City Poems And Urban Crisis, 1945 - Present

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CITY POEMS AND URBAN CRISIS, 1945 – PRESENT

by

JEFFREY NATHAN MICKELSON

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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Abstract

CITY POEMS AND URBAN CRISIS, 1945 – PRESENT

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Jeffrey Nathan Mickelson

Adviser: Professor Ammiel Alcalay

*City Poems* proposes that twentieth-century American city poets hold important concerns, commitments, and strategies in common with urban theorists and city planners. The study situates canonical and lesser-read city poetry, including work by William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson, Allen Ginsberg, George Oppen, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Wanda Coleman, among others, in relation to discourses of urban crisis. Following Raymond Williams, Henri Lefebvre, and James Scully, it approaches city poetry as a form of social action that holds particular value for practitioners of progressive city planning. Because poetic representations of cities influence public perceptions, *City Poems* suggests, they have the potential to shape private and government actions. The relationship between poetry and public life has become an increasingly urgent topic for American poets, in particular since the emergence of neoliberalism as the dominant political order in the 1980s. Applying insights from critical urban theory and reader-response criticism, *City Poems* suggests that poets and planners have shifted their responses to urban crisis in the wake of neoliberalism’s emergence from articulating comprehensive theories of the city to observing and responding to everyday practices in communities. Following through on this insight, the study analyzes the efforts of city poets and progressive planners to expand the range of knowledge that counts in defining the social and physical dimensions of cities and argues that experiential knowledge and affective engagement have proven to be crucial components in their visions of a more just and equitable urban future. The study’s main contributions are the commonalities it identifies in the practices of city poets, urban theorists, and city planners and the methodology it demonstrates of reading city poetry as a mode of insurgent urban practice.
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Introduction: City Poems and Urban Crisis

*Show me the words that will reorder the world, or else keep silent.*

— Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*

The Housing Act of 1949 authorized unprecedented federal intervention in the built environments of American cities. Conceived in response to fears about slowing economic growth and perceived threats to public safety, the Act enabled the physical transformation of urban neighborhoods through aggressive redevelopment. While the Act required that cities direct a majority of federal funds toward the construction of new low-income housing, from its passage to the present, greater and greater percentages of urban renewal and redevelopment investments have been allocated to “higher and better uses.” Far from strengthening the urban fabric, in fact, many of the interventions pursued under the Act have resulted in the physical and social destruction of low-income and minority neighborhoods and the displacement of vibrant urban communities.¹ From passage of the Act, through the urban uprisings of the 1960s and the demolitions of larger housing projects that peaked in the 1990s, to the uncertain present of cities such as Detroit, researchers, city planners, and residents have contested national priorities for addressing the “urban crisis.”² During the same period, American poets have increasingly turned to the urban as a setting and subject matter for experimental poetics. This study

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¹ The Supreme Court’s 2009 decision in Kelo v. City of New London favoring the use of the powers of eminent domain to seize land for private development is a recent example of this tendency. Ashley Foard and Hilbert Fefferman describe the legislative history of the urban renewal policy in “Federal Urban Renewal Legislation” in the edited collection *Urban Renewal: The Record and the Controversy.*

² An early use of “urban crisis” to describe the state of American cities appears in the report of the Kennedy Conference on Urban Affairs held on October 10, 1960 in the midst of Senator John F. Kennedy’s presidential campaign. The term was used widely in popular and academic media throughout the 1960s. Victor Gruen’s *The Heart of Our Cities: The Urban Crisis: Diagnosis and Cure* (1964) and Irwin Isenberg’s *The City in Crisis* (1968) are representative titles. Critiquing this line of reasoning, Naomi Klein argues in *The Shock Doctrine* (2007), that government and business leaders sometimes define existing conditions as “in crisis” in order to achieve political ends. Approaching “crisis” as a revolutionary opportunity, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, in *Commonwealth* (2009), and David Harvey, in *Rebel Cities* (2011), suggest that activist groups can take advantage of the rhetoric of crisis by consolidating their agendas and efforts in opposition to capitalism.
documents debates about the present and future of American cities that have played out in parallel in the fields of urban theory, city planning, and contemporary poetics from 1945 to the present. Identifying common concerns, commitments, and strategies emerging across and within these fields, it points to opportunities for collaborative work toward developing a more just and equitable urban future.

An important starting point for this discussion is the urban crisis of the 1950s and 1960s, a period of social and political anticipated by the 1949 Housing Act. Triggered by the departure from cities of wealthy, white residents and the concomitant erosion of public funding for infrastructure and social services, the crisis signaled a rupture in the collective urban consciousness that contributed to the rise of movements for racial and social justice. In response to the crisis, civil rights groups turned to cities as venues for organizing and as terrains of conflict. Focusing attention on everyday urban problems such as access to housing, services, and jobs, groups such as the Black Panthers and the Young Lords built constituencies among the urban poor and asserted their claims in protests, uprisings, and other actions. As the broader civil rights movement gained momentum, three developments in urban research and city planning shifted the public discourse surrounding intervention and renewal. First, researchers began to challenge the logic and outcomes of the varieties of urban renewal pursued under the 1949 Housing Act. Studies such as Kevin Lynch’s *The Image of the City* (1960), Herbert Gans’s *The Urban Villagers* (1962), and Jane Jacobs’s *The Death and Life of American Cities* (1961), for example, asserted that the centrally-directed redevelopment of neighborhoods authorized under the Act was both unjust and ineffective. Second, within the field of city planning, Paul Davidoff applied Gans’s and others’ research into the problems of urban renewal in a critique of planning practice that challenged the field to reconceive its roles as an advocate for the public interest. Davidoff claimed in “Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning” that existing planning practices “discouraged full participation by citizens in plan making.” The article inaugurated a progressive turn in planning that prioritized greater involvement of communities in planning processes and acknowledged that different segments of the urban population have competing
needs and interests (193). Third and finally, urban researchers Manuel Castells and David Harvey articulated a critical approach to urban geography in *The Urban Question* (1972) and *Social Justice and the City* (1973), respectively, that exposed material flaws in discourses of urban crisis and renewal. Their work prompted scholars and activists to reconsider the kinds of problems cities pose, the kinds of interventions that might be effective in the future, and the ways different populations might benefit depending on which approaches are adopted. Taken together, these urban social movements and related developments in urban research and critical urban theory exerted pressure on planners to shift their attention from the city as a whole to individuals and from the physical characteristics of urban environments to the social relations within and among communities. These pressures enriched the planning field’s conception of the interrelations of social and physical problems and introduced new avenues for research and practice.

Beginning with Gwendolyn Brooks’s *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945) and William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson* Book I (1946), poets of the period increasingly turned to cities as sites for research and experiment. Brooks, Williams, and others, including George Oppen, Allen Ginsberg, and Charles Olson, crafted poetic cities in order to inquiry about and critique the changing nature of American life after World War II. Blending techniques of modernist experiment with direct engagement with everyday life, these poets and their successors documented and challenged the processes and effects of deindustrialization, suburbanization, gentrification, and the more recent neoliberal diversion of public resources to promote economic development. At Black Mountain in the 1950s and 1960s, for example, Charles Olson and Robert Duncan encouraged their students and contemporaries to write “open poems” that combined fragments of thought, found language, objects, and experiences occurring during the composition process instead of poems that were consciously planned and rigidly logical.3 Through

3 See Olson’s “Projective Verse.” Studies of the influence of existential philosophy on Olson and Duncan’s poetics include: Fredman, *The Grounding of American Poetry: Charles Olson and the*
their influence, emerging city poets such as Frank O’Hara, Sandra Hochman, Allen Ginsberg, and Paul Blackburn mined everyday urban experience in provocatively casual verse while artists such as Robert Rauschenberg, Richard Stankiewicz, and others transformed urban detritus into abstract works of art. Their poems and collaborative projects demonstrate that social relations need not be accepted as inevitable and that cities themselves can and must be rearranged through collective consciousness and aesthetic effort.

Working in different media and engaging different questions and traditions, city poets probed the urban crises of the 1950s and 1960s in order to propose alternative visions of the urban future. George Oppen, for example, took New York City as an object of research in his 1962 collection The Materials, his first book of poetry since 1934, applying the principles of Objectivism to post-WWII urban reality and asserting a Marxist critique that resonates with the critical urban theory of Castells and Harvey. Just as Jacobs had in Death and Life, Olson actively opposed urban renewal projects in The Maximus Poems (1950 – 1970) and in letters to the editor of The Gloucester Times for their destructive effects on the city’s topography and the psychic and social well-being of residents. As New York City approached the brink of financial dissolution in the mid-1970s, Miguel Algarín and others founded the Nuyorican Poet’s Café on the Lower East Side or “Loisaida,” and, in the process, invented a poetics of neighborhood that claimed city streets for residents who used them. In Los Angeles during the same period, poets, visual artists, and musicians including Wallace Berman, Lewis MacAdams, Wanda Coleman, and Jayne Cortez, among others, explored improvisation and collaboration through small

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Emersonian Tradition (2009) and Contextual Practice: Assemblage and the Erotic in Postwar Poetry and Art (2010); and Altieri, Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in the American Poetry of the 1960s (1979). Martin Heidegger, Alfred North Whitehead, and Charles Sanders Peirce are important influences on both Olson and Duncan.


Daniel Kane describes the genealogy of the Café and documents the literary relationships of poets and artists on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in the 1960s in All Poets Welcome (2003).
presses, literary magazines, writers' workshops, and community centers. Their efforts to construct and sustain social and physical sites for art and activism anticipate urban historian Dolores Hayden's later project, “The Power of Place” (1984 – 1991), which focused on preserving and celebrating everyday spaces in order to make cultural difference visible in the urban landscape. While these poetic experiments and communities emerged in different places and through different—and even conflicting—aesthetic and political genealogies, they have in common the investigation of changing urban conditions. Taken together, and especially in the networks they created through periodicals, readings, and other collective enterprises, these poets, artists, and activists developed a foundation and rationale for poetically theorizing and enacting urban change.

