

2013

Lifting Belly: The Language of (In)Visibility

Christine Scanlon

CUNY City College of New York

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Follow this and additional works at: http://academicworks.cuny.edu/cc_etds_theses

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [Modern Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Scanlon, Christine, "Lifting Belly: The Language of (In)Visibility" (2013). *CUNY Academic Works*.
http://academicworks.cuny.edu/cc_etds_theses/481

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the City College of New York at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.

Lifting Belly: The Language of (In)Visibility

Christine Scanlon

Mentor: Professor J. Wilner

August 7, 2013

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts of the
City College of the City University of New York.

Lifting Belly: The Language of (In)Visibility

The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything. This makes the thing we are looking at very different and this makes what those who describe it make of it, it makes a composition, it confuses, it shows, it is, it looks, it likes it as it is, and this makes what is seen as it is seen. Nothing changes from generation to generation except the thing seen and that makes a composition.

(Stein 513)

This excerpt from Gertrude Stein's "Composition as Explanation," a lecture delivered at Oxford College in 1926, delivers a rather involved explanation on her definition of what makes a "composition." The importance she places on the need to "see" with a very wide lens, and the connection between what is seen and "change," can be useful to keep in mind when reading Stein's earlier "composition"—her poem "Lifting Belly." Deborah Mix characterizes the poem, in part, as working within (and against) conventions of lyric poetry in a celebration of her romantic partnership with Alice P. Toklas (70). The dialogic structure used by Stein, in the poem, successfully imitates the rhythms and sounds of the domestic harmony shared by this couple. Mix writes that "substantial sections of 'Lifting Belly' can be read as a relatively straightforward dialogue between two speakers, specifically Stein and Toklas" (74). Stein's vocabulary in this poem is also very simple, and helps to place the narrators (the two subjects, Stein and Toklas) in a domestic space that is completely personal. This interiority leads some critics to read the phrase "lifting belly" as a coded name that hides the lesbian nature of their relationship.

But to read “lifting belly” as something that equals, or tries to obscure, the particular, lesbian relationship shared by Stein and Toklas, narrows the scope of what the language of the poem, and the phrase, are trying to do. This poem is not at all hermetic. The dialogue between the two lovers attempts to redefine possibilities for self-representation; it creates a name for them, from inside the relationship, that will “lift” it from the strictly personal space of its origin. “Lifting Belly” is the couple, but also the language and act of composing the text that will come to define the couple. The signs of a well-ordered home (“We like linen. Linen is ordered.”), the language of love (“Kiss my lips. She did./Kiss my lips again she did.”), and the mundane statements of the everyday (“I told him I would send him Mildred’s book.”) are woven together in the poem. The dialogue, between the two subjects, provides the reader with markers to help them stay afloat in the overwhelming current of text that attempts to define what “lifting belly,” and its place in the world, is. The overall effect of the poem, however, is something like Stein’s own definition of composition: “it confuses, it shows, it is, it looks, it likes it as it is and this makes what is seen as it is seen.”

Part of the confusion may come from the difficulty in keeping track of who speaks in the poem. The text shifts between multiple (and multiplying) pronouns (I, we, me, you, and it.) This makes it difficult to see who speaks to whom, who sees and is seen, and what location they speak from. But, from this confusion of pronouns, two very distinct voices come to light. This seems contradictory, absence (of voice, textual meaning) coexisting with presence. This pattern is replicated throughout the poem: the (in)visibility of “lifting belly,” as the couple, and their relationship, is both obscured and illuminated by the language of the poem. The text promotes a coexistence of opposing forces, often within the same image:

presence with absence, light with dark, and textual meaning with incomprehensibility. This struggle replicates the difficulty that the couple experiences, as they explore the ways they can more accurately represent their life together, while still maintaining their private space.

To begin this exploration, the poem focuses on increasing the vocabulary available to them. For Stein: “Poetry has to do with vocabulary just as prose has not” (Stein, Poetry 230). Mix sees the expansion of vocabulary as of great importance in reworking definitions (of self) that have already “settled into rigidity”:

As a concept, ‘vocabulary’ emphasizes breadth; many words may be subsumed under the umbrella of a “vocabulary.” As such, a vocabulary has the potential to function as a kind of tool of empowerment. The person in possession of a vocabulary is in possession of a great deal of power, the power to pick and choose, the power to draw from a range of options. There isn’t much space for a reader to act in response to a definition—decisions have already been made, and language settles into rigidity. Vocabularies are capacious enough to allow for both collectivity and individuality (2).

Stein opens the poem with what seems to be an aspiration, represented by the star that has “breath in it.” This is followed by the statement: “Little pieces are stupid” (65). By increasing the vocabulary she can use to define her own experience (by adding breadth), she will also point out the “little pieces” of an inadequate lexicon that was suffocating. Though the overwhelming flux of language in the poem can be difficult for the reader to understand, the vocabulary will build, so that the meaning of “lifting belly” eventually takes shape.

It is normative language, or the “little pieces,” that was keeping the couple in the “dark,” even though it is in this place of darkness where “lifting belly” first comes together. The dark is where their private language develops, where the erotic spark (light) and creative spark (composition of “lifting belly” that enters public space) leads the couple towards the light of representation. “Lifting Belly” speaks of this couple as it is spoken (created) by them.

The erotic spark, that draws these two women together in life, leads to their textual coexistence. Their desire for each other, and to communicate it, removes them from the privacy of their bedroom and compels Stein to find a way to speak of their shared experience, differently.

[1]

To write “what is seen as it is seen” may mean that the author chooses to focus on, and write of an object (like the beloved, if we are talking about the love lyric), carved out of the landscape. Stein, however, defines “what is seen” as dependent “upon how everybody is doing everything.” This dramatically expands the range of experience Stein wishes to incorporate into her work: to see and compose what has changed in how “everybody” does “everything.” Her definition of composition also necessitates action on the part of “everybody,” including the author. The author is an important part of the composition and sees “everybody” as they act in, and react to, their surroundings. Composition is also, according to Stein, contingent upon what is different. Habits, as they change over time, are observed by the author, and then described. However, difference is not simply restricted to observable modes of behavior, but also includes the changed perspective of the author (and eventually the reader), as an integral part of the composition. Difference of perspective affects how an author engages with what she sees, as well as influences what form the composition will take.

“Lifting Belly,” acts out the process of composing a poem that will define the phrase “lifting belly.” This phrase will represent the two lovers, who, in their particular experience, are different, and in living their life, are always different. In the ongoing dialogue that

constructs the poem, what they say is dependent upon how they see each other (“Oh yes you see. /What I see./You see me.”), and affected by the ways they are perceived by others outside their relationship. Anxiety over how they are seen by others, points to the influence such representations can have on the couple’s identity. (“All the time there is a chance to see me. I don’t wish it to be said so.”) Concern with how “lifting belly” is represented (not said “so”) is the kind of “pressure” (“Sneeze. This is the way to say it./You meant a pressure.”) Stein attempts to alleviate by creating new ways that she can “say it.”

Penelope Engelbrecht writes of the emphasis Stein places on the verb “to say.” She points to the subject’s insistence, in the first section of the poem, on saying the phrase for the first time:

I said lifting belly.
You didn’t say it.
I said it I mean lifting belly. (66)

Engelbrecht writes that “for Stein, to speak is to act.” For her also, “Stein signifies the lesbian sex act with the verb ‘say.’ To see difference clearly, she must first “say” or write the language that is based on the “doing,” which for Engelbrecht is the lesbian sex act, the inspiration for her desire to speak. It is always action that is stressed by Stein, in seeing, saying and loving. The initial act is the first coming together, an erotic spark or fire that initiates the desire for speech. (“I want to tell about fire.”) In this way the act may be seen as preceding speech. A complication arises in this ordering though, because the act of coming together is continuous. So the composition of the poem, the act of speaking the relationship, always precedes and comes after an act of coming together even as it is inspired by it. Seeing, speaking, and coming together are in a continuous flow of activity. The phrase that comes to describe this

dynamic —“lifting belly” — imitates the way that they come together, in love and work, replicating the way that the gerund “lifting” is an action that is always happening. As Stein says, “we are always lifting.”

Stein keeps her language in play (and playful), not centered, but shifting between each “I” as they attempt to view themselves, each other, and the world around them clearly. She attempts to create an expression that defines a lesbian relationship that is not “lesbian.” It is also an attempt to write experience as she is in the midst of living. The poem and the phrase continually evolve because there is always change in how Stein and Toklas are “doing everything” (living, loving, writing, and seeing.) Stein’s project, to write and define a self (who is part of a couple) who changes as she does “everything,” propels the poem out of the confined, darkened space of its conception— the bedroom. It is the act of writing that moves the couple from the personal to public space:

What is it when it’s upset. It isn’t in the room. Moonlight and darkness. Sleep and not sleep. We sleep every night. (66)

Although the bedroom (where they come together) remains the touchstone of the phrase (for the poem and relationship), the subjects can emerge from it once they are named. This important development is reflected by the lighter tone of the poem as the dialogue between the two voices (Stein and Toklas) begins. Though the tone of the poem is lighter, the presence of darkness is never absent. Darkness remains in two ways: in the recognition of the couple’s personal space that the poem protects, and the acknowledgement of the cultural silence that gives rise to her project.

[11]

Language that will embody this coming together is developed as the couple is “lifting.” Before “lifting belly” is named in the poem it can only be referred to as “it.” (“What is it when it’s upset. It isn’t in the room.”) Once this phrase is introduced, it is repeated “more than 400 times in the poem, each time with a different predicate word or phrase, and, occasionally appears without “is” (Mix 75). As these different definitions of the phrase build, its meaning becomes layered and complex. Susan Holbrook sees Stein’s “textual meddling,” which she describes as “puzzling iterations, indeterminacies, and incongruent registers of speech,” as a way to work around gaps in the “material” of language to make “visible the ‘cultural limits’ of lesbian subjectivity” (757). The iteration of the phrase “lifting belly” increases the scope of what this phrase can mean for the couple who, in coming together, created it. Additionally, the phrase can point out, and fill in, the historical silence that surrounded representations of lesbian partnerships, like that of Stein and Toklas (Lubar 65). Each time the phrase adds a slightly different possibility of what “lifting belly” can be, the language that can describe the couple is stretched. With a vocabulary that is more expansive, and flexible, there is a better “chance” for the couple to be seen. (“All the time there is a chance to see me.”)

