernadette Mayer, and Anne Waldman)—is reflected in the content of her poetry of this period, and her own household with her husband and children makes up the most sustained site of collaboration for her. As she writes in an early poem from this period, “I’ve ostensibly chosen / my, a, *family*. . . . I’m wife I’m mother I’m / myself and him and I’m myself and him and him” (*Grave* 8). The decision here is not just that she’s chosen to make a family, but that she’s chosen to make the relations that constitute this family her primary site for poetic collaboration, and her work of this period insistently reiterates this decision. In making poetry in this way, and for this purpose, she models her poetry after Frank O’Hara’s poetics of dissensual collaboration as a way of speaking a poetic community into existence through the process of poetic composition. This sense of collaboration is at once constituted through a process of ongoing discussion and disagreement and is bolstered by a way of speaking about literary influence and ancestry that works against a strictly historical account, rendering all such relations available for continuous redefinition by the poetic subject. However, as she develops this project, she runs it up against the limits of the sort of collaborative recognition available to a person operating from the subject position out of which she constructs her poetic speech. The poetics of dissensual collaboration that O’Hara develops, as I describe in chapter 2, relies on a fundamental assumption of the equality of all participants. Notley’s poetry, however, draws out the ways the domestic relations available to a wife and mother, the relations her poetics attempt to make visible and available for collaborative participation, are mystified by the

material conditions of a heterosexual household as it exists within the system of patriarchal capitalism. As Sylvia Federici, Selma James, and other Marxist feminists have argued, the domestic relations that constitute the heterosexual household under patriarchal capitalism construct the subject position of a wife and mother through a system of demands for unwaged labor. The result is that the subject position whose construction Notley investigates is one whose social relations are thoroughly mystified in order to render the unwaged aspect of her labor invisible. The mystification of her relations cuts her off from the collaborative potential of those same relations.

The purpose of this chapter is to flesh out the politics of this work, because, I argue, the specific feminist potential in Notley's 1970s poetry has gone largely unacknowledged due to its difference from other feminist moves. Her poetry explicitly claims her position as "wife and mother" as a starting point, but she does not treat these as identities—either to be claimed and celebrated or to be rejected—but rather focuses on how these positions are constructed out of relations to those who make up her domestic life, her husband and her children. Additionally, Notley herself eventually developed another mode for her poetry, so her frustration with where this poetics takes her has been read as a kind of failure, even by Notley herself. I am not interested in looking past what she ultimately understands as the limits in the politics of this work, but I will make a case that by exploring in precisely which ways her work of this period runs up against its limits as a politics we can draw out a political possibility in the work. Specifically, Notley's 1970s poetry is a poetic investigation that develops a critical knowledge of the material construction of the otherwise mystified social relations of her everyday life.

1. *Doctor Williams' Heiresses: Feminist Criticality and Community*

Doctor Williams' Heiresses is the text of a talk Alice Notley delivered at 80 Langton Street, San Francisco, in February 1980, published by Lyn Hejinian's Tuumba Press later that year. The talk was delivered as one night of four Notley spent for the writer's residency series at the artists' space, and while the other nights Notley mostly read from her poetry, *Doctor Williams' Heiresses* has been read as something more like a poetics statement or lecture. I turn to *Heiresses* first as both an articulation and enactment of the mode of politics Notley's poetic work of 1970s aimed to perform.

One way of reading this talk would be to understand it as a statement of poetics, one that focuses on Notley's negotiation of the debt she feels she owes William Carlos Williams in thinking about poetry and coming into her own poetic voice. But the text is not composed in any programmatic way, and is certainly a far cry from the recognized form of a lecture, so to try to summarize it purely as an argument fails to capture the work it performs. Accounting for its form is an important step in getting a better idea of what's at play. The text weaves its way in and out of forms, with excerpts from and examples of Williams's poems interspersed throughout, though there's no direct discussion of or reference to the poems within the prose text. The opening page presents probably the most straightforward example of something like a standard prose argument, in the form of a myth articulating a poetic lineage beginning with Poe, Dickinson, and Whitman, through modernist and postmodernist poets, and on up to Notley and Bernadette Mayer. From there, Notley moves through a section written as if it is a series of direct quotations from a conversation with her

husband Ted Berrigan, to a description of a half-remembered conversation with him that she eventually declares she can't remember any more of and will simply make up the concluding section of. She moves on to a section labeled "An Interview" in which it's not totally clear who her interlocutor is, or if it is maybe only her voice, on to a letter addressed to Alice and signed by Bernadette Mayer, through a series of quotations of William Carlos Williams from various unidentified sources, and finally closing with something written in the tone of a confessional letter from Notley to Williams himself.

Through these various forms, the closest thing there is to a through line to be found is the way Notley moves in and out of a variety of attitudes towards Williams. She tries to explain how she found his work fruitful in giving herself, as a woman poet, permission to write in her own way. She writes, "You could use him without sounding like another imitation Williams poem.... you could use him to sound entirely new if you were a woman. It was all about this woman business," which Berrigan's voice then comes in to gloss as, "Well he made you feel like you could talk about your tampax without feeling tragic about it or even daring," prompting Notley's reply, "He also made it so I could write about the kids or not always about, but just include the kids. It's because of Williams that you can include everything that's things . . . if you are only up to noticing everything that your life does include. Which is hard. Too many people have always already been telling you for years what your life includes" (4). Elsewhere, she talks about feeling disgusted with Williams for his treatment of and unfaithfulness to his wife Flossie, a subject that seems to cause a bit of awkwardness in her conversation with Ted. At another point, she asserts that Williams "sets himself up to be this character of the American male.... So if you're a woman you can relate

to him in this way, where you'll be the woman, the typical American woman character" (10), which she suggests makes Williams particularly clarifying for women poets in a way that he isn't necessarily for men.²

There are a couple of important things to make explicit here. First is the difference between what Notley expresses as "this woman business" and the way her husband seems to understand it. For Notley, this is composed of what makes up the world around her. It is made up of "everything that's things," which makes the position one that is relationally defined rather than essentially defined. On the other hand, Berrigan's answer reveals an understanding of her "woman business" that is fundamentally about what differentiates her body and her feelings, as a woman, from his. This essentializes, from his position, her status as a woman, and makes everything around her, the relationships and objects that make up her life, flow from that essential difference.

Secondly, here Notley makes the claim that, at the specific time at which she is writing, she believes Williams can be important for female poets in a way that he wouldn't be for male poets. Somewhat opaquely, she chalks this up to the position a female poet can put herself in with respect to Williams, where he is the "typical American male" to which she can be "the typical American woman character." This requires a bit of unpacking. Some of what she means by this can be gleaned from the words of Williams she includes, and from what she writes directly to Williams. The series of quotations from Williams includes quotations that mostly say something about the nature of men and women, especially as poets, and she pointedly concludes the series with Williams's description of the excitement he felt reading to women students at Wellesley, declaring, "They were so adorable. I could

have raped them all,”³ followed by a separate quotation that begins, “we’re talking of the art of writing well in a modern world & women haven’t much to do with that” (18).⁴ In her concluding letter to Williams, Notley writes about how, after a late night argument with her husband, “I started to remember some things about the time when I addressed you directly . . . in my long poem ‘Songs for the Unborn Second Baby.’ I believe I even told you I hated you” (20). She goes on to write that she remembers when she was “very darkly depressed from having had a first child & being pregnant with another” she thought of “how many pregnant women who were how I was then you must have talked to—& how many couldn’t talk to each other about it—I couldn’t find a female confidante then, but I could talk to my husband, especially, & my doctor (surprisingly), & Dante & Philip Whalen & you” (20). Then she goes on to scold Williams, writing, “In that bad time there was always you. To love as a poet & to love & hate as a man. Immobile pregnant & isolate & unhappy, I didn’t need to read about your attractions to women other than your wife. Your reasoning was specious & was enraging” (21). From that enraged state, though, she says she wrote a poem, “& I used for its form your Paterson & an O’Hara ode & those Cantos . . . & it is held together by flowers as [Williams’s poem] ‘Asphodel’ is” (21). Finally, she concludes the piece, “And because you had written so, I was able to write & love & live, I don’t even ever hate you temporarily anymore” (21).

Part of what she understands as her relation to Williams is that he—in what she describes as the position of typical American male—understands women according to their sexual function with respect to him, the feminine position of difference to the masculine position. For the Williams Notley constructs using these quotations, women are either

objects of sexual desire, or they are pregnant women to whom he is a doctor, over whom he occupies a position of lexical or scientific mastery. While we could understand this as a limitation in Williams's thinking, Notley's focus is on how the construction of these positions, with respect to her as a woman, are discursively open and productive in a way that potential relations to other women do not seem to be, for her.⁵ For Notley, Williams's poetry provides forms she believes she can take and make her own even if she also believes he discounts the possibility of speech from the position of a woman. But more than that, since she is a woman, occupying this position of difference with respect to the masculine position, to adopt these forms is more productive than it would be for a male poet, since she is able to do it while managing not to fall into the line of patrilineal descent and repetition. Making use of these forms allows a female poet to take them and make them function differently for her. That is, to use these forms while occupying the position of a male poet would be to just offer variations on what the forms do. But from the position of a male, the female position is defined by its fundamental difference, so when the forms created from the male position are used from the position of a woman, the result is something new, something that prior masculine articulation would not have understood. And finally, we must also note that because the specific forms and modes Williams uses that Notley adopts are focused on "everything that's things," the result is that she ends up with a relationally defined female poetics. While the masculine position within which these forms originated was only capable of understanding the feminine position as essentially flowing from the body of the woman, the function of the forms is to focus on the points of contact between the individual and the world of things within which the individual defines itself. In this way, the use of these forms

begins to clear the way for an understanding of how the feminine position is constructed by defining its relation to objects and society.

So the text doesn't operate in the mode of argument, or even really that of a statement, and the conclusion it arrives at works more as a poetic conclusion than as the logical arrival at or summary of a clear idea. Even still, critical takes on *Dr. Williams' Heiresses* most often simply suppose it to represent an example of a feminist recuperation of Williams.⁶ The two most extensive critical treatments of *Dr. Williams's Heiresses* are from Kathleen Fraser and Maggie Nelson, writing about two-and-a-half decades apart. Somewhat contradictory to the common supposition, rather than playing up the feminist nature of the talk, both poet/critics find it to complicate Notley's relation to feminism.⁷ In the Notley chapter of *Women, The New York School, and Other Abstractions*, Nelson reads *Heiresses* within the larger context of Notley's overall career. Relying partially on interviews with Notley conducted later in her career, Nelson finds *Heiresses* to be a rehearsal of ideas the younger Notley had in the 70s about "gender performativity, along with a longstanding belief that cross-gender identification is a central aspect of being a poet" (139), an aspect of a poetics that Notley eventually abandons in favor of the hermetic epic form she has adopted in her later career. In this career trajectory, Nelson picks out Notley's *Disobedience* as a turning point, about which she says Notley "realized while writing the book the extent which she 'couldn't go along with the government or governments, with radicals and certainly not with conservatives or centrists, with radical poetics and certainly not with other poetics, with other women's feminisms'" (162). Nelson's overall reading of Notley's career considers *Heiresses* to be a part of the younger poet's attempts to perform a feminism that wasn't quite

her own, something she eventually overcomes as she develops her mature and more individualist voice.

But if Nelson reads Notley as having moved from her idiosyncratic but feminist poetics of the 70s, it's interesting to note that Kathleen Fraser's account of Notley at 80 Langton Street, written contemporaneously to the event itself, ultimately concludes that the talk was troubling for what she almost considers to be its anti-feminism. Fraser's guiding observation about Notley at Langton Street is that

[f]rom the beginning, Notley's message was a double one: 'I am a strong, sexual, funny, compassionate, inventive artist who wants to write what I want to write about, and how I want to, when I want to, and no one's gonna get in my way,' &/or 'I am a perpetually young, fragile, rebellious, extremely vulnerable, flakey female with enormous feelings that may overwhelm me at any moment so please be careful and tell me it's okay to do it this way, even though I already know it is, really. (61)

Fraser finds herself troubled "that the constant shifting of identities and her poems' insistence on keeping the tone intimate prevented a post-performance switch to a less personal dialogue in which the dilemma of 'Alice' could be placed in a larger social/historical context" (62-3). As she reflects on Notley's performances, she has to admit, rather than insisting on speaking from within this dilemma, she "want[s] Notley to run with the healthier (though always tentative) climate that does now exist for women writers" (73).

There are a couple of important things going on in Fraser's reaction to Notley here. First of all, Fraser recognizes that the moves Notley makes are not the moves of a more recognizable feminist critique. While she senses there is a political charge to Notley's performance, particularly in her inhabiting of what she describes as an almost excessively girly persona, she doesn't see the critical maneuver she believes ought then to happen of

placing this persona ‘in a larger social/historical context.’ The critical move Fraser wants Notley to make is to pull back from her position within a specific community in order to arrive at the removed, critical position from which it would be possible to begin to become “more familiar with the female roots of her poetry family.” By not making this move, and by insisting on her own self-declared genealogy, with the twinning of herself and Mayer as the contemporary moment, Fraser accuses Notley of creating ‘for herself an exclusive mirror-vision that again denie[s] a powerful community of gifted female peers’ (68). Though Fraser writes as if she has discovered a failure in Notley’s method to adequately perform the maneuver of feminist critique, the practical payoff of her argument is ultimately about the construction of community.⁸ Fraser’s more recognizably feminist method would move by means of critique in order to pull back from the intimate language of a contemporaneous community to the abstract level of a community that would be constructed by seeing through the cracks of the prevailing power structure in order to seek out and claim as roots those female poets neglected by the male critical establishment. Operating this way would open up a “healthier . . . climate . . . for women writers, a climate which daily improves each time one of us claims her ‘voices’ and experiences as complicated and essential to the artistic growth and survival of the community at large” (73). This sort of critical feminist move aims its political attacks at the temporal poles of the past and the future: the patriarchal past that has to be punctured and rewritten to demonstrate there is another past that can be reconstituted, and a utopian community to come which this newly written past will inaugurate. The community this move calls into being is ultimately a virtual community—a community that can be invoked as the community to come but is never quite a community

constituted in the present moment. The politics of this critical feminist procedure are different than the politics at play in Notley's poetics, but it is important to stress that these are two different kinds of politics, not that Fraser's is political while Notley's is something else.

To clarify what sort of politics *is* at work, let's circle back to look at a few features of *Dr. Williams' Heiresses*. At the beginning of the text, Notley writes a short myth-like genealogy of poets. This part of the text begins, "Poe was the first one, he mated with a goddess. His children were Emily Dickinson & Walt Whitman—out of wedlock with a goddess. Then Dickinson & Whitman mated—since they were half divine they could do anything they wanted to—& they had 2 sons, William Carlos Williams & Ezra Pound. . . ." The narrative goes on to include, in a similar tone, T.S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, Frank O'Hara, Philip Whalen, Charles Olson, the latter three of whom are called "male-females," and when it arrives at what Notley considers her generation, the story goes

the male-females also produced a second wave of children of which there were many females. These females could not understand how they came to be born—they saw no one among their parents & brothers who resembled them physically.... They came to indulge in a kind of ancestor worship—that is they each fell in love with a not too distant ancestor. One of them, Bernadette Mayer, fell in love with Gertrude Stein. And the one named Alice Notley fell in love with her grandfather, William Carlos Williams. (1-2)

When Fraser reflects on this genealogy, she chides Notley for such an elided list of names, which she worries "denie[s] the more complex truth of poetry's historic development" (68). Of course, Fraser is absolutely correct. But there is an extent to which the disagreement here is not just about the extensiveness and selection of the figures, but is also about the *purpose* of a genealogy. Fraser, operating from a critical feminist mode, sees Notley failing to

adequately address history, but I would argue Notley, in writing the genealogy as a myth, is actually engaged in constructing something other than a history. The mythic tone of the genealogy removes it from the discourse of concrete history and we get something more closely related to a personal recitation of heroes or gods and goddesses. Julia Bloch notes how the genealogy in *Heiresses* “becomes legible as a poetic text that defers conclusive critique in favor of an ongoing sequence of parodic and affective questioning of origins, sources of power and linear descent” (9). Additionally, this nonhistorical mode of construction of one’s poetry world, a mix of the proper names of historical figures with one’s own immediate poet friends, is a mode established as an important part of New York school poetics all the way back to Frank O’Hara, a move repeated often by subsequent poets. Lytle Shaw has articulated how this move in O’Hara’s writings works to “recode kinship structures,” to “form and reform families” (29), the effect of which is not to harden relations into historical fact but to make relations malleable, accessible for the self-creation of the writer. It’s not a critical evaluation or re-evaluation of a truer history, but an articulation of kinship and community that is as true as it needs to be for the moment of its utterance. This is the sort of genealogical work Notley is engaged in.

And we can see a further articulation of community in another major feature of the text, as well—in the way it is constructed out of conversations (real and/or imagined) between Notley and Berrigan, from quotations and poems of Williams, from a letter written by Mayer to Notley and a letter written by Notley to Williams. All of this situates the text as speaking not from the abstract remove of a traditional lecture, but in the voices of a subject who constitutes herself by articulating and constructing her position within a community.

Historical and material relations between the constitutive figures are less important than the way this community can be invoked through a creative act. So rather than seeking the sanction to speak objectively by adopting the language of a critical subject removed from the situation, Notley speaks from the position of a subject embedded within the situation, and she speaks to the present moment of the community articulated by this utterance. Unlike the way Fraser describes a political feminist project focused on invoking the healthy consensus of a community to come, Notley describes a community of the present that is engaged in disagreement in its moment of constitution.

We can articulate the politics of this move a bit more clearly by reference to Jacques Rancière's term dissensus. For Rancière, "The essence of politics is dissensus. Dissensus is not a confrontation between interests or opinions. It is the demonstration of a gap in the sensible itself. Political demonstration makes visible that which had no reason to be seen; it places one world in another" (38). The moment of politics, according to this thinking, is the moment in which a subject not recognized as a political member of the community, whose language is not treated as the political language of the community, demonstrates and makes visible in this language disagreement with the community. This political subject attempts to force recognition of a moment of dissensus.