City Poems is grounded in a hypothesis that poets, activists, planners, and urban researchers respond to cities in mutually informative ways. To investigate this claim, the study seeks convergences between poetic, theoretical, and activist approaches to urban life. Following an interdisciplinary approach suggested by Marshall Berman's All That Is Solid Melts Into Air (1982), I take cities and how they function for residents as my primary objects of analysis rather than focusing on poetics or urban planning theory or social movements in isolation. The study builds on analyses of modernist city poetry such as William Chapman Sharpe’s Unreal Cities: Urban Figuration in Wordsworth, Baudelaire, Whitman, Eliot and Williams (1990) and Cecilia Rangel’s Cities in Ruins: The Politics of Modern Poetics (2010) by expanding the poetic conversation about urban experience to include the insights of city planners,

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7 All That Is Solid investigates the effects of modernist aesthetics and economic development strategies on urban life in Paris, Petersburg, and New York. Berman follows Walter Benjamin and David Harvey in applying insights from the poetry of Charles Baudelaire to analyze Parisian modernity. He uses the work of Allen Ginsberg, along with examples from popular culture, to diagnose and analyze the New York of Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs.
designers, activists, and theorists. As an interdisciplinary project, City Poems also aims to contribute to the theory and practices of critical urban theory and progressive planning by demonstrating that poetic conceptions of urban spaces can transform readers’ and residents’ senses of what cities can be. My intent overall and in the individual chapters is to identify overlaps between the discourses of urban emerging in these fields. In doing so, I hope to suggest, with progressive urban planner Leonie Sandercock, that the reading and writing of city poetry produces knowledge that might contribute to the work of building more equitable and just cities.

At the level of interpretive practice, City Poems follows James Scully in defining city poetry as poetry that would “act as part of the world, not simply as a mirror of it” (4). Analyzing how poets situate themselves, their speakers, and their readers in particular places in cities—for example, streets, buses, sidewalks, parks, apartments, and shops—and exploring how their representations of those spaces compare with the representations of urban theorists, planners, and designers, the project argues for understanding city poetry as a foundation for social action. Through both its theoretical and practical commitments, City Poems suggests that careful engagement with the poetry of urban experience can expand our understandings of how cities might be arranged and how we might use them despite restrictions and constraints imposed by overarching social and economic orders. Heeding Jed Rasula’s warning in The American Poetry Wax Museum against reifying poetic schools, City Poems takes a place-based approach to interpretation and analysis. Each chapter focuses on a particular poetic city at a particular time, specifically: New York, Gloucester, Los Angeles, and Chicago. In chapters 1-3, I consider the choices poets make in representing the social and physical dimensions of these cities through engagement with their histories, communities, and everyday realities. I turn to readers and reading

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practices in chapters 4 and 5 in order to show the common ground of poets’ conceptions of their audiences and planners, theorists, and researchers’ views of the communities they study and affect. By reading the canonical city poems of Williams and Olson alongside the lyric experiments of Brooks, Ginsberg, and Wanda Coleman, among others, City Poems signals a continuity of concern among American poets for the fine-grained interactions of people and their neighborhoods. In so doing, the study responds to Christopher Nealon’s call for “restor[ing] to the study of poetry a sense of high intellectual stakes” of engaging with the terms of the political and economic histories these city potries attempt to address.

In chapter 1, I explore William Carlos Williams’s attempt in Paterson to construct a poetic city that encompasses the dynamics of everyday life in post-WWII America. Initiated, in part, as a response to the pessimism of Eliot’s The Waste Land, Paterson has been used by a range of poets as a model and intertext for experimental urban poetics. Olson and Ginsberg, for example, review sections of the poem in small periodicals and critique it in private correspondence. While they praise Williams’s ambition and formal inventiveness, they challenge the limitations of his approach. In particular, they observe that the metaphors Williams uses to represent the city in Paterson’s first four books, man as city and city as marriage, artificially constrain the reader’s sense of both the city’s and the poem’s complexity. Their assessments of these metaphors relate, at different scales, to progressive critiques of the reductive physical determinism of the rational-comprehensive approach to urban planning. For Olson, I suggest, the metaphors make it impossible for Williams to situate present-day Paterson within the region’s longer history and broader social and political dynamics. Extending and reorienting Williams’s methodology in his investigation of Gloucester in The Maximus Poems, Olson applies personal and geologic insights to characterize the city’s delicate urban ecology. For Ginsberg, by contrast, Paterson is too broad. A native of the city, he challenges the older poet’s standing as a witness to its everyday realities and engages him in dialogue about what a city is and how it should be represented. Moving
from Paterson to New York and across the country in his own city poems, Ginsberg encourages Williams to place greater emphasis on personal experience as he expands *Paterson*. In the chapter’s conclusion I argue that Williams incorporates Olson’s and Ginsberg’s critiques in *Paterson* Book V, bringing the circulation of influence among the three city poets full circle.

Chapter 2 shifts from the East to the West coast and from canonical poets to poetic communities. Drawing on anthologies specifically dedicated to Los Angeles poetry, I analyze artistic collaboration and activism in the city from the 1950s – 1970s in relation to uses made of it as a site for urban research in subsequent decades, in particular, in the work of Mike Davis (*City of Quartz*, 1990), Dolores Hayden (*The Power of Place*, 1997), and Edward Soja (*Postmodern Geographies*, 1989, and *Thirdspace*, 1996). Like Ginsberg, Los Angeles poets emphasize everyday experience in their city poems, contemplating the isolation of an automobile-oriented city and proposing critiques of its social and racial inequality. Beginning with the circles surrounding Lawrence Lipton, progenitor of the Venice Beats; Thomas McGrath, a leftist poet caught up in the anti-communist hysteria of the 1950s; and Wallace Berman, publisher of the kabbalist journal of poetry and visual art, *Semina*, I argue that a primary impulse of Los Angeles poetry is to imaginatively reconstruct the region’s unmanageable geography. Specifically, I propose that participants in the communities surrounding these poets share a conception, drawn from John Dewey’s aesthetic philosophy, that artmaking and other creative practices enable contact and mutual understanding across physical and social divides. Centered in the city’s most disadvantaged communities, the Watts uprising of 1965 and the South Central riots of 1992 call this possibility of aesthetic community formation into question. City poetry produced in the aftermath of these events, especially poems written by residents of Watts such as Wanda Coleman, Eric Priestley, and Blossom Powe, suggests that rather than community, the true condition of Los Angeles poetics is crisis. I read Coleman’s decades-long struggle to “factor-in feeling” alongside her work’s critique of the city’s economic disparities as an example of a poetic practice that brings together the simultaneous
trajectories toward community and crisis in Los Angeles and in so doing asserts a “right to the city” also articulated by critical urban theorists in the 1970s and 1980s and adapted and enacted by progressive urban planners in the decades since.

George Oppen is the focus of chapter 3. Continuing the aesthetic and philosophical investigations introduced in chapter 2, I examine Oppen’s use of contrasting modes of inquiry in city poetry from the 1930s, 1950s, and 1960s. Like Coleman and other participants in Los Angeles’s poetic communities, I argue, Oppen embeds concerns about the ways public discourse conceals the dangers of living in common in his explorations and critiques of urban politics and experience. In *Discrete Series*, published in 1934, his analysis is purely Marxian: commodities such as cars and skyscrapers alienate city residents from one another even as they are positioned by politicians and business elites as natural features of the urban environment. By the early 1960s, however, after combat service in France during World War II and a long exile in Mexico to avoid anti-communist persecution, Oppen’s conception of urban experience and the relations between discourse and reality changes. To investigate this shift, and to make clear the difference I see between Oppen’s early and late perspectives, I interpret Oppen’s later city poetry in relation to critical urban theorist Manuel Castells’s landmark study of the discourse of urban crisis, *The Urban Question*. I attempt to show that whereas Castells asserts the impossibility of intervening in the “urban ideology” that sustains capitalist exploitation, Oppen contends that poetry can provide an alternative way of being. Drawing on Peter Nicholls’s study of the philosophical background of Oppen’s work, I argue that the poet embraces the Heideggerian notion that everyday experience comes into being through language. While Heidegger shares with Castells the view that language structures consciousness, I suggest, he argues that this is always the case, even when discourse has been bent to serve ideological ends. Oppen applies Heidegger’s idea that the language we use to describe and understand our experiences can, in fact, alter our conceptions and actions. I conclude the chapter by arguing that Oppen expansion of the 1965 poem “The Language of New York” into the longer, serial
poem “Of Being Numerous” represents his attempts to integrate Heidegger’s transformational view of language and the commitment he shares with Castells to exposing the structural of economic injustice.

I turn in chapter 4 from analysis of the strategies poets use to represent and interrogate cities in crisis to exploration of the experience of reading city poetry. Tracing a poetics of neighborhood in the work of Gwendolyn Brooks, Miguel Algarín, and Sandra Esteves, I argue that neighborhood poetries enable readers to make discoveries for themselves about urban conditions and possibilities for change. My readings are guided by Angus Fletcher’s notion that characteristics such as metonymic logic, everyday observations, and phrasings that defer rather than hastening closure provide readers with the “experience of an outside that is developed . . . inside the experience of the work” (227). Fletcher classifies poems that exhibit these characteristics as “environment-poems.” Drawing on examples from John Clare, Walt Whitman, and John Ashberry, he further claims that reading “environment-poems” requires us “to practice a casual, unauthorized, but always intensely focused noticing” that we experience, while reading, as equivalent to other practices of everyday life (238). Relating Fletcher’s model of the reader’s interaction with the poem to residents’ use of the city, I suggest that the neighborhoods Brooks, Algarin, and Esteves develop in their poetry have transformative potential. While the “Bronzeville” readers experience in Brooks’s work shares characteristics with the Bronzeville that exists on Chicago’s South Side, the poetic neighborhood circulates more easily across the city and beyond its borders via the imaginative empathy it occasions for readers. This is important because, as urban researcher Robert Sampson demonstrates, a neighborhood’s reputation contributes as much to public perceptions, including the perceptions of city officials and planners, of its relative safety and well-being as its actually existing social and physical conditions. These perceptions, in turn, as Sampson explains, play a crucial role in allocations of funds, zoning decisions, and the implementation of large-scale redevelopment projects, among other consequences. Anticipating Sampson in recognizing the urgency of such perceptions, Miguel Algarín and other Nuyorican poets proposed a cultural identity for
their neighborhood on New York City’s Lower East Side in the 1970s. Through poetry, community service, and other collective social action, they worked to strengthen their community’s claims to “Loisaida” in the face of the city’s moves to disinvest in infrastructure and public services and predatory practices on the part of landlords and business owners. The central argument of the chapter is that the poetics of neighborhood evident in “Bronzeville” and “Loisaida,” like Heidegger’s hopeful poetic language, constitutes a “spatial project,” to use critical urban theorist Douglas Madden’s term, oriented toward changing readers’ perceptions of cities by enabling them to understand the neighborhoods in new ways.