The language of the poem “Lifting Belly” is fluid and full of possibility, a contrast with language (phallogocentric) that is part of a system that had silenced and pathologized them. (Faderman 2) The beginning of the poem shows that the couple is, culturally, in the dark. This silence, or gap, in hegemonic language means that a vocabulary that might have helped describe positive lesbian identity was, according to Robert S. Lubar “buried beneath masks of silence and layers of cultural amnesia” (65). This silence is reflected by the difference in structure of the first section of the poem. The initial namelessness of the couple, and the

disjointed form, indicates a struggle to find a way to accurately speak about their desire: “I want to tell about fire” (65). This fire, the initial erotic spark, is the act that Engelbrecht sees as the precursor to speech. But the impetus to tell about fire is halted by the necessity of using language that hides or misnames that experience. Adrienne Rich elaborates on the difficulty of filling in the cultural gaps, or silences, that Lubar sees in hegemonic language:

Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images, whatever is omitted from biography, censored in collections of letters, whatever is misnamed as something else, made difficult-to-come-by, whatever is buried in the memory by the collapse of meaning under an inadequate or lying language—this will become not merely unspoken, but unspeakable. (Wiley 388)

A relationship that is “unspeakable” restricts what the couple of “Lifting Belly” can say about themselves. For example, the term “lesbian,” as it emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, meant something that is not necessarily applicable to the two subjects of “Lifting Belly.” Lillian Faderman writes that at the time this poem was written (1914-1917) definitions of lesbianism, in part, promoted the idea that lesbians were suffering from issues of gender dysphoria and morbidity. It was the sexologists who “called her [the lesbian] into being as a member of a special category”(5). Gaps in language were replaced by this name, “lesbian,” that created a term of deviance and separation for the lesbian, and ignored the more positive characteristics that had been part of the experience of female romantic friendships. Not only did the term, along with definitions of deviant behavior, “cast suspicion on romantic friendships, but also because they helped to make possible the establishment of lesbian communities through their theories, which separated the lesbian from the rest of womankind and presented new concepts to describe certain feelings that had before been within the spectrum of ‘normal’ female experiences” (35).

“Lifting Belly” is a poem that speaks of a desire that, by the cultural standards at the time of its composition, might be viewed as different and/or deviant. The poem very clearly expresses lesbian desire but, equally importantly, also speaks of the desire to form an identity that is not confined by sexual orientation. The couple, as they desire each other, also desire to be completely engaged with the world, and not only as part of a particular community. It is by negotiating new terms to express their desire as different, not deviant, that they will be able to create a more comprehensive vocabulary, one that can work against conventional representations of lesbian and female desire; these representations that were either absent or alienating. The dialogic structure of the poem replicates this negotiation, and also allows the reader to see each subject as an independent, speaking “I,” who engages with the world while speaking (privately) with each other.

[III]

Gygax recognizes dialogue as important to Stein’s work in that it “always creates a connection” (8). The project of the poem is about connection: between the two lovers, name and thing, textural representation and cultural presence. But, the dialogue that comes to define the poem does not begin it. There are many false beginnings, in the first section, as Stein tries to find the pronoun that will represent the narrator. As the poem begins, the narrator is embodied by the Steinian “I.” This “I” is the subject most in control of the poem in this first section, though the pronouns quickly shift between “we,” “he,” and “it.” The Steinian “I” speaks of the “we” that, it is assumed, refers to the couple, Stein and Toklas. They remain in the place of “moonlight and darkness” until the emergence of the phrase, “lifting belly.” (“I said lifting belly./You didn’t say it.”) The initial disagreement over the meaning of this phrase

begins the dialogue, as the voice of the other emerges from the “we,” and speaks with a voice separate from the Steinian “I.” The initial confusion over the meaning of the phrase brings the two subjects out of the darkened bedroom, in order to take part in defining it. The tone of the poem lightens once the dialogue begins, and it moves past the stuttered attempts to “tell of fire.”

Dialogue, as compositional structure, makes visible the collaborative importance of the lover. One “I” does not obscure or surpass the other: they coexist as equally powerful voices. The two distinct voices, a repetition of “I,” calls into question the center being from which this composition is written. Melanie Taylor points out the tendency that Stein has in deconstructing the “I” as it swings between “the writing ‘I’ and the ‘I’ that is written of— between having meaning and producing meaning” (38). In “Lifting Belly,” attention is called not only to the fractured “I” but also to the many voices that are present within each “I.” For Stein repetition is not about repeating but about highlighting a difference within each iteration, as there “can be no repetition because the essence of that expression is insistence, and if you insist you must each time use emphasis and if you use emphasis it is not possible while anybody is alive that they should use exactly the same emphasis” (Stein, *Portraits* 167). The repetition of the pronoun “I” focuses the reader on differences between what each “I” says, rather than trying to connect which “I” belongs to whom. It also reflects the movement that has always been contained by that pronoun as it can be shared by any “one.” Because the poem replicates the patterns of speech between two lovers, the “loving” focus on the “I” helps to create a text that is fluid or natural, because: “such a way is the natural way when one expresses oneself in loving the name of anything” (Stein, *Poetry* 234).

The desire of one lover for another (and one writer for a name) can balance the many voices that are inferred by the pronoun “I,” creating a text that is fluid and moving, rather than incomprehensible. Balancing these voices means that they are not erased, but moving, one behind the other, until they blend together. Descriptions of light and dark also blend within one image, rather than either one dominating. For example, light and dark coexist within the phrases: “Moonlight and darkness” or a sun that is obscured by clouds: “A great many clouds for the sun. You mean the sun on high” (71).

I am very pleased.
 Thank you I am scarcely sunny.
 I wish the sun would come out.
 Yes.
 Do you lift it.
 High.
 Yes sir I helped to do it. (67)

The “I” obscures, temporarily, the attribute “sunny,” but hope is offered by the other subject that the sun will emerge through “lifting,” an effort both subjects engage in. The composition, like their life, is collaborative. The desire that is the foundation of this collaboration creates the harmony that not only balances dark and light but each “I,” who is present in the poem, but also absent when they become the object. Because the pronouns are changeable, the reader cannot track which “I” is speaking because an “I” speaks and is silent at the same time in the text. The reader, however, doesn’t focus on who is speaking, but instead follows along with the couple’s dynamic relationship as it unfolds. Ulla Dydo sees the “voice of a work,” not as “the personal, expressive voice of the author but the articulating voice of the composition” (22). “Lifting Belly” does not posit one voice, but rather, two who compose this project of desire. They are united by their desire to be recognized, and in taking action (loving, speaking, writing), neither is a silent “other.”

Dydo, in her research of Stein's composition books (the *carnets*) finds that notes for Stein's compositions are interspersed with shopping lists, addresses, and other bits of information, forming a record of the couple's daily life. Dydo writes that these *carnets* "make clear how inseparable working and living were" (34). Though Toklas, according to Dydo, was not involved in the direct composition of the work, she was proofreader, typist, and for a time, publisher, of Stein's works (35). For this couple, love and work are always shared. The dialogic structure of "Lifting Belly" reflects this. It clearly shows the part Toklas played in composition, making it necessary to find an alternative paradigm for the single, authorial "I," that Mix sees as, in the traditional lyric form, "analogous to the author" (76). Mix quotes Holly Laird, who sees the collaborative voice in the text as something that can promote writing that is "a place where people meet, where they must negotiate their differences, where they may contest each other's powers, and where, while retaining their bodily borders, they may momentarily, ecstatically merge" (76).

[IV]

There are potential pitfalls incurred by constructing two such independent "I's," who define their name together. For Engelbrecht, the dialogue between two lesbian subjects is a potential "conflict of interest" found in the process of naming "lifting belly." In defining the name, each can potentially act with the authority of a subject with separate "idiolects, or private languages." What must happen to alleviate this conflict is for each to take a turn being the "other," but not in the sense of an "alien Other" (91). Engelbrecht introduces "a new category, a lesbian Other/self." She defines the category as referring to two separate beings

who are categorically the same (lesbian) but, because each shares a name and gender, one cannot be substituted for the other. Instead they:

are simultaneous, coexistent, even identical in essence, yet different, because they denote different modes which fluctuate from moment to moment. They have a single referent "lesbian." Each lesbian may be described by either category, according to her operative, functional status at a given instance. (92)

Each subject of "lifting belly" shares the referent "lesbian." But within that referent are two separate subjects who take turns being the "other/self," to use Engelbrecht's term. The paradigm she introduces, the "lesbian self-other/self," is a pattern that is analogous to the structure of dark as absence, and light as presence in the poem. Within each subject there is the possibility of being an "other/self." In this way subjectivity can be obscured in the text, but never negated. ("We are so necessary.") And to write about this, each voice, as it speaks the meaning of "lifting belly," must take turns being the subject and object, I and you. This is what maintains the health of the pronoun "we" as it progresses in the text.

We are so necessary.
Can you wish for me.
I never mention it.
You need not resemble me.
But you do.
Of course you do.
That is very well said.
And meant. (100)

Here, one voice speaks of a wish, and the other negates its textual existence, because she "never mention[s] it." The wish is spoken, but remains in the private space that belongs only to the couple, who exist as separate from the text. Meaning, here, lies somewhere beyond the text: it points to some thing or one that is behind the resemblance. Stein calls attention to the language's own shortcomings, pointing to a split between text and meaning because,

though “it is well said,” that it was also “meant” cannot be assumed. By separating the term said (as text) from meaning, other possibilities are generated, for example that text might exist for reasons other than meaning, like for pleasure.

Frustration with the text exists for both reader and poet. The reader struggles to “see” what Stein means and Stein struggles to convert her meaning into something that can be “seen” or read as text. This frustration is found in the first section of the poem as she experiments with different pronouns beginning with the authorial, personal pronoun. This unified, subjective voice is not confusing to the reader because the second voice of poem is still silent, but it does not work for Stein, as it overwhelms the shared experience she wants to speak of, the couple’s joint desire.

It is easy to think that to counter the unified, subjective narrative, a switch to the pronoun “we” might project the collaborative spirit of her relationship that is important for Stein to convey. She switches the subject to “we”: “Sometimes we readily decide upon wind we decide that there will be will be stars and perhaps thunder and perhaps rain and perhaps no moon” (65). But instead of balance, the tone is overwhelmed by the possibility of too many voices. The “we,” in fact, in its overbearing inclusivity, manages to override the power of the initial “I.” This is indicated by the pronounced break in tone between the opening of the poem, and the prose stanza that uses the subjective “we.”