By composing her text through the naming of her community, and then constructing it from various voices of this community addressed to each other, Notley's *Dr. Williams' Heiresses* aims to be a text of the community speaking a language of its own to itself. She also situates herself as a specific subject within the community—a subject position she identifies as that of the wife of a recognized male poet, and a woman who speaks the

experience of pregnancy, motherhood, and complicated emotions about the figure of the male poet—which the text demonstrates are, at the moment of her text’s utterance, in disagreement with, or are in some sense not recognizable to, the male poetic subject’s understanding of poetic speech. Rancière writes that “[p]olitical argumentation is at one and the same time the demonstration of a possible world in which the argument could count as an argument, one that is addressed by a subject qualified to argue, over an identified object, to an addressee who is required to see the object and to hear the argument that he ‘normally’ has no reason either to see or to hear” (39). It is exactly this kind of political act we can read *Dr. Williams’ Heiresses* to be engaging in. This is a political act that functions differently than the politics of critical feminism as demonstrated by Fraser’s critique of Notley’s performance, and it also functions differently than a politics of coalition building aimed at continuously opening the community to greater degrees of inclusivity, with an eye toward the community to come in which every subject is given equal representation. Such political moves understand the proper sphere of politics to be the sphere of historical and social understanding abstracted from the experience of the community itself, the ‘larger context’ that functions along a historical timeline. While those would be more recognizable and common political moves in both the late 1970s and in the current political moment, Notley’s text, operating in a mode I argue is the political mode common to New York School poetics, demonstrates a politics of a different sort, a politics engaged in forcing recognition of dissensus from a subject position that is articulated within a specific community, and a politics aimed at the present moment of the community it is articulated within.

2. Notley's Everyday Life Poetry: The Maternal Domestic Subject under Capitalist Patriarchy

In her chapter on Notley, Maggie Nelson ends up putting Notley's '70s poetry in a career narrative. Working from interviews with Notley as much as from her own readings of Notley's work, Nelson reads her work as having run up against the limitations of the form of everyday life poetry, as inaugurated and exemplified by Frank O'Hara:

Notley realized early on that her relationship to the quotidian differed dramatically from O'Hara's. As she has explained it, hers lacked serenity. "I wanted to write something like O'Hara's *Lunch Poems*," she says. "They have a serenity to them which seems to emerge from the rather strict borders of his work at the museum: the hours, the suit and tie, the office, etc., as if the fact of being a rather anonymous worker like that was the condition that lit up the poem." But by her early twenties, Notley realized that she "didn't really have anything to put into the form of the I do this I do that, or any other form involving details of going through the day." Or, rather, the details that she did have to put into the form couldn't play off the same mystique of the ordinary as O'Hara's *Lunch Poems* had. (142-43)

Nelson points to some of what is evident in *Songs*, especially the way the poem deals with differences in what is available for the female poet versus the male poet for use as everyday material, and the different charges these types of material can have. But in Nelson's retelling of her career, it is as if the problem Notley ran into was that she didn't have material to fill poetry of this sort. Nelson herself glosses this as demonstrating Notley's "ambivalence about a poetry focused on the details of so-called everyday life [that] may have deepened over the years" (144). But Nelson is registering an ambivalence of the later Notley rather than reading the actual ambivalence in the poetry of this period itself. This helps explain why Notley moved on to her later poetics in books like *Disobedience*, by which time Nelson writes that Notley

says she realized while writing the book the extent to which she “couldn’t go along with the government or governments, with radicals and certainly not with conservatives or centrists, with radical poetics and certainly not with other poetics, with other women’s feminisms, with any fucking thing at all.” It’s her most extreme position to date, especially in its argument that the only possible position for her, as a woman, is to “try to know everything from [herself],” as “all thinking from outside seems tainted by the male.” (162-63)

What Nelson’s explanation of Notley’s career amounts to is an interpretation of how her later work represents a solution she had to find to the problems her poetry ran into in the 1970s, a solution that seems to come from adopting an ever more idiosyncratic project. In looking at the 1970s poetry, Nelson emphasizes that everyday life poetry represented a form Notley had to shed. But I would emphasize a different difference between these periods of her career, which is that it is not so much the form of everyday life poetry that she shifted away from. Instead, Notley’s 1970s poetry is consistently engaged in an attempt to construct a collaboratively defined writing subject out of her immediate, everyday relations as a wife and mother. The great deal of poetry Notley produced in the 1970s suggests that it wasn’t so much an inability to find material that Notley ran into, but that her work increasingly made visible just how thoroughly the experience of a woman working from the position of a wife and mother is mediated by patriarchal relations. As Nelson quotes Notley to say, she began to see the problem as one of trying to remove her thinking from being “tainted by the male,” and so she moved to try to establish a writing subject that would be entirely self-defined rather than collaboratively defined. Hence the push toward a *Culture of One*. This is a coherent interpretation, but it does not allow us to really grapple with the actual contradictions Notley’s 1970s poetry runs up against. Notley’s poetry of this period is

interesting partly because of *how* it makes visible the obstacles to equal collaboration in the poetics it aims to inaugurate, even where it does not overcome them.

In arguing for the significance of this poetry, I aim to avoid a rehabilitation of Notley's poetry from this period that would misread the politics of her work as too simply a successful correction of the work of her male predecessors. Such a reading could easily develop from the way some readings of feminist writing of this time have taken shape. A good example can be seen in the underlying editorial principle of the recent anthology *Not for Mothers Only*, and a more thoroughly spelled out articulation of it can be found in Andrew Epstein's *Attention Equals Life*, where he devotes a chapter to a feminist politics that arises from what he describes as a poetics of attention to everyday life. Though he devotes the chapter primarily to a reading of Bernadette Mayer's work in the 1970s and 1980s, to a certain extent he intends the reading to be exemplary of a more general tendency in other women writers, a group that includes Notley. Of these feminist writers, Epstein argues that they create a politics by writing directly from their everyday experience as women: "they are careful to neither idealize nor demonize women's quotidian experience. Instead, they attempt to show the irreducible complexity and variety of women's daily lives" (59). For Epstein, this apparent neutral and direct treatment of lived experience is the basis for how these works manage to arrive at their political effects. By writing poetry directly from the materials of domestic life, Epstein argues, this work hinges on a demonstration that "[o]ur sense of what constitutes the everyday is radically dependent upon perspective and subject" (159). If these women write everyday poetry in the already established mode of everyday life poetry, and their poetry looks different based on the material they end up

including, this forces a greater awareness of the different meaning of writing from and living out different subject positions. In the specific case of Mayer's work, Epstein views this basically as a process of "replacing" the matter and urban subject of Joyce and O'Hara with the "thoughts and actions of a woman caring for little children in a small town" (171). Focusing on Mayer, Epstein emphasizes the importance for this procedure of the sort of attitude adopted toward the material, as he sees part of the political payoff of Mayer's work as coming from her "stripping mothering, pregnancy, and child-rearing of sentimentality and cliché, while at the same time not condemning these activities as 'square,' oppressive, or politically conservative" (163). This apparently value-free inclusion of the material of domestic life allows Mayer to make her point, which Epstein argues is both a correction of the exclusively male subject of previous generation's conception of what everyday life writing looks like and is also a "feminist refusal to abide by strict divisions of labor and the engrained belief that the domestic and intellectual are incompatible" (171). Epstein writes that Mayer's works "exuberantly demonstrate that one *can* be a poet and a mother at the same time and still survive, and even thrive" (160). While the basic terms of this reading of Mayer's work could be mapped onto a reading of Notley's from the same time without too much difficulty, even if we accept Epstein's triumphal conclusion about Mayer's work, we can't really accept that this is the conclusion Notley's work winds up with.

I would not argue it is necessary to reject Epstein's conclusion about Mayer's work, but one hesitation I have is that in the ease with which Epstein sees Mayer's work to have landed its political aim, his argument overlooks some important steps in the process of making visible a writing subject that was previously excluded. That is, Epstein adopts a

Rancièrian framework that involves a concept of the distribution of the sensible. The idea is that an older aesthetic order, of Joyce and O'Hara, for example, did not include the materials of the everyday life of a mother, and by taking the form of everyday life writing and including those materials, the work is done, and the distribution of the sensible has been shifted. The problem is that this way of thinking about how this process works assumes that once the distribution of the sensible has been shifted for the writer—in this case, Mayer—it has been shifted for the entire order. In other words, this is a description of how the practice of writing could be used by a writer to defamiliarize her experience and to gain a more accurate or enlivened engagement with the world around her. But it leaves out the question of what sorts of forces remain that police the distribution of the sensible within a particular ideological, aesthetic, or material order. Notley's poetry, on the other hand, takes that initial insight and then runs it right up against the frustration of encountering a social reality unwilling or unable to accept this shift in the distribution of the sensible. There is an important difference in the way Mayer (at least according to Epstein) works with the difference between her writing subject and her literary forebears and the way Notley does. In a way, Mayer ends up adopting a more universalizable position than Notley. Her work insists on the difference in subject matter for a mother poet, but the assumed success of this move entails simply that the writing subject can include more or different things but otherwise occupies the same position with the same acknowledged right to speak as any other writing subject. Notley, on the other hand, refuses to let her writing subject resolve into a subject like any other, repeatedly highlighting the disagreements and blind spots between her writing subject and those around her, with the result that her poetry gives us a

clearer picture of some of the ways the speech of a woman defined into the position of wife and mother is policed, or of what forces are at work that enforce a distribution of the sensible which maintains the power of the male subject of capitalist patriarchy within the relations that make up the family.

In many ways, the situation Notley's writing subject finds herself in resonates with Luce Irigaray's critique of phallogocentrism and the impossibility of female speech within patriarchal capitalism, particularly as articulated in the chapters "Women on the Market" and "Commodities among Themselves" from *The Sex which Is Not One*. For Irigaray, the history of Western discourse is a history of phallogocentrism, in which wielding the Phallus is a prerequisite for any subject to speak. Thus, all discourse in Western history has served to reinforce the speaking status of the Phallus. When this patriarchal system intersects with capitalism, Irigaray argues in "Women on the Market," all forms of exchange are only ever exchange between men. Women, on the other hand, exist in the position of the commodity, as objects of exchange between men. As a result, relations among women are blocked, since commodities cannot relate directly to each other but only relate to each other through the relations of men, so all the possibilities of "'real' relations with them or among them are reduced to their common character as products of man's labor and desire" (181), and women's very existence is reduced to a "manifestation and the circulation of a power of the Phallus" (183). If the only status of the female within this economy is as a commodity for exchange among men, one result is that "as soon as she desires (herself), as soon as she speaks (expresses herself, to herself), a woman is a man" (194). In other words, there is no such possibility as feminine speech, especially speech among women, as far as capitalist

patriarchy is capable of understanding or acknowledging, and the speech of any woman that is recognized as speech is functionally patriarchal activity.

There are a lot of similarities here to the position Notley's writing subject frustratedly articulates herself as being trapped in by the time of *Songs for the Unborn Second Baby*. She recognizes that male poets have been able to speak in the past, and that their definition of the female is one that does not allow for feminine speech. She tries to work past this by writing into what she identifies as an androgynous position, but she finds that even though she herself feels androgynous 'on paper,' her position is continuously redefined as female by every relation with men. One way for a female poet to write, then, would be to write as a man, or in other words, to write in a way that corresponds fundamentally to a male writing position. Notley is pushing for a more difficult, a riskier form of speech, but one that is potentially more radically opposed to the set of relations defined by capitalist patriarchy. To try to write as a woman from the position definitionally available to women—that is, to try to write as a woman from the specific position of wife and mother as defined within a heterosexual household, as Notley does—one necessarily runs up against capitalist patriarchy's denial of the possibility of this speech.

Further, following Irigaray's analysis, the attempt to write not just from the more generic position of a woman, but specifically from the position of wife and mother, would seem to represent a uniquely difficult position from which to attempt to have one's speech recognized. This is because, according to Irigaray, when a woman becomes a mother, her position within the framework of commodity exchange among men changes, as "mothers . . . must be private property, excluded from exchange" (185). For Irigaray, a mother must be

excluded from exchange because mothers are expected to perform actual labor, but this labor has to function “at the level of the earliest appropriation” (185), or in other words, it has to be totally appropriated by the husband. The role of a mother is to reproduce the capitalist patriarchal relation within the family, as it is “their responsibility to maintain the social order without intervening so as to change it” (185). Structurally, then, “their nonaccess to the symbolic is what has established the social order” (189). The implication for the subject position Notley explicitly attempts to write from, whose relations she makes use of in order to construct her writing position, is that her speech can only be recognized by patriarchy insofar as it reinforces the social order that relies on her exploitation, and what’s more, any labor she performs has already been appropriated by the fact of her occupying that subject position.

The position would appear to be quite intractable, so the fact that Notley’s poetry in this vein culminates with profound frustration only suggests that she worked her way to this point of difficulty. The difficulty is evident in the fact that Irigaray’s proposed solution is thoroughly utopian, but without much by way of clarity as to how to arrive there. Irigaray suggests women must refuse to “go to ‘market’” in order to participate in a kind of “commerce, among themselves” (196), which Irigaray describes only in terms of what it isn’t. She writes that this would entail “[e]xchanges without identifiable terms, without accounts, without end.... Without additions and accumulations, one plus one, woman after woman.... Without sequence or number. Without standard or yardstick,” a post-everything world in which “[u]se and exchange would be indistinguishable.... Nature’s resources would be expended without depletion, exchanged without labor, freely given, exempt from masculine

translations: enjoyment without a fee, well-being without pain, pleasure without possession” (197). The only thing certain about this utopian hope is that it must happen outside the system of exchange, but the breakdown or breaking out of that system is just the assumed future step which would allow for this utopian arrival. For her part, Notley proposes no utopia. Notley is not trying to construct a poetry that would free her from this system of exchange, but she tries to speak in the voice of one occupying that position. She acknowledges and makes visible how this position is constructed by the sets of relations that surround her, and she ends up demonstrating how the frustration of writing from this position stems from the inability of those relations to understand or acknowledge her. The specific potential political value of Notley’s poetics is the way it builds its speech from within this position rather than by first removing itself from the position in order to become an authorized critic. But this is not a political move guaranteed to succeed. It can only form its expression and insist on the validity of its expression for itself. As I show below in my reading of *Songs for the Second Unborn Baby*, this results in a thorough investigation of the limits of the ways someone writing from this position is able to collaborate in the production of a poetic subject, one that makes visible how thoroughly the relations of domination and debt are involved in the position’s construction.

A major part of how Notley’s poetry from this period develops this politics is by constructing its poetic subject from her immediate everyday surroundings. While Notley does outline in *Heiresses* quite clearly how this could potentially work, she ends up in the same position of frustration about the issue, because the position of a mother—an unwaged laborer—faces unique problems with respect to her contact with the materials of life around

her. That is, the task of making use of the everyday for a writing subject in her position turns out to be not the same as the task was for those whose everyday life writing Notley modeled her work after. To get a clearer handle on this, it helps to develop a more defined analysis of just what we mean by ‘everyday life.’ One of the fundamental ideas in Henri Lefebvre’s *The Critique of Everyday Life* is that the idea of ‘everyday life’ is a particular construction of life under capitalism, in which the experience of creative productivity has been alienated from everyday life, which is by definition the mode of life that is non-creative. In volume 2 of *Everyday Life*, Lefebvre develops this into an idea of layers of life, in which everyday life is the layer experienced as the non-creative, cyclical and repetitive experience of daily living. At the same time, moments of creativity are separated out as exceptions from everyday life and held above that level, so that the creative individual comes to be either someone freed from the constraints of the drudgery of everyday life, or creative activity itself represents moments of escape, from everyday existence. Based on this analysis, Lefebvre argues for an aesthetic part of Marx’s project, which is “a radical critique of art as an alienated activity (exceptional, allocated to exceptional individuals and producing exceptional works which are external and superior to everyday life....)” (330). What Lefebvre is after here is the idea that according to bourgeois ideology under capitalism, some subjects have access to the productive and creative level of reality, but they experience this production to be alienated from their everyday existence. As a result, a critical art of everyday life would perform the task of disalienation, which would be to resituate creative production within everyday life. There’s a case to be made that this is essentially the political project of O’Hara’s “I do this, I do that” poetry: that O’Hara, and the New York School poetry of everyday life, works

toward disalienating everyday life from creative production. The thrill of this poetry is that moments of everyday life are treated and experienced as moments of creativity achieved without the creative subject first removing themselves from their everyday life. The problem this sort of creative subject aims to overcome is not how to be creative in the first place, but how to disalienate the experience of creativity from the poet's everyday life, and in so doing, regain creative access to the direct experience of everyday life.

Here is where it becomes specifically important that Notley situates her poetic subject explicitly in the position of a wife and mother. Lefebvre devotes a certain amount of attention to the different relation to everyday life of women, especially women as housewives. In volume 2, his analysis is that the housewife finds herself in the situation of being submerged under the everyday and disallowed from seeing beyond it. That is, her problem is not that she is alienated from everyday life, but that her life is experienced as being impossibly buried within the level of everyday life. As a result, rather than being left looking for a way of reintegrating creative production with one's own everyday life, "[f]or the housewife, the question is whether she can come to the surface [above the everyday] and stay there" (345). I want to highlight the necessity of this difference, but we have to move beyond Lefebvre here. There's an idea of symmetry in this construction that seems to satisfy Lefebvre: if the creative individual must attempt to disalienate creative activity from everyday life, the housewife has to move in the opposite direction, to achieve moments of creativity that make her everyday life appear to contain moments of extraordinary creativity. But this simple symmetry gets in the way of Lefebvre's effort to analyze how 'the 'feminine world' is a particular construction of an aspect of life under bourgeois ideology. If we hold

onto this symmetry, we might be able to see the power imbalance between the two worlds, which would then appear to be a mistake that needs to be corrected. That is, it would point toward a project of empowering the feminine world to claim equal grounds for representation in creative products, while leaving the separation and basic construction of the two worlds unexamined. We're still left with a reified idea of the existence of a male world and female world, without adequately calling into question the precise means by which these worlds are constructed and kept separate.

When considering a proletarian subject, Lefebvre supposes a male worker, and he describes a situation in which the separation of different parts of life into the world of work and the domestic world result in a splitting of the self. He writes, "He is one human being, the same everyday being who divides himself between these three sectors [of work, family life, and leisure] and undergoes these phases. He is the same and not completely the same. He keeps going through rifts and separation, in the divided (alienated) wholeness of his proletarian condition" (346). The situation of Notley's subject is quite different. Rather than undergoing divisions of the self, she is operating with a self that she is unable to adequately separate, she is at once herself, wife and self, mother and self, wife and mother, and these subject positions are constantly bleeding into each other. What's more, she has no control over this, as they constantly bleed into each other according to the demands others make of her—she cannot find self-definition within this matrix of relations and their demands, and she has no control over when or how these demands of others will invade her life and instantaneously redefine her self in any given moment. For Notley's poetic subject, what is

He went to get the checks however
 He had checks to deposit in his name
 Because
 He's older & successfuller & teaches because
 When you're older you don't want to
 scrounge for money besides it gives him
 a thrill he doesn't too much acknowledge,
 O Power!