Finally, in chapter 5, I describe a common ground between city poems and progressive approaches to urban planning in the present day. As Peter Marcuse explains, progressive planners’ emphasis on the involvement of communities in planning processes and the identification of social and economic justice as primary goals distinguishes them from planners working in other “currents” (“Whose City” 37). Progressive planners use a variety of approaches to contest the pressures of neoliberalism and the negative consequences of growth-oriented development for poor and minority communities. Indeed, as Leonie Sandercock explains, “the single undeniable cultural hegemony [facing planners] is that economic rationality is paramount.” In view of this, she continues, planners “have to somehow find ways of collaborating with each other, without retreating to outworn public models, to assert our needs and our social ideals in the face of this global economic rationalization” (199). After providing a condensed history of the emergence of progressive planning since Davidoff’s 1965 call for “Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning,” I discuss examples of city poetry that share principles held in common by progressive planners: Brenda Coultas’s “The Bowery Project” (2003), poems from Anne Winters’s The Key to the City (1986) and The Displaced of Capital (2004), and Lewis MacAdams’s The River (1998-2007). I argue that city poetry can contribute to the work of progressive planning’s opposition by taking up the objectives of exposing inequalities; consolidating everyday observations
into focused critiques; and mobilizing action by proposing alternative visions. In a sense, the poetics of progressive planning is a politicized version of the poetics of neighborhood, just as progressive planning, as Sandercock, Marcuse, and others claim, is a politicized approach to planning.

In the final section of the chapter, I demonstrate tensions between neoliberal and community-based, progressive approaches to the city by comparing two ongoing, large-scale redevelopment projects: the construction of Brooklyn Bridge Park in New York City and the revitalization of the Los Angeles River. In the case of the former, neoliberal decision-making has led to the inclusion of luxury apartments and hotels within park boundaries. In the case of the latter, community groups have advocated and won piecemeal improvements over more than thirty years. The poet Lewis MacAdams founded the first of these groups, the Friends of the Los Angeles River (FoLAR) in 1986 and has been a strong advocate for restoring public access to the river since. Noting the successes of sustained community advocacy on behalf of the river, I argue that commonalities between the goals and objectives of the Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan and MacAdams’s The River, a three-volume poetic history of his activist work suggest that city poetry has the potential to catalyze the progressive action by constituting what Harvey defines as a conceptual urban commons (66-88).

Many poets and city poems are, of course, missing from this study for reasons of timing and space. Including Susan Howe’s investigations of the history of the city of Buffalo (Frame Structures, 1996), for example, would extend and complicate my analysis of Williams, Olson, and Ginsberg in chapter 1, and discussion of a San Francisco nexus would enhance my account of Los Angeles poetics in chapter 2.9 Similarly, Langston Hughes’s Montage of a Dream Deferred (1951) and Melvin Tolson’s Harlem Gallery (1965) belong with Brooks’s community-centered Bronzeville poetry in chapter 4, as does more recent work such as Ed Roberson’s City Eclogue (2006). Finally, consideration of the poetics of Robert Duncan’s Heavenly City Earthly City (1947) seem particularly ripe for exploration.

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9 The urban contours of Robert Duncan’s Heavenly City Earthly City (1947) seem particularly ripe for exploration.
of dissent formulated in 2014 by Juliana Spahr, Joshua Clover, and Jasper Bernes in a series of blog posts for Jacket2, and enacted before the fact in Leslie Scalapino’s *way* (1988) would enhance my assessment of poetic and theoretical opposition to neoliberalism in chapter 5.

While *City Poems* undoubtedly suffers from these omissions, limiting its poetic scope has enabled me to include a range of urban theory and planning literature in my examination of the problems and opportunities of American cities. It is my hope that this interdisciplinary approach will contribute to the project Joseph Harrington outlines in *Poetry and the Public* of returning “poetry’s perceived abilities . . . to effect equilibrium and ordering, to preserve or transmit aesthetic and ethical values, and to (de)sacralize twentieth-century capitalist society” to the forefront of literary and cultural studies (167). As Raymond Williams asserts in *The Country and the City*, his still-crucial study of representations of the city in nineteenth and twentieth-century British literature, “people have often said ‘the city’ when they meant capitalism or bureaucracy or centralized power.” Since city literature serves to consolidate collective ideas and anxieties about the state of society at a particular moment in time, Williams argues, it also represents a field of experiment through which new urban futures can be tested and taken up. His lesson for critics is that:

> At every point we need to put these ideas to the historical realities: at times to be confirmed, at times denied. But also, as we see the whole process, we need to put the historical realities to the ideas, for at times these express, not only in disguise and displacement but in effective mediation or in offered and sometimes effective transcendence, human interests and purposes for which there is no other immediately available vocabulary. (291)

*City Poems* follows Williams, I hope, in characterizing and questioning the relations of city poetry to urban research and theory and the practices of progressive planning. In so doing, it aims to return “human interests and purposes” to the center of analysis of the social and physical conditions of urban
crisis and to articulate a progressive and practical vision for American cities that draws equally on the realities of experience and poetic imagination.
Chapter 1: Writing Around Williams: Paterson and Experimental Urban Poetics

The poem
is complex and the place made
in our lives
for the poem.

— William Carlos Williams, “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower”

William Carlos Williams published the long city poem Paterson in five books over 12 years from 1946 – 1958 and in a single volume along with typescript fragments of a sixth book in 1963. As Christopher MacGowan notes in the preface to the 1992 revised edition, the poem was on Williams’s mind as early at 1914, when he published “The Wanderer: A Rococo Study” in The Egoist alongside an excerpt from Joyce’ Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and a review of an exhibition at London’s Goupil Gallery by Ezra Pound, and reached a stable form in 1943 in an outline published as “Paterson: The Falls” (x-xi). As might be expected of a poem whose composition extended over 50 years, the dimensions of Paterson shifted considerably from its original conception. The poem’s first four books follow a structure “large enough to embody the whole knowable world” and particular enough to depict a man “beginning, seeking, achieving, and concluding his life” (A 391; P xiv). Though Williams hopes it will maintain a “unity directly continuous” with the rest of the poem, Book V marks a significant departure from this four-stage conception. As he explains in a letter to New Directions later used as dust jacket copy:

After Paterson, Four ten years have elapsed. In that period I have come to understand not only that many changes have occurred in me and the world, but I have been forced to recognize that there can be no end to such a story as I have envisioned with the terms which I had laid down

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for myself. I had to take the world of Paterson into a new dimension if I wanted to give it imaginative validity. (P xv)

The “new dimension” Williams introduces in Book V responds to the new dimensions of the postwar world, a world that now includes, as he indicates in the lyric poems later published as *Pictures from Brueghel*: manned space flight, environmental spoliation, the housing crisis and other urban problems, and, most importantly, “the bomb” (PB 36; 69; 73-74; 165).

Some readers consider Book V an important extension of the experiments of *Paterson’s* first four books. Peter Schmidt, for example, suggests that it represents an extension of Williams’s engagement with modernist visual art, providing an alternate ending for the poem that balances Dadaist decomposition and parody with a Cubist attempt to produce creative synthesis and equilibrium (193-205). For Alba Newmann, Book V “thickens” Williams’s representation of the city of Paterson by preempting the sense of closure in Book IV: “*Paterson* is not only a document of place, but an explosion of it, a thickening of our understanding of what such a place could mean that corresponds with the thickening of the identity of city and man and text” (71). For others, Book V is a poetic outlier. Brian Austin Bremen, for example, excludes Book V from his analysis of Williams’s poetry altogether because it responds to “different” concerns, primarily the poet’s failing health (202). Following a related line of critique, Marjorie Perloff suggests that Williams’s use of symbols and personal lyric in Book V is symptomatic of a broader “return to tradition” in his late writing. “For all its seeming openness,” she suggests, *Paterson* manifests a “symbolic superstructure” that reverses the “calculated indeterminacy” of Williams’s most innovative works, *Spring and All* (1922) and *Voyage to Pagany* (1928) (*Indeterminacy* 148-154).

An active reader of *The Black Mountain Review*, *Jargon Books*, *Origin*, and *Neon* throughout the 1950s, Williams recognized that the field of American poetry was changing and that his influence was in ascendance (Mariani 691). Even so, he feared that emerging poets might stop short of full realization of
their experiments. He explains this concern in “On Measure,” a short manifesto published in Origin in 1954: “Without measure we are lost. But we have lost even the ability to count. Actually we are not as bad as that. Instinctively we have continued to count as always but it has become not a conscious process and being unconscious has descended to a low level of the invention. There are a few exceptions but there is no one among us who is consciously aware of what he is doing” (SE 340). While some younger poets were heeding his calls for invention, in other words, none were following his lead in developing substantially new poetic forms. Developing from a sense of impatience with the pace of poetic innovation in the 1950s, Book V is a powerful example of Edward Said’s “late style.” Strangely personal, the book proposes an experimental urban poetics adequate to “measure” the new dimensions of postwar America. As Williams explains in “The Poem as a Field of Action,” a lecture delivered at the University of Washington in 1948, developing such a “measure” requires the “accumulation” of examples: “The clearness we must have is first the clarity of knowing what we are doing—what we may do: Make anew—a reexamination of the means—on a fresh—basis. Not at this time an analysis so much as an accumulation” (SE 285).

The shortest section of Paterson, Book V ranges from personal reminiscence and ekphrastic description to biblical quotation and the invocation of a symbolic touchstone, the Unicorn Tapestries. Throughout, Williams interweaves dense meditations on language and on the prime accomplishments of his poetic oeuvre. Williams asserts his intention to innovate in the book’s first six lines. Bending forward, the lines indicate an insistent posture:

In old age

11 Said’s inquiry into “late style” was incomplete when he died. Edited by Michael Wood, On Late Style is a collection of published and unpublished essays in various stages of completion. As Edward Rothstein notes in his review of the book for The New York Times, the book does not provide a “coherent synthesis” or propose a composite theory of “late style.” Rather, Said presents analyses of a number of examples, including Beethoven, Cavafy, Genet, and Thomas Mann. John Updike extends Said’s thinking to additional literary examples—Shakespeare, Hawthorne, and Iris Murdoch, among others—in a more sympathetic review for The New Yorker.
the mind
casts off
rebelliously
an eagle
from its crag

(P 205)

Perched on the “crag” of experimental American poetics, Williams enacts the practice of “accumulation” he announces in “The Poem as a Field of Action” in Book V by surrounding himself with a community of poets, including like-minded modernist peers Pound and cummings and a generation of aspiring successors, including Ginsberg, Olson, and Gilbert Sorrentino, among others. He positions himself as a mentor to these younger writers: “trying / to get the young / to foreshorten / their errors in the use of words which / he had found so difficult, the errors / he had made in the use of / the poetic line” (P 227).