The beginning of the poem speaks not only of fire, but reinforces this theme with images of wood, coal, heating and burning. Besides the presence of stars in the prose stanza, the images in this section defined by the “we” are: wind, thunder, rain, moon (negated), storm, boat (sunk), waves, sails, and danger. These images create an atmosphere of chaos and darkness, creating an aura of gloom and apprehension that the surrounds the “we.” The

presence of the star is significant though, because it signals that the project of composition is still possible, but the instability of the atmosphere implies that this pronoun is not the space from which the project can continue. It is not until the expression/name "lifting belly" emerges that Stein finds a way to balance all of these pronouns within the composition so that no one occupies the center. It is also significant that the presence of a "he" is a factor:

Sometimes we readily decide upon wind we decide that there will be stars and perhaps thunder and perhaps rain and perhaps no moon. Sometimes we decide that there will be a storm and rain. Sometimes we look at the boats. When we read about a boat we know that it has been sunk. Not by the waves but by the sails. Anyone knows that rowing is dangerous. Be alright. Be careful. Be angry. Say what you think. Believe in there being the same kind of a dog. Jerk. Jerk him away. Answer that you do not care to think so. (65)

This passage attempts to move past the psychic space where subjects had been, a place of wood fires and neat linen. The power and force associated with the word "wind" sets the pace for this stanza and imparts a feeling of a force that can move things (gather and clear storm clouds), but also brings danger. There are forces of nature that cannot be controlled and the wind that the couple calls upon may prove to be too strong for them. This possibility is heightened by the lack of light in this stanza; though there are stars (perseverance of project) the thunder, rain and lack of moon outweighs them. Though they ("we") assert their agency in calling these phenomena (wind, thunder, rain) into textual existence, there is a sense of struggle in communicating what and how they see ("Sometimes we look at boats.") and a sense of their failure in accomplishing this ("When we read about a boat we know it has been sunk."). The boat is sunk, interestingly enough, not because of the waves but because of the wind, presumably the wind called into existence by the "we" in the first line of the prose section. By the end of this stanza there is a note of caution mixed with bravado. The additional presence of "he" can lead to a reading where the catastrophe of the ship is related

to the presumption of the “we” to tell of it. Or, the pronoun “we,” in its inclusivity, incorporates “him” into this space from which they speak. It is “he” who upsets the balance from within the pronoun, and creates the uneven tone of the section. This instability is eventually nullified by the name, “lifting belly,” that emerges after the first section.

The wind, the possibility and power of its movement, is necessary to drive the composition away from the closed psychic and domestic space of the first stanza. But, the increasingly aggressive tone at the end of the passage indicates that careful navigation is necessary as the project progresses. That idea that the couple must be careful is further reinforced by the possibility of “shipwreck.” As a way to separate the composition from “his” influence, as it causes the uneven tone of the section, one subject directly asserts: “Answer that you do not care to think so.” They emphatically deny “him” the power to influence their thinking by reinforcing their own ability to be: “Be alright. Be careful. Be angry.” Only then can they “say” what they think (or see). It is through the presence of the text that the couple will *be*, though they still have not found the subject from which to speak yet. It must be a name/pronoun where each “I” can speak of their relationship outside of their personal/domestic space, like “he” can, but separate from “his” influence.

[V]

“Lifting Belly” is about desire and its continuation, as well as the desire to speak about “lifting belly.”

Lifting belly is so pleased.
Lifting belly seeks pleasure.
And she finds it altogether. (110)

Desire, in the above lines, between the two subjects is something they seek (pleasure), act out (as pleased), and are (pleased), corresponding to the description of lesbian desire that Engelbrecht interprets from Nicole Brossard “as something ‘always already becoming’ but never ‘is’” (92). This is in part why images are always eliding—never “are.” What connects Stein’s text is the desire between the two subjects. Pleasing each other by giving and seeking pleasure unites the two subjects. While their desire is separate, it is only “altogether” that pleasure is possible. The pronouns shift in the three lines quoted (with “lifting belly” as the name of the couple). There is first the mention of the couple who are pleased, an indication that each subject is pleased (adjective), or that they have made each other happy (verb). The adjective/verb hybrid is referencing the proper noun “lifting belly.” A similar structure occurs in the second line, as again, the “we” of “lifting belly” must seek together, continually. Stein reminds the reader that this act that each engages in, is dependent on the two being together, and textually each “she” is visible and connected by the word “altogether.”

Each speaker shares in being an “other.” This is why the pronouns change “from moment to moment” (Gygax 84) They share the power to speak in the text, but also cede the center without relinquishing an active part in composition. Gygax sees a similar dynamic at work in Stein’s theory of composition where “each part of a composition” is “as important as the whole” (84). Each part of the poem has a function and may function differently though characterized as a part of a whole. Stein, promotes difference by making visible and equally important, the different functions of each part of the composition. For example, changes in pronoun usage undermine the reader’s assumption that composition is the unification of how one author “sees,” because the shifts call attention to influences and changes within the author in the act of composing. These influences are as important to the act of composing as

the author herself. Gygax writes of the indeterminacy of the speaking “I” in Stein’s (self-categorized) autobiographies, *Everybody’s Autobiography* and *Wars I Have Seen*. Gygax sees the “I” in the title (*Wars I Have Seen*) as: “less prominent in the text than the participle ‘seen’ because it is the seeing that is transformed into writing and thereby changes the ‘I’” (78). For the poem “Lifting Belly,” the “I” is less important than the dynamic between the two subjects in the context of their daily life. In this way there are two “I’s” (eyes) who see differently and in seeing are different. So there is no center “being” who writes. The act of seeing and composing and seeing again (and composing again) what is different continues because everything is always different. Life is action; it is not static. Difference must always be negotiated, and leads to the recognition of a self that is something other than negatively “different.” (“We cut strangely.”)

Gender of the love object in lesbian writing was omitted or manipulated after the emergence of the term “lesbian.” As poets did not need to explicitly reference the gender of the beloved, lyric poetry became an extremely popular form for lesbian poets around the turn of the century. (Bennet 100) Paula Bennet sees this freedom from gender specificity in mentioning the beloved as an alluring quality that might benefit the lesbian poet. Poets were able to “skirt” the issue of their lesbianism. (“All the time there is a chance to see me. I don’t wish it to be said so. The skirt.”). Bennet writes:

[the] lyric poet [was] free to devote her poems to many things besides romance but also, when writing love poetry neither the speaker nor the object of her affections need be specifically gendered. (100)

Of course an alternate reading of “the skirt” would not only indicate avoiding issues of sexual orientation, but indicate conventions dictating gendered writing and reading of poetry.

Stein's theory of composition would be violated if she disguised the gender of her lover. That would mean adopting "another" name. ("What is my another name.") So when Stein "lifts" elements of the love lyric, according to Mix, this is in order to "steal," "raise up," and, "move" the traditional form from its restrictive tendency. Stein calls attention to the conventions that promote the cohesive, unified narrator of the lyric, that eclipse the speech of the lover. Stein also plays with the typical use of the erotic spark as the "catalyst" for speech in lyric poetry, but a speech that demanded the continued silence of the lover. (Mix 76)

Dialogue, as compositional structure, makes visible the collaborative importance of the lover, if only at the symbolic level. The clouds obscuring the sight of the sun (connected with the "heavy" atmosphere of the first lines of the poem), can point to the obscured role that the beloved plays, as Mix pointed out, in traditional lyric form. These clouds can also be read as the difficulty that the author has in seeing herself, which make it necessary for her to leave old ideas of "me" behind. ("Leave me to see me.") The sense of difference, and isolation, that affects the narrator in the first section of the poem must be dismantled so that a new identity, based on expanded criteria, that is not strictly attached to issues of sexual orientation and gender.

[VI]

Mix sees poetic language as the "center" from which "poets work to create change"(89). Stein writes poetry to rediscover things that have become obscured by their name: "to discover the things the things to see the things to look at and in so doing I had of course to name them not to give them new names but to see that I could find out how to

know that they were there by their names or by replacing their names” (Stein, Poetry 235). To regenerate the vocabulary, Stein must also rework the generic forms that support, and perpetuate, tired poetic language. Mix sees that poetic forms can be used to affect changes in representations of difference. She specifically references the love lyric, pointing out the way that Stein plays off of this poetic form, in “Lifting Belly,” as writing against the convention of the erotic spark as the “catalyst” for speech; “the lyric ‘I’ as analogous to the author;” the silence of the beloved; and the lyric’s traditional association with heterosexuality, promoting the “invisibility of the lesbian experience.” By questioning these conventions, from within the generic form, Stein is able to “change the way readers think about ‘woman,’ ‘women,’ and ‘others’” (67).

Stein, as she plays with conventions of the love lyric, does not restrict the poem to the personal concerns of the two lovers, but also integrates what Mix calls the “political”:

details and experiences they choose to record [that] are both personal (snippets of conversation, intimate moments, interior questionings) and political (investigations of language, the quotidian realities of World War I, historical details, exterior scenes), thus placing [the poem] into the space between the personal and the political, a space Carolyn Forché calls “the social.” (89)

The “social,” Forché argues, “is a place of resistance and struggle, where books are published, poems read, and protest disseminated” (89). “Lifting Belly,” as poem, phrase, and couple, oscillates between the personal and “social.” The poem does this because it is an act that takes place in and is part of, this social space. But, it is also a poem that is highly personal, evoking the hermetic language that develops between lovers. Phrase and couple straddle both worlds because they are based on the site/sight of the “real” Stein and Toklas, who are composition as well. “Lifting Belly” is the real couple as written, mimicking the process by

which our own identities are formed. Stein exposes the often invisible power that language has on the way we see ourselves: as it is an important force in the social space, but penetrates our personal space as well.

Mix points out the inclusivity of Stein's references: to self, couple and world outside, as well as the many generic forms that she uses to communicate her comprehensive poetic project:

Indeed, the poem is in many ways a detailed record of Stein and Toklas's daily life during the war with references to customs of Mallorca, the battle of Verdun, the Ford in which Stein and Toklas made their rounds for the AAFW, and interactions with people who were part of their social circle. It is also a clear representation of a romantic relationship, with numerous references to Stein and Toklas's intimate lives—to pet names (pussy, Caesar, baby), to beauty, and even to a husband and wife. Through their integration, examination, and revision of generic forms, most significantly the love lyric, *Lifting Belly...become[s] [an] extended meditation on questions of form, language and social identity* (66).

This "meditation," as the poem is described, can be hard to read because it upsets expectations based on generic structure. For instance, according to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, male authors tend to "aggrandize" themselves in autobiographies that "idealize their lives or cast them into heroic molds to project their universal import (Smith and Watson 9)". Stein, in her attempt to write the "composition of the time in which [she] is living" adopts this narrative tone, positing an author who is confident enough in her powers to see, understand, and communicate the historical time in which she lives. Her vantage point is elevated even though she begins the poem rather "low."

For Esther Jelinek, women's autobiographical narratives were fragmented because they represented the "interrupted and formless nature of their lives. That is, a pattern of

discontinuity consistently characterizes women's autobiography just as it marks their lives" (Smith and Watson 9). Stein also adopts, yet destabilizes the fragment, as a useful contrivance. This may seem an unusual statement to apply to "Lifting Belly": that Stein subverts the usefulness in adopting the fragmented autobiographical narrative, especially when considering Stein's eccentric syntax and use of repetition. These elements contribute to a reading experience that feels very fragmented. But, Stein tells us in the opening lines, "little pieces are stupid." As she sets up her project in the first stanza of the poem, she makes sure that we know her aim is to put breath back into all language available to her. The revived language will, rather than communicate the many fragments of a life, will promote a life as a whole, as it is lived. This is Stein's idea of a continuous present that incorporates the "time when and the time of and the time in that composition [that] is the natural phenomena of that composition..." (Stein, *Composition* 516) That the time of the composition and the time that the composition describes is conflated, an immediacy in the writing is promoted but continued, as each action, of writer and subject, must be addressed and incorporated into the composition. So time is continuous, a constant flow, that is oppositional to a fragmented form. The fragment implies a break in composition, and a start from some other point. Stein does not halt the composition, but begins repeatedly. Her repeated beginnings all flow into one comprehensive composition. As mentioned, the star she is focused on (her project) is "low" but that is where the creative spark is. This space has breath and breadth. Little pieces (of a life) are all Stein would be able to write if she restricted herself to a form that was truly discontinuous and truly fragmented. In effect, she would then be piecing together little bits of a life to make it whole, something that "he" does in the poem: "I believe he makes together of pieces" (86).