So I got pregnant
 I hope not last night now
 I'm a slave, well mildly, to a baby
 Though I could teach English A or
 type no bigshot (mildly) poet-in-residence like him
 Get a babysitter never more write any good poems
 Or, just to
 Scrounge it out, leave him. All I can say is

This poem is in the Mainstream American Tradition (*Grave 25*)

Here, she turns her attention directly to the way the power imbalance between her and her husband is constructed and enforced economically, and the way her position as wife and mother is constituted out of the demands others make on her. This way of articulating the maternal subject manages to avoid participating in the reification of an essentially feminine world because Notley's poetic subject is at its base constructed through the burdens domestic relationships place a woman (as wife and mother) under. That is, there is nothing essential about the fact that she is a woman from which this situation flows. Rather, the situation is built from these sets of relations. The focus is on how these other relations surround and enclose her in constituting her as the subject wife and mother.

Throughout this period, Notley repeatedly returns to these declarations as if trying use them as ways to solidify her sense of self. This is a really vital bit of confusion that becomes visible here, as these categories of self are supposed to be available to her for

definition of who and what she is, but she just can't get them to function that way. Rather than assuming this confusion is the result of having been submerged within everyday life (the mirror to the problem of the male worker), Marxist feminist analysis helps us understand that this confusion is the result of the mystification of domestic work. Sylvia Federici has argued that function of the 'family' as it is constituted under capitalism is the mystification and enforcement of a sexual division of labor, that as women were defined as "non-workers," and "any work that women did at home was 'non-work'" (92), the "family emerge[d]...as the most important institution for the appropriation and concealment of women's labor" (97). It is not that the wife and mother is excluded from production (and therefore would face the task of attempting to disalienate herself by trying to rise to the level of production), but that the wife and mother *is* productive within the set of relations established by capitalist patriarchy, and her production is thoroughly mystified as "women's work." In this way it is disavowed as productive labor. Notley's focus on herself in her poetry as "wife" and "mother," and especially as a non-wage earner subject to her husband's wage-earning status, ends up placing her focus quite directly on this mystification, and her task becomes not one of disalienation but one of demystification of the sets of relations that constitute her position. She can't entirely say "this activity of my everyday life as wife and mother is part of my artistic productivity" as a way of disalienating her levels of experience, because this activity of her everyday life is not her own according to the patriarchal capitalist division of labor, and the way it is not her own is mystified rather than explicit and visible. It would require attacking the mystification of this labor situation before it would be possible to thoroughly claim her work as wife and mother as belonging to her. As Selma James has formulated it,

one result of performing unwaged reproductive labor is that those who are forced to perform it in effect constitute part of the wage of those for whom it is performed. When Notley focuses on these moments of self-representation as a mother and a wife, she simultaneously focuses on moments in which she productively performs the function of fulfilling part of another's wage. She feels that she is not allowed to claim ownership of these moments, and instead they become moments of irritation, or feeling herself put upon by her children or resentful of her husband's wage-earning status. She's able to articulate this feeling, this dissatisfaction, but this is a fundamentally different move than disalienation, and it does not point so easily toward a sort of affirmative representation of women's everyday domestic life. Rather, it makes acutely visible the way the subject position wife and mother as defined by capitalism is one in which the social relations that compose this subject's world are fundamentally mystified relationships. One of the calling cards of New York School poetry is the way it manages to infuse poetry and poetic work with the potentially collaborative social relationships that make up a poet's life. Notley's work follows this procedure but discovers that, functioning as a wife and mother, the social relationships available to her in the domestic sphere are mystified and laden with a burden that isn't clearly visible to her or to those around her in its full materiality, and so they are not so simply social relations readily at hand for free collaboration.

Notley constructs her writing subject from a position whose speech is disallowed according to the terms of the sets of relations that define that position, and whose collaboration with those around her is made difficult by the mystification of those relations within the system that creates those relations. Rather than attempting to remove herself from

this position to comment on it critically, or imagining a utopian possibility of activity outside this system of relations, Notley's project functions by building the possibility of its speech out of the very relations that define the position. To put this in Rancièrian terms, Notley's poetry of the 1970s functions as speech that the established distribution of the sensible cannot understand. Rather than altering her speech, or translating it into a recognizable form of discourse that would appeal to some aspect of the established order willing to recognize her, she constructs her speech in such a way that it cannot be recognized without shifting the nature of the distribution of the sensible itself, or by attacking the systems that police the established distribution of the sensible. According to Rancièr's formulation, this is how a moment of actual politics is constituted, and highlighting this fact gives us a way of understanding the significance of the Notley's frustration, even to make sense of what she seems to have decided was a failure. Speech that constitutes politics in this sense is necessarily risky, and there is no guarantee that such speech automatically redistributes the sensible. Within capitalism, the forces that enforce the family as the site at which the reproduction of self/family takes place as unacknowledged production are many, many of which are thoroughly mystified, and the recognition of speech in the language of and from the position which Notley's poetry insists on requires laying bare the reality of that situation and breaking apart the nature of those relations. Notley's poetry can't do that work, but what it does give us is an example of work that is waiting for a shift in the distribution of the sensible so we can hear its frustration as perfectly articulate, and we can see how the distribution of the sensible is set up to police the speech of someone attempting to speak from a position unauthorized for speaking.

3. *Songs for the Second Unborn Baby: Mystified Domestic Relations and Frustrated Collaboration*

In this section, we turn back to a few examples of longer poems from the 1970s that I will argue are best read to function politically in the way *Doctor Williams' Heiresses* makes a case for. These poems all make use of the world of things that surrounded Notley in her daily life during this decade, things that she intentionally tries to gather into her writing. Additionally, we see in this poetry repeated attempts to construct a writing position that is relationally or collaboratively defined, rather than one that flows from an essentialized individual position. As this poetics develops over the course of the composition of these poems, we can see how Notley's poetic subject becomes increasingly aware of the obstacles that stand in the way of achieving this poetic vision. Particularly, the project is frustrated by the way the relations that compose the position of wife and mother prove incapable of acknowledging or understanding the full implications of this subject's exploration of her position. And it becomes increasingly visible that the position of wife and mother, when it is articulated in terms of her relation to a husband and child, is a position whose relations are blocked by the imposition of domestic labor.

Notley's 1973 poem "Incidentals in the Day World" represents a good example of this. The title of the poem and its form indicate something about the way it was written—the poem is composed of a series of short stanzas that appear to be constructed by making references to incidental objects Notley observed around her at whatever moment she happened to be writing, so the poem holds together according to an indexical relation to the poet's external world rather than according to any thematic or logical element. For example,

(presumably her husband) and “baby” are established first, before the “I” is established through being known by the initial two figures. Additionally, the “I” is known first of all by her body, in parts observed by the initial two figures, before she becomes the whim of an active presence. But it’s not only that the “I” of the poem is constituted through being seen in the eyes of the others around her. She also suggests a sense in which she understands her self to be extended through these others. Toward the middle of the poem, she writes:

You take my old time and space I wanted
 having set out and won another’s face
 wanted it back or wanted a new it
 a bold blind face
 little baby extend my space the rent
 is extensive tho space for a whole heart
 marriage has a bold blind face

but our birth rent me from an easier part (12)

Here, what makes up the relations between the “You,” “baby,” and the “I” is confused and seems to fluctuate. The “you” takes from the “I” an older version of herself, something the “I” wishes to restore or to rebuild anew. Now, in the present, after the former version of herself has been taken, the “I” has “won another’s face,” become or achieved a new self, “a bold blind face” which turns out to be the face of marriage. So, though the loss of the old self is not just a loss but something the “You” has taken, a theft or something drained from her, this is also because the speaker “won” a new “bold blind” face. There is both something lost and something gained. Additionally, she expresses a prayer for the “little baby [to] extend [her] space,” so the baby is at once a third element and also an extension of herself. Even so, along with this extension of the self, the birth (and it is “our” birth, not “your” birth) also represents a rending of some “easier part” of her self. Again, there is both something

lost and something gained. The definition of the poetic self that emerges here is thoroughly relational and slippery, and this seems to be at once uncomfortable because it disrupts a more stable, prior sense of self, and something she wants to frame as an expansion of a single self. At this stage, if we read this poem as something like the outset of this poetic project, Notley begins to try to work out a poetic subject who, rather than seeking self-discovery, engages in a process of relational self-definition, defining herself according to the contours of the position her relations construct with her. She understands this as a potentially collaborative mode of self-construction, and looks for the ways these relations both take from her and give to or expand her self. This is a way of attempting to articulate these relations into a collaborative community that can be continuously spoken into existence.

The poem “January,” from three years later, represents an even further realized example of this poetics. Where “Incidentals” sometimes makes use of a kind of abstraction or form that obscures its construction, “January” is more on the face of it a product of its process. For one thing, the title marks the poem as belonging to a specific period of time, which makes its moment of composition more a part of our explicit experience of the poem, and it also situates the poem more specifically within the historical passage of Notley’s life. Additionally, the content of the poem more often takes the appearance of a direct record of the poet’s incidental thoughts at whatever moment she happens to be writing. For example, one stanza of the poem reads, in its entirety, “It’s too early. It’s too dark. If I can’t watch TV I’ll / turn on the light and look at stars. / I see 2 full moons” (*Grave* 48). The slippery sense of self is present in this poem, as well, though here it looks more recognizably like a kind of

her subject to burdens or demands made of her, as wife and mother, by her husband and children. For example, a passage near the end reads:

I didn't lose any weight today
 I had clean hair but I drove
 Ted nuts and spanked Anselm on
 the arm and wouldn't converse
 with him about the letter C. And
 didn't take Edmund out or change
 the way the house smells or not
 drink and take a pill and had to watch
 John Adams on TV
 and fantasized
 about powers of ESP when on LSD—
 there is no room for fantasy in
 the head except as she speaks.
 The Holy Ghost is the definitive
 renegade like in the white falling-out
 chair stuffing, 2 chairs
 asking me if
 I liked my life. I thought she
 meant my life and said
 how could
 you dislike being a poet? and having
 children is only human
 but
 she meant my chairs. The
 trouble is the children distribute
 the stuffing to the wind. It's
 soft and pliant and they can do it
 intimately together. (51)

In this passage, the “I” is registered as multiple sites of obligation assumed by the others and toward the general environment, obligations she finds it impossible to keep up with. Within this, the first line registers an unfulfilled desire to improve herself, something that's overwhelmed by the cavalcade of disappointed expectations that make up her interactions with her husband and children. The interlude fantasy about an LSD trip could seem like a flippant aside, playful in a characteristically New York School manner, but the conversation

this interlude records represents more than just a bit of levity. The question the Holy Ghost asks her is “if [she] liked [her] life,” and the speaker of the poem initially answers incredulously, “how could / you dislike being a poet? and having / children is only human.” The joke is that the Holy Ghost corrects her—“she meant my chairs”—but in this joke is the suggestion that her “life” is actually composed by the domestic objects she lives with, objects whose upkeep she fails at because of the impossibility of really controlling her children. Crucially, what is deflected by this redirection of focus is what she wants to believe is really her “life,” namely her being a poet. This is not to say that her life is really not the life of a poet, but that *for others* around her, even for the Holy Ghost, her life is visible only in its domestic obligations, obligations that are uniquely hers in her position as wife and mother within a heterosexual household. Beyond that, in the speaker’s initial gloss of her “life” she includes “having /children,” but in the sense that it is “only human,” a sort of purely natural or physical fact. In the deflection, this again becomes the charge of care for the children and the domestic objects around her, expressed in terms of an unfulfilled obligation. What the speaker thinks of as simply the natural fact of reproduction isn’t accepted into representation, and instead it is turned back on her as a function she performs for others: for her children, in trying to keep them out of trouble and train them in the proper treatment of chairs, and for her husband, in the need to maintain a certain level of presentation in the household. So what we see is the beginning of an articulation of the tensions between the ways Notley’s poetic subject is trying to use the position of wife and mother to write from, and the ways the husband and children against which that position is defined expect it to function.

These tensions grow to the level of serious thematic concern by the time of 1979's long poem *Songs for the Second Unborn Baby*. In *Songs*, Notley still makes use of a relationally defined wife and mother in order to try to describe a unique poetic subject, but the poem is just as much an exploration of how the ways this position is defined by those it is positioned in relation to are at odds with this attempt at self-articulation. That is, like her other work of the 1970s, *Songs* is a poem constructed from indexically marked relations to the mundane objects of everyday life.¹⁰ But if this practice had seemed to promise the possibility of articulating the force of a formerly unrealized poetic subject by including "everything that's things," what Notley runs up against in this poem is that the objects and relations that make up the world of a wife and mother are relations of obligations and burdens that mediate her contact with objects and make it impossible for her to relate to those objects entirely on her own terms. To the extent that the poem is a success, it is a poem made from frustration about running up against the limits of its project.

Songs is a long and quite complex poem, so a somewhat more extended reading is necessary in order to tease out what's at work within it. At various points, the poem makes a central concern out of thinking through the different possibilities for women and men in writing poetry. To a certain extent, this is mediated by the way—as Notley mentions in *Heiresses*—the poem is addressed to and written in response to William Carlos Williams. This is clearest in the second section of the poem. Early on in this section, Notley writes these two lines, somewhat set apart from what comes before and after them: "Women DO get so overall earnest in their poems / Men are only that way in life, all the time" (10). This is somewhat opaque and risks coming off as a rather weak generalization, but it can be more

usefully understood as speaking to the ways “women” and “men” are defined against each other, rather than as a generalization about essential characteristics of women and men. The adjective “earnest” gets taken up again a page later: “male principle of the poetry, you earnestly sexed / character of your poetry” (12). From this we can take that the earnestness is specifically an earnestness of sexual definition. Additionally, in the former couplet, the concern is the range this sexual earnestness covers for each. I can only make sense of the first line here if the line is an echoing of and begrudging agreement with something said either by her husband or Williams: the female speaker is ironically agreeing with an obviously sexist statement by a male, that women get so earnest in their poetry. The next line then doubles down on the irony and she sarcastically writes, “Men are only that in life, all the time.” The word “only” here is the most ironic word in the phrase, and the speaker reflects the male poet’s accusation about women’s poetry back on the man, implying that what the male poet believes is true of women’s poetry is actually true of men in their entire way of existing. That is, sure, women might be earnestly sexed in their poetry, but men are that way all the time, in *life* itself. If we take poetry to function here as the idea of discourse, or representation, we can see that the point is about the different ways representation and actual life match up for women and men. For women, the earnestness of sexual definition is something they perform discursively in representation, while for men there is a more seamless continuation between life and the “male principle of the poetry.”

The problem, for Notley, is not that the discursive “earnestly sexed” male principle has a more accurate correspondence to *life*, allowing for smoother existence as a poet and a man, but that the underlying reason for this is the way the masculine position is dominant

and seems to dictate all the terms of definition for the female position. To continue the latter excerpt from above:

male principle of the poetry, you earnestly sexed
 character of your poetry fucking
 me across the decades like we
 poets like or centuries why aren't you
 my obstetrician, are you?

but you're right, Bill Williams, I won't
 take it

your flattery, I hate
 Venus, you
 can't flatten me, further
 you betray me with your fragrant
 infidelities to Floss and I toss off our
 whiskies to your impalement
 on
 our immense unflowery tooled up
 universes, you unmitigable (12-13)

In this passage, women are given three positions to occupy with respect to men, in this case to Williams. First of all, there's the way she, as a reader, represents someone Williams (the poet) is fucking—so there's the female poet as the one who is subject to sexual attention and activity by the male Williams. Secondly, Notley casts Williams as her theoretical doctor, specifically obstetrician. In this case, the masculine position is one of scientific mastery over the female body, her pregnancy something that can only be properly mediated through this masculine role of knowledge. Thirdly, there is Floss, Williams's wife. Notley stresses Williams's unfaithfulness to Floss, so she represents both the position of wife and the imbalanced commitment inherent to the masculine principle's construction of how men and women are bound to each other through marriage. Notley also makes Williams's infidelities to Floss infidelities to herself as well, shifting her accusation from one of Williams's own

personal moral failing in his relationship to a matter of the construction of these positions themselves—infidelity is part of how the masculine principle constructs the feminine position. In all of these cases, the masculine position is either the active side of the equation, either fucking the feminine position or committing infidelities with and against it, or it is a position of dominance constructed through a discourse of knowledge and control.

Notley consolidates these relations further down the page, asking a series of questions:

Where is the female the polarity to you
to my tongue?
Who would join the
polarities is life's crank?
Who
functions as formally normal, that is
a polarity—
to be an eye, an I-character, sturdy-lived? (13)

The syntax here is irregular, so it invites a bit of work in interpretation. We can start by noting that Notley describes “a polarity” as a formal function, and that to fulfill the polarity is to function in a formally normal fashion. Notley suggests with the second question reference to an idea that this polarity, its formally normal function, is “life’s crank,” something necessary for the regular function of life, something cyclical and engine-like. What she is after, however, is something that doesn’t fit within this normal function. That is, in her first question, she wonders rhetorically about the relation of the formally normal female position to her tongue. As a poet, she doesn’t find the formally normal feminine positions to be equipped with a tongue she can use, to be able to function as “an eye, an I-character, sturdy-lived,” in other words, an active (seeing rather than being seen), a subject, with its own foundation. It is Notley’s understanding, it seems, from the way these positions

are constructed, that she has to seek a tongue by adopting an androgynous position. As she writes a couple of pages later, “I feel pretty androgynous / on paper / otherwise it’s still just me here” (16). Here Notley lays claim to a feeling of androgyny achieved in her poetry, “on paper.” But as with what she said earlier, there is a difference between what she, as a feminine subject, has access to in discursive representation and her experience in life. If before she had ironically commented on the sexist male claim that women are “earnest” in their poetry, here she claims that, at least in her poetry, she is able to feel androgynous, which would potentially seem to offer something of an escape from male definition.¹¹ However, outside of discursive representation, it’s only her—“otherwise it’s still just me here.” The line immediately following this elucidates just what “here” means, as she describes what is supposed to be the immediate situation of her writing:

shaggy with rain an enveloping drowsing warm cold
 in the head friends night air mail like a swathe of flesh and joy
 of seeing
 a naked baby
 though he’s upset, crying—fear of the big bath! that
 the giant the mama
 once made too hot
 insert relevant profundity (16)

What she represents here is first of all, fairly straightforwardly, a domestic scene. It’s a domestic scene specifically because it’s about her relation to her baby, whose care is her charge, within her house. But of particular note here is that she describes the scene in a way that includes visiting friends, and the difference in register of reaction to the baby on the part of her friends as opposed to her. To the friends, the baby is just cute, “a naked baby.” To the speaker, the baby is upset, and upset at a perceived failure in her care of the baby, registered by the baby being “upset, crying,” essentially calling her attention to her obligation to

maintain its comfort. So while she might want to feel androgynous on paper, she contrasts this with the way her actual situation of living demands, by subjecting her to obligations, that she remain fixed in the position of mother or wife, even in the presence of company who exist outside these relations.