Like many ambitious younger poets of the period, Ginsberg and Olson corresponded and met with Williams during the late 1940s and early 1950s. Williams read their work with interest, using excerpts from Ginsberg’s letters in Books IV and V of Paterson and a long section of Olson’s essay “Projective Verse” in his Autobiography. He wrote introductions for Ginsberg’s first two books, the City Lights edition of Howl and Other Poems and the Totem/Corinth edition of his early poems, Empty Mirror, and reviewed Maximus II for The Evergreen Review. The younger poets tested Williams’s claims for Paterson in their own published and unpublished writing. In Ginsberg’s view, Paterson was too symbolic and too abstract. It strayed too far from everyday experience on River Street and elsewhere in its namesake city to adequately account for lives underway there, including Williams’s own. For Olson, by contrast, the poem was too concrete and specific, too much a record of one locale and its history. As a result of this narrowness, Paterson fell short of what it might have achieved, namely, a critical rethinking through of the ecological complexity of contemporary life. Ginsberg and Olson embarked on

12 As Mariani notes, Williams’s review of Maximus II was not published until 1971 when it was included in a special issue of Maps dedicated to Olson’s long poem (686). The review is reprinted in Something to Say: William Carlos Williams on Younger Poets, Ed. James Breslin. Further references to Breslin’s volume will be noted as SS in the text.
major city poems of their own around the same time of their most intensive consideration of *Paterson*.

Olson’s project became *The Maximus Poems*, an impassioned investigation of Gloucester, Massachusetts and its relevance to American culture and ways of being. Ginsberg never fully realized the “American epic” he envisioned in response to *Paterson*, but his early city poems, including “Howl,” and his later travel poems, especially the urban explorations of *The Fall of America*, take up its agenda of experimental urban poetics.

The relations between Ginsberg, Olson, and Williams’s city poems are complex. Ginsberg and Olson confront Williams as emerging poets seeking ways to ways to move beyond his poetics in order to develop their own. In the same way that Ginsberg and Olson orient their readings of *Paterson* toward developing their own projects, Williams writes their influence back into the poem itself, most directly in the excerpts from Ginsberg’s letters but also, with regard to Olson, in his experimentation with open-ended, relational poetics in Book V. This chapter describes the circulation of influence among Williams, Olson, and Ginsberg in the 1940s and 1950s and outlines the experimental poetics each pursues then and after. Taking *Paterson* Books I – IV as a common origin, I suggest that all three poets write around the Williams of those books using strategies that derive from their different conceptions of the dimensions of urban experience. In the first section, I describe two flawed analogies that predominate in *Paterson*’s first four books: man as city and city as marriage. Providing both a poetic and narrative structure, these analogies limit, as Olson and Ginsberg claim, what Williams is able to “measure” in his urban epic. The second section focuses on Olson’s response to *Paterson* Books I – IV and his use of insights from geography and archaeology to propose an ecological perspective on the city in which residents, infrastructure, and geography are in dynamic relation. I argue that the techniques of “projective verse” enable Olson to demonstrate the embeddedness of individual cities in larger systems of relations and to map the complex historical and geographic forces that shape everyday life. In the third section, I outline Ginsberg’s engagement with *Paterson* and the poetic use he makes of personal
experiences in and among urban subcultures to challenge political and social norms. By integrating firsthand experience and observation, Ginsberg’s city poems expand from the local scenes around Paterson, New York, and San Francisco, to include a network of cities across the country. Writing in a distinctive voice, Ginsberg immerses readers, not least Williams, in scenes that require them to reconfigure the dimensions of their identities. Finally, I turn to Williams’s response to Olson’s and Ginsberg’s experiments in *Paterson* Book V. I demonstrate how Williams applies the investigative and personal methods he learns from Olson’s and Ginsberg’s city poems in his own renewed attempts to expand his city poem and create a critical poetic language adequate to a new American “measure.”

**Man as City as Marriage: The Limitations of *Paterson* Books I – IV**

Announcing in Book I that *Paterson* will trace the contours of “a man like a city and a woman like a flower / —who are in love,” Williams identifies the dynamics of heterosexual relationships as a central element of the poem. In fact, as the line continues, the relationships he sets out to measure are between one man and many women: “Two women. Three women. / Innumerable women, each like a flower” ([*P* 7]). As Sandra Gilbert and Anne Marie Mikkelsen observe, though the relationships depicted in the first four books of *Paterson* are complex, they tend to “reinforce traditional gender hierarchies” (Gilbert 11). In Book I, for example, Sarah Cummings either commits suicide or is murdered by her husband, while in Book II the fictional “Cress” writes damning letters to her paramour, “Dr. P,” and in Book IV, “Paterson” competes with “Corydon,” a wealthy Manhattan woman, for the affections of Phyllis, a black domestic trained in Williams’s title city. In “*Paterson: The Falls,*” the precis published in 1943, Williams frames the longer work as a drama of marriage: a man arriving on the scene to attempt

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13 Mikkelsen’s reading differs from Gilbert’s in arguing that while *Paterson* relies on traditional conceptions of gender and sexuality, it also offers a poetic model of “social” and “political” inclusion by linking representations of heterosexual women, gay women and men, and workers as “pastoral speakers” (78-79). I discuss Nardi’s letters and the tensions between Gilbert’s and Mikkelsen’s readings as they pertain to Book V below.
to domesticate and harness the natural female power of the place. The first part, he explains, will introduce the “archaic persons of the drama” and depict “Sound // married to strength” through the image of the falls. Picking up this narrative, the second and third parts will catalogue men’s attempts, in the figures of Billy Sunday and Alexander Hamilton, to channel the “roar” of the “water, married to the stone,” at their base. In the fourth and final part, Sunday’s and Hamilton’s courtships will be revealed as failures through descriptions of what Paterson, the city, has become: a “modern town, a // disembodied roar! the cataract and / its clamor broken apart” (CP2 57-58).

For Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Williams’s overreliance on gender as a model for poetic identity limits Paterson’s “scope and address” and reduces its “achievement.” Summarizing Williams’s preoccupation with the “problem of organizing the female subject” (57), she explains:

The sexual, for Williams, occurs in the critical fusion of virgin and whore—ideal figure and degraded figure—the fusion claiming that these are one, that they are the same, and that they represent the female. He has taken binaries and fused these polarized categories without altering the traditional terms. He reproposes the power of these terms by exaggeration. (62-63)

As in much modernist poetry and art, DuPlessis suggests, Paterson’s formal and linguistic experiments conceal “highly conventional metaphors and narratives of gender,” such as the view that women can only be represented as “static, immobile, eternal, goddess-like” (44). These faulty metaphors narrow the “plentitude and mysterious fecundity” of Williams’s poetic experiments “into a figure, a theme, an idea,” heterosexual masculinity, rather than remaining “generative . . . formless, inchoate, [and] excessive.” Though Williams attempts to account for the complex ways “writing is engendered” in Book V, DuPlessis concludes that Paterson is ultimately marked by two terms that “do not appear”: “rape” and “queer.” (63) To the degree that Williams measures poetic masculinity in relation to female vulnerability, in other words, he limits the kinds of meanings and identities that can accumulate in the poem, dominating some and marginalizing or suppressing others.
He introduces a particularly compromised female subject in Book III in conjunction with the apocalyptic visions of the burning of the town library in Book III, a section of *Paterson* that Olson, among others, singled out as exemplary.\(^{14}\) Identified as the “Beautiful Thing” that triggers the conflagration, the woman is “bedraggled,” a victim of male violence:

```
And as reverie gains and
your joints loosen
the trick’s done!
Day is covered and we see you—
but not alone!
drunk and bedraggled to release

the strictness of beauty
under a sky full of stars
Beautiful thing
and a slow moon—
    The car
had stopped long since
when the others
came and dragged those out
who had you there
indifferent
to whatever the anesthetic
Beautiful Thing
might slum away the bars—
```

(P 104)

In some ways a “radical figure,” the “Beautiful Thing” is at once an object of the poet’s pity and source material for his writing (DuPlessis 63). In Paul Mariani’s view, she is the “hidden core” of *Paterson*, the “Beautiful Thing” that inspires Williams’s experiments with poetic measure (581-82; 697). Much as he does with the excerpts from Marcia Nardi’s letters in Books I and II, Williams uses the violence the woman suffers to comment on broader social problems. For example, when he takes her on a “ride around, to see what the town looks like” during her recovery, he compares the “world of corrupt cities” they see to failing marriages which, “lacking love,” tend toward destruction (P 107). The analogy seems

\(^{14}\) Affirming his appreciation of *Paterson*, Olson writes to Williams in January 1951 about the conceptual importance of Book III: “It’s the FIRE section still keeps me right with it boy is it good i keep readin it, brother bill” (Olson to Williams, January 1951, WCW Papers).
meant to console the woman and explain the violence she suffers as a function of male ignorance and fear. “What is there to say?” Williams writes, “save that” men fear “beauty more than death” and “marry only to destroy, in private, in / their privacy only to destroy, to hide / (in marriage)” (P 106-107).

The speaker vows to “BRIGHTen / the cor / ner” where the woman lies recuperating “flat on [her] back, in a low bed” later in Book III, but even as he attends to her “regal” indifference and “radiant” beauty, he implicates himself in the attack.¹⁵ Williams worries, as James Breslin explains, that the man’s words are too coarse to adequately address the woman in her fragile condition (192-195). The lustfulness of the description is shocking:

—flat on your back, in a low bed (waiting)
under the mud plashed windows among the scabrous
dirt of the holy sheets .

You showed me your legs, scarred (as a child)
by the whip .

Read. Bring the mind back (attendant upon
the page) to the day’s heat. The page also is
the same beauty: a dry beauty of the page—
beaten by whips

A tapestry hound
with his thread teeth drawing crimson from
the throat of the unicorn

(P 126)

Marked by violence, the woman’s body is a page of poetry Williams orders himself to read. The earlier passage is important because it includes Paterson’s first reference to the unicorn tapestries that dominate Book V. Like the hound baring his “thread teeth” in pursuit of the unicorn, he approaches the encounter as an opportunity to draw blood, to introduce in his poem the raw vulnerability the “Beautiful Thing” represents. Because she is exposed to the city, the woman is at permanent risk. Her suffering

¹⁵ This phrase “brighten the corner where you are” repeats in different lineation in section II of Book 4, immediately preceding the long first letter from Ginsberg (P 172-175).
serves as a hinge between two analogies: man as city, a destructive force opposed to natural beauty, and city as marriage, the possibility that natural beauty can be restored in art.