Stein's poem blends elements of both male and female autobiography. This practice challenges the notion that generic form must be gender specific in order to be understood. Stein, who is trying to write honestly of gender and sexual identity, cannot restrict her story or her vocabulary in choosing one form. Stein instead "lifts" from many generic forms, and constructs a poem that encompasses the public and private, low and grand. All of these influences, genres, and the vocabularies that support them are thrown together, increasing the possibility that new forms and vocabularies will emerge. The constant sliding between vocabularies, generic manipulation and temporal disruptions, may lead the reader to focus on one recognizable part of the pattern. For instance, Stein's friend, Virgil Thomson did this in his introduction to the poem, focusing his introduction of the poem on a known and familiar form, a diary:

I do not know the meaning of the title, *Lifting Belly*. It may be a pun, and it may be literal. The poem itself is a diary, like the "Sonatina" and a hymn to the domestic affections. The current events that determined the author's movements and whereabouts during the years of its composition gave frequent cause for anguish and difficult decisions. And yet the piece is full of gaieties and lightness of heart. It shows Miss Stein in one of her most winning aspects, that of the happy woman. Her power of love and hilarity are there too, but dominating all is the author's gift for well-being and for spreading it around her. The sight of her must have been good for our troops.
(Stein, BTV 64–65)

Thomson references World War I by acknowledging the "anguish and difficult decisions" that Stein and Toklas faced in Spain, then France, at the outbreak of the War as well as their decision to work for the American Fund for French Wounded in Nîmes, in 1917. But he seems to fall back upon the more recognizable aspects of the poem, placing its appeal squarely in the space that is largely personal. Stein is portrayed as the "happy woman" whose ability to love is her highest recommendation. She seeks domestic pleasure and comfort and is

comforting to us for that reason. These qualities are not absent from the poem, but comprise only a single strand of its total power.

Most striking is the stress on Stein's aura of "well being" that, according to Thomson, "must have been good for our troops." This quality of Stein's personality, also present in "Lifting Belly," evokes domestic pleasure, the comfort and solidity of a bourgeois home. For Thomson, Stein seems to embody this sense of domestic pleasure and the "sight" of her by the troops brings them to this domestic, personal site. That this space is idealized in a time of war may also be a factor in the heightened tone of wistfulness in his introduction. Over this image of Stein, different discourses are projected (gender, class, nationality), that exist independently from Stein's work, though this poem does possess elements that Thomson describes. Thus, her image becomes the focus, and it is no longer her work that acts as the point where these discourses are negotiated. This state of affairs did upset Stein, because for a long while the prevalence of her image eclipsed her work. Though her compositions were not widely circulated at the time "Lifting Belly" was composed, her image was famous. Dydo puts Stein's image in historical context by reminding us that Stein was little published early in her career and "what little was published left many readers angry. Dydo also reminds the modern reader to "understand what it was like for an artist to live under incessant, condescending assaults upon herself as a writer, a person, and a woman" (13). This public scrutiny (not always positive) was hinted at in *Everybody's Autobiography*, where, Stein confesses: "It always did bother me that the American public were more interested in me than in my work." (Stein, Selected xix) In effect Stein was "seen," her image well-recognized, but she was not (a being) heard.

Stein's friend Mabel Dodge was instrumental in circulating Stein's work in the U.S. by disseminating Stein's "Portrait of Mabel Dodge at the *Villa Curonia*." But even Dodge, a perceptive reader of Stein's work, falls back to describing her prodigious personal presence.

In one letter, Dodge gives an insightful assessment of Stein's writing:

To name a thing is practically to create it and this is what your work is—real creation...your palette is such a simple one—the primary colors in word painting & you express every shade known & unknown with them. It is as new & strange & as big as the post-impressionists in their way and I am perfectly convinced, it is the forerunner of a whole epoch of new form and expression..." (Rudnick 54)

In Dodge's portrait of Stein at *Villa Curonia*, she falls back on Stein's recognizable image:

Gertrude Stein was prodigious. Pounds and pounds and pounds piled up on her skeleton—not the billowing kind, but massive, heavy fat...she intellectualized her fat, and her body seemed to be the large machine that her large nature required to carry it.

Gertrude was hearty...She had a laugh like beefsteak. She loved beef, and I used to like to see her sit down in front of five pounds of rare meat three inches thick and, with strong wrists wielding knife and fork, finish it with gusto, while Alice ate a little slice daintily, like a cat. (53)

Dodge's two quotes show some balance, illustrating the possibility that Stein's writing was heard, at least by Dodge and Stein's circle of friends, but again point to the possibility of competition for prominence between the image of Stein's body—her appetite for life— and her writing. In the oscillation between image and work, one is often eclipsed by the other. And again, in describing Stein, Dodge touches on upper-middle class values, sexual orientation and the gendered contrast between the "massive" Stein, and "dainty" Toklas.

In Dodge's letter to Stein she articulates the importance of Stein's writing, comparing it to the modern art movement that Stein was part of, using this vocabulary in order to

“paint” a picture that conveys a sense of Stein’s work. Interestingly, it is Dodge’s assertion that Stein’s ability to “name” is a mark of her creative powers, but this is and is not the case. Stein does not name, in the typical sense, in “Lifting Belly,” though the poem is about the process of creating this name. It does not recognizably belong to the couple at first, and a history of its connection to them needs to be written, from inside the experience of the couple. Dodge’s portrait of Stein, on the other hand, begins from the outside, observing physical characteristics, and so reduce Stein, in this portrait, to metonymic signs. Dodge begins with Stein’s bulk, and only then moves on to characterize that fat as “intellectualized.” This type of writing is descriptive, and relies on external characteristics to denote what is internal, but instead remains superficial. It does not move and live in the same way as Stein’s portrait of Mable Dodge. Stein sees a literary portrait as the “making of a portrait of any one is as they are existing and as they are existing has nothing to do with remembering any one or thing” (Stein, Portraits 175) Stein listens and watches and talks with the subject of her portraits and captures their living rhythms. It is not based on a resemblance (or remembering.) For example, here is a portion of Stein’s portrait of Dodge: “There is that desire and there is no pleasure and the place is filling the only space that is placed where all the piling is not adjoining. There is not that distraction.” (Stein, Portrait of Mabel Dodge 530) The movement in this excerpt is continuous and ambiguous, and seems to capture the emptiness of a space that is being filled because of desire unconnected with pleasure. This conveys a sense of spiritual emptiness even as it conflates the image of the Villa, with the body of Dodge. They are both this place, where there is no support, and where there is a “piling” of objects, an acquisitiveness that builds on this emptiness. We are left with the impression of a being filled with something other than what is necessary to create pleasure.

This is a kind of portrait that collapses borders between objects: between Dodge and her Villa, function of verbs, nouns and adjectives. These things all slide together in the midst of reading.

[VII]

This is the kind of image-making that Stein intends; the light movement of words that does not capture a person's likeness, but instead is a "continuous succession" of statements. Stein keeps writing until she writes "something [that] was just that much different from what I had just said that somebody was and little by little in this way a whole portrait came into being, a portrait that was not description and that was made by each time..." (Stein Portraits 177) Because a person is not one thing, but many things that are always moving and changing from moment to moment, an accurate (literary) portrait must replicate this movement.

A continuous succession of statements is exactly how "lifting belly" begins to define itself. But first, Stein works through a place of psychic heaviness that is reminiscent of Dodge's description of Stein's body. In this way, the use of the adjective "heavy" can reference the sight of her body that obscures the site of her work. The mood of the opening lines do seem oppressive, as the two adjectives on the first line, "heavy" and "low," indicate a burden:

I have been heavy and had much selecting. I saw a star which was low. It was so low it twinkled. Breath was in it. Little pieces are stupid.

I want to tell about fire. Fire is that which we have when we have olive. Olive is a wood. We like linen. Linen is ordered. We are going to order linen. (65)

The narrator of the poem is troubled by the act of “selecting.” This does not necessarily have to do with her function as a writer, and may instead indicate that she is acted upon, that the selection is not something that she can control. But “heavy” of course has other meanings, and can also point to Stein’s wish for her composition to be taken seriously. If Stein’s feeling of heaviness indicates the importance of her project (the desire to speak “about fire”), then the “selecting” may indicate her function as author, and the “star” (her function as an author and her composition, both) is “low,” or something attainable. Since Stein is seldom content to construct a phrase unless there are multiple ways to read it, the use of the adjective “low” may also indicate the type of subject matter that she will speak of. She wants “to tell about fire,” her erotic relationship, but this can also be a literal reference to the fire they use in the kitchen. This personal detail, using fire and not coal during the war, is a detail of daily life that might be considered trivial or “low” subject matter. That Stein sees the light in “low” could indicate a choice—that she will concern herself with what Sherwood Anderson called the “little housekeeping words, the swaggering bullying street-corner words, the honest working money saving words...” (Stein, *Geography* 6)

Stein’s work evades simple categorization, and to write that this poem is concerned with the “low” or “little” concerns of housekeeping, and the pleasures of domestic partnership is too restrictive for the scope of Stein’s poem. Dydo sees in Stein a desire to do away with “rigid conventions of language” and to “dissociate herself from hierarchal thinking” (17). This means Stein’s language can shift in tone to write themes that are both high and low. Themes of love, war, and despair are found side by side with mundane themes like the

ordering of linens and food. Vocabularies associated with all these themes share space in the poem and are contrasted with the solemnity of current events:

Lifting belly is gratifying.
 I can't express the hauntingness of Dugny.
 I can't express either the obligation I have to say it.
 Lifting belly is so kind. (75)

These lines quickly shift in tone between light and dark: the positive adjective/verb ("gratifying"), and adjective/noun ("kind") envelop the "hauntingness of Dugny," and the solemnity of that allusion to the War is the flip side of desire, also compelling them to speak. "Lifting Belly," poem, couple and name incorporates this darkness within itself so that it is also at the center of what "lifting belly" is. Dark and light coexist within the poem. What can be illuminated (fire, star, moonlight) is always also obscured (smoke, darkness). This landscape of shifting images can frustrate the reader's expectations: that one image must dominate or eclipse the other. For Stein, single words can be both adjective and noun, at the same time, in the same sentence. This occurs in the line: "Lifting belly is gratifying," where the function of the word alters its meaning, neither one dominates the other but coexist within that single line. Mix characterizes a type of reader who may get frustrated, one who "seek[s] mastery [of text]," or would like to come to an interpretation of the text that is "impermeable and totalizing". (15) This reader is frustrated by the "material's movement, a shifting of words among words" in Stein's writing (15).