What we can see here is a feeling of resentment that arises in the disconnect between the representative androgyny she wants (or believes she can feel on paper) and the earnestly gendered obligations the relations in her life leave her with. It should be noted that this disconnect is enforced in two ways, on two levels. The first can be seen in a question that concludes the series of questions about polarity and the tongue, referenced above: “There’s / no formalized dailiness for the androgynous?” (14). The idea of dailiness is a driving force of Notley’s poetry of this period; it comes out in the indexical markers in her poetry and in the ways she mixes references to immediate objects with thoughts or bits of language that happen throughout the course of daily life. But here she includes an understanding that “dailiness” is a formally constructed idea, and more specifically, it is constructed along gendered lines. Near the end of the second section of the poem she writes:

What I stand for being pregnant

 How ‘he’ feels
 lift a cup, walk upstairs, and it’s
 Dailiness (17)

Within the set of relations as defined by patriarchal capitalism, Notley recognizes that her role, what she stands for, is to be pregnant—additionally, it’s a static role, she stands for a state of being. This is dailiness as prescribed by the role of wife and mother. Dailiness for the male poet, however, is unattached and active. To “lift a cup, walk upstairs” may be

mundane activities, but they are activities characterized by his free and easy manipulation of objects according to his whim. This is a specifically male construction of dailiness, and, from its point of view, its polarity is femininity as a state of being rather than an activity. And while it may seem at first that what makes this activity, with these objects, a register of “Dailiness” is their mundanity, what specifically makes them a register of male dailiness arises from his easy domination of the objects. That is, there is no weight to his interaction with them. He simply lifts the cup, elevates himself upstairs, freeing objects and himself from being weighed down. By contrast, and this is the second way her fixity in the female role is enforced, when she approaches mundane objects of daily experience, she cannot so simply elevate herself or the objects. Even if she adopts an active role for herself, tries to attain a representative androgyny, her experience of the objects around her binds her to a position of domestic work. As she continues from her question about androgynous dailiness:

When I
hate the diapers the dishes
just now those yellow
daffodils and you? (15)

The first pair of objects mentioned here are obviously objects associated with the domestic work of a wife and mother. They are mundane objects of daily life around the home, but she cannot approach them simply as objects in themselves to enjoy in their mundanity because what she encounters in them is also her domestic obligation as a wife and mother. Her hatred arises from her awareness of the impossibility of free contact with the objects of her experience and the impossibility of free choice about what objects to interact with, and from the recognition that her everyday encounter with objects is laden with the labor she is required to perform. This in turn colors her attitude toward less earnestly sexed objects

(“those yellow daffodils”) and toward the male position against which her role is defined. Her domestic obligations come to color her entire experience.

It is especially important about this last point to emphasize that it is not something inherent in her own relations to objects that leads to this hatred, but the hatred arises from the way the patriarchal assignment of burdens to the position of wife and mother frustrates the possibility of her own free contact with the objects and relations around her. This in turns helps us understand the profound ambivalence about pregnancy and motherhood the poem registers. The opening line of the poem reads, “Pregnant again involucre” (1), which points toward two ways the poem works to try to understand pregnancy. First of all, pregnancy according to this poem’s thinking is a cyclical state, something the speaker is “again.” And secondly, in metonymically calling herself the part of a flower that encloses the bloom, she attempts to rhetorically aestheticize this cyclical state by characterizing it in the way of a natural prettiness. The second line of the poem continues, “(sounds gorgeous)” (1), and the parentheses around the phrase, along with the verb “sounds,” suggest the possibility of an ironic stance towards its supposed gorgeousness. But the comparisons of pregnancy to flowering run throughout the poem and Notley never really registers an outright rejection of the aesthetically desirable naturalness of pregnancy. Instead, what we see is the way patriarchal relations continuously disrupt the possibility of her experience of the potential naturalness of this experience. First of all, this is in the way the male principle identifies the experience of pregnancy as a state of being, constant rather than repeated. As noted above, when she sets her dailiness up against the dailiness of the male poet, she finds that she

making her beautiful, and meeting in a point at her to render pregnancy her definitionally constant state. Either way, the first section of the poem has developed its attitude about pregnancy from her initial register of the experience of pregnancy as a potentially natural repetition to this point, where pregnancy is a constant state, her experience of it reduced to her functional definition within this system of relations.

Along with rendering the experience of pregnancy a constant state, the poem explores how the patriarchal definitions of wife and mother also function to obstruct her contact with the actual experience of it by defining it in terms of the ownership of the products of pregnancy. In the middle of the first section of the poem she writes:

May God the Chosen have His Joy
if *that's* what he wants, anyway

Give me good issue
whom no fencing can avail it, for

The flambeau between my ribs and hips
is its own flair
when it's born I'll have
to 'have' mine. (5)

Here, as fits the stronger sense of ambivalence in the first section of the poem, she mainly registers a conflict between senses of ownership. On the one hand, there's the patriarchal ownership that functions linguistically or legally, the ownership of the proper name. She ironizes this, making the male "God" and exaggeratedly capitalizing "Joy," and subsequently attempting to flippantly dismiss what this ownership amounts to. As she continues, in opposition to this, she points to her physical state of pregnancy, pointing to the parts of her body as a way of staking her claim. But she recognizes, also, that something prevents her from attaining it. The final "have" appears in quotations marks, set apart from

the rest of the phrasing of this section, suggesting that something is in the way of her actual desire to have it. The way these relations render pregnancy a question of ownership is more thoroughly troubled in the second section of the poem. Here she writes:

Pregnancy most literal or flat state
 is closed or worked by key
 Work as compost

 persistant pasture on another's ground by one's wife (16, *sic*)

We see again a gesture toward the possibility of pregnancy as “literal” or “flat,” just the experience of it as a human experience. But this experience is cut off, “closed,” as it is rendered “work as compost.” The idea of “compost” takes the potential naturalness she has evoked earlier by references to flowers and splits it into a passive state of being—rather than a bloom, it’s the ground from which blooms sprout—and a matter of labor. And this is in turn taken one twist further, as the compost becomes the “pasture,” and the pasture, if we follow the possessives, resides on ground owned by the husband, and worked by the wife. By the time the poem arrives at its fifth section, this reduction of pregnancy to its economic part is complete, as she refers to herself as “least motherly of all / nine-month motels and eighteen-year / mortgages” (39). Here her experience of pregnancy is registered as if she were a rental space to be occupied and the product of her pregnancy purely an investment. Through this series of articulations about the experience of pregnancy, Notley demonstrates how within the patriarchal arrangements of family, relations between a wife/mother and her husband are mediated by the economic reality of the situation, in which the woman’s pregnancy becomes a site of work producing value in the name of the father.

It is not only relations between wife and husband that are rendered irreducibly economic, but also the mother's relationship to her offspring. Another major aspect of this poem is Notley's registration of her frustration about the work of being a mother. In the fourth section, one of the more pithy couplets in the entire poem reads, "Giving birth is cleanly painful what truly / Hurts is learning to live with what you give birth to" (29). This comes at the end of a stanza addressed to the unborn child of the poem's title, in which the speaker has been reflecting upon what month she had been at this stage of her previous pregnancy, so the couplet is at once a statement of what she learned from her previous experience of childbirth and raising the first child and an expression of the cyclical expectation that this will be the experience again. As with previous moments in the poem, the reference to the cyclical nature of pregnancy could point towards understanding the experience as a matter of existential fate, but there are details about the way the poem describes this frustration that ultimately make it more about aspects of the structure of these relations than about the state of being a childbearer itself. Nearer the beginning of the fourth section, Notley writes:

The violent achievement of serenity

I'm not strong enough to strangle
a baby am I I ask

Of course you
are, he says That's hilarious

Put it in your work
for comic relief

If he'd only sit

on my lap and hug me
constantly, or go be asleep! (27)

Here, she comes right out with a traditionally unavowable fantasy of infanticide, but the point is more than just a transgressive expression of a hidden truth about motherhood. While part of the structure of this desire is the need for serenity, the frustration is situated within a set of relations that determine how the mother is kept from the possible experience of serenity. On the one hand, the poem stages this expression of frustration as something the speaker says to her husband, who isn't capable of acknowledging the seriousness of the question she poses to him. Instead, he declares it a joke, much like he does in their conversation in *Heiresses* when she attempts to express the depth of her feeling about using Williams to write about her experience as a woman. But not only does he treat it as a joke between them, he tells her she should include the statement in her work "for comic relief." In some sense, we recognize this as an iteration of the directive to "include everything that's things," which Notley has taken as an overriding principle at this stage of her work. Except that from the perspective of a husband, a wife/mother could only possibly include as a joke any expression of the seriousness of burden the work of motherhood represents for a woman in that position. It can be included, but cannot be totally recognized even in its inclusion. And the inability to recognize this in turn amplifies the distance the patriarchal family structure enforces between husband and wife/mother under capitalism. On the other hand, this stanza gives us a bit of insight about the relation between mother and child within this set of relations. Along with serenity, the structure of this desire is also for the relief of moments when the child is asleep or simply participating in physical affection. In other words, she finds herself longing impossibly for the moments of leisure that might constitute

parts of the daily relations between mother and child. This is a moment in which it is important to recognize that it is not simply a patriarchal relation Notley's writing subject articulates herself within, but specifically a capitalist patriarchal relation. Leisure in life under capitalism is by definition the time allotted for recovery from the labor one performs for someone else. The structure of this means that these moments must be experienced as moments of respite from the demands of the child, or moments of withdrawal or removal from the relationship, rather than moments that constitute part of the relationship. There is a barrier built into the relation of mother to child, between serving the need of the child and seeking serenity from the child's need, that is continuously enforced by this system of relational definitions.

We can see how much throughout the poem the understanding of this relationship is defined by this system of demands. For example, near the beginning of section three, the poem discusses the need of the child:

Her baby
cries his pajamas red his need glows
grows blue eyes
clings
in colors to her carriage her
thought through the morning's
substance, his toes his fingers his
porous golden difficult
need! (19)

The need of the baby grows, is porous and difficult; it seems that in some sense it can't really ever be satisfied, or even totally defined. What's more, it clings to her as she moves through her day, once again mediating her own access to every aspect of her daily experience. What she experiences around her is always in some way made to be a part of her subjection to the

child's need. On the other hand, the child does not offer any reciprocity in their relations. Slightly later in the third section, she again gestures toward the movement of a day, situating her relation to her baby within dailiness, and considers the dynamic of this relation:

She gets up slips
the curtain on, the other
eye opens the day
begins, in English
“Don't let me sleep past”
in baby, “doodoo” and in
weather, rain. She serves

the baby the baby repays her mysteriously
by continuing to exist and intertwine
with her in ancient humanity. (21)

Within the framework of daily experience, immediately upon waking she finds herself aware that she “serves” her child, experiencing the waking moment both in her own language and the language of the child. But the baby can only repay her “by continuing to exist.” That is, continued reproduction of the relation is all that results from this service. All she is able to resort to is the idea of some kind of payment that only exists outside of time, in some other place of ancient humanity. What we might call a more fundamentally human—or, better, demystified—relation has no place within the daily existence of a mother, according to this structure of relations. The mother is left only time to serve the child and to long for respite from the child's evergrowing need, while the time in which the relation can be experienced in a more reciprocal or level way—human to human, as it were, unmediated by a system of relations in which one is defined as in service to the other—can only be fantasized about but not actually experienced on an everyday level.

I read *Songs for the Second Unborn Baby* as the culmination of Notley's poetic work of the 1970s, not in the teleological sense of it being a masterwork toward which she had been working, but in the sense that it marks the point at which the politics her work of this period tries to build runs up against some of the inherent contradictions in the way the position of a wife and mother are constructed within a family under capitalist patriarchy. First of all, she attempts to construct an iterative community by means of a collaborative poetics, one in which her writing subject is defined by and within the set of relations she finds around her and writes alongside and the writers she claims implicitly or explicitly as forebears or contemporaries. In the early 70s work, she points more toward the possibilities this sort of community presents, but by the time of *Songs*, these relations are inseparable from the frustrations they entail. Though she writes toward an androgynous position, she also sees how the male position is incapable of understanding the speech of someone it defines as occupying its polar female position. Additionally, her own family relations are not immediately available to her writing subject for free collaboration because they are always constructed within the mystified system of burdens capitalist patriarchy places them under. The result is that the more she tries to constitute this writing subject through collaboration, the more the asymmetry in relations between this subject as female defined by the male position and as wife/mother defined by the husband/children who are her potential collaborators becomes an irritant. And *Songs for the Second Unborn Baby* is just as profoundly a register of frustration at the impossibility of being recognized within this system of social relations as it is a thoroughly uncompromised attempt to write such a collaboration into existence.

¹ Most published criticism of Notley has focused on her *The Descent of Alette* (1996) and other book-length poems to investigate Notley's project of writing a feminist epic—reappropriating the historically masculine form as part of a female poetics. See Lara Glenum, "The Performance of Crisis in Alice Notley's *The Descent of Alette*," Page DuBois, "'An Especially Peculiar Undertaking': Alice Notley's Epic," Susan McCabe, "Alice Notley's Epic Entry: 'An Ecstasy of Finding Another Way of Being,'" Julia Bloch, "Alice Notley's Descent: Modernist Genealogies and Gendered Literary Inheritance," and Christopher Roman, "The Owl of the System: Alice Notley's Queer Poetics in *The Descent of Alette*."

² Notley is not the only feminist poet to have taken Williams's poetics in this way. See chapter 1 for a discussion of how Rachel Blau Du Plessis considers Williams's importance in a very similar way.

³ See Williams's *I Wanted to Write a Poem* 95, though since Notley provides no citations or footnotes I can't be certain about her source for this quotation.

⁴ See "Shapiro is All Right," in Williams, *Something to Say*, 151.

⁵ This resonates quite well with the way Irigaray talks about relations between women in "Women on the Market" from *The Sex Which Is Not One*, about which more later.

⁶ A facsimile of the original publication of *Heiresses* by Tuumba Press has been shared on eclipse.org. The link occasionally makes the rounds of twitter and poetry blogs, and this seems to be the most common way it is glossed. In some cases it is simply taken to be an explicit acknowledgment of the influence Williams, particularly his variable foot: Robbins and McCabe both mention *Heiresses* for this reason.

⁷ See also Perelman, "Alice Notley and Poetic Inheritance," for a reading of *Heiresses* that emphasizes how the text functioned, in the historical moment of its presentation, to draw out some lines of distinction between Language writing and 2nd-Generation New York School writing.

⁸ Julia Bloch also reads the play and irony in *Heiresses* to function as "a disavowal seemingly of cultural critique, if not of feminism itself" (7), and insists Notley is engaged in a different mode of intervention. Bloch's reading focuses heavily on the genealogy aspect of *Heiresses*, and ultimately is most concerned with the text's ambivalence toward the idea of modernist progenitors for the postmodernist Notley. Like I do, she sees Notley performing a politics that operates in a way other than critique, though ultimately Bloch sees the text working as something closer to a revision of history.

⁹ This collaboratively defined writing subject is very much in keeping with New York School poetic activity at the time (and it certainly wasn't a practice restricted to the New York School).

¹⁰ See Bob Perelman, "Alice Notley and Poetic Inheritance," in *Modernism the Morning After*, for a reading of *Songs* as a poetic "toy[ing] with such notions of contact" (175). Perelman reads *Songs* as demonstrating a "Notley's embodied poetics," which he contrasts "with the social textuality of Language writing" (182).

¹¹ Notley's idiosyncratic way of discussing issues surrounding gender has been noted earlier by Nelson, and has been taken up as a theme in criticism of Notley's later poetics. Bloch for example, reads *The Descent of Alette* as an attempt at a poetics that breaks out of

Modernism's gendered system. McCabe, Glenum, and Dubois all focus on how Notley's later epic style is an attempt to appropriate the masculine form of the epic for a feminist purpose. Roman reads *The Descent of Alette* as a queer—rather than feminist—project of trying to situate a body outside of the binary gender system.

CHAPTER 4 “GRADUALLY WE BECOME HISTORY”: AMIRI BARAKA AND THE CULTIVATION OF THE REVOLUTIONARY POETIC SUBJECT

Introduction

By now the story of Amiri Baraka’s departure from the bohemian New York art scene (when he still went by LeRoi Jones) for Harlem, in order to make himself part of the radical Black politics that was on the upswing at the time, has been installed as such a fixed flashpoint in the history of mid-century American poetry it practically serves as the sole cipher by which the meaning of Baraka is unlockable.¹ Baraka, according to the general outlines of this heuristic, was a star in the free, open, and ostensibly integrated aesthetic world of bohemian New York. But he became disillusioned with the softness of the politics of that world, and so he abandoned art for the more concrete and didactic political life of a radical Black activist. Depending on which side of that point is being defended, the stakes of Baraka’s move tends to take one of two major valences. From one side of this break, the bohemian scene of New York represents an unrealized flourishing of complex openness, sexual liberation, and racial integration. Baraka’s move, in this interpretation, is a fall from grace, as he abandoned what was a promising career as one of the leading lights of this aesthetic movement for the harsh didacticism and culturally reactionary program of Black nationalism.² From the other side, the New York art scene Baraka left was a decadent world of politically noncommittal aesthetes, whose failures run from blindness about the fundamentally white supremacist makeup of its cultural formation to a cowardly refusal to commit to political action of any kind. This reading is encouraged in no small part by Baraka’s own autobiographical writing from the late 1960s on through the 1970s. At a

moment when the Civil Rights movement was coming to a head, the noncommittal politics of downtown was pure white privilege, and Baraka had to abandon his connections there in order to really participate in any actual politics. Black power was a necessary next step for Baraka, the only way forward on his path to developing a real pro-Black politics.³

Though both versions of the story have aspects to recommend them, the stark contrasts the story relies on is too simple. While some work has been done to complicate the story in various ways, the incommensurability of the two parts of the story is rarely questioned. This is likely at least somewhat due to how dramatically Baraka made his departure. But it also has to do with how the terms we set up on of either side of Baraka's move function. On the one side, there's the almost-entirely-white world of Baraka's beginnings as a writer, and on the other is the almost-entirely-Black world of the Black Arts movement, and his even later commitment to Third World Marxism.⁴ These are different movements whose casts are definitionally exclusive of each other according to these terms, but through all of it, Baraka continued to write and publish poetry, with no real period of significant let-up in his output. This isn't the same story as someone like George Oppen, who completely abandoned poetry for twenty years in order to dedicate himself to active communist politics. Baraka was always writing and publishing poetry, and though many interpreters can't help but hold their nose at some of his most blatantly propagandistic work in the 1970s, if a reader is willing to accept the presence of outright political sloganeering in poetry it's hard to make the case for anything like a radical break. The poetry he was publishing at the height of his influence in the bohemian poetry world was often too overtly political and too strong in its condemnation of white society for many of his New American

Poetry companions, and even as he was working as one of the prime movers in the development of radical Black political organizations (and even as he moved on to other forms of activism) his poetry retains a commitment to openness and experimentation in form that makes it recognizable as continuing in the grain of the New American movement.⁵

Rather than allowing Baraka's break to so decisively determine how we can understand the work he produced on either side of it, I would argue, echoing James Miller, that we should not see the work that comes after his break as a "sharp disjuncture, but as a consolidation and refashioning—a revision—of the concerns which have preoccupied him throughout his public career" (184). Miller reads the poems in 1975's *Hard Facts*, for instance, as a "record of Baraka's attempts to reorient himself ideologically, an exorcism of his personal and political demons" (186). What this allows us to keep visible is the ways Baraka's various social and political breaks—and, importantly, Baraka's own account of the purposes of these breaks—can be better understood as a strategy to push his poetry into a position different—just as much further along in a line development as it is a turn to a new position—from what came before. Baraka's dismissal of his earlier work as fundamentally void of political content is not a critical account of the development of his work. Rather, it functions for him as a writer as a justification of his social decisions and an attempt to emphasize by bringing into relief the distance of his new political stance from the one he had held before. As Barrett Watten puts it, in Baraka's work and in his explanation of his own psychological and artistic development, "[c]ontext . . . is split, as everywhere in Baraka's work, in a form of projective identification: either aligning with the good identity that survives or insisting on the bad identity that must be overcome" (1668). I would argue

there are legible ways of seeing his work of later periods in conversation with his earlier work that don't need to adhere to the stance of absolute rejection of one in favor of the other.