Williams foregrounds these analogies and the centrality of urban suffering in the epigraph to Book III, an excerpt from philosopher George Santayana’s novel The Last Puritan. In the excerpt, Santayana describes cities as “second bod[ies] for the human mind, a second organism, more rational, permanent, and decorative” and works of “natural, yet moral art, where the soul sets up her trophies of action and instruments of pleasure” (P 94). To the degree that they fuse masculine rationality and feminine “pleasure,” Santayana suggests, cities serve as sites of the reconciliation. The epigraph provides a counterpoint to the violence visited on the “Beautiful Thing” and the destruction of library. Associating the woman’s violated body with the compromised landscape of the city of Paterson, Williams challenges Santayana’s assertion that cities might provide provides a “body for the human mind.” Indeed, as the troubled and failing relationships depicted throughout Paterson suggest, cities and women’s bodies function, for the poet, more as sites of disruption than as markers of marital reconciliation. When Williams invokes cities, marriage, and poetry together again in Book IV, his distrust of Santayana’s synthetic vision is even more pronounced: “Oh Paterson! Oh married man! / He is the city of cheap hotels and private / entrances” (P 154). The lines identify the poem’s hero, “Paterson,” who in Book IV ranges across the metropolitan region, with urban vice. He confirms the association of cities and masculine destructiveness at the conclusion of Book IV, section 2, by comparing Paterson with the pre-modern cities of renaissance Italy. Noting a “difference between squalor of spreading slums / and splendour of renaissance cities,” he contrasts his city poem with the archetypal love poetry of Petrarch (P 185). Appearing in a stanza of its own at the end of a long meditation on credit and monetary policy, the comparison recalls the description of the battered body of the “Beautiful Thing” in Book III. Debased rather than ennobled by masculine rationality, both the woman and the city are absorbed, as DuPlessis explains, in the processes of Williams’s artistic struggle (64).
While the “Beautiful Thing” of Book III exists in the poem only in Williams’s descriptions, another vulnerable woman, Marci Nardi, exists in her own words. As Elizabeth O’Neill explains, the excerpts from Nardi’s letters that Williams includes in *Paterson* introduce a “dissonant note that disturbs the harmony” of the poem (xxxi). An aspiring poet, Nardi met Williams in 1942 and corresponded with him periodically until 1956. In addition to providing minor financial support and letters of recommendation to the Yaddo and MacDowell artist colonies, Williams introduced Nardi to James Laughlin, his publisher at New Directions, and Marguerite Caetani, the editor of the journal *Botteghe Oscure*, both of whom published her poems. There has been a limited though sharp critical discussion of Nardi’s role in the poem. Mariani, for example, suggests that she “triggered something” in Williams that allowed him to complete *Paterson* Book I after struggling with the materials he had assembled over decades (461-63).16 Following Gilbert and DuPlessis, Elizabeth Gregory argues that Williams’s use of Nardi’s letters is oppressive, especially because he obscures her identity with a pseudonym (92). By contrast, Brian Austin Bremen proposes that Williams’s use of Nardi’s letters is a “conscious exposure of the force of gender polarity and the forms of domination inherent in it” (171). Suggesting that critical discussion of the letters has been “sidetracked” by editorial questions and the dynamics of Williams’s relationship with Nardi and thus has missed the “bigger picture” of how the texts themselves function as part of the poem, Erin Templeton argues that Nardi’s letters are a “force of disruption” that deforms *Paterson*’s intended trajectory (80-100). Williams explains his use of the letters to Srinavas Rayaprol, another aspiring poet, in 1950: “The letter at the end of Book II is a real letter or a combination of two actual letters written to me several years ago by a woman I had attempt[ed] to help as best I could . . . You might call her Mrs. Paterson. It is the woman striking back at the man, at all

16 Nardi indicates that Williams had a similar effect on her in the letter excerpted at the end of Book II: “The anger and indignation which I feel towards you now has served to pierce through the rough ice of the congealment which my creative faculties began to suffer from as a result of that last note from you. I find myself thinking and feeling in terms of poetry again.” (P 89)
men.” Linking personal experiences to his engagement with Nardi’s ideas, Williams assumes an insincere
distance: Nardi is “Mrs. Paterson” fighting with “Mr. Paterson” rather than a woman he knows critiquing
his own attitudes and ideas. He indicates a second purpose for including Nardi in *Paterson* in the same
letter: “But there is also in my use of the letter a recognition of the writer of the letter as a writer. It is in
many ways good writing. That is the final reason for including it.” (O’Neill 184-85).

While Nardi all but disappears from the poem after the long letter, written in 1943, that
concludes Book II, she resumes her correspondence with Williams in 1949, as O’Neill documents, and
continues writing to him for seven years. She points out contradictions in his relationship to her and her
writing in a postscript to an April 1956 letter:

I think it’s wonderful how your poetry has gone from greater to greater development all the
time—always saying something new and fresh and never repeating. I tie this up with the moral
and human side of your work, and also with the spiritual side, because it is so rooted in love that
transcends time as all major poetry has to be (at least for me and my evaluations of it). My
poetry represents, alas, a much more narrow, time-bound world. But that is almost inevitable
for a woman if she tries to write honestly, since men have never permitted her to emerge from
those confines, in her actual living. (O’Neill 229)

At the same time that she compliments Williams’s poetic achievements, Nardi criticizes the scale of his
ambitions. She suggests that the “greater to greater development” of his work, specifically, the way it
“transcends time,” owes as much to social structures that permit him to develop his “moral and human”
sides as to his talent or craft. Just as DuPlessis argues thirty years later, Nardi claims that Williams’s
poetry benefits from the confinement of women to minor roles. While DuPlessis analyzes how the
gender dynamic plays out in *Paterson* itself, Nardi’s critique is more general. Her point is that she would
have had a better chance at writing “major poetry” if the dimensions of her everyday experience had
encouraged her development in the same way they encouraged his. She regrets the missed opportunity.
The thrust of this critique recasts the personal attack Nardi advances in the letter excerpted at the end of *Paterson* Book II in broader terms. Angered by Williams’s refusal (or inability) to secure her a job and by his appropriation of her earlier letters in Book I, she accuses the poet of rejecting her because the details of her life offended his sheltered sensibilities. “My attitude toward woman’s wretched position in society and my ideas about all the changes necessary there, were interesting to you, weren’t then, in so far as they made for literature?”:

But when my actual personal life crept in, stamped all over with the very same attitudes and sensibilities and preoccupations that you found quite admirable as literature—that was an entirely different matter, wasn’t it? No longer admirable, but on the contrary, deplorable, annoying, stupid, or in some other way unpardonable; because those very ideas and feelings which make one a writer with some kind of new vision, are often the very same ones which, in living itself, make one clumsy, awkward, absurd, ungrateful . . . . (P 87, italics in Williams’s transcription)

In response to what she sees as Williams’s artificial separation of poetry from everyday life, Nardi asserts: “Only my writing (when I write) is myself: only that is the real in me in any essential way.”

Contrasting the “wretched position in society” she holds as a woman with the empowerment and control she experiences as a poet, Nardi covers similar ground in the letter as Williams does in *Paterson’s* man as city and city as marriage analogies. Where he identifies conflicts in cities and marriages related to the spoliation of natural feminine beauty and urban masculine corruption, however, Nardi asserts the possibilities of continuities between artistic and everyday life.

But in writing (as in all forms of creative art) one derives one’s unity of being and one’s freedom to be one’s self, from one’s relationship to those particular externals (language, clay, paints, etcetera) over which one has complete control and the shaping of which lies entirely in one’s own power; whereas in living, one’s shaping of the externals involved there (of one’s friendships, the structures of society, etcetera) is no longer entirely within one’s own power but requires the cooperation and the understanding and the humanity of others in order to bring out what is best and most real in one’s self. (P 87)

In Nardi’s view, writing poetry involves the same search for unity and freedom as creating a life, but, in the case of poetry, the search involves fewer obstacles. Since it does not involve relationships or
external structures, poetry permits Nardi “complete control” over her materials. In this sense, it serves as a proving ground where she can attempt to work through the complexity of everyday experience.

Poetry is not an analogy for life in Nardi’s view; instead, it is a means for making a life. When she is unable to write, as she explains in a September 1950 letter written in the aftermath of the breakup of her marriage, she feels imprisoned. “I hate words when they are a substitute for living,” she writes, “they are for me like the fence through which prisoners are forced to communicate with the outside world during visiting hours, better than nothing, but at the same time—as a symbol of imprisonment—something to be hated” (O’Neill 194). Where Williams separates poetry from the “outside world” of marriage and cities in order to explain, by analogy, the conflicting impulses and drives that motivate his writing, Nardi describes “externals” such as relationships and the “structures of society” as integral. They are as much determining factors in her work as her use of language and measure. Rather than separating internals from externals, poetry from experience, and analyzing their relations, as Williams does throughout Paterson Books I–IV, Nardi argues they are “the very same” and proposes to bring them into “unity of being” through her writing. Williams’s correspondence with Nardi prefigures his engagement with Olson and Ginsberg’s city poems. The experiments they pursue in the 1950s enable him to see the wisdom of the critique Nardi proposes in the 1940s.

**Paterson and the “Polis”**

In a review of Maximus II written in 1956 but not published until 1971, Williams praises Olson’s ambition and achievement and identifies challenges he might face in continuing to expand the poem. He agrees with Denise Levertov, the “correspondent” who had mailed him a copy, that Maximus II “attracts the eye” and ear as a major work:

> Reading [Maximus II] is a rewarding, really to me a thrilling experience. Categorically this book is much better than the first by which I was often defeated. My correspondent is quite right in
finding it at first glance a poem that attracts the eye and, I am ready to say it, my critical objections, and comes off as a major contribution to the contemporary scene and may possibly go much further. (SS 231)

When the poem works, as Williams explains, it has a “brilliant, breathtaking” effect, transporting the reader through the streets of Gloucester and making words “walk about” through time and space (SS 228). Acknowledging that the first volume of *Maximus* often “defeated him,” he emphasizes the degree to which the systems of relations in *Maximus* II cohere despite Olson’s withholding of specific connective tissues. Despite its obscure references and accelerated pace, Williams suggests, there are in most of the sections of the poem sufficient connections between ideas to permit readers to “leap from one sense impression to another” and move with the poet out from Gloucester “over the whole world.”