Stein defines composition as something that begins by forming around her but she is not a fixed entity. She rejects, in her work, the single, authorial "I" who is often assumed to be the center of the composition. She promotes instead a center that is an open space, where

difference voices engage. “Act so that there is no use in a center”(43). This is the first sentence of Stein’s section “Rooms” from her book *Tender Buttons*. Here, the lack of center creates more “room” or space to breathe. True lack of center is hard to grasp. But an insight can be offered by Stein’s definition of “equilibration” in “Composition as Explanation.” This word is important in describing the relationship she sees between words and things:

And now so one finds oneself interesting oneself in an equilibration, that of course means words as well as things and distribution as well as between themselves between the words and themselves and the things and themselves, a distribution as distribution. This makes what follows what follows and now there is every reason why there should be an arrangement made. Distribution is interesting and equilibration is interesting when a continuous present and a beginning again and again and using everything and everything alike and everything naturally simply different has been done. (521-522)

Stein, in her theory of composition, promotes a balanced system of connections. Most interestingly, there is balance between words and things as well as equal distribution of power between “words and themselves,” and “things and themselves.” She separates words and things from their assumed “meaning” by claiming that each has another component (“themselves”), that is also part of their identity, but hidden. In a similar way, a noun can often obscure what the things are as “themselves,” and for Stein, poetry is an attempt to reveal this essence. The separation within words and things creates the room necessary for words, things, and these hidden elements (“themselves”), to interact in different ways. Equality is freedom of movement, and the ability to come together “differently.” It might be easier to illustrate Stein’s idea of equilibration, and the balance of power between words, things, and their particular, elusive components by showing the kind of imbalance (and invisibility) that is created by a room that has a center. To quote again from *Tender Buttons*:

There was a whole collection made. A damp cloth, an oyster, a single mirror, a manikin, a student, a silent star a single spark, a little movement and a bed is made. This shows the disorder, it does, it shows more likeness than anything else, it shows the single mind that directs the apple. All the coats have a different shape, that does not mean that they differ in color, it means a union between use and exercise and a horse. (46)

This quote articulates a system of relationships that develops when there is a “single mind that directs the apple.” The single mind is reminiscent of the descriptions of her brother Leo, who, along with Gertrude, amassed an art collection (along with a collection of artists) based on the development of a single (unifying) aesthetic theory. Daniel Henry Kahnweiler describes Gertrude and Leo as “a pair of theorists” who collected paintings on which to “hang hypotheses” (Wineapple 245). Gertrude attributes this sentiment solely to Leo, after their estrangement in 1914. She claimed her gift was for “construction” rather than “analysis” (344). “Analysis” gives disparate objects superficial unity (like creating connections between cloth, oyster, mirror, manikin, and student) imposed by this “single mind.” The originality or difference of each object fades as they are covered by identically colored coats whose difference of cut is not apparent. Objects, as they are “themselves,” are obscured by a name and a theory imposed by a unified subject. Their difference is rendered invisible.

The “silent star,” and “single spark,” of this passage in *Tender Buttons* are images also found in the first part of “Lifting Belly.” The “silent star” in *Tender Buttons* (Gertrude) connects spark to star (herself) as contrast with the image of the “single mind.” The silent star can illuminate, while the single mind can only obscure. And, more importantly, the star can show “the disorder.” Disorder is that which cannot be contained by the “single mind.” The power to illuminate this disorder is possible because of desire (“a little movement and a bed

is made"). This erotic spark is the fire that is a prerequisite for a composition that is disordered, which will illuminate what was hidden beneath the order, imposed by the "single mind."

[VIII]

Stein avoids the trap of becoming a "single mind," because her desire helps to write a composition that erodes conventions. The couple tells of their "fire" by "burning composition," or, like a phoenix, razing composition in order to raise something new. Lubar sees Stein's project as one that works toward a "disorganization of perception" (64). Fracturing the subjective "I," and dis-ordering the temporal narrative, allows for different points of view to appear in the work. The ability to see and communicate different points of view, freed from generic conventions that incur self-censorship, is not only a concern for Stein in the poem, but is also a primary theme in her portraits of Cezanne, Matisse and Picasso. These literary portraits were printed in *Camera Work*, in 1912, and accepted by Steiglitz for publication because "he did not immediately understand them" (Stein, *Three Portraits* 328). Stein's portrait of Matisse characterizes him as a great painter who can express something new and a "being struggling" (330). The word "clearly" is repeated and indicates that, for Stein, "clearly" expressing the "being struggling" is the difference between genius (Picasso) and greatness (Matisse). Matisse "clearly" express something, while Picasso does not, is at the center of the difference Stein sees, in her portraits, between Matisse and Picasso. Though what she exactly means by that is a bit ambiguous, as she states in her lecture, "Portraits and Repetition": As I say a thing that is very clear may easily not be clear at all, a thing that may be confused may be very clear. But everybody knows that. Yes anybody knows that" (173).

Genius, according to the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, is something that Picasso and Stein both possess. This quality, as Stein writes in Picasso's portrait, does not mean that Picasso can show anything "clearly." Instead he is always working to have "this thing" come out of him. The "thing" (work) is described as "a solid thing, a charming thing, a lovely thing, a perplexing thing, a disconcerting thing, a simple thing, a clear thing, a complicated thing, an interesting thing, a disturbing thing, a repellant thing, a very pretty thing" (334). Picasso's work is inclusive in that it can show different facets of a thing at the same time. Matisse, as a great painter, is concerned with process, with the struggle to paint what and how he sees. The struggle for him was personal: if how he sees can or should be painted. He paves the way for his followers in overcoming the self-censorship that would only let him paint in a manner that aligned with conventional paradigms of representation.

For Stein, Picasso was able to see and to paint how he saw (as different) because he was able to ignore conventions. He never questioned if what he was doing was right: he just struggled with new methods of painting to represent what and how he saw objects, expanding the painter's vocabulary, and regenerating the way objects could be represented in space. His project is similar to Stein's, as her definition of poetry focuses on an exploration of objects from the inside out. It is by exploring the nature of nouns that poetry began. Poetry as it first focused on nouns: "practically included everything it included narrative and feelings and excitements and nouns so many nouns and all emotions" (Stein, *Poetry* 232). Stein and Picasso each try to signify this inclusivity in their work, by illustrating the many connections that exist between objects and the world they inhabit. To accomplish this goal, each artist must create new compositions that will allow readers and viewers, habituated to

conventional composition, to reengage with objects. But, in order to notice the object anew, the viewer must feel that they are “moving against something” (Stein, Portraits 165). An impenetrable composition initiates the realization that there is now a “new composition” as the way we live, is reflected by the art that we (are now) seeing and hearing” (165).

Conventional practices of representation are disregarded because they are exposed as habits that govern and perpetuate ways of seeing and hearing that no longer expresses the feelings of the current generation. These conventions are modified, ignored, confronted, and engaged with by the genius. In fact, this is a sign of a genius, who, as Stein writes: “is some one who does not have to remember the two hundred years that everybody else has to remember” (Stein, EA 121).

This means that a genius can and does engage in a process of disordering (or ignoring) conventional ideas of representation. This is what Stein does as the “single star.” In the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Picasso’s atelier is described with language that emphasizes the disorder and heat of his domestic space, echoing these themes (disorder, domesticity, fire) as found in “Lifting Belly”:

In those days there was even more disorder, more coming and going, more red-hot fire in the stove, more cooking and more interruptions. There was a large broken armchair where Gertrude Stein posed. There was a couch where everybody sat and slept. There was a little kitchen chair upon which Picasso sat to paint, there was a large easel and there were many very large canvases. (Stein, ABT 43)

Picasso is at the center of this messy, moving landscape. Here in this space all actions of life take place: sleeping, eating, sex and work. Fernande is also a strong presence, not only because she has a part to play in the painting of Stein’s portrait (reading *La Fontaine* to help Stein relax); but because her presence and participation undermine the construct of the

genius who creates in isolation. The emanation of heat from the stove in Picasso's atelier creates an impression similar to the domestic and erotic warmth, created by the image of fire in "Lifting Belly." Alice, a presence in the "autobiography" because she "narrates" the story, is problematical because it is not Alice who narrates; still, the ventriloquism Stein performs, includes Fernande through Alice (who sits with all the "wives"), and gives these characters the chance to act (reading, cooking, speaking). These women are included in the process of creation in a way that highlights their importance without eclipsing the genius of Stein and Picasso.

Stein, as she sits for her portrait, is a commanding presence in Picasso's atelier, where he paints and she will be painted. This decenters the space that Picasso works from, a further dismantling of the image of the autonomous artist, who paints in the same way the unified, authorial "I" writes. The unified "I," that Mix sees as analogous to the author, is a convention that a genius must find a way to dismantle. It brings with it the limitations of the "single mind," who cannot show the disorder. But genius does not mean that things are shown "clearly." What genius can do is expose the thing itself, removing it from the habitual connection between object and name, between subject and portrait. What is truly radical cannot be clear in part because if the work truly reflects life as it is seen and heard, then it is too many things to be seen clearly.

Stein and Picasso are able to create something new because their struggle (with and against each other) forces them to "come up against something" and to feel how life has moved:

But the strange thing about the realization of existence is that like a train moving there is no real realization of it moving if it does not move against something and so that is what a generation does it shows that moving is existing. (Stein, Portraits 165)

Stein “meditates,” while sitting for her portrait or on the long walk back to her apartment. She contemplates the innovative sentences that will form the building blocks of her experimental work *Three Lives*. Picasso also struggles with Stein’s portrait, and, according to Stein, this frustration leads towards the radically different presentation of form that in part defines cubism:

In the long struggle with the portrait of Gertrude Stein, Picasso passed from the Harlequin, the charming early Italian period to the intensive struggle which was to end in cubism. Gertrude Stein had written the story of Melanctha the negress, the second story of three lives...(Stein, ABT 50)

It is significant that Picasso’s frustration is communicated by the act of painting out her whole head: “All of a sudden one day Picasso painted out the whole head, I can’t see you any longer when I look, he said irritably. And so the picture was left like that” (49). Picasso’s struggle, according to Lubar, was the difficulty that Picasso had in seeing how he could paint Stein with the tools of representation that were available to him. “Picasso’s inability to recognize Gertrude Stein as an intelligible subject of portraiture may, in this light, be approached as a problem in representation that exceeds the traditional limits of subject-object relations”(56). The power of her “genius,” her prodigious physical presence, and his inability to capture what he sees are at the root of Picasso’s struggle to finish Stein’s portrait. Her presence cannot fit neatly within the boundaries constructed by the “traditional” relationship that the painter has to sitter/object.