None of which is to say there's a singularity of purpose and vision behind all of Baraka's writing. However, this chapter argues that there is a coherent development to Baraka's poetry that is made hard to see by the frame the story of his radical break fits over his work. Many of the commitments and lessons in poetry Baraka's early work demonstrates hold through to his later work, and the developments and changes in his writing can be read as attempts to better achieve what Baraka wants poetry to be able to accomplish as a political tool. This chapter is an attempt to theorize this major through line in the poetry of Amiri Baraka.

More precisely, a major way the conventional story of his radical break affects the way the politics of Baraka's poetry has been read is that it has made it easy to overlook his efforts to articulate a more politically useful poetry during his early career. The milieu within which he worked at this time often defaulted to a liberal political outlook that held aesthetics apart from politics (though, of course, the actuality of that separation in the cases of individual writers is worth troubling).⁶ Because of this, and because of how thoroughly embedded within that scene he was in his early career, the conventional story of Baraka's career tends to treat his early poetry as operating from this more purely aesthetic position. His trip to Cuba in 1960 is understood to be a major turning point in his thinking, but his departure for Harlem in 1965 stands as the point at which he suddenly becomes a political activist, and, for all intents and purposes, a different person. This story distorts what 'political' refers to when we are considering Baraka's poetry and writing. Alongside that,

Baraka's participation in the rise to prominence of Black cultural nationalism is such a marked part of his story that it becomes the realized politics toward which all of his earlier political thinking is taken to be nascent.⁷ But Baraka's dissatisfaction with the political commitments of many in his New York milieu predate even his trip to Cuba, and we can read in his work from this earlier time the development of a critique that is meant not necessarily to discard the scene for being ineffectual but to push it into a more effective political position.

As I will show, the critique he develops early on has actual content in its own right that is obscured when we read it primarily as inklings of Baraka's later political commitments. Baraka writes the open, experimental aesthetic world of New York circa 1960 as potentially coterminous with a revolutionary politics, and his critique of the social scene he is part of can be read as frustration with its failure to realize this potential. The value in reading this way is that we can understand how Baraka begins to develop early in his career a theory of the ways poetry might function as a tool for creating a revolutionary political subjectivity. In this chapter, I outline a way Baraka's poetry undertakes the beginnings of a political poetics, emphasizing the influence of William Carlos Williams, particularly in the charge to make poetry from contact with whatever is present in the material world of the poetic subject. As Baraka develops as a writer and as a vital participant in the bohemian art scene of New York, he begins to see distinctions between the ways he responds to aspects of life in America from the ways most of the (mostly white) artists and poets around him do. From this starting point, he goes on to develop a critique of that scene for its inability to understand the extent to which the subject positions allowed by America's bourgeois

ideology determine not just how one is seen by others, but the kinds of speech and activity available to different subjects. This critique grows into a belief that an essential part of a creative subject's encounter with reality must entail an understanding of how the subject's possible positions have been determined by history. In order to be what one can, one must be able to see how one has been shaped by a visible and comprehensible historically determined net of ideological forces. More than scientific or theoretical study, what is required for poetry to function as a tool for creative subjectivization is that the poetic subject makes of poetry a site within which they can perform a synthesis between theoretical awareness of ideology and immediate contact with material reality. Without the former, the latter is pure phenomenology; without the latter, the former is pure abstraction. Ultimately, Baraka sees poetry as a vital tool with which the creative subject can engage in a process of inventing a new position, full of radical potential, with an active, insubordinate relation to history.

1. Graphing the Materiality of the Poetic Subject

Although it would be impossible to talk about Baraka's formative years as a poet without mentioning the significance of William Carlos Williams for American experimental poetry of the time, the actual meaning of Williams for Baraka has been inadequately considered. Usually, the name Williams is either grouped with a set of influences that demonstrate his poetry's similarity to other poetry of the time, or it is used to indicate a poetic antecedent to an interest in vernacular and spontaneity in poetry.⁸ This critical shorthand not only stops us short of considering what I have shown in chapter 1 to be the real potential of Williams's demonstration of how the poetic subject can make political use

of attention to their immediate reality, it also takes Baraka's references to Williams to be something of an empty signifier, demonstrating little more than membership in a group. As I will show, Williams's influence has important and specific significance for Baraka as a writer.

In a 1960 interview, he explains that he took “[f]rom Williams, mostly how to write in my own language—how to write the way I speak rather than the way I think a poem ought to be written—to write just the way it comes to me, in my own speech, utilizing the rhythms of speech rather than any kind of metrical concept. To talk verse. Spoken verse” (interview with David Ossman 6). This sentiment can also be found in his brief poetic statement “How You Sound??,” where he writes:

MY POETRY is whatever I think I am. (Can I be light and weightless as a sail?? Heavy & clunking like 8 black boots.) I CAN BE ANYTHING I CAN. I make a poetry with what I feel is useful & can be saved out of all the garbage of our lives. What I see, am touched by (CAN HEAR) . . . wives, gardens, jobs, cement yards where cats pee, all my interminable artifacts . . . ALL are a poetry, & nothing moves (with any grace) pried apart from these things. (*LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader* 16)

The first thing to note is that rather than marking a purely stylistic aspect of poetry, Baraka considers the value of a Williamsian vernacular in poetry to be the way it situates the poet with respect to poetry. Rather than needing to hold to an externally dictated form or ‘metrical concept,’ the poet is able to take the basic fact of their material existence as the starting point from which poetry can flow. In writing from this personal vernacular, though, the point isn't a kind of documentary adherence to accurately reflecting an already formed self. Instead, the poet can be what they can—composition is at once a matter of composing the language of a poem and, through that process, in a dialectic with the “interminable artifacts” of

material existence, inventing the poetic subject the poetry evokes, a process of creative subjectivization.

In order for this process of subjective invention to be practical, the language—the system of references—must be directly meaningful to the poetic subject. In the same interview with Ossman, in answer to a question about his inclusion of Frank O’Hara’s “Personal Poem” in a recent issue of *Yugen*, he says:

I didn’t especially think there was any charted-out area in which the poetic sensibility had to function to make a poem. I thought that anything—anything you could grab—was fit material to write a poem on. That’s the way I think about it. Anything in your life, anything you know about or see or understand, you could write a poem about if you’re moved to do it. I’m certain that if they have to footnote what the House of Seagrams was in his poem, or who the LeRoi was, that will only be of interest to academicians and people doing masters’ theses. Anybody who is concerned with the poem will get it on an emotional level—or they won’t get it at all. Certainly, if I didn’t like it, I wouldn’t go through any book to look up those names with the hope that I would feel moved once I knew where the building was or who LeRoi was. I don’t think that means anything at all. I don’t think that has anything to do with the poem, actually. What the poem means, its functions, doesn’t seem to me to be the same kind of stupidity that’s found when you have to go to Jessie Weston’s book to find out what a whole section of “The Waste Land” means. The House of Seagrams is certainly less obscure than certain Celtic rites. And I don’t see what makes it any less valid because it’s a casual kind of reference or that it comes out of a person’s life, rather than, say, from his academic life. (interview 4-5)

Again we see this very Williamsian sentiment that the poem can be made of whatever the poet happens to be in contact with, and Baraka rehearses precisely the terms of Williams’s argument with Eliot that I explore in chapter 1. But here he begins to also consider what it means that any given reader may not be aware of the references found in O’Hara’s poem. Baraka draws a distinction between this potential obscurity and the academic obscurity of something like *The Waste Land*. This distinction has a couple of major implications. The first

has to do with how the poem functions on an emotional level. Because of the concrete casualness of the references, regardless of whether the reader is actually familiar with the places and people referred to in the poem, the poem works. The poem situates itself within a lived system, and this functions in a fundamentally different way than a system of abstract, academic references. Baraka understands what O'Hara's poem does emotionally, and the similar effectiveness of writing using his own immediate language, to be a matter of troubling what Ranciere identifies as the distribution of the sensible. The second implication of this distinction is that the poem functions to validate the importance of its references, rather than the other way around. That is, a poem like *The Waste Land* makes use of its references as a way of trying to draw itself up to the same level as the obscure but vaunted sources of its references. A poem like "Personal Poem," however, in Baraka's reading, assumes the validity of whatever's available to the poetic subject and brings these references into a system of poetic signification. The poem challenges a distribution of the sensible that relies on trained and authorized systems of reference in order for a poet or reader to identify the matter as poetic and asserts the poetic validity of these references recognized as the casually observed contents of everyday experience. In doing this, the poet creates a subjectivity recognizable as living because it exists within a network of references from an actual life. At the same time, it invents a new subjective life within which the world of the poet is active: the poet can be what they can.

"Balboa, The Entertainer," an early poem from his second volume of poetry, *The Dead Lecturer* (1964), gives us further insight into his thinking about the relation between material, poetry, and the poetic subject. This is most of the poem's first stanza:

It cannot come
 except you make it
 from materials
 it is not
 caught from. (The philosophers
 of need, of which
 I am lately
 one,
 will tell you. "The People,"
 (and not think themselves
 liable
 to the same
 trembling flesh). (Jones 10)

The poem begins with a sort of aesthetic axiom declaring that, while it may be necessary for there to be materials from which "It" is made to come, it's not something that arises from the materials itself, but something that "you" have to make. Poetry gathers its effect from a particular use to which the materials it is composed from are put, rather than the poetic being something that is 'caught' from sanctioned poetic material. This axiom is followed up with a criticism of philosophers who function by positioning themselves as subjectively separate from ordinary life, from "the same / trembling flesh." The poetic subject has to realize itself in a position embedded within the flesh of ordinary life, alongside other people, in order to begin to make poetry arise from available materials (rather than catch it dripping from them).

The poem's second stanza opens with a prayer, "Let my poems be a graph / of me," that introduces a new effect of the poetry on the poetic subject (10). Within this cluster of relations between poet, materials, and self, the poem becomes a way to make use of the materials available to the poet in order to describe, to graph out, the poetic subject. This is a dynamic relationship, one that is at once descriptive and prescriptive. While a graph is a way of depicting something that already exists, it is not a neutral portrait but a particular

way of making our understanding of what it depicts active, of changing the way we see the information the graph contains. In the thinking of this poem, the relation between material, poem, and poetic subject is similarly dynamic, and the poet is not a neutral, separate observer, unaffected by the flesh of the poem, but is vulnerable to it, shaped by the way it composes its materials.

Poetry as a means for both describing and (re)constituting the poetic subject is important in order to understand how poetry functions for Baraka within a system of politics—that is, poetry’s political role. Even in this early poem, he isn’t aiming for a transcendent removal of the poetic subject from the world but basically the opposite, a way of understanding how poetry fits the poet actively within a fleshed world of actual material. As he develops, though, he begins to see how the process has to be more complex than this. It cannot simply be a matter of repeating over and over again the self’s phenomenological contact with the material world. The poem “Letter to E. Franklin Frazier” from *Black Magic* (1969) gives us an example of this next step. The first half of this poem is composed of a series of everyday, urban images, identified as memories from the poet’s childhood:

Those days when it was all right
to be a criminal, or die, a postman’s son,
full of hallways and garbage, behind the hotdog store
or in the parking lots of the beautiful beer factory

Those days I rose through the smoke of chilling Saturdays
hiding my eyes from the shine boys, my mouth and my flesh
from their sisters. I walked quickly and always alone
watching the cheap city like I thought it would swell
and explode, and only my crooked breath could put it together
again.

By the projects and small banks of my time. Counting my steps

on tar or new pavement, following the sun like a park. (Jones, *Black Magic* 9)

In some ways, this could almost be read as an echo of the list of snapshots of urban life O'Hara put together in his "Personal Poem." The retrospective removal of the material from the moment of writing is greater in this poem, however, looking further back, which allows the narrator to continue in a more reflective tone, "I imagined / a life, that was realer than speech, or the city's anonymous / fish markets" (9). Whereas O'Hara's poetic subject follows the chain of materials continuously up to a present moment of wondering if someone in that moment is thinking about him, the subject in Baraka's poem inserts a break of completed thought. Back then, in 'those days,' the subject 'imagined a life' in the past tense, "A literal riddle of image / was me, and my smell was a continent / of familiar poetry" (9). Even with this remove, however, and even with the skepticism of characterizing the life as imagined or as a riddle, the poem does conclude with a poetic subject existing in the present, composed of the material that leads up to the moment: "Those days like one drawn-out song, monotonously / promising. The quick step, the watchful march march, / All were leading here, to this room, where memory / stifles the present. And the future, my man, is long / time gone" (9). The present moment that concludes the poem here is recognized as representing the loss of a former future—what the subject in those days had imagined about life, what those moments of life might be leading to, is gone, has failed to ever be realized.

While there's certainly pathos in those closing lines, we have to remember the title—marking the poem as an object of address to the sociologist E. Franklin Frazier—to recognize that there's something more going on than a poetically pathetic regret for the aspirations of childhood. Frazier, the author of books like *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957) and *Race and Culture*

Contacts in America (1957), was very influential on Baraka's thinking about the intersections of class and race around this period, especially his analysis of the specific Black bourgeois strategy for trying to address racial inequality in America. In *Black Bourgeoisie* Frazier argues that "the black bourgeoisie has developed a deep-seated inferiority complex. In order to compensate for this feeling of inferiority, the black bourgeoisie has created in its isolation what might be described as a world of make-believe in which it attempts to escape the disdain of whites and fulfill its wish for status in American life" (27). Through this make-belief, according to Frazier, the Black bourgeoisie focuses on "the activities of the members of Negro 'society,' or it tends to make 'socialites' out of most Negroes whose activities are considered newsworthy. 'Society' is a phase of the world of make-believe which represents in an acute form the Negro's long preoccupation with 'social life' as an escape from his subordinate status in America" (28).

In Baraka's poem, the Black bourgeois make-believe is the imagined future life of "those days," the future that has never arrived. More than material contents of the poetic reverie—the everyday urban images from the poet's childhood—what's pushed away into the past tense is precisely this make-believe, this ideological frame through which, according to bourgeois thought, the memory of a childhood becomes the base from which an aspirational future is supposed to spring. The introduction of Frazier's analysis gives the poet a system with which to cut through the imaginary. The poetic subject is then able to reconnect with these images, and they're able to compose a chain leading to the present moment, the moment of poetic utterance. Here, I would argue, we see an example of Baraka trying to work through how to connect a system of analysis to subjective contact with the

material world. Importantly, this is a system of analysis that is fundamentally about understanding how the individual is subjectivized through ideology to a certain way of understanding their place within society. Through being able to see the ideological distortion that had colored his contact with the material of childhood, that material becomes available again for a new process of poetic subjectivization. Moreover, the reference in the title is saved from being merely an academic reference (aside from its status as marking the address of a letter) by the fact that it functions to make this chain of everyday references available for the graphing of the self. That is, the significance of the poem comes from the way the poetic subject makes use of the material, situating it within a system of analysis that allows it function as part of a tool for creatively political subjectivization.

2. The Unrealized Revolutionary Potential of Bohemian New York

The beginnings of Baraka's effort to work out a poetics that centers around effectively situating a poetic subject within a dialectic between a system of material references and a system of analysis is happening at the same time that he is writing within the artistic world of the Village in New York. As part of his political development he would later renounce that scene. But this later renunciation would have the effect of exaggerating the politically ineffectual nature of his earlier work (and scene). I propose reading his work from this period by teasing out how throughout this period he is engaged in developing an analysis and critique of the scene's failure to arrive at what he thought was its political potential. The problem for him during this period isn't so much why the scene needs to be discarded as it is trying to convince the scene to continue moving along in its political development. He begins an effort that leads him to develop an analysis of why his white

bohemian compatriots seem stuck in a moment of political potential and why they are unwilling or unable to continue forward.

While his trip to Cuba in 1960—along with his accompanying essay “Cuba Libre”—is rightly understood as a profound experience that convinced him of the need to push for a more politically effective position, it is important to note that at this stage he sees the artistic milieu with which he is engaged as potentially coterminous with a radically revolutionary politics he encounters in Cuba rather than politically disinterested.⁹ Baraka initially came to the attention of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, who organized the trip to Cuba he was a part of, due to his publication of the pamphlet “Jan 1st 1959: Fidel Castro.” His own contribution to the pamphlet consists of a poem, “For You,” that doesn’t appear to have been reproduced anywhere else. The poem reads in its entirety:

She is hung up
on the New Year. the
blue eye shadow where
the sun runs down the
sides of 3family houses.

& she immenses from out
a doorway. silk scarf &
red hat (a gold needle
has it skewered) into
the sun. & Sunday (a
bell bangs
the quiet into
little pieces. they
blow down
my chimney &
settle on the floor.