In other words, the relations between poems are rendered clearly enough to allow the reader to understand exactly how the whole of the poem is constructed from its parts (SS 228-29). As an example of a poem that works well, Williams cites “Maximus, to himself,” the second poem in the volume:

```
I have had to learn the simplest things
last. Which made for difficulties.
Even at sea I was slow, to get the hand out, or to cross
a wet deck.
    The sea was not, finally, my trade.
But even my trade, at it, I stood estranged
from that which was most familiar. Was delayed,
and not content with the man’s argument
but such postponement
is now the nature of
obedience,
    that we are all late
in a slow time,
    that we grow up many
And the single
is not easily
known.
```

(Maximus 56)
The lines are “admirable,” in Williams’s view, because the sense is clear. Difficulties arise for the reader only where Olson sees them, in the attempt to extrapolate universal meanings from local and personal experiences. As Olson suggests, the work of making meaning from everyday experience requires “postponement” because it involves resisting the application of external frames of understanding. “Not content with the other man’s argument,” for example, that he is well-suited to the sea as a “trade,” the poet measures his interests and aptitudes according to what he experiences rather than what he is told. This means he arrives at his understanding of himself and the world “late,” but such lateness is not. “We are all late,” in fact, when we practice the “postponement” of configuring the world according to our own experience of it rather than turning to external models.

From biographical details like those included in “Maximus, to himself,” Williams concludes in the review that *Maximus* is as much an experiment in measure as the story of the “particular events of a man’s experience in graphic terms which all good poems must be, put down economically on the page in an organized manner to give the feeling of an organic whole” (SS 228). Williams approves sections of the poem that permit him, as a reader, to understand the relations between its parts, to see the “organic whole,” or to use Olson’s term, the “single,” as a system of relations. He recognizes in the review that Olson gathers the personal and public dynamics of his poems in such a way as to demonstrate an alternative vision of the world that enables measurement of emergent orders rather than the imposition abstract modes of understanding. By linking everyday observations and discoveries about Gloucester’s history and geography, Olson invites readers to share in his particular understanding of the city, for example, in the self-awareness that comes from reporting on his halting progress across a “wet deck,” rather than merely witnessing such events from the outside.

In the first four books of *Paterson* Williams presents an arrangement of historical, geographic, and experiential knowledge of the title city. Rather than walking the streets along with readers, however, he offers Paterson itself as a model for human consciousness. As he explains in a press release
circulated in advance of the publication of Book IV: “the thing was to use the multiple facets which a city presented as representatives for comparable facets of contemporary thought thus to be able to objectify the man himself as we know him and love him and hate him” (Paterson xiii). Putting “man himself as we know him and love him and hate him” at the center of his experiments, Williams focuses attention on the relationship between perceptions of places and the processes of discovery and self-discovery. He positions poets and readers both as sympathetic observers by encouraging us to “listen to the language” of his poem for the “discoveries [we] hope to make” (SE 290). As Williams notes in his review, the reader The Maximus Poems has different work. Confronted with the speed and intensity of Olson’s investigations, the reader is called upon to give the poetry the “reading its writing involved,” to permit the “larger force” enacted in the verse to carry him outside of himself (Collected Prose 246-247). As Lytle Shaw observes, Maximus presents a “world of independent clauses . . . imagined as a space of both conceptual and bodily liberation.” By contrast with Williams, he continues, Olson improvises with his “cultural/historical materials” in order to “continually break through into new quasi-epiphanic insights that emerge in the speaking subject as sudden, almost physical sensations, derailing and suspending narrative.” (49) The systems of relations he prioritizes in his poem necessitate the “leaps” of active, energetic reading. Since, as Olson explains in “Projective Verse,” a poem is “energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader,” readers are faced with a choice: adapt their views of the world to accommodate the new dimensions the poems propose or be “defeated” by the poems’ complexities and remain mired in the “slow time” imposed by outside forces (Collected Prose 240).

When Williams asks permission to use excerpts from “Projective Verse” in his Autobiography, Olson responds with enthusiasm:

My god Bill, OF COURSE
god, how wonderful it is, your letter, to have you say that, to put it
that way thanks thanks

WOW

it came out of the sky, all
apple, apple

look: to have it joined to you, there, in the BOOK, why,
Bill, where, where, could it make, for me, such
sense.

... Make this use, you propose, or any, you choose. For it doth honor
Me, Bill, it doth, and maketh (as you see)

me giddee

(Olson to Williams, December 11, 1950, WCW Papers)

He delights in the prospect of having his ideas “joined” directly to his mentor’s and the increased

audience republication might bring. Such a linkage of their projects, as he claims in the letter, makes

“such sense.” Marjorie Perloff demonstrates the close resemblance between “Projective Verse” and

Williams’s 1948 lecture, “The Poem as a Field of Action” (“Inferior Predecessors” 287-295). Since the

lecture was first published in 1954, Olson would not have known it when he composed his essay, but it is
clear that the poets were pursuing related experiments. In his Autobiography Williams explains his

interest in “Projective Verse” by analogy with a friend, the landscape painter Charles Sheeler. He likens

the choice Sheeler made to relocate his family from Manhattan to a gardener’s cottage on the grounds

of a decaying Hudson Valley estate to the “reconstruction of the poem” Olson proposes in the essay.

The wonderful incongruence of the new Sheeler household attracts Williams because it represents an

attempt by the artist to reconfigure the relations between his everyday life and his aesthetic practice in

such a way as to produce a rejuvenation of his craft. In this sense, Sheeler’s move is a concrete example

of the taking up of new “stance[s] toward reality outside a poem” Olson advocates in “Projective Verse”

(Collected Prose 246). By moving to the cottage, Sheeler establishes “understandable limits” for his

artistic life, as Williams explains, transplanting modernist artistic values inherited from decades of
practice “into a new context” that “gives [his] mind its say.” Williams concludes his discussion of Sheeler on an Olsonian note: “It is ourselves we organize in this way, not against the past or for the future or even for survival, but for integrity of understanding to insure persistence.” (A 333-334)

In the same letter agreeing to republication of “Projective Verse,” Olson informs Williams of his own plans to relocate to Mexico for a period of months to conduct research on Mayan culture. He expects the trip, as he explains to Rainer Gerhardt, the German translator of “Projective Verse” and Call Me Ishmael, to mark the beginning of a new phase in his poetic career. Having “finished with the frame of my people—that is, as an urgent necessity for me to come to conclusion about it,” Olson departs for Mexico with “an ease & a joy & a hunger which surprises and delights me!” (Selected Letters 126). He refers in the letter to “The Kingfishers,” a poem written in 1949, as a “document” of his struggle to reach a new beginning for his poetics by constructing a mode of inquiry and analysis sufficient to sustain investigation of the origins and limits of Western consciousness. The poem ranges from Delphi to Mexico to China and finally to the nest of its eponymous bird. As Stephen Fredman explains, it centers on an investigation of “what tradition withholds” and “how the present stands with respect to that withholding” (22). Olson cuts through the kingfisher’s symbolic resonances in a series of loosely related “poetic units” in order to expose the material facts of its existence (Fredman 22-24). In particular, he focuses on the mechanics of the kingfisher’s nest, which, since it is composed of “fishbones . . . thrown up in pellets by the birds,” decays over time as young birds hatch and mature. By the time a new generation has fully fledged, Olson explains, the nests where they were nurtured resemble a “dripping, fetid mass” (Collected Poetry 87). In Fredman’s reading, the nests stand in for the European literary tradition: when taken for granted, they conceal the “dirt-and-gore-encrusted roots” of kingfisher ecology, but when exposed for what they are, they provide an example of a nexus where the “cultural” meets the “biological,” where an individual bird’s lived experience, in other words, intersects the traditions and practices of the larger species (23). What motivates Maximus, he continues, is an attempt
to “wrest forth something that has remained hidden a long time” through the influence of these traditions and thus to bring forth a new “grounding” for inquiry “whose emergence would profoundly disturb the modern world” (24).  

As Olson indicates in his letter to Gerhardt, he intends to focus in his work from 1950 onward on investigating the realities of individual experience that traditions of Western thought conceal from view. More directly, he plans to expose the numbing exploitation conventions of philosophy and aesthetics enable in order to propose alternative ways of being. The disruptions Olson attempts in *Maximus* stand in stark contrast to the personal reflections, observations, and research Williams includes in the first four books of *Paterson*. While Williams’s poem is sharply critical of American capitalism and the destructive effects its cycles visit on the urban landscape, it does not call, like Olson’s, for the taking up of new perspectives on complex forces that influence contemporary individual and social life.

While in Mexico Olson writes a series of letters to Robert Creeley later published as the *Mayan Letters* that include descriptions of his research and wide-ranging discussions of contemporary poetics. In a March 8, 1951 letter he analyzes the relative achievements of Pound’s *Cantos*, Joyce’s *Ulysses* and *Finnegan’s Wake*, and Williams’s *Paterson*. In some ways a “sweeping dismissal” of “inferior predecessors,” as Perloff contends, the letter outlines strengths and failings in Pound, Joyce, and William’s experiments and proposes the terms of his own urban poetics ("Inferior Predecessors" 296-298). Olson writes that a key achievement of *Paterson* is Williams’s “scrupulousness of attention to the objects of which words are to him the nouns” (*Selected Letters* 110-111). This mode of attention differentiates *Paterson* from *The Cantos*, in Olson’s view, because it allows Williams to restore “the

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17 Fredman observes that the relationships American poets have to tradition are fraught. Focusing specifically on Emerson, Thoreau, Williams, Olson and Robert Duncan, he argues that American poets have been consistently preoccupied with constructing traditions that would authorize or “ground” their particular projects. “Unwilling or unable to inherit a tradition that presents itself as a stable ground,” he writes, “our poets invent provisional groundings, while at the same time restless overstepping the limits of any constituted ground” (6-7).
naming force/function of language” and present an “emotional system which is capable of extensions & comprehensions” beyond his particular experiences (Mayan Letters 27-28). Even so, he observes, Williams tries to “BEAT LIFE INTO FORM” by imposing beauty on the “running street of, to the Passaic of (water poisoned with the dead (cats win, in the urbe) and stained with dyes (cats,& industry) the brutal” (Selected Letters 110). Paterson fails, he suggests, because it attempts to establish too direct a correspondence between man and city: “by making his substance historical of one city (the Joyce deal), Bill completely licks himself, lets time roll him under as Ez does not, and thus, so far as what is the more important, methodology, contributes nothing, in fact, delays, deters, and hampers, by not having busted through the very problem which Ez has so brilliantly faced, & beat” (Mayan Letters 28).18

In place of Paterson’s “scrupulous” depiction of a single city, Olson proposes a city poem that brings into immediate relation the historical, cultural, and aesthetic dimensions of human experience. As he explains to Creeley: “I am trying to see how to throw the materials I am interested in so that they take, with all the impact of a correct methodology AND WITH THE ALTERNATIVE TO THE EGO-POSITION” (ML 28-29). Rather expressing or representing subjective experience, in other words, Olson arranges his materials so that they will induce readers to respond critically to the “concerns and experiences of daily life, wherever and however it is lived” (Alcalay 146). Indeed, as he claims in a letter to Creeley, he intends The Maximus Poems to be capacious enough to analyze the “validity of a total life of a people” (Mayan Letters 14). Where Williams struggles to roll “up out of chaos, / a nine months’ wonder, the city / the man, an identity” (P 4), Olson aims to produce a poem of ecological dimensions, “something so open it hangs like the whole fucking universe itself, in itself—trillions or whatever, who cares,” as he explains in a 1958 letter to Ginsberg (Selected Letters 259). Rather than two terms, man and city, The

18 For Olson as for Williams, the poem is coincident with the life of the poet. Olson explains his view to Gerhardt in another letter: “For if Bill, say, & Creeley, and I (who certainly, any of us, are absolutely committed as you are, to the premise that a poem is the man who writes it, that that origin is the single life . . . that, a poem IS integral, and is only a coming and going from the man who makes it” (Selected Letters 125-126).
Maximus Poems center on a “complex of occasions” involving geography, history, infrastructure, and all forms of human endeavor.