Picasso, leaving the portrait incomplete for a few months, finishes it while Stein is away, and paints over her face, using an Iberian mask as the model. Lubar attributes one aspect of Picasso's struggle representing Stein, to his own issue with gender and sexuality. Stein could not be the "earth goddess," was not the turn of the century "invert," nor did she live separately in small antiestablishment communities of lesbians that existed at the turn of the century. (66) She evades these conventional ideas of the lesbian, for Picasso. He solves this representational problem by painting over her face with a mask. Lubar sees the mask as a sign that "cover[s] the gaps that had been exposed in his own experience of gender and sexuality only after he had maintained an objectifying distance from his subject" (75). ("See me leave me.") The mask represents gaps in systems of representation that Lubar connects with what Teresa de Lauretis calls "space offs," defined as "blind spots within hegemonic discourses," and a "movement back and forth between representation of gender (in its male centered frame of reference) and what that representation leaves out or more pointedly, makes unrepresentable" (Lubar 68). Stein confronts Picasso with this space where gendered identity shifts and cannot be captured. He paints this mask over the original, which was a mimetic likeness, a more traditional portrait. Picasso replaces her head with the mask, which will always signify his inability to complete her portrait. The mask will always be a reminder of the absence of the original (in the *Autobiography* it is completely forgotten), and will point to impossibility of representing this woman's identity. Her portrait will always refer back to the process of representation, making Picasso's portrait a work that dis-orders, continuously.

[IX]

The language of “Lifting Belly,” in a way, paints over of the face of this couple—Stein and Toklas. John Carlos Rowe, interprets Michael North’s assessment of Picasso’s use of the mask in Stein’s portrait as: “exposing the conventionality of all representational systems, whether pictorial or visual” (225). For the couple to be visible, the language of the poem must first call attention to its own deficiencies. Rowe sees that conventions of “race, gender, sexuality, and other forms of identity” can no longer be seen using conventional language but can only become “visible” by “de-forming” “literary language” (226). Literary language reinforces identity paradigms. But Stein, as a self-defined genius, can ignore those paradigms as she searches for a way to express these forms of identity that had been invisible. She searches for new forms while writing the sights and sounds of her life, as she is living it.

Stein, according to Dydo, strips away narrative “commonplaces,” and eliminates “the link between text and author” (19). Fragmenting the authorial subject points to the changeability within names and things, and exposes the limits of the conventional framework that governs representation. Names become signs, and are emptied of meaning. This then allows room within that name for Stein to really investigate what the name hides. For Stein, words had “lost their value,” no longer conveyed information about a thing. In an interview in the *Transatlantic*, in 1946, Stein says that what she wants to do with language is to “recapture the value of the individual word, find out what it meant to act within it” (Holbrook 753). In “Lifting Belly,” she investigates and writes from inside this name, in order to know and communicate its “value” (753).

The evolving definition of “lifting belly” does not evade or conceal meaning, but enacts a composition that hints at the kind of language that might be able to capture the multi-faceted identity that Engelbrecht describes as “lesbian(ism)”: “something consisting of activity, constituted by dynamic, social relationships of women” so the language that “verbally embodies” this name (lesbian), must “involve conceptions of being and conceptions of inter/action. Language itself provides the obvious model for the theory, because its basic structure incorporates things and actions, subjects and verbs. The shortcomings of this model lie mainly in the ‘subject-object problem.’” (86) Stein solves this problem in part by conflating this binary relationship, as her subjects are object and subject, both. This is a similar tactic that the cubists use, according to Marjorie Perloff who, in analyzing Picasso’s painting *Ma Jolie*, writes that he creates a space in painting where there is: “no distinction between solid forms (arms, knees, elbows, guitar, table) and the space around them. Mass and void are fused and the precise location of discrete objects in some kind of illusory depth gives way to a volatile structure of dismembered planes whose spatial positions are ambiguous” (34). This is much like the landscape of “Lifting Belly” where the couple of the poem is indistinguishable from the space in which they move, and so they cannot be separated from the poem that they compose. The continuous process of composition and life, writing and sign, always influence each other. This cyclical process is part of the “continuous present” that Stein considers a central component in her theory of writing:

In my beginning it was a continuous present a beginning again and again and again and again, it was a series it was a list it was a similarity and everything different it was a distribution and an equilibration. That is all of the time some of the time of the composition. (Stein, *Composition* 522)

For Stein, writing is always about beginning and becoming. “Lifting Belly” is always a beginning that responds to each possibility of what “lifting belly” can mean, by elaborating, negating, and repeating. This is why “lifting belly” is “current rolling.” It enters the stream of artistic representation to effect change because it promotes continuity: “When will they change./ they have changed./ then they are coming” (113). Stein avoids temporal progression by promoting a circularity of influence through the re-ordering of verbs. The current keeps moving and change is always almost realized but never completely, as it always needs to respond to new influences.

“Lifting Belly” cannot be defined in the way that someone can point to an adjective or line and say: that is what “lifting belly” is. The poem imagines the subject(s) as the site where the process of representation begins. For Stein, this is visibility. Stein’s kind of composition is about creating space in order to expose the thing that is behind the name of the object/subject. Picasso’s portrait of Stein was not a mimetic likeness. In the *Autobiography*, when Alice tells Picasso of her admiration for the portrait, he responds: “Yes, he said, everybody says that she does not look like it but that does not make any difference, she will, he said”. (12) She comes to look like the portrait, and will always look like it, because his painting is about the process of painting her essence, not her likeness. The type of painting that is concerned with mimetic likeness is typified by the painter Volloton, who also painted Stein’s portrait. In the *Autobiography*, Stein describes the manner in which he painted her:

When he [Volloton] painted a portrait he made a crayon sketch and then began painting at the top of the canvas straight across. Gertrude Stein said that it was like pulling down a curtain as slowly moving as one of the swiss glaciers. Slowly he pulled the curtain down and by the time he was at the bottom of the canvas, there you were. The whole operation took about two weeks and then he gave the canvas to you. First

however he exhibited it in the autumn salon and it had considerable notice and everybody was pleased. (47)

That the painting is done from the “top down,” can be read as an imposition of a single point of view. We are back to the single painter/poet whose works are “pleasing” to “everybody” (at the Salon). This experience is very different from the struggle that Picasso faced with Stein’s portrait. Volloton cuts “straight” across so that Stein’s likeness is captured, and frozen in perpetuity. As the “curtain” of ice is pulled down, the subject is concealed. She will only look like this portrait for the very brief time in which it was painted. Picasso’s portrait will always look like her, because it will always lead the viewer to investigate what the mask hides. Picasso’s portrait of Stein means that the viewer must engage with the being beneath the mask.

Volloton’s portrait of Stein is the type of work described as pleasing to those at the Salon, a mimetic likeness that cuts difference, and reinforces cultural norms governing how a subject can be seen. In the first section of “Lifting Belly” the Steinian “I” quarrels with “him.” The quarrel is connected with “his” rejection of the composition that was given to “him,” because “he” is unable to recognize the merit of the work; similar to the way that the members of the Salon favor conventional artists, but alienate others. The “he” of the poem angers Stein, as she is angered by the reception of Matisse’s painting, *Woman with a Hat*. This painting is ridiculed, in the *Autobiography*, because it pointed to a new way of seeing. Stein connects this to the reception of her own work:

She did not understand why [they mocked the painting] because to her it was so alright, just as later she did not understand why since the writing was all so clear and natural they mocked at and were enraged by her work. (33)

If “lifting belly is the understanding,” it is also about the creation of space where understanding can begin. It teaches how to read differently and subverts the dominance of works that negate the subject, that paint in the manner of Volloton, so that the original, particular subject is forgotten.

Picasso’s portrait of Stein becomes for her, “the only reproduction of me which is always I, for me” (North 71) Michael North sees that for Stein, the “duality of the mask forces a confrontation between representation by likeness and representation by convention or habit” (71). Stein sees this masked representation as most like her because it encourages a beginning—an investigation into what is hidden. This investigation can go deeper, getting closer to the essence of the subject, because the mask has already been addressed. The name “lifting belly” acts as a mask for the couple by calling attention to the obfuscating nature of a name, by presenting a new combination of words: lifting and belly. The reader is stopped, so that an examination of what this new combination describes, leads the reader to investigate what lies beneath the name.

[X]

When a name is too familiar, the name communicates a single, unified meaning. This happened to poetry in the nineteenth century, according to Stein, who writes in “Poetry and Grammar,” that when “everybody had come to know too well very much too well the name anything had when you called it by its name” (241). So language that represents not only the couple of this poem, but any couple, conceals rather than reveals the experience of their coming together. The inability of a name to address the particular experience of a couple is

not necessarily related to the nature of their difference, as a lesbian couple, but is instead because the names themselves were “known too well” (241).

Do you lift it.
 We cut strangely.
 What.
 That’s it.
 Address it say to it that we will never repent.
 A great many people come together.
 Come together. (67)

The question (though no punctuation can confirm this) “Do you lift it” is an echo of the question asked after the initial emergence of the phrase: “Do you lift everybody in this way” (66). Information is needed because the phrase is new and there is a lack of precedent in connecting the words “lifting” with “belly.” Stein moves away from the assumed (singular) meaning of each word by introducing a list of alternate possibilities: “Lifting belly. Are you. Lifting./ Oh dear I said I was tender, fierce and tender” (66). Though it is natural to ask if lifting belly means to lift a physical, particular belly, Stein would rather include descriptions of a more interior, personal nature. Like Mabel Dodge, whose portrait of Stein was concerned with physical characteristics that only hinted at interiority, Stein begins with what is interior—feelings of tenderness, and of fierceness.

The frustrated expectation, that something is being lifted, calls attention to the habit of connecting text with a single meaning, where each sign acts like a “silent ferry to the signified” (Holbrook 752). That the gerund “lifting” cannot be easily connected to “belly,” and redirects attention (of the reader and the voice in the poem who questions) towards the possibility of alternate readings (that it is “tender” and “fierce”). Holbrook sees that it is Stein’s language play that “draws attention to the material of language...” and necessitate a

closer reading of the material to “engage sound and shape in a more intimate way” (752). The pleasure that the sounds and shapes produce for the reader will naturally lead to a closer, more careful reading. It also introduces the possibility that the text is produced for the pleasure of the poet and reader (in the sound and the wordplay of the poem), rather than meaning in the conventional sense.

Self-judgment of the couple, with the admission “we cut strangely,” points to the internalization of conventional ideas about what a normalized pairing should be. So the composition of the poem is not only an attempt to reverse language, it is an attempt to undermine the assumption of what constitutes a normal pairing, in language and in life.

This poem, as it is composed, assists the couple in their struggle against an internal doubt that sometimes creeps into the dialogue. When this happens, the phrase, “lifting belly,” is absent, and the pronoun “it” reemerges (“address it”). This indicates a regression to the no-name, darkened existence that confined the subjects to the (bed)room in the beginning of the poem. (“What is it when it’s upset. It isn’t in the room. Moonlight and darkness.”) They renew their resolve in speaking their experience—to find a way to tell of “lifting belly” (“we will never repent”) and the poem continues to move forward.