The new yr.; squatting
on the hardwood, polished
floor reading
the new york times.

& come the revolution
 it will be the same,
 Miles Davis &
 bourbon. Sunday mornings;
 after we have won. (Jones, *Jan 1st 1959* 3)

The point of the poem is obviously to signal an allegiance to the revolution to come, and at the same time the context of the poem situates the poetic subject on the same side as that of Castro's revolution. This allegiance did not go unremarked among his contemporaries, and in *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, Baraka recalls "a rather sharp discussion during our weekend bashes" about the poem. There, he implies the discussion was down to his fellow poets' discomfort with his embrace of the revolution, in the line "Sunday mornings, after we have won" (237), presumably in both the way the line identifies with a collective revolutionary subject and in the way it marks a clearly committed political stance. Even as the poem signals this allegiance, it also describes a continuity between the present world of New York 1959 and the potential revolutionary subject. The first stanzas of the poem develop by way of a series of images that evoke the everyday, urban life of the writer's bohemian milieu. This is broken by the shift of the final stanza to the right of the page and the resituating of the setting to a future moment after the revolution, but the next line, declaring everything the same, draws what had come before along into this new moment. Though there's nothing outrageously transgressive about the activity of listening to Miles Davis and drinking bourbon, placing it on a Sunday morning would set the "we," the collective poetic subject of the poem, apart from a more conventional churchgoing bourgeois life. In this poem we see an instance of Baraka trying to situate his social world alongside a revolutionary subjectivity.

In describing his trip to Cuba, he writes about efforts to articulate his difference from the type of officially American subject he thinks his Cuban hosts expect to find. He describes one meeting with a Cuban officer: “He asked was I an American? and I told him that I was an American poet, which meant that I wasn’t a real American like Señor Nixon or Arthur Godfrey but that I had certainly been born in that country. He slapped his sides laughing and shouted his answer to his aides” (*Home* 34). Here the question is about what sort of collective subject he can be identified as constituting a part of—what is the name or description of the collective subject of which he is a part. He tries to articulate why he is part of something other than America, a way that being an “American poet” marks him as participating in something that is not official American culture. Later in the essay, this caveat is upset a little bit, when Señora Betancourt corrects him about the term American: “I was jokingly cautioned against using the word American to mean the U.S. or North America. ‘Everyone in this car is American, she said. ‘You from the North, we from the South.’ I explained as best I could about the Eisenhowers, the Nixons, the Du-Ponts, but she made even my condemnations seem mild” (42). Baraka’s political impulse is this attempt to cordon himself off into a more individualistically determined subject position, to declare himself to be distinct from representatives of official bourgeois culture. Counter to this strategy, Betancourt raises the possibility of evoking a greater collective subject that attacks the legitimacy of official bourgeois claims to power from the opposite direction. This strategy evokes a subject position that lies outside the bourgeois subject because it is more expansive—more fundamental—than the subject that would mark itself off into a position of unique privilege.

As his account of the trip goes on, he is clearly fascinated by and strongly attracted to the possibilities of a collective subject. Baraka tells the story of encountering a wild crowd outside of the train he's riding across Cuba. He can't really understand what's animating the crowd: "What was it, a circus? That wild mad crowd. Social ideas? Could there be that much excitement generated through all the people? Damn, that people still can move. Not us, but people. It's gone out of us forever" (43). Again, it's this recognition of a different kind of subject, one that undermines his own subjectivity by demonstrating a broader subject, "people," of which his "us" isn't able to be part as long as it sets itself apart. In the crowd, he sees "The same idea, and people made beautiful because of it. People moving, being moved. I was ecstatic and frightened. Something I had never seen before, exploding all around me" (44). When he encounters a similar crowd later, he begins shouting along with the Cubans: "After one of the 'Vivas,' I yelled, 'Viva Calle Cuaranta y dos' (42nd Street), 'Viva Symphony Sid,' 'Viva Cinco Punto' (Five Spot), 'Viva Turhan Bey'" (46). In this moment he tries to include his places of identification in a chain of subjectivity alongside these revolutionary people. He imagines and tries to give voice to the possibility that those in his world would be compatible with this expansive, revolutionary subjectivity.

What I want to especially point to in this early moment of his political thinking is that, in both of these cases, his initial response is not to try to disidentify himself from bohemian New York, but to try to articulate the possibility that this world could be brought along into a revolutionary, collective subject. Even so, in this moment he also begins to recognize some of the limitations of the position from which he is experiencing the revolutionary moment. A key turn in the essay revolves around his encounter with the

Mexican poet Jamie Shelley. Shelley castigates him, “You want to cultivate your soul? In that ugliness you live in, you want to cultivate your soul? Well, we’ve got millions of starving people to feed, and that moves me enough to make poems out of” (43). Obviously, this condemnation is against the cultivated individualism that undergirds bourgeois poetics. I would point out that it also runs counter to a sentiment like Adorno’s oft-quoted formulation that there can be ‘no poetry after Auschwitz.’ The point for Shelley, identified in this essay as the more revolutionary poet than Baraka, isn’t that poetry is obscene in the face of the systemic problems of the world. Rather, poetry is necessary. It is just that the orientation of the poetic subject to those systemic problems has to be altered. The poet has to endeavor to make poetry out of those problems, or more properly to make poetry out of a system of critique of those problems, rather than to make poetry as a way of effecting the individual poetic subject’s spiritual survival in the face of those problems.

In the conclusion of the essay, he ends up lamenting the “residue [that] had settled on all our lives....That thin crust of lie we cannot even detect in our own thinking” (61). In this moment, the essay does take as its target the supposed rebellion of New York bohemians:

The rebels among us have become merely people like myself who grow beards and will not participate in politics. Drugs, juvenile delinquency, complete isolation from the vapid mores of the country, a few current ways out. But name an alternative here. Something not inextricably bound up in a lie. Something not part of liberal stupidity or the actual filth of vested interest. There is none. It’s much too late. (62)

This is the second time in the essay he concludes it’s too late for US Americans, but the trip obviously spurs him to find a way to create something he feels around him in Cuba. And even though he criticizes the political quietude of aspects of his and his friends behavior, at

this moment he laments it as something that has dulled the sharpness of their potential. What I would most make note of here is that the problem he begins to critique is specifically a problem created by separating politics from bohemian activity. He doesn't see the cultural spheres he is a part of in New York as constitutively separate from political activity. In fact, throughout the essay and in his earlier poem, he envisions them as potentially part of a broader political solidarity. The problem is that they have to be moved to that point of greater political efficacy. It's possible to read a great deal of his work in the first half of the 1960s as attempts to bridge that separation, rather than as necessarily pointing toward the need to split from that world into a separate world of politics.

This spirit animates the development of his critique of bohemian New York throughout the early part of the 1960s, even as he begins, through that analysis, to develop an idea of why there are some key distinctions in the way he, as a Black artist, might approach the subject position of the bohemian rebel from the way most of his white contemporaries have arrived at that position. In the chapter "The Village" from *Autobiography*, his retrospective account of his participation in and eventual break from the milieu of the Village, he notes several times how white his world was becoming. This he puts down both to his marriage to a white woman and also to a sort of unacknowledged social segregation: he just wasn't with Black folks anymore. He notes that the "first issue [of *Yugen*] was evenly divided between black and white writers. By the third issue there was not one black writer at all (though I was still an editor)!" (223). He echoes this later, writing about the fourth issue, that "there is only one black writer, LeRoi Jones" (230), following this up with some reflective questioning, "But what had happened to the blacks? What had

happened to me? How is it that there's only one colored guy?" (231). He writes, "obviously my social focus had gotten much whiter" (231). Though in describing his social world this way he is clearly identifying this as a problem, characteristically of the writing in the *Autobiography*, he first marks out the problem without attaching it to an analysis he'll develop later. That is, though it's stated in basic terms of Black and white, as the book continues it becomes clear the problem isn't simply a matter of the whiteness of his colleagues, but how their worldview operates.

Describing the nature of his participation in the scene, he writes that at the time he valued "a wide-open perspective" (229), being "'open' to all schools within the circle of white poets of all faiths and flags" (231), a sort of poetic ecumenism that allows him to work in and out of all the social scenes he finds operating around him. What these scenes all share, for him, begins with a rejection of "the dead bourgeois artifact I'd cringed before in *The New Yorker* [which] was a material and spiritual product of a whole way of life and perception of reality that was hostile to me" (229). This hostility holds a racialized component, as he writes:

as an African American I had a cultural history that should give me certain aesthetic proclivities. In the U.S and the 'western world' generally, white supremacy can warp and muffle the full recognition by a black person of this history, especially an 'intellectual' trained by a system of white supremacy. A cultural history is at once the result of a particular psychological outlook which has been shaped by the sociopolitical and economic context of its development, as well as the raw material for a particular aesthetic. It determines what you think is beautiful or even intellectually significant. (229)

While he felt instinctively that the white bourgeois US aesthetic system was hostile to his experience as an African-American person, he could see some ways the specific social scene

of emerging New American Poetry world “somewhat resembled myself” (230). It resembled him in its “open and implied rebellion—of form and content. Aesthetic as well as social and political” (230). He recognizes this rebellion as a rejection of the white bourgeois US aesthetic by means of dropping out of mainstream culture, through which he “could see the young white boys and girls in their pronouncement of disillusion with and ‘removal’ from society as being related to the black experience. That made us colleagues of the spirit” (230).

Writing at the time, he actually puts this idea of being colleagues of the spirit in more forceful terms. In a letter to the *Partisan Review* from 1958, in reply to Norman Podhoretz’s “The Know-Nothing Bohemians,” he defends the value of Beat and other new writing. There he writes, “Violence is just fine,” because “this generation of writers must resort to violence in literature, a kind of violence that has in such a short time begun to shake us out of the woeful literary sterility which characterized the ‘40s” (472). What he seems to mean by ‘violence’ is not strictly physical violence but has to do with violence as an outright rejection of any claim to authority by mainstream bourgeois culture. Here, in writing a political justification for Beat poetry and outlining why he feels aligned with it, he ups the intensity of its rejection of bourgeois culture from the purely aesthetic to the violent. As he continues, he follows up his discussion of the value of violence with a correction to Podhoretz’s characterization of African Americans in bohemian culture. He quotes Podhoretz, “Bohemianism, after all, is for the Negro a means of entry into the world of the whites, and no Negro is going to cooperate in an attempt to identify him with Harlem or Dixieland” (473). He goes on, “Harlem is today the veritable capitol city of the Black Bourgeoisie. The Negro Bohemian’s flight from Harlem is not a flight from the world of color but the flight

of any would-be Bohemian from what Mr. Podhoretz himself calls ‘the provinciality, philistinism and moral hypocrisy of American life.’” (473). In this letter, Baraka sees the social world of Bohemian writers as not only against mainstream white bourgeois culture but also against the Black bourgeoisie. The association with Beat culture is not about a way into white culture but is about placing himself in association with a potentially revolutionary social formation.

This feeling of consonance wouldn’t remain. In *6 Persons*, a largely autobiographical novel written a few years before the *Autobiography*, he describes his growing frustration with the scene, writing that what might have seemed minor difference in his initial sense of recognition grew to feel much starker. He writes, “But see it piled up is what’s being sd! It piled up. One thing, one word, one motion, one copout, one death, after another, one poem, one headline, one visiting professor, after another, they piled, and piled, and suddenly it was different. It had all (the world) been shot out from under them. Or else it was simply another place they’d come to that nobody recognized!” (*Fiction* 338). What piled up has to do with things like those little moments of arguing about his line “after we’ve won” in his Castro poem, along with the differences in their awareness of and reaction to the rising intensity of civil rights issues at the time. He writes, “They began to be limited by their lives, in relationship to their description of them” (339). In the structure of *6 Persons*, the chapter about the Village is called “They,” and throughout the chapter ‘they’ is the pronoun used to refer to Baraka’s earlier self and the people around him in the scene, so here the accusation of being limited is leveled at once at his former self and at the Village bohemians.

Specifically, he starts to articulate how their lives, their understanding of their subject positions, function as a limitation to their understanding of the political situation:

They smirked at King, not really understanding the heroic historical dynamic that King merely gave voice and leadership to. The masses of the people wanted access to the goods and services they had helped create through their slavery. Jewish hipster history, hillbilly history, blueblood rebel history and kook history didn't spell out the rising historical parameters of the black liberation movement. And besides, except for the fiction of poverty the commitment to exotic hedonism might temporarily seem to cause, they had always assumed the goods and services. Petty bourgeois Negroes, working class Negroes, petty bourgeois and working class whites. They watched the stuff like weekend football or basketball.... At a distance from the turmoil of American reality, constructing another reality. (341)

Here he puts politics (in this case, concretely, the Civil Rights Movement with King as figurehead) outside of the artistic milieu. It is necessarily outside of it because of its class formation, because of its place within the economic system, and the fact that it can't see its way outside of that. Instead of truly opposing the system, it ends up reproducing itself within it because of its dependence on access 'to the goods and services'.

In retrospect, with this awareness, he comes to understand that world as a "Fantasyland and fantasy folks," who "told him that this fantasy was heavier than the middle class Negro fantasy. That's what they told him when he started be 'n w/ them" (305). In terms characteristic of his later denunciations of the Village scene, here the lie of the bohemian life is its claim to be meaningful in a different way than the middle class Black life he had moved on from. How does the bohemian fantasy justify this claim? They hadn't told them specifically what to be except a general category ART!" (305). 'ART' is too vague an idea, and it is also a category given by the bourgeois society rather than a position that constitutes a critique of that society. He writes, "They'd set up a scene wherein the sickness

the whole society had backed them in was shown as full of life and smiles. Was, in fact, deep. Heavy. Everything. They didn't know how they looked. But it was in tune with the greater them. The them which runs the place" (309). The problem, for the white bohemians around him, is that they can't see the extent to which their lives within the bohemian world are functionally consonant with the larger ideology they believe they've dropped out of.

While their removal from the mainstream was an optional aesthetic and political decision, his own was a fact already decided for him. As he puts it in the *Autobiography*, "because I was black and that made me, as Wright's novel asserted, an outsider. (To some extent, even inside those 'outside' circles)" (230). This constitutes a material difference between himself and those around him that isn't necessarily resolvable in argument. In *6 Persons*, he makes it clear that this status as an outsider necessarily leads to a different awareness of his relation to the ruling ideology. He writes,

It was the state. The actual govt. Corrupt. Mediocre. The enemies. At one side of the skin movie....

But yeh, what'll be done? And who'll do it? What'll be done? And who'll do it? They were tiny sensitive objects created in white folks' leisure for their leisure. They were, the niggers, the enemies of the state, and they never understood that clearly. (351)

Here he argues for the necessity of a clear declaration of antagonism, and the need for that declaration is clearer for him as a Black artist because the state is explicit in its declaration that he is its enemy. This is echoed in the *Autobiography*, where he writes that while these differences "registered anonymously in my head," they represented a nascent political understanding "tied to a black soul base" (237, 38). As he marks the distinctions in the ways he and his compatriots register their position with respect to society's reproduction of itself,

he begins to see the need for a clearer analysis and for a more forceful, politically violent position.

In the *Autobiography*, Baraka concludes his chapter on the Village with a parable of sorts, in which he describes an encounter at the old Cedar Bar with a couple of “guys in grey flannel suits, sleek with ties,” who start in on him with some low-level racial harassment.

The encounter escalates to the point that

I spit in this guy’s face. But I got to hand it to the guy, he was all class. I say, “So what do you think of that?” The spit is literally hanging off his starched and stiff puss. I say, “Spit is dripping down your face.” He says, “No, it’s not.” Goddamn. Now tell me that’s not the height of absolute subjectivism. That’s how these people can torture, kill, and oppress people. “No, it’s not,” he says, with my nasty saliva rolling down his cheek. (239)

The point here is about the need to actually violently confront and assert a new reality against the established order’s denial of its contradictions. There’s no arguing with the avatars of bourgeois authority because as long as they occupy the default subject position within the aesthetic order, they can simply declare the meaning of actual things. Those committed to a partial connection to that position, either their white or their bourgeois status, make the mistake of misrecognizing the potential ‘we’ they can be part of. What Baraka understands about the line “after we have won,” and what his white bohemian compatriots can’t accept, is the way it declares a “we” that is radically incommensurable with the white bourgeois US mainstream. His friends in white Bohemia, he is eventually forced to realize, are not ready to make that break.

3. *Blues People* and the Black Artist

At the same time that he is developing his analysis of his social scene’s failure to move to a more radical position, we can also see, especially in his writing about African-

American music, how he begins to articulate a theory of the Black artist.¹⁰ Specifically, in contrasting the authentic blues musician to the white jazz hipster, he develops some thinking about why the Black artist might be better positioned to achieve a revolutionary stance toward society. Ultimately, for Baraka, this comes to be about the ways in which Black cultural expression, especially blues music, operates politically the way Rancière argues expressions of dissensus take place. To be the language of a discounted class expressing itself to and for itself amounts to a demonstration that the distribution of the sensible has no validity and is only maintained by the domination of the police. One idea that Baraka comes back to repeatedly in *Blues People* (1963), is the idea that what distinguishes authentic Black music is that it doesn't function according to bourgeois art's strict separation of art and life. He first describes this as a historical aspect of African culture: "It was, and is, inconceivable in the African culture to make a separation between music, dancing, song, the artifact, and a man's life or his worship of his gods. Expression issued from life, and was beauty" (29). Initially, this accounts for the fact that the earliest Black music in America was work music, "something someone would whistle while tilling a field," because this was the only cultural expression allowed enslaved by people by their slaveowners, who otherwise outlawed and denied participation in every aspect of African culture they could manage to snuff out (29). Eventually, though, Black music's resistance to bourgeois aesthetics comes to flow from the position African-American culture is forced to occupy in society, and, specifically, for Baraka, its relation to middle-class American culture. Because, in his thinking, the only middle-class position allowed to African-American people was an assimilationist one—that is, one that required a disavowal of the African-American history as an enslaved and

oppressed lower class—to be part of a middle-class cultural expression required adopting the white bourgeois ideology of art.

Building from this idea, throughout *Blues People*, Baraka highlights a constant pressure on artists to rid Black music of its cultural utility so it can achieve this middle-class erasure:

There was always a border beyond which the Negro could not go, whether musically or socially. There was always a possible limitation to any dilution or excession of cultural or spiritual references. The Negro could not ever become white and that was his strength; at some point, always, he could not participate in the dominant tenor of the white man's culture. It was at this juncture that he had to make use of other resources, whether African, subcultural, or hermetic. And it was this boundary, this no man's land, that provided the logic and beauty of his music. (80)

It's worth trying to tease out what precisely he means by "strength" here, since he leaves it implicit. It's first of all a strength because it distinguishes itself from 'white' culture, so it's a strength of a kind of cultural purity, but it's not enough just to resist this appropriation. It's also partly a strength because it is necessarily lodged in a relation to life not allowed to bourgeois art.¹¹ Black music was able to retain its attachment to material African-American culture because it wasn't elevated or removed to the status of the bourgeois aesthetic object.