Olson spent childhood summers in Gloucester and lived in the city more or less permanently from 1957 until shortly before his death in 1970. He worked for a time as a substitute letter carrier, and, in the words of landscape historian John Stilgoe, never forgot what working for the postal service taught him to do, namely: “to understand the urban landscape in terms not only of streets, but patterns of street addresses [and] the feel of the streets through his boot soles” (Polis Is This). An important center of the transatlantic fishing industry from its founding in 1623 through the nineteenth century, Gloucester declined in importance during the twentieth century through competition with other urban centers. By 1957, as Olson observes in letters to the editor of the Gloucester Daily Times, it was becoming less a place of its own and more and more a part of Boston’s periphery. Olson was deeply troubled by redevelopment projects that were altering Gloucester’s geography in the late 1950s and early 1960s to accelerate its integration in the larger metropolitan region. Historic buildings were being torn down to widen and straighten highways; hillsides were being flattened to make car travel more efficient; and marshes and ponds were being drained to create marketable, developable land. He states his case for the importance of geography and landscape for Gloucester and the lives of its residents in a December 21, 1965 letter to the editor of The Gloucester Times:

Editor: What bastard man today does not know, or his fellows who sell to him abuse in and for him, is the created condition of his own nature. One of these certainly is topography, that is that the shape of things on earth, of his own tools and constructions, the paths he and animals made and the road which followed on and after those earlier means of his own movement, have, like the air and odors of spring and fall, or the difference of light and color when Winter’s air is cold, and like food, and love-making, and children, and a place he lives in, much to do with how alive he himself or her personally is. (Maximus to Gloucester 93)

Olson’s point here is that the dimensions of the environments we inhabit affect our experiences in profound, often unacknowledged ways. Since we develop our understandings of ourselves through our
relations with “the shape of things on earth,” he explains, the shapes of our cities play a large part in our conceptions of the kinds of communities and relationships we conceive of as possible.

He applies a similar critique of instrumentality and short-sightedness in the third of The *Maximus Poems*. Mocking attempts to beautify Gloucester through plantings of “tansy buttons,” small yellow flowers, in the city’s parking lots and newly expanded streets, he contrasts expert and local approaches to urban renewal. “Let those who use words cheap, who use us cheap / take themselves out of the way / Let them not talk of what is good for the city,” he begins:

Let them free the way for me, for the men of the Fort
who are not hired, who buy the white houses

Let them cease putting out words in the public print
so that any of us have to leave, so that my Portuguese leave,
leave the Lady they gave us, sell their schooners
with greyhounds aft, the long Diesels
they put their money in, leave Gloucester
in the present shame of,
the wondership stolen by,
ownership.

(Maximus 13)

Adopting the persona of the “root person in root place,” Olson distinguishes in the poem between projects that use the city as a tool for creating economic growth, on the one hand, and projects that enhance daily life there by responding to everyday concerns, on the other. He worries about influence and displacement, watchwords of contemporary debates about urban renewal, and condemns arguments put out “in the public print” favoring development that would alter Gloucester’s geography. In contrast to expert opinions, he offers his own and fellow residents’ lived experience, things “any knowing man” of the city might report about conditions on the ground and what the city deserves.

Olson’s strongest critique of urban renewal comes in a November 26, 1968 letter to the editor of the *Gloucester Daily Times* protesting the widening of Route 128. “MISTER URBAN RENEWAL / -
PLEASE/DON’T CUT DOWN THE / CHISHOLMS the Printer’s / HOUSE,” he demands in all capitals, then

P.S.: Let not
Urban Renewal
touch anything Decent more
which is Left in the
City

P S 2
WHY NOT let
CHISHOLM’s literally block
the double-laned
or
parkway
HIGHWAY literally
like a Civil Rights
Demonstration –
FOREVER
and but
SOLID
THE BUILDING?
when will FUNDS be
stopped? why NOT
do this MONUMENTAL
THING

(Maximus to Gloucester 143-144)

The jagged form of the letter calls attention to the disruption the widening of Route 128 will cause in Gloucester’s geography. Olson’s fundamental disagreement with the project is that the city government and the developers it has hired are making local changes for regional or even national ends. Rather than studying the city’s historical landscape and the potential effects of their projects on local residents, the developers are working at a region scale, measuring Gloucester’s usefulness in relation to Boston and larger networks of exchange centered there.

He makes a similar point about the relationship between landscape and experience on a personal scale in “Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27 [withheld],” a poem from Book IV of Maximus:

An American
is a complex of occasions
themselves a geometry
of spatial nature.
I have this sense,
that I am one
with my skin

Plus this—plus this:
that forever the geography
which leans in on me I compell
backwards I compell Gloucester
to yield, to
change

Polis
is this

(Maximus 185)

Like the “tools and constructions” Olson mentions in his letters to the editor, the “geometry” and
“geography” of Gloucester in these lines constitute the “created conditions” or “complex of occasions”
of his identity as a resident of the city. Rather than identifying this set of relations as a model for
consciousness, as Williams does with similar relations in Paterson, Olson describes the city as a “skin”
through which he encounters the world. Instead of using Gloucester as a metaphor for himself in
Maximus, as Lytle Shaw explains, Olson attempts to construct a “material understanding” of the city’s
past and present that accounts for both the “material (especially geographical) determinants that
underlie daily life” and also the relation between the city and the “physical conditions” of its possibility,
including “wind patterns, river flows, oceanic tides, [and] mountain shapes” (59, italics in original). Olson
identifies the specific landscape that taught him the “spatial nature” of his experiences earlier
in “Letter 27 [withheld].” Remembering walks with his father along the coast, he writes: “I come back to the
geography of it / . . . / To the left the land fell to the city, / to the right, it fell to the sea.” The sweep of
the land “leans in on” the poet as he tries to situate himself in this landscape years later. Even so, he
“compell[s] Gloucester / to yield to / change” in this present moment so that its material landscape will
bear the memories he holds of his father. Because he has incorporated the “created condition” of the
city’s geography into his understanding of himself in this way, inhabiting Gloucester as a “skin” rather
than as an abstraction, Olson can see problems widening highways and filling the marshes will visit on
the city and its residents that others cannot.

He uses the term “polis” throughout Maximus to denote a kind of seeing that, like the seeing he
practices in Letter 27, measures urban reality as a dynamic relation between human activity and
landscape. The term suggests, as Carla Billitteri explains, “a disposition toward living” that emerges from
a “fluid, utterly dynamic form of communal aggregation” (86). Billitteri locates the force of Olson’s
“disposition” toward Gloucester in his inclusion in The Maximus Poems of the “global context” of the
city’s development: “human migrations (some voluntary, others brutally coerced), transcontinental
venues opened by mercantile trades, the birth and exponential development of capitalism” (87).
Because it aggregates these contexts alongside personal reminiscences and geologic and environmental
determinants, she suggests, Olson’s poetry is both transnational and transhistorical. As such, it enacts
the possibility of thinking through and understanding the world at the human and geologic scales
simultaneously. In fact, as Mark Byers argues, because Olson brings events as distant in time as the
retreat of the last Ice Age, the founding and development of Gloucester, and 1950s urban renewal
projects into such “close relation through their coincidence on the page,” The Maximus Poems function
as a “spatial” intervention in Western teleological thought (264).

The “polis” that emerges in Billitteri’s and Byers’s readings derives directly from the
“composition by field” writing process outlined in “Projective Verse.” Describing the “open” nature of
“projective verse” in that essay, Olson contends that poets must treat “the objects which occur at every
given moment of composition . . . exactly as they do occur therein and not by any ideas or
preconceptions from outside the poem” and further that such objects “must be handled as a series of
objects in field in such a way that a series of tensions (which they also are) are made to hold” (Collected
Prose 243). His description transmutes a temporal process, the development and composition of a
poem, into a spatial form, objects arranged in relation in a “field.” If, as Olson claims elsewhere in the
essay, a poem is “energy transferred from where the poet got it . . . by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader,” reading works in the opposite direction as writing, converting the spatial “tensions” of the poem back into an experience of energy transfer that unfolds in time (Collected Prose 240). Noting this modulation, Fredman describes the exchange of energy in a “projective poem” as an interplay of research and discovery: “for the writer, the epistemological bliss of finding out what one knows through the act of writing is incomparable; the reader, of course, has been proffered the same bliss, although few of us realize that the writer’s joy of recognition infuses the text and waits for us to recognize it” (81). Fredman’s “bliss” is Olson’s “energy,” the hinge that connects relations in time, the necessary condition of writing and reading, and relations in space, the enabling condition of “projective” poetics.

Olson identifies time and space as constitutive elements of projective poetics in his May 1959 “Letter to Elaine Feinstein.” Responding to questions from Feinstein, Olson explains relationships between three areas of concern: “speech rhythms,” a form of measure introduced in “Projective Verse” that follows the “pressures” of the poet’s breath; the emergence of Indo-European languages; and the “archaeology behind our own history proper” (Collected Prose 243; 250-251, emphasis in original). Just as close observation of the material of the kingfisher’s nest exposes the decay at the heart of its existence, Olson argues in the letter that the application of “speech rhythms” as a tool for measuring the world exposes disjunctions in our conventional understandings of language and culture. Emerging from the rhythms of individual experience, “speech rhythms” expose the interconnectedness of the visible and the hidden and signal the seriousness of the task of measuring our relations to particulars of history and geography. Whereas in “Projective Verse” the primary function of a poem is to transfer energy from writer to reader, in the letter, poems takes on additional work, specifically: confronting gaps in historical and geographical renderings of contemporary reality. As tools of analysis and

19 Fredman is paraphrasing an idea from Creeley’s essay “A Sense of Measure.”
investigation, “projective” poems serve poets and readers, in Olson’s account, as means for measuring
the relations between individual experience and immediate and distant history and social structures.