The word “belly,” by itself, without the gerund “lifting,” cannot move the expression forward. There is no action, just body. (“All belly belly well.”) Similarly, the dialogue between the couple can only move forward once the “I” understands that the phrase can mean many things: body, name, tenderness, strong (to name just a few examples.) The meaning of the phrase, as it is slowly developed and discovered, contemporaneous with living, speaking, and writing, moves the dialogue. This movement, inherent to the name, needs the adjective/verb

hybrid of “lifting” to capture an important part of its character. Not only does the gerund describe the body, but as a verb it is also able to move and create the atmosphere in the poem that corresponds to Stein’s idea of a “continuous present.” Stein’s focus on continuity is demonstrated in the text by the seemingly fragmented chronology of the ordering of linens. In the second stanza, this event is linked by the use of the participle ordering: “We like linen. Linen is ordered. We are going to order linen” (65). The reader understands that these sentences describe an ongoing cycle, of ordering linens and of linens being ordered, founded on the pleasure that linen gives them. (“We like linen.”) This continuous cycle of domestic life is always happening and is successful because it is something that is based on pleasure.

The desire to please and the pleasure that desire leads to is connected to work: domestic work like ordering linens, and the work of composition. Desire, in the space of this composition, is the meaning behind the continual action by each “I” to create a space, in life and composition, where each subject is equally present. Their desire for each other is the initial (light)spark that begins the ongoing process of domestic work and composition. In both home and work, they can be different but visible. They are different because their desire is for someone of the same sex (the sameness of the sex creates the difference) but the same because their desire is a shared emotion. This composition (“Lifting Belly”) is simultaneously the name for the experience of a couple who come together based on mutual desire, as well as the creation of a name for this experience that incorporates, and makes visible, and understood by everyone, the difference of their desire.

[XI]

Couples may develop pet names for each other as a way to set themselves apart, or pair off. There are also names that are not available for couples to use in order to take their place in the social space. These names are problematic for the couple of “Lifting Belly.” For example, “husband” and “wife,” does not truly express what/who they are; nor is the phrase “a married couple” a good fit. They cannot use these names based on their gender and sexual orientation. When Stein does adopt gendered names in the course of the poem, the effect is jarring because they are not accurate:

Darling wifie is so good.
 Little husband would.
 Be as good.
 If he could.
 This was said,
 Now we know how to differ.
 From that. (110)

In this quote the “wife” can be “good” because this is a gendered name that fits Toklas’s experience. Stein, as “husband,” cannot be as “good” because while the function fits, the gender does not. But now they know how to differ from these names, by creating their own. This new name, “lifting belly” not only names their experience, but can also influence their actions. It is now possible for each to be “good.” In this way they can avoid the internalization of the negative adjective “strange” that accompanies names that are not a good fit. Instead of feeling strange, they can feel, and be, good.

Engelbrecht writes that “phallogocentric Subjectivity relies on an essential visual distinction of binary (sexual) difference between Subject and Object (phallus/absence) which

is inimical to lesbian(ism), because two lesbians display no such essential physical distinctions" (86). "Lifting Belly" plays with this idea of visual substitution:

In the morning
By that bright light
Will you exchange purses. (111)

By "that bright light" purses are exchanged—an indication of substitution, perhaps because two women share both pronoun and gender in their relationship. For example, the pronoun "she," like a "purse" is a gendered name (or accessory), and one of many. The name eclipses the particular value of the individual purse. Desire, as the "bright light," grants this purse visibility shining on the thing within the name. The "I" who says: "You know I like to please you" (111), shows that they are not alike in that they "like." This desire makes them un-substitutable, a reading reinforced by the verb, purse, producing an image of lips pursed, as in a kiss. So value and affection is exchanged (with a kiss) by each subject, emphasizing the idea of independent and reciprocal action.

The stress on light in the two lines: "In the morning./ By that bright light," through association (morning/light), and rhyme (bright/light), can be read as a reaction to the lines that precede the "exchange of purses":

Don't tell me what you call me.
But he is pleased.
But he is pleased.
That's the way it sounds. (111)

"He" is back and is pleased by a name "coined" by one subject about the other. This causes a rift in the dialogue, indicated by the echo of the line "But he is pleased." This line focuses on the pleasure the name affords him, and points to a disruption of their work. The unspoken

name originates from a space that is outside lifting belly (the couple), and includes “him,” so cannot be incorporated into the dialogue between the two subjects. The exchange of purses is not an exchange of equal value, but indicates a naming process that has been compromised.

The ability to name is currency. The new name (never mentioned) infiltrates and dominates momentarily, the site (of writing) and sight (of each other), reflected by the repetition of the line: “But he is pleased.” The current of desire is diverted to him because “he” is pleased. Engelbrecht sees a conflict between the lesbian and patriarch or male subject because in the lesbian’s act of self-definition she comes up against the male subject with his (historical) power “to name”(91). Naming (and language), for Engelbrecht, is “traditionally...figured as a metaphor for the powerful patriarchal male, who determines reality according to two principles: binary visual distinctions and univocal, “phallogocentric” naming and language” (87). Stein, by undermining the principle of subjective voice based on visual distinction, compromises the patriarchal power to name. She disrupts his language, one that adheres not only to a univocal, grammatical subject, but also to a chronologically structured narrative. Stein re-orders signs of time, and shifts verb tenses:

When
 You will see.
 Will it please me.
 Not suddenly
 But soon
 Very soon.
 But you will hear first.
 That will take some time. (111)

The current of the dialogue continues once chronological order becomes disordered. This erodes the power that “he” has had in eclipsing one of the subjects, excluding her from participating in the creation of her new name. The couple will be able to “see” (each other, each self) again because pleasure has been reclaimed, but this is dependent on the ability to “hear first.” This will take “some time,” which destabilizes the understanding of the previous line where “it” is supposed to happen “soon.” Gygax sees Stein’s concept of time as “subversive” and “cyclical” (as opposed to linear), “characterized by repetition, cycles and gestation” (82). Stein’s textual disruption of time undermines the power to name that was temporarily seized by “him.” She creates a text that can subvert the constraints of subjective unity and chronological linearity, and reestablishes the equilibrium between the two subjects; there is once more an (equal) “exchange of purses.” Value and desire can be exchanged so the work of “lifting belly” is resumed.

The work that they each perform in creating a name will also influence their perspective. Hugh English suggests that Stein’s “language play” demonstrates: “in one sense, we are whom we are named as, and, in another sense we are whom we name ourselves” (6). By avoiding concrete language and using pronouns that evade capture, subjectivity can be fluid. Stein discusses, in “Poetry and Grammar,” her preference for pronouns over nouns because they offer more possibility for the author, as they “are not really the name of anything. They represent some one but they are not its or his name” (214). There is the possibility that they point to many different referents, like the proliferation of the “I” that Stein uses throughout the poem. The excess of pronouns act as the mask did, stimulating a deeper investigation into the subject who lies beneath it.

Focusing on a sign (like a name or pronoun) that connects with only one referent can prevent the reader from seeing the difference of emphasis, the slight variations of meaning, that is most important to notice. Stein repeats words in order to call attention to the emphasis that is different time. Actions that are repeated in life also differ slightly each time an act is performed. What often remains is the sign of the action, and the small differences that occur each time are forgotten. For Stein, an address can act in a similar way, as it becomes a sign of a daily habit that erases the difference that occurs each time you return home:

It is a funny thing about addresses where you live. When you live there you know it so well that it is like identity a thing that is so much a thing that it could not ever be any other thing and then you live somewhere else and years later, the address that was so much an address that it was a name like your name and you said it as if it was not an address but something that was living and then years after you do not know what the address was and when you say it it is not a name any more but something you cannot remember. That is what makes your identity not a thing that exists but something you do or do not remember. (EA 71)

The place where you live, where you eat, live, work is all “like identity.” These describe habits of daily life that are thought to add up to a life. As you give your name to a stranger, identifying yourself, you might also give your address, your occupation, and all those additional pieces of information that can communicate your story. This illustrates the process of identity construction that Judith Butler explains as “not made in a single moment in time” but is instead “made again and again” (116). For Stein, your address is part of your identity in that it is the repetition of an action, the return home not only as it repeats, but as there is change each time. This is what is intrinsic to identity: the change in each action, not the sign of the action (the address itself.)

Often, the emphasis of a repeated act is forgotten, and what remains is the sign of the habit, the address. We are often happy to ignore the possibility of movement within names, their history and inconsistencies. Proper names (“more lively than nouns”) can play an important role in the construction of an identity, and in a way similar to an address, can be based on something forgotten, like a family tradition. Names that convey such information as gender, class, and nationality can be viewed as part of a “constellation of social power,” described by Butler as the space in which “identities are supported and articulated” (117). This “constellation” is a space that grants recognition, as understood by the norms that govern it. From within this space, attention can be drawn to its rules and change can be affected; it is possible to redefine a self within a given name. Butler describes this space as one where we: “decide what kind of subject we can be, but in being those subjects, in occupying and inhabiting those deciding norms, in incorporating and performing them, we make use of local options to rearticulate them in order to revise their power” (117). Identity does not have to be a fixed connection with a name. Butler acknowledges room for negotiation of terms within this space: “Social terms decide our beings, but they do not decide them once and for all” (117). But one must be aware of and examine the terms and rules that organize this “constellation.”

[XII]

Negotiation of terms within the social space of a name is a primary concern in the poem. “Lifting Belly” is the site where the contradictory force of constraint and the power of self-definition are negotiated. “Jack Johnson Henry is an especially eloquent curtain”, enacts the negotiation of social terms within this name:

Jack Johnson Henry
 Henry is his name sir.
 Jack Johnson Henry is an especially eloquent curtain.
 We see a splendid force in mirrors. (79)

That the name is “eloquent” implies the power of this name to communicate this being, to tell his story. But if this name is also a curtain, it destabilizes the meaning of the adjective attached to it. This name, Jack Johnson Henry, is “eloquent” in that it announces the presence of a subject, even as it conceals the subject it names. The next line: “We see a splendid force in mirrors” fuses the nature of a name, as it can reveal, and conceal, a subject. Mirrors reflect, so the reader might see the image of Jack Johnson Henry from the previous line, or he may be hidden behind the reflection of “we,” who are viewing him. Additionally, the mirrors can surround the “we,” and face outward, so that the reader sees him/herself while the couple remains hidden. The force of mirrors, their strength, is in their ability to manipulate images. And though we know that the possibility for manipulation exists, mirrors still give us important information about who we are, because we assume it reflects a likeness.

A name, like a mirror, can reflect or deflect a subject. In an anecdote about a family that Stein grew up with in San Francisco, the refraction of a family name along the paternal line deflects the sight of the most current incarnation of the name. In this family, she tells: “there was a father and mother and they were known as Monsieur and Madame Henry and there were five children the oldest Henry Henry played the violin” (Stein, *Paris* 3–4). The father, wife, and son all share the family name, Henry, with the oldest son mirroring the exact configuration of his father’s name. Each member of the family who bears the name, Mr. Henry Henry, is incorporated into (and concealed by) the history of that name. What makes, for Stein, the youngest Henry Henry visible, is his violin playing. It is through this repeated

action that he is shaded from the glare of his (reflected) family name. Because he plays the violin, it is his father (and his father's father, etc.), who is instead obscured.

Father, son, and married couple are three pillars of the cultural landscape that can be named:

Can you mention her brother.

Yes.

Her father.

Yes.

A married couple.

Yes.