More specifically, the value of the blues, for Baraka, is that "[t]he blues impulse was a psychological correlative that obscured the most extreme ideas of *assimilation* for most Negroes, and made any notion of the complete abandonment of the traditional black culture an unrealizable possibility" (142). Blues carries through this kernel of unassimilated culture. "Music," he writes, "is the result of thought. It is the result of thought perfected at its most empirical. *i.e.*, as *attitude*, or *stance*.... If Negro music can be seen to be the result of certain attitudes, certain specific ways of thinking about the world (and only ultimately about the

ways in which music can be made),” then the music “changed as he changed, reflecting shifting attitudes or (and this is equally important) *consistent attitudes within changed contexts*” (153, emphasis in the original). In this way, the artists performing authentic music come to understand their practice as fundamentally oppositional to the bourgeois way of thinking about the world because it can’t be assimilated. In becoming conscious of this fact, the social world of the music takes on the form of a subculture, one capable of reflecting its opposition back onto the culture that rejects it. He writes, “[T]o understand that it is the society that is lacking and is impossibly deformed because of this lack, *and not yourself*, isolates you even more from society” (185), and, in turn, “[T]he young musicians of the forties sought to make that separation meaningful” (186). The expression of this idea renders a subcultural position a stance or attitude with its own charge, and “white musicians and other young whites who associated themselves with this Negro music identified the Negro with this separation, this nonconformity” (188). That, in turn, grows into “a general kind of nonconformity” (191). Even with this, however, there remains the fundamental fact that, about this nonconformity, “the Negro himself had no choice. . . . merely by being a Negro in America, one *was* a nonconformist” (188). While this could point to an idea of greater authenticity of Black cultural expression, I would highlight how it also entails that the adoption of this nonconformist stance, even if self-conscious, by an African-American, necessitates a politically oppositional understanding of the position. There isn’t recourse to the idea that it could potentially become a parallel way to cultural power within a reformed cultural order. This nonconformist stance toward America might represent a “formally understood refusal of the hollowness of American life” (231), but because for a Black artist

there is no culturally authorized position of authority to aim toward, it can't come to represent a potentially parallel way toward enriching bourgeois American life. The cultural expression of this reality in America, he writes, is that "[o]nly Negro music, because, perhaps, it drew its strength and beauty out of the depths of the black man's soul, and because to a large extent its traditions could be carried on by the 'lowest classes' of Negroes, has been able to survive the constant and willful dilutions of the black middle class and persistent calls to oblivion made by the mainstream of the society" (131). While the idea of the soul seems like a vague echo of W.E.B. DuBois, what he's after when he gets down to it is the idea that authentic Black music retains its status as the cultural expression of a current of society opposed to assimilation for material reasons, because it is first of all the living expression of that unassimilable material culture (as opposed to the aestheticization of its expression) and because its existence as the living expression of it makes it "hideous" to bourgeois culture (131).

Ultimately, then, we can see how his critique of bohemian New York points to the problem of what sort of subject can take the steps to a more politically effective position. In the first part of the 1960s, as he grows frustrated with the bohemian world's unwillingness to become radical, he comes to focus on the extent to which the Black artist is positioned in a way that doesn't allow him or her to be seduced by the ideological apparatus that holds the white bohemian in a state of arrested political development. It's easy to see how this train of thought could lend itself to the kind of Black cultural nationalism he went on to become such a vital part of, but I would also point it that it isn't synonymous with that. There's an extent to which Baraka's radical departure is historically contingent, coming on the heels of the

trauma of Malcolm X's assassination and at a moment when Black separatist politics was on the rise. That's the step Baraka took, but the step doesn't necessarily have to subsume our understanding of his thinking leading up to that moment. With that in mind, we can see a little bit more clearly how his theory of the greater political oppositionality inherent to authentic Black music resonates with what he would write in "The Jazz Avant-Garde." At one moment in this essay he writes about the relation between life and ideas: "Ideas are things that must drench everyone, whether directly or obliquely" (Jones, *Black Music* 70), an interesting rewrite of "no ideas but in things." He explains himself:

For Braff or for Charlie Parker *or* James Joyce, the relationship between their actual lives and their work seems direct. For Braff or for Charlie Parker and Bud Powell imitators or Senator Goldwater, the relationship, the meaning, of all the ideas that history has stacked so wearily in front of them, and some utilization in their own lives, is less direct. But if an atomic bomb is dropped on Manhattan, moldy figs will die as well as modernists, and just because some cornet player looks out his window and says 'what's going on' does not mean that he will not be in on things. (70-71)

So here it's that 'things' refers to an actual material reality that has to be accounted for in ideas whether the idea-haver realizes it or not. He goes on, "I am trying to explain 'avant-garde.' Men for whom history exists to be *utilized* in their lives, their art, to make something for themselves not as an overpowering reminder that people and their ideas did live before us" (71). The idea here is that, for the creative subject, the past shouldn't tower over the present, and that history, when used by a proper artist, exists to be material for the artist. The authentic artist uses an awareness of history to create a stance toward reality, rather than allowing his or her stance toward reality to be determined by history.

What all of this shows is that even as he was engaged in the artistic and poetic world of New York, particularly the Village, from the mid 1950s to the mid 1960s, Baraka was at

the same time developing an analysis and critique of the limits of what that bohemian position allowed its participants to do and say politically. Although what attracted him to the scene initially was the way he saw its aesthetic and poetic commitments pointing toward a self-consciously oppositional stance toward official culture (both artistic culture and bourgeois culture more generally), he wanted to continue pushing toward a more politically radical position. Though there are flash points where he articulates this as something like a straight-forward desire to be more concretely effective—particularly in writing about his experience in Cuba—this more often takes the form of a dialectically developing consciousness within the artistic world. We see him repeatedly express the idea of being on the side of the militants, often not as an expression of what sets him apart from others but more as a claim he makes on behalf of those around him. The result, however, is frustration in recognizing that the others will not go along. Particularly in his writing on music, then, we see him begin to develop an analysis of white bohemian culture versus Black bohemian culture in which the Black subject begins from a place of exclusion, from where they can only lift themselves into another position by means of imitation or assimilation—by means of disavowal of Blackness—or by trying to articulate a position that is self-consciously unassimilable by official culture. In his analysis, blues and jazz musicians are able to resist assimilation when they take Black culture as the ground for their artistic expression (that is, Black music as it comes through a social tradition that can be traced back to the lived life of oppressed African-American people and, further back, the musical traditions that survived their forced removal from Africa). The point is not a purity of Blackness, but instead is an articulation of how Black music operates as a cultural formation not by seeking authoritative

confirmation from white culture but purely on its own terms. In Baraka's analysis, we see a way blues music functions as a concrete example of what Rancière would call dissensus. At its base, and in the forms Baraka emphasizes as adhering to its core tradition, what gives the music its vitality is that it is the cultural expression of a discounted class in a language the police refuse to validate. And where Baraka sees it coming most to the fore as a imbued with political potential, it self-consciously rejects any aspiration for official validation. In this analysis, the question of white bohemians, or especially white jazz musicians, becomes a problem. But the problem isn't a racially essentialist problem so much as it is that white bohemians approach the problem as one of trying to drop out of official culture, and in so doing to remove themselves from history or from their position as potential participants within an authorized culture. The problem of dropping out of official culture is the not the problem of opposing official culture—the former may be necessary for the latter, but it's not the same move.

IV. *Wise, Whys, Ys: Activating the Material of History*

In the 1970s, Baraka's work begins to take on a much more recognizably explicit political expression, veering into what critics have sometimes understood too simply as sloganeering. I would argue the writing of this period can better be understood as a record of Baraka's experiments with how to bring a developed historical analysis into contact with the field of poetic activity. Writing about Baraka's work around the time of *Hard Facts* (1975), Nathaniel Mackey draws out what he sees as an ongoing attempt to bridge "an accord between the conflicting claims of the accessible and the esoteric" (382). In Mackey's thinking, "accessible" and "esoteric" are two terms in what he sees as a dialectic in Baraka's

thinking between a classic sort of intellectual rigor and an almost anti-intellectual desire to “*unthink* the many perversions of thought” (376, emphasis in the original). In characterizing the two sides of this dialectic as “accessible” and “esoteric,” Mackey leaves us looking at Baraka’s project as an effort to reconcile definitionally opposite concepts.

We can get a better understanding of what Baraka’s project at this time is if we adjust the terms slightly. First of all, ultimately what Baraka is after is a way of using poetry as a site within which a poetic subject’s analysis of history and experiential understanding of their material reality activate each other. An analysis of history and an experiential understanding of material reality are ways of knowing that are not necessarily opposite, but that are subject to an ideological separation dictated by the bourgeois understanding of the creative individual’s supposedly transcendental remove from historical determination. That is, as Lefebvre’s critique outlined it, bourgeois ideology locates creative or intellectual activity on a level of experience that necessarily removes itself from everyday, material reality, while the level of everyday activity is treated as void of meaning. This results in a situation in which meaning—whether artistic, scientific, historical, etc.—is reserved for the level of reality held above everyday life, and in the subject’s everyday existence, that meaning can only be appreciated in moments of remove from everyday or life, or it can only be aspired to.

We might add to this another way of thinking about the problem of distance between what Mackey categorized as “accessible” and “esoteric.” In chapter 1, I outlined a way that Williams expresses a problem in how the individual in the present approaches the writing of the past. Particularly, in *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, Williams writes, “Each age wishes

to enslave the others” (107), by which he means to articulate the danger of a certain approach to the writing and lessons from history, an approach by which the subject in the present might come to feel the historical material is more alive than their own material experience. In this way, according to Williams, the present is the slave to the past. The solution to this problem isn’t to avoid reading history, but to understand a different relation than one of domination to the material one encounters. The reader must engage the imagination and place whatever material they encounter within an accessible active system of material. For the poetic subject, this system is poetry, where the material of experience and the material one encounters as a reader and listener can all be emplotted on the same plane. Baraka, in the latter part of his career, is working out a similar problem, except that for him the problem is not so much how to resist the domination of the past as it is how to activate the subject in the present by enacting a creative relation to history.

Shortly after the writing of *Hard Facts*, in a 1978 interview, Baraka articulates this idea:

Basically, your feelings come from your worldview, from your way of perceiving reality. All people want to be revolutionary; there’s always a need to struggle to try to transform your worldview, to remold your worldview, so that you actually perceive reality as do the great masses, the working class. That’s basically the problem. There is no actual dichotomy between your personal feelings, your private, personal understanding of your experience, and the strivings of the collective consciousness if you have succeeded in remolding your worldview so that you actually perceive the world from the viewpoint of the working class, the proletariat. The dichotomy arises when you maintain a kind of isolated, subjective perspective, but still try to reach out toward the collective will. (Baraka, interview with Kimberly Benston, 308)

This is put perhaps a bit too schematically here, but the basic idea is about trying to undo a distance between the material experience and perception of the working class and a private

consciousness cultivated bourgeois ideology. Much the same spirit animates his later work *Wise, Why's, Y's* (1995), but by then Baraka has worked out a more dynamic understanding of this problem. What's at work in *Wise* is not an attempt to bridge a logical divide but a conviction that what appears as a logical divide, between the esoteric and accessible, is more fundamentally the product of some ideological work that determines our relation to experience and knowledge. Thought in this way, we might understand *Wise* as an attempt to compose an articulation of what an awareness of history would look like if, rather than aiming at allowing the subject an illusory freedom that comes from the desire to transcend the material conditions of reality by achieving a sort of abstract critical remove, it grew out of a more active understanding of the subject's embeddedness within actual material conditions. Baraka articulates the former relation to history in *Wise* as being "Railroaded by Time / We were always / trying / to remember / things" (79). This suggests a subject from whom the "things" they are "trying to remember" have come to seem hopelessly separated by the passage of time. We should recall here Baraka's criticism in *Blues People* of the Black bourgeoisie's constitutive denial of any material connection to the historical enslavement of African-American people. That would be an attempt, in Baraka's thinking, to try to arrive at a sort of stasis removed from the flow of history. Instead, in *Wise* Baraka calls the poetic subject to "Let the verb / of what it is / inform your / hipness" (80)—hipness here in the sense of knowing, of being 'hip to,' something, and of being cool, of not being beaten down by history. If "what it is" becomes a verb, the facts of the world ordinarily assumed to be static—the setting upon which the action of history is played out—become themselves active in the ways they are available to the subject.

In his 1999 introduction to *Blues People*, Baraka articulates what he had come to realize he had been doing when he initially wrote the book. He writes that “what I had carried for years” in *Blues People*, what made him “high” while in the process of writing it, was, “how to measure this world in which we find ourselves, where we are not at all happy, but clearly able to understand and hopefully, one day, to transform. How to measure my own learning and experience and to set out a system of evaluation, weights, and meaning” (viii). In writing this, Baraka is writing what he understands to be the standpoint of a poet. A poet is able to develop a dialectic between a “system of evaluation, weights, and meaning” and “my own learning and experience,” by beginning with the latter as a way to at once apprehend and articulate the former. Baraka describes a critical stance that starts out as a poetic one. He envisions critical analysis as a technology for understanding how one’s individuality is constituted through the material of society.

We can also see this as the fundamental idea driving his 1995 long poem *Wise, Why’s, Y’s*. The poem is an attempt to articulate a historical analysis through which a poetic subject is able to arrive at an active realization of their activity within history, as opposed to an aspirational bourgeois self passively dominated (or enslaved) by history. In the introduction to the book, Baraka describes *Wise* as “a long poem...about African-American (American) History. It is also like Tolson’s *Liberia*, WCW’s *Paterson*, Hughes’ *Ask Yr Mama*, Olson’s *Maximus* in that it tries to tell the history/life like an ongoing-offcoming Tale” (3). Here he puts the poem firmly in an American poetic tradition, the long poem about history. Even though the poem is heavily intertextual, bringing a thoroughly developed theoretical history into conversation with a long list of references to specific African-

American music, and references to writers and artists,¹² the point is not to build a documentary history nor to bowl the reader over with credentials. In the poem, he writes, “I want little ones to comprehend / & the mature, w/o reference / or theory, stone reality // understood” (71). It would be possible to misread this line as yearning for a kind of folk theory, an insistence on the fundamental truth of statements uttered from nothing more than simple contact with reality. But Baraka was a voracious reader, and his arrival at the various intellectual stages of his career all came with new sets of texts, new systems of thinking that he connected in his writing by way of reference and articulation of theory. The poem itself is brimming with references. Another way of reading this line, then, is not to set it against that apparent contradiction, but to understand it as an expression of what Baraka ultimately feels the political role of poetry can be. He continues:

How is it rolled
down
 What
do you
 carry?
To speak
of it
all?
What do you conjure
how deep in its crazy
pit?
 To dig up,
What tells it all
 The precise
 sunset
 &
 rise
The look in an old man’s
 eyes
I can lay out a field
 a Spectrum
 Where in

So what is spoken
 is the living
 the flesh
 & its
 Movement—
 Slavery
 Civil War
 Reconstruction
 its
 Destruction
 The Slaves'
 poverty. (71-72)

For the poet, poetry can be a tool for activating one's experience of reality, both by way of clarifying one's own individual experience of immediate reality and of bringing that experience into contact with a politically effective historical analysis. Poetry is a tool through which the poet can "lay out a field [or] Spectrum" through which "what is spoken" is activated, is "living," "flesh," and "Movement." At this moment of the poem, Baraka places the poetic field between experience—"the precise sunset...the look in an old man's / eyes"—and the historical awareness of the list of events he concludes the sections with. Poetry is a tool for synthesizing experience with understanding gleaned from an analysis of history.

In the case of *Wise*, the poetic subject Baraka is concerned with is not a free-floating abstract subject but, more specifically, a potentially revolutionary African-American subject in the late twentieth century. If, from very early in his career, Baraka found fault with the Black bourgeoisie for buying into the bourgeois desire to remove oneself from history—what he saw as their denial of their connection to the history of slavery and anti-Black racism in America—*Wise* can also be read as an attempt to articulate an active awareness of and contact with that history. It is also an argument that the bourgeois ideological remove is not simply a mystification, it's an active problem, creating a stultifying ignorance that leaves

those who follow it unable to actively grasp history and make use of it. It railroads time out of reach for the living individual.

Baraka begins the poem by articulating the way he understands the situation of his poetic subject:

If you ever find
yourself, some where
lost and surrounded
by enemies
who won't let you
speak in your own language
who destroy your statues
& instruments, who ban
your oom boom ba boom
then you are in trouble...
probably take you several hundred years
to get
out! (7)

This is a collapsing of history that articulates an immediate connection between the contemporary situation of African-Americans and the historical moment of their African ancestors' capture and enslavement. He continues in the second section of the poem: "I still hear / that song, son / of the son's son's son's / son...that cry / cries / screams / life exploded" (8-9). In both of these cases he articulates a connection that bears the past into the present. But then he reverses this, writing that the "[s]ong to me, was the darkness ... in those crazy dreams I called myself / Coltrane / bathed in a black and red fire / in those crazy moments I called myself / Thelonius / & this was in the 19th century!" (13). Here the immediacy of the connection serves to bear the names of Baraka's contemporary heroes into the past, making the string of relations not necessarily a matter of one-way descendent lineage but a more active relation to ancestry. Additionally, this begins to articulate a connection between the

activity of the great twentieth-century jazz performers and the singing of African-Americans through the centuries. Coltrane and Monk do not have to remove themselves from history to become performers, but their performance arises from living out an immediate connection to history. The poem itself serves as a system in which all of this material exists within reach of each other, part of the same breath or the same song.