Olson concludes the letter with a new term, “landscape,” which seems to “ground,” to use
Fredman’s term, this investigative measuring:

The other part is certainly ‘landscape’—the other part of the double of the Image to ‘noun.’ By
Landscape I mean what ‘narrative’; scene; event; climax; crisis; hero; development; posture; all
that meant—all the substantive of what we call literary. To animate the scene today: wow: You
say ‘orientate me.” Yessir. Place It!

again
I drag it back: Place (topos, plus one’s own bent plus what one can know, makes it possible to
name. (Collected Prose 252)

Serving as the context or field in which the “noun” or poetic object appears, “landscape” replaces
structures such as narrative, climax, and development that would organize texts and reading
experiences temporally. Olson proposes that texts that avoid these typical structures lead readers to
demand “orientate me” as they work to make meaning. Using landscape or “composition by field” as a
mode of organization is a way to invite readers to situate themselves in relation to both the form and
content of a poem. In other words, landscape or projective poems invite readers to adopt a
“disposition” toward their encounter with the text that involves, as Olson explains, measuring “one’s
own bent plus what one can know,” a disposition, in other words, that involves the possibility of
discovery. Landscape comes up again in a reading list prepared for Ed Dorn, Olson’s student at Black
Mountain College. In part a list of sources, the “Bibliography on America,” as it is titled in the Collected
Prose, also includes advice for Dorn about developing poetic lines of research and inquiry. Citing
Williams’s exploration of local landscapes as archives of American history in In The American Grain and
Paterson, Olson affirms that a central purpose of poetic research is to “get that topographic sense in the
mind as you have it in the feet” (Collected Prose 300). While Olson suggests Williams’s texts are
examples of how “even one of the best men don’t quite make it,” his summary advice signals respect for
Paterson’s methodology: “Best thing to do is to dig one thing or place or man until you yourself know
more abt that than is possible to any other man. It doesn’t matter whether it’s Barbed Wire or Pemmican or Paterson or Iowa. But *exhaust* it. Saturate it. Beat it. And then U KNOW everything else very fast: one saturation job (it might take 14 years). And you’re in, forever!” (*Collected Prose* 300; 306-307, italics in original).

The archaeological “disposition” Olson encourages here, *digging* “one thing or place or man until you yourself know more abt that than is possible to any other man,” is not, as Ammiel Alcalay observes, “happenstance.” Rather, it reflects an insistence on Olson’s part that poets and researchers “allow the objects [of their inquiries] to determine the theory” (Alcalay 85-86). Olson advises Dorn that if he wants to understand American history, he should immerse himself in some particular aspect of it and track the relations between his one object and “everything else” that constitutes its landscape. This is, of course, the methodology of *The Maximus Poems*. Digging into the archives of Gloucester’s geologic and commercial history as well as the archives of lived experience, Olson demonstrates, as Alcalay contends, that poetry can serve as a “fundamental basis for facts and how one absorbs knowledge about the world, how one responds to the world” (113-114). This orientation toward the world and the way Gloucester opens out onto it both historically and geographically differentiates Olson’s poem from *Paterson*. Whereas Williams condenses archival and personal knowledge, especially in his poem’s first four books, into a complex depiction of human consciousness, Olson points to the economic and social relations embedded in Gloucester’s landscape in order to lead his reader to consider what those relations reveal about the past, present, and future dimensions of urban reality.

Gert Buelens links Olson’s methods of research and composition in an essay comparing *The Maximus Poems* to *Paterson* and Hart Crane’s *The Bridge*. Suggesting that the three poets construct different relations between reality and “the ideal,” Buelens argues that while Williams and Crane rely on abstraction, Olson “conscientiously tries to deliver a first-hand account of the world around him” (261). He has in mind the Olson who asserts in an aside in a poem dated February 7, 1966, “(we are speaking
of dailynesses, throughout / this poem)” (Maximus 493), and who explains the work in a subsequent poem as:

An act of “history”, my own, and my father’s
together, a queer [Gloucestor-sense] combination
of completing something both visionary—or illusions (projection? Literally
lantern-slides, on the sheet, in the front-room Worcester,
on the wall, and the lantern always getting too hot
and I burning my fingers—& burning my
nerves     as in fact John says or Vincent Ferrini they too
had to deal with their father’s existence.

(Maximus 495)20

What matters for Buelens about Olson’s integration of “dailynesses” and personal and public history is that his “disposition” toward researching and understanding the city of Gloucester, the “polis” yields poems that “equate vision and reality, polis and eyes.” Olson is a “mapmaker,” in Buelens’s view, who “register[s] features of the world paratactically, without imposing upon the world a subordinating

20 Olson’s references to his father in this poem and elsewhere are important but beyond the scope of my discussion. This poem, in particular, offers a profoundly dark meditation on the nature of patrimony, what the son inherits from the father, and the broader topic of cultural inheritance. Further on in the poem Olson links himself to Leroy Jones (Amiri Baraka) whose father was also a postal worker and felt similarly marginalized. Like Jones, Olson is disgusted at the state of American culture, “this Nation / which never / lets anyone / come to / shore,” and asks:

how many waves
of hell and death and
dirt and shit
meaningless waves of hurt and punished lives shall America
be nothing but the story of
not at all her successes
—I have been—Leroy has been
as we genetic failures are
successes, here
it isn’t interesting,
Yankees—Europeans—Chinese

By the end of the poem, Olson’s reflections contort the verse into a curved shape that eventually capsizes in a simultaneous celebration of his father’s life and contemplation of his own death. (Maximus 494-499)
humanistic order that is not there” (263). Creeley writes in similar terms about Olson’s emphasis on space, landscape, and the work of mapmaking in his introduction to the *Collected Prose*:

> Mapping in all its sense and applications is a primary act both for Olson and for those to whom he pays attention. One recognizes quickly that it is not simply a romantic enterprise he is drawn to, but the need to know by means of a determined *process*, to have been there, as Herodotus got there literally, to make a record of having witnesses one’s self, or heard, or felt, or seen, something uniquely specific to the face one hoped to make particular. (*Collected Prose* xii, italics in original)

Creeley’s and Buelens’s analogies to mapping and mapmaking draw together elements of Olson’s “polis” that emerge in other readings of *The Maximus Poems*: Fredman’s notion that the “polis” provides a spatial grounding for American poetry; Byers’s and Billitteri’s claims for its transhistorical and transnational dimensions; and Alcalay’s sense that it provides a “fundamental basis” for learning about and responding to the world. The analogy also reinforces Olson’s own insistence on immersion in the physical and textual archive as the necessary methodology of his city poem. The mapmaker-poet enacts a belief that reality is “knowable,” or, as Olson explains in a late *Maximus* poem, that:

> Truth [what can also be called, and is so often, to yield the suddenness, and completeness, and thereafter difference in the being (whether it is man or Earth—all the rest is self-declared, and simply will or can reveal itself by Earth & to Man if he chooses.

(*Maximus* 564)

According to this vision, poems provide a means for accessing “truth” as it reveals itself by creating landscapes or fields through which readers can measure the relations between their conscious experiences and the geographic and cultural dimensions that surround them.

Olson refers to himself as a mapmaker in a November 12, 1961 poem placed near the beginning of *Maximus* V. Looking west from Tyre, the Phoenician city where the philosopher Maximus lived and
worked, he asserts, “I am making a mappemunde. It is to include my being. / It is called here, at this point and point of time / Peloria” (*Maximus* 257). The poem describes a voyage across the Mediterranean to the ports of Malta, Marseilles, and Iceland, and finally to “Promontorium Vinlandiae,” the shores of Cape Cod, and “Settlement Cove” in Gloucester. It links three historical moments: the life of Maximus in the second century A.D., Viking voyages in the North Atlantic seven hundred years later, and the British settlement of Gloucester in the early 1600s. Olson borrows the term “peloria” from botany where it refers to a flower that, were it a regular example of its genus and species, would have an asymmetrical form but, through mutation of some kind, appears regular in order to signal the possibility of irregular regularity, of an order that coalesces in particular circumstances rather than in accordance with or through the imposition of an overarching system.

Seemingly linear in its westward progression, the poem intersects an earlier poem, “On first Looking out through Juan de la Cosa’s Eyes,” in a shared civic practice: tossing flowers into the sea to memorialize sailors. Like Maximus, who Olson describes sending “flowers on the waves from the mole / of Tyre,” residents of Gloucester gather each summer, “at the August full,” to “throw flowers” into the Annisquam River, “which, from there, at the Cut, / reach the harbor channel, and go, // these bouquets (there are few, Gloucester, who can afford florists’ prices) / float out / you can watch them go out into, / the Atlantic” (*Maximus* 257; 84). The drift of the flowers south and east from Gloucester harbor into the Atlantic mirrors the voyages north and west from Europe undertaken by the Greek, Viking, and British explorers Olson alludes to in the later poem. Complementary in this sense, the movements of the ships and flowers press outward from the local to the global scene and from the present moment of lived experience backward and forward into broader sweeps of time. The flowers and the ships—and the contexts from which Olson takes them—all are component parts of his “mappemunde,” which, in including his “being” at a specific location, Gloucester, and in a particular moment, either in “August full” or November 12, 1961, suggests a spatialized historical landscape that surrounds the objects on the
surface of the poems. Olson points to “On first Looking out” as perhaps the most successful poem in the second volume of Maximus in his November 1958 letter to Ginsberg (Selected Letters 259). The poem links a number of explorers, including de la Cosa, captain of the Santa Maria and a mapmaker who advocated that the earth was shaped “like a round ball;” Pytheus, who explored the islands of Great Britain in the fourth century BC; and John Cabot, the Italian sailor who reached the North American continent in 1497 on commission from the king of England, with shipbuilder John Lloyd, and various figures from myth: Hercules, Calypso, and unnamed “mermaids & Monsters.” Ranging from Greece to Great Britain to Massachusetts, the poem proceeds, as Williams might have observed, by leaving out specific connections between these figures and asking the reader instead to “leap from one sense impression to another” in moving through the poem’s landscape.

Rather than measuring the dimensions of Gloucester at an abstract distance or imposing a structure of metaphors or correspondences on its “material (especially geographical) determinants” (