Lifting belly names it. (95)

These are names that confer identities that are culturally acceptable expressions of family structure, and can be named. "Lifting Belly," by naming these (brother, father, and married couple) points to the fact that "lifting belly" is not included. The poem writes of a couple, who live as a married couple, but "lifting belly" cannot be recognized by this name, "married." This makes the couple, "lifting belly," more visible because the adjective/noun, married couple, attempts to "erase" the original couple of the poem, who have become very powerful voices, and can now contest this (attempted) erasure. "Lifting Belly names it," and continues to name it. "Lifting Belly" is a long poem because it is creating its own history, the story of the creation of its name. It is also the matrix of norms and social dynamics, where difference is negotiated.

Lifting belly is so long.

It is an expression of opinion.

Conquistador. James I.

It is exceptional.

Lifting belly is current rolling. Lifting belly is so strong. (76)

The narrative contained and promoted by your name (or names), is not a fact but an "expression of opinion." ("Lifting belly is so long./ It is an expression of opinion.") An opinion

is formed over time, based in part, on an interpretation of facts and beliefs. As opinions change, and adapt to new information, so too does the meaning of the name, "lifting belly." Its length is due to the gathering of informational pieces, which will suggest the meaning of the name "lifting belly." It becomes an "expression of opinion," creating a history that places the name within a certain belief system. The pattern of the poem, and its concern with the process of naming, imitates, at times, the propagation of a paternal family name. "It is an expression of opinion./Conquistador. James I/ It is exceptional" (76). Lifting Belly is grouped with the epithet, Conquistador, and with the historical, imperial name, James I. These names locate a historical time and place, and are incorporated into the present manifestation of the title. These names also express a belief system based on their history, and point to a (imperial) ruler of the system. For example, "Conquistador," imagines a system of representation that dominates others, and makes them disappear. "Lifting Belly" wants to co-opt the power to name and "name it," collecting its own "history," to make sure that their experience is not one that disappears. But the system that they are promoting is not based on dominance that erases difference, but instead on finding a way to represent what is different.

Stein adopts a title of authority for herself, an echo of an imperial name, Caesar. As most titles do, this name outlives the person attached to it. And, as in the case of the name, James I, the title points to a personal and national history. Caesar, originally a family name, becomes a title that is removed from the strictly familial association and develops, over the course of its history, a strong identification with absolute power. This title, and its association with power, crosses familial and national borders. Stein, in adopting this title, crosses gender borders as well: "You see what I wish./ I wish a seat and Caesar" (87).

The “I” who wishes to have “a seat and Caesar” desires both the locus of power (seat or throne), and the title (authority). This image also calls to mind a seat at a desk, where the author has absolute control over her work. The next line, however, deflates some of the authority of the title: “Caesar is plural” (87). Authority, as synonymous with the title, is expanded by the possibility that there may be more “Caesars,” and though personal authority is divided, this fragmentation is in keeping with the spirit that the poem promotes:

I can think
 And so can I.
 O yes you see.
 What I see.
 You see me.
 Stretches and stretches of happiness. (87)

Each subject can think, see, and argue. This, rather than an historical title, stretches their visibility. Desire for each other creates the poem that is the space where they can think, see and speak (argue) and is what expands their happiness. This is a new kind of visibility for a new kind of name.

Caesar is one of those “coded” words that critics often associate with Steinian sex/body references. Mix sees that many have read Stein’s work as a “process of decoding, finding one-to-one equivalences between words like ‘belly’ or ‘Caesar’ or ‘cow’ and Stein’s sexuality” (71). Caesar, according to this kind of reading, is associated with breast, cow to orgasm. But Stein’s work, as is especially apparent with “Caesar,” cannot be read on such a strictly associative level. When Caesar is first introduced in the poem, the association with breast, while possible as a reading, is undone by the wordplay that is also present within those lines:

Big Caesars.
 Two Caesars.
 Little seize her. (83)

While these lines can certainly indicate two large breasts, what is more interesting is the sound rhyme “seize her.” Caesar is seizing or being seized. Additionally, it can be read as two seeing while being seized. Two see and are seen, and each acts as subject and object. Again, action and visibility of two subjects is at the crux of the wordplay. Reading “Caesar” strictly as an erotic reference negates the focus on each subject’s determination to promote the different ways that they see. Within the one name Caesar there is sex, desire, the body, history, and a body of work which gives power.

In a similar way that Caesar is read as a sexual reference, “lifting belly” is also limited by its association with the lesbian sex act. Female eroticism is a central theme in the poem, and it also suggests the physical and sexual presence of the two subjects. But, “lifting belly” is also an action that is the composition of the poem, the body of the text, and the two voices whose dialogue structures the poem and does the “thinking.” (“I can think. And so can I.”) The poem, and the women who compose it, construct its history, appoint its rulers (the two Caesars), and create the tools (language) that will represent its subjects.

[XIII]

Lifting belly visibly.
 Yes I say visibly.
 Lifting belly behind me. (101)

The name “lifting belly” will always be “behind me,” in a manner different from what Stein sees as the solidifying association between a noun and thing, where the noun/name is always in front of an object, obscuring it. “Lifting belly,” positioned behind the pronoun,

references the poem and the couple, without dominating the meaning of either one. “Lifting Belly” is a name that has an evolving history of meaning, so while the name is stable, what it represents is fluid: “Lifting belly can change to filling petunia./ But not the same./ It is not the same./ It is the same./ Lifting belly” (114). “Filling petunia” cannot be substituted for the name of “lifting belly” because it is not “the same.” The name cannot change because that would violate the history and identity of what the name has come to mean, something originating between the two lovers, who brought the words together. But, “lifting belly” can incorporate the action of filling petunias into its name, and have that become part of its definition. “Lifting belly” can be in part about the action of filling petunias, but it cannot be called “filling petunias.” This is the constraint that the poem creates, and prevents it from becoming chaotic. The name is grounded by the touchstones of the work and desire of its creators.

The landscape of the poem shifts at every level: genre, line and word. These shifts replicate the movement and change that occur within those repeated actions that make up each life. Habit is important, the repetition of action within that habit is also important, but most important is to recognize the change of emphasis that occurs with each act. This is the movement of existence that is often forgotten “...like a train moving [when] there is no realization of its moving...” (Stein Portraits 165) “Lifting belly” will always be behind the “me” and not in front because it must always refer back to the movement within the pronoun.

The two subjects “sing” at their work (or rather, singing is their work) as they continue this project: “In the midst of writing./ In the midst of writing there is merriment” (115). Singing about “lifting belly” happens all the time and must happen all the time. As they live and sing, they change, which must be reflected in the work. The poem, in recreating the

movement of the couple's daily life, makes "lifting belly" the "measure of it all" (73). The poem promotes inclusivity and openness, revealing intimate details of their relationship. But, it is telling that while the word *midst* refers to the idea of the continuity of the work and desire; it also calls to mind the word "mist." So the couple, made visible by the expansive vocabulary created by the poem, is still obscured. That private space, which is also part of their definition, always evades articulation.

Works Cited

Bennett, Paula. *Poets in the Public Sphere: The Emancipatory Project of American Women's*

Poetry, 1800-1900. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2003. Print.

Dydo, Ulla E. with William Rice. *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises: 1923-1934*.

Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2003. Print.

Engelbrecht, Penelope J. "'Lifting Belly Is a Language': The Postmodern Lesbian Subject."

Feminist Studies 16.1 (1990): 85-114. Print.

English, Hugh. "Learning and Unlearning Historical Sexual Identities." *The Radical Teacher*. 66

(2003): 5-10. Print.

Faderman, Lillian. *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century*

America. New York: Columbia UP, 1991. Print.

Gygax, Franziska. *Gender and Genre in Gertrude Stein*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998.

Print.

Haselstein, Ulla. "Gertrude Stein's Portraits of Matisse and Picasso." *New Literary History*. 34:4 (2003): 723-743. Print.

Holbrook, Susan. "Lifting Bellies, Filling Petunias, and Making Meanings through the Trans-Poetic." *American Literature* 71:4 (1999): 751-771. Print.

Lubar, Robert S. "Unmasking Pablo's Gertrude: Queer Desire and the Subject of Portraiture." *Art Bulletin* 79:1 (1997): 56-84. Print.

Mix, Deborah M. *A Vocabulary of Thinking: Gertrude Stein and Contemporary North American Women's Innovative Writing*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2007. Print.

North, Michael. *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language and Twentieth-Century Literature*. New York, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994. Print.

Perelman, Bob. "Write the Power." *American Literary History* 6:2 (1994): 306-324. Print.

Perloff, Marjorie. "Poetry As Word-System: The Art of Gertrude Stein." *American Poetry Review* 8:5 (1979): 33-43. Print.

Reddy, Vasu and Judith Butler. "Troubling Genders, Subverting Identities: Interview with Judith Butler." *Agenda* 62:2 (2004): 115-123. Print.

Rowe, John Carlos. "Naming What is Inside: Gertrude Stein's Use of Names in 'Three Lives.'" *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*. 36:2 (2003): 219-243. Print.

Rudnick, Lois P. "Radical Visions of Art and Self in the 20th Century: Mabel Dodge and Gertrude Stein." *Modern Language Studies*. 12:4 (1982): 51-63. Print.

Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson, ed. *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1998. Print.

Stein, Gertrude. "Composition as Explanation." *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*. Ed. Carl Van Vechten. 1962. New York: Vintage, 1972. 512-523. Print.

---. *Everybody's Autobiography*. 1937. New York: Vintage Books, 1973. Print.

---. "Lifting Belly." (from *Bee Time Vine*) *Yale Gertrude Stein: Selections*. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1980. 64-115. Print.

---. *Geography and Plays*. Mineola, NY: Dover, 1999. Print.

---. "Poetry and Grammar." *Lectures in America*. New York, NY: Random House, 1935. Print.

---. "Portrait of Mabel Dodge at the Villa Curonia." *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*. Ed. Carl Van Vechten. 1962. New York: Vintage, 1972. 526-530. Print.

---. "Portraits and Repetition." *Lectures in America*. New York, NY: Random House, 1935. Print.

---. *Tender Buttons: Objects, Food, Rooms*. Mineola, NY: Dover, 1997. Print.

---. "Three Portraits of Painters: Cezanne, Matisse, Picasso." *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*. Ed. Carl Van Vechten. 1962. New York: Vintage, 1972. 328-335. Print.

Taylor, Melanie. "A Poetics of Difference: 'The Making of Americans' and Unreadable Subjects." *NWSA Journal*. 15:3 (2003): 26-42. Print.

Wiley, Christopher. "'When a Woman Speaks the Truth About her Body': Ethel Smyth, Virginia Woolf, and the Challenges of Lesbian Auto/biography." *Music and Letters* 85: 3 (2004): 388-414. Print.

Wineapple, Brenda. *Sister Brother: Gertrude and Leo Stein*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996. Print.

Wood, Mary E. "'With Ready Eye': Margaret Fuller and Lesbianism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature." *American Literature* 65:1 (1993): 1-18. Print.