Throughout the poem, Baraka performs a similar move bringing many different historical figures into the field of the poem. “This is the stage of / our Du Bois,” he writes, “link from Fred [Douglas] / & he now dead,” asking, “Can you see / the baton? (Well / Feel / It!) // From Fred to E.B. [sic] / to Langston / to (Zora to Richard & Ted & / Jimmy &) / Margaret / to / WE!” (43-44). Along with these repeated moments of bringing historical figures into contact with each other, the poem also consistently tries to articulate a specific way of understanding the relations of historical events to each other. As quoted above, while this sometimes involves bringing “Slavery / Reconstruction / its / Destruction” into the same breath, it also often is a matter of bringing historical events that are normally treated as disparate into the same field: “amidst our sunlight / mass laughter / emancipation / The Paris / Commune // The Berlin meeting to divide / the Dark Places / Colonial Pie // What the Slave Trade / Wrought,” for example, and, “As the Commune / smashed / dead // The rehearsals / for Buchenwald / & Belsen / carried out in the / American / South” (64, 65). Here, again, all these historical moments placed alongside each other within the same system. But though his point here is to emphasize a sense of immediate contact with the historical extent of the damage rendered by the domination of the ruling class, and, at the outset of the poem, an understanding of how long it will take people in this situation take to get out, by drawing the

figures and events together into the same field so the scope of the problem and the scope of the fight for freedom can be more fully in the picture, Baraka's point is not defeatist. This system of awareness is meant to activate a poetic subject, to articulate a poetic subject whose lived experience includes these historical realities.

Early in the poem, in "Wise 5," he writes:

I overheard the other night
standing by the window
of the big house

a nigra say, through an alabaster
mask, "the first negro
was a white man."

Slanty red darts angulate the darkness
my hands got cold, my head was sweaty (14)

This bit of historical awareness is valuable, because "I fount out something that night / about the negro / & the world / got clear," and "I fount out something / about / the magic / of slavery // & I vowed not to be / a slave / no more" (15). This is not just a matter of the acquisition of a piece of knowledge. It's a shift of historical awareness. Becoming aware of "the magic / of slavery" entails that the speaker has seen through a mystification, that slavery is not a condition that results from an inherent difference between the slaver and the enslaved, but is only naked domination. And the vow that follows, to be a slave no more, rather than representing a denial of history, is instead the functional result of the field of historical awareness cutting through the mystification. It's a realization of how slavery was invented, which allows for a clear understanding of slavery's scope and its aftermath, in a way that makes the problem material, graspable, and therefore actively targetable for the subject.

This can help us make sense of the provocative final lines of the book, in the section titled “Y The Link Will Not Always Be ‘Missing,’” which reads in its entirety, “Think of Slavery / as / Educational!” (132). Though Baraka is playing with an expression that courts the offensive historical idea that American slavery was in the long run good for African-American people, he’s obviously after something quite different. The point here is the link with history, contact with an analysis of material reality. If this contact can be articulated and made active, Baraka believes,

Gradually we become history
to
have

us

inside
it

There was 19th c Progress
Slavery ReBorn

as fascism
in its colored low budget
original
version!

We are bullets into
tomorrow
We are Changerers (74)

For Baraka, the political potential of poetry is that it can be a tool for the potential revolutionary to become history not as a subject limited by it but as its creative subject.

If we left Williams, at the end of *Spring and All*, at the point at which he had articulated a poetic subject potentially liberated from domination by history “to act in whatever direction his disposition leads” (92), we leave Baraka having expressed a vision of

a poetic subject able to realize itself as the creative subject of history. The upshot of Baraka's vision is that, in "becom[ing] history" by way of this poetic route—by the poetic subject training themselves to realize a creative relation to all the materials of experience—Baraka describes a poetic subject that has molded itself into a shape capable of changing a future world. However, this is also where I see Baraka's project as running into a limit. The overall movement of Baraka's career demonstrates how a poetic subject needs to make use of the material of history (or historical analysis) in the process of poetic subjectivization in order to see clearly the ways systems of domination work against different kinds of subjects. That is, as he comes to understand in his analysis in *Blues People*, while a poetic subject might gain a relative level of freedom by realizing their radical particularity, that freedom is relative with respect to the different ways systems of domination express themselves against classes, and the inability to see the power of these systems—or an insistence that the systems should merely be transcended—results in an impossibility of collaboration among creative subjects. Subsequent moves of his poetic career can be understood as attempts to experimentally bring such systems of analysis into contact with the constitution of a poetic subject in a way that does not resolve into an argument for apprenticing oneself to history. In the work of his middle career, this sometimes amounts to bringing the ideas of political and historical analysis directly into the poetic field and articulating them in the speaking voice of his poetic subject. In *Wise*, however, the strategy is more expansive, as across the book-length poem he enacts a poetic subject that has no specific point of enunciation, one that is instead composed from the system of references that make up the poem. Thus, the problem *Wise* works to solve is the problem of what a revolutionary poetic subject looks like, one capable

of creative articulation of their relation to history such that in articulating that relation they are not denying it in order to escape it but are embodying it in order to realize a creative relation to it. But in its moments of clearest articulation, the poem also expresses a desire for that subject to resolve at a moment sometime in the future, and Baraka casts the subject into tomorrow. The problem *Wise* leaves us with, for the poetics I have traced in this dissertation, is how to bring this poetic subject into an ongoing present of composition among other poetic subjects, rather than attempting to describe how a potentially more effective poetic subject might exist in the future. Or, to circle around in another way, Baraka's *Wise* leaves us with a demonstration of the importance of understanding the materials of historical and political analysis as material available to the poetic subject in the same way the materials of everyday life are available, opening up the possibility of a creative relation to such systems of knowledge. Indeed, that was the blind spot we were left with as we saw the socially focused version of this poetics, the poetics of dissensual collaboration, develop through O'Hara and Notley. Thus, these three poets leave us with a pair of problems that might most productively be thought together. That is, they leave us with the problem of working into the poetic field the material of historical and political analysis along with the material of social and everyday life—as Baraka does—and using it in a system of creative ongoing disagreement and rearticulation of dissensual collaboration as demonstrated by O'Hara and attempted by Notley. The potential usefulness of bringing such material into the poetic field as Baraka does, for a process of poetic self-pedagogy, is that the systems of domination by race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc., that function to define subjects within a hierarchy are rendered part of the visible material of poetic investigation. The material and historical

reasons they can't be assumed away or transcended thus become part of the very articulation of the poetic subject. Bringing such a practice into a process of poetic subjectivization through dissensual collaboration might open up a way for its politics not to be cast into the future but to make up part of the composition of an ongoing present.

¹ The name: for the sake of clarity, I refer to him as Amiri Baraka throughout the text, even though much of the work I look at was published before he changed his name in the latter part of the 1960s.

² Nielsen's chapter in *Writing Between the Lines* gives a good sense of the bitterness many of the writers from the scene felt about Baraka's departure, something that clearly colored their understanding of what he was doing. Along the same lines, Joseph LeSeuer's chapter about O'Hara and Baraka from his memoir portrays Baraka's departure as cruel and selfish. More recently, Epstein's chapter in *Beautiful Enemies* on Baraka's work in the early '60s, in trying to defend its complexity, ends up setting it up as a promising initial flourishing by someone who would go on to forget everything that had made his work interesting—as if it weren't possible for work from both periods to be interesting.

³ This is essentially the critical framework established by Werner Sollors and James Harris. More recently, Daniel Matlin, to an extent, follows this assumption in building up to an examination of Baraka's thinking as an activist. Similarly, although Komozi Woodard's book is primarily a historical study of Baraka's prominence in the Black Power movement of the early 1970s, Baraka's political activation is set up as an awakening from an apolitical earlier existence in New York. Standing out as an interesting exception to this tendency to keep the two phases of his career in competition with each other, Lorenzo Thomas's chapter in *Extraordinary Measures* about visiting Baraka in Newark during the height of the Black Arts Movement provides a nuanced but unflinching argument for the importance of all of Baraka's work even while acknowledging he is always a problematic figure.

⁴ It's worth noting Baraka's Black cultural nationalism was just as much a step in his career as was his time in New York, and his departure from that movement was in its own way just as dramatic. Recent work by Cedric Johnson and Asad Haider on Baraka's involvement in the Black Power movement and his eventual frustration with it both use this period as way of demonstrating the limits of Black nationalism, or what Haider identifies as identity politics, and arguing for the necessity of a move to anti-colonialist Marxism.

⁵ If *Wise, Why's, Y's* (1995), which I look at more closely in the final section of this chapter, had been published by a more familiar New American-friendly press, and if it hadn't come at a time when Baraka was revered primarily for his activism but was relatively overlooked by the poetry world, it would likely be considered one of the strongest late entries by his generation of writers. The book has yet to receive its due.

⁶ For example, in "Gay Language as Political Praxis: The Poetry of Frank O'Hara" (1979), Bruce Boone makes the case that the oppositional politics of O'Hara's poetry is invisible to the critical establishment (of 1979) because the critical establishment is fundamentally

aligned with a dominant political order. In this reading, note that the idea of a political removed avant-garde is something that academic criticism is in the process of reading onto the counter culture of the late 1950s and 1960s, even as Boone also outlines the extent to which various factions of that counter culture were more institutionally connected than they may have represented themselves as being. For a more recent example, Loren Glass, in *Counterculture Colophon* (2013), makes a case for remembering the extent to which participation in the alternative literary and art culture that cohered around Grove Press in the 1950s and 1960s signaled participation in what its participants understood as an oppositional culture.

⁷ For one example, writing about Baraka's trip to Cuba, Epstein writes, "By all accounts, the trip was a major turning point for Baraka, as it sparked what would become (quite a bit later) his full-blown commitment to radical political activism and hastened his dissatisfaction with the bohemian stance and its purely aesthetic and 'individualistic' forms of protest and critique" (180). Baraka's politics are pushed away from the period Epstein considers, as they only really come quite a bit later, in order for Epstein to focus on a more purely philosophical aspect of his work.

⁸ For example, Sollors: "In his emphasis on a spontaneous aesthetic and in his selection of literary prototypes (Lorca, Williams, Cummings, as well as the traditional favorites Eliot, Pound, and Yeats) Baraka differs little from other Beat writers" (33). In gathering together this conglomeration of influences, Sollors establishes a beginning point for Baraka of pure aestheticism, as he argues the work was unexceptional in its placement within the Beat aesthetic, an aesthetic that "all but ignores the social implications of poetry" (32). The period becomes a quietude Baraka had to reject outright—white influences most especially—in order to arrive at his mature work. Harris takes more notice of the way Baraka's frustrations with these sets of influences is built into the very forms and patterns of thinking of many of the same influences, but frames the problem in a generational way, a "need to destroy his literary predecessors" that repeats the moves of "Ginsberg and Olson, Pound and Williams, the white avant-garde of both generations, [who] were themselves involved in the process of overthrowing their fathers" (30). More recently, Matlin considers the efforts of Baraka's early work to be primarily towards an "artistic transcendence that had first attracted him to the Beats," that he came to see "as a self-indulgent evasion of the political" (135). Matlin focuses on what went into Baraka's eventual move to Harlem and his work in the Black Arts Movement, but in his account the presence of any politics in Baraka's work is assumed to be entirely a matter of Black nationalist activism. A major side-effect of this simplified narrative about Baraka's career is that his importance for and influence in the poetry and art world of 1960 New York ends up being severely underplayed even by those critics attempting to amplify Baraka's writing – the essential nature of that world is left entirely up to his white compatriots, and it comes to seem almost as if his participation in the scene were peripheral, a matter of following around an imitating the actual movers and shakers. He's treated as a Black ornament to a white scene. The reality is that when he was LeRoi Jones, publishing both *Yugen* and *Floating Bear*, hosting almost weekly parties in his apartments, getting into all sorts of social entanglements with so many of the central figures of that artistic and poetic movement, he was a key player. The materiality of those historical facts aside, Nielsen in *Writing Between the Lines* makes a strong case for the importance of Baraka

to many writers from the scene based on an intertextual analysis of dedications/acknowledgments directed to him at the time. In a more specific instance, Epstein demonstrates how the importance of the relationship between Baraka and Frank O'Hara has been sorely overlooked.

⁹ In making this argument, I am echoing aspects of Fred Moten's and Ben Lee's treatments of Baraka's work during this period. Both of these make a strong case for revising our understanding of the political potential of this period. Moten develops a way to understand it as a sort of queer communist prophecy, a moment of potential foreclosed by later developments but all the more important for that foreclosure. Moten argues:

one condition of possibility of black arts is bohemianism, the rejection of bohemianism; the limits of black arts are set by the rejection of a certain revolutionary embrace that is embedded in bohemianism, and the possibility of their transgression is given in the rejection of a certain retrogressive privilege that bohemianism retains and that is manifest in and at its hip and unhip poles. There are questions here concerning decadence or deviance. The black arts are, in part, the cultural vehicle of return to a certain moral fundamentalism, one based on (the desire for) African tradition rather than white/bourgeois normativity. This is to say that they would enact a return to the former after having enacted the bohemian rejection of the latter. The embrace of the homoerotic is, here, an opening and not an aim." (281-282, fn 102)

Lee helpfully highlights various ways that Baraka makes explicit how the project for an open aesthetic form was "part of a more widespread attempt in postwar America to consolidate a position of cultural authority" (375), specifically set against a more traditionally liberal (if not outright conservative) New Critical establishment. For Baraka, Lee argues, this more open poetics could point toward more "potentially radical ideological forms," which should therefore "support to the radical political engagements of intrepid souls like Robert Williams [the Civil Rights activist who, in the late 1950s, advocated forceful, violent resistance to the KKK]" (377). Also see Moore for an even more recent entry in the critical re-assessment of Baraka's earlier writing as more politically forceful than has been the critically commonplace assumption.

¹⁰ Though his writing about music has long been held in very high esteem, these theoretically very rich texts could serve as much more of a source for understanding Baraka's theory of art and constructing a frame through which to read his work than they have. But for one example, see Emily Ruth Rutter, who reads Baraka's writing about music in order to make more directly visible the importance of Baraka's work for contemporary poets Fred Moten and Terrance Hayes.

¹¹ He dramatizes a version of this idea in "A Poem for Speculative Hipsters," in *The Dead Lecturer*, telling of a titular 'he' who "had got, finally, / to the forest / of motives," where "[t]here were no / owls, or hunters. No Connie Chatterleys / resting beautifully / on their backs, having casually / brought socialism / to England." Here, still relatively early in his career, as LeRoi Jones, 'Chatterley' is one in series along with 'owls' and 'hunters,' a natural-animal figure (owl) along with a primitive-utilitarian cultural figure (hunter), set as precedents for the literary figure who 'casually' brings 'socialism to England' — he

explicitly marks socialism as a goal, but the way it comes about is simply as the natural outcome of the Bohemian brand of anti-bourgeois behavior. But where this hipster figure ends up, this forest, is a place of “Only ideas, / and their opposites,” ideas separated from their material outcomes or origins. “Like, / he was really / nowhere” (76), a place that’s not real. This is the weakness of bourgeois art/thinking for Baraka, even in its Bohemian/hipster form. It can’t escape this, because in order to overcome it would require (re)connecting art/ideas to a materiality — to active culture or to politics.

¹² For a thorough textual reading of these elements of the poem, see Kathy Lou Schultz. Giving a sense of the complexity at work in the poem, she describes it in this way: “The book provides an African American history lesson covering topics including the genocide of slavery, Reconstruction and the oppressive Black Codes, the Great Migrations and the shift to an urban Black population. Throughout the text, Baraka also addresses the development of African American literature, the struggles to create a modern Black identity in the twentieth century, and how previous struggles manifest in different forms in human history. Throughout the book, Baraka provides the musical score that accompanies this journey. Moreover, the epic is a commentary on the writing of history itself, presenting history as a “spiral” (rather than linear narrative), singing African Americans’ diasporic history from West Africa through the Middle Passage and slavery and into the present. The complete book reads like a score for a performance piece containing poetry, music and visual art. African American music, particularly jazz, is central to its overall meaning and method” (27). Ultimately she reads the poem as an attempt to enact “the creation of home not as a physical location but as a state of being that is improvised through collective performance” (47). I would only quibble that in treating all the different voices and cultural products Baraka recruits into the poem as a horizontal ground from which the poem improvises a celebratory new collectivity, she somewhat misses the extent to which the poem can be read as an attempt to utilize an analysis of history, such that the ‘state of being’ the poem evokes points toward a new politically activated collective subject.

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ABSTRACT**THE CENTER OF ALL BEAUTY:
RADICAL DEMOCRACY, MATERIALITY, AND THE POETIC SUBJECT IN
TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN POETRY**

by

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In *Center of All Beauty*, I trace a strain of poetics in twentieth-century American poetry from William Carlos Williams through Frank O'Hara, Alice Notley, and Amiri Baraka. This poetics is founded in a radically democratic conception of the poetic subject and in the use of poetry as a tool for developing critical knowledge about the material conditions within which the poetic subject is constituted. In *Spring and All* and *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, Williams articulates a poetics that denies the authority of any grounds upon which any poetic subject would be considered inadequate to poetic speech and outlines a way of using poetry to train the poetic subject into a critical resistance to authority. I demonstrate similarities between Williams's poetics and the political pedagogy Jacques Rancière articulates in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* in order to show how Williams's poetics amounts to a way of holding poetry open for political speech according to Rancière's definition of politics as a rupture in the distribution of the sensible. I outline how Frank O'Hara develops a poetics of everyday life and sociality that renders the social formation

the poetic subject exists within visible for critique and poetic articulation. Following Rancière's definition of dissensus as the means by which politics operates in an ongoing present, I argue O'Hara makes this poetics part of a process of dissensual collaboration among members of the oppositional queer social world he is a part of in 1950s New York. I turn to Alice Notley's poetry in the 1970s to show how she develops an everyday life poetry of the maternal subject. Following Henri Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life*, I argue that Notley's poetry initially functions by trying to disalienate the material of everyday life from the poetic field of meaning. She tries to enact this poetics by modeling it after Williams and O'Hara. However, the social relations she invokes for poetic collaboration are mystified rather than alienated in their definition under capitalist patriarchy. Her poetry develops a critical knowledge of this domestic situation, making visible the ways these relations are constructed from a system of demands for labor. Finally, I turn to Amiri Baraka, who, in making use of this poetics encounters the problem of how to declare the possibility of speaking without qualification as a Black poetic subject engaged in the struggle for African-American liberation without seeking the invisible qualification that such a declaration should begin in an attempt to transcend or disavow Blackness. Ultimately, Baraka sees that in order to fully articulate the ways a poetic subject is subject to systems of domination according to race and class, this poetics must treat the material of historical and political analysis as available to the poetic subject in the same way as the materials of everyday life. Baraka's poetics shows us the necessity of not only disalienating the materials of everyday life from poetic meaning, but also of disalienating systems of historical and political analysis from the everyday life of the poetic subject.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

I hold a BA in English (Philosophy minor) from the University of South Dakota (2006), an MFA in Creative Writing (Poetry) from the University of San Francisco (2009), and an MA in English from the University of South Dakota (2011). I have presented papers that grew into this dissertation in United States and Germany. I received a University Graduate Research Fellowship from the Graduate School at Wayne State in 2011, and a Summer Dissertation Fellowship in Summer 2018. I teach Creative Writing at Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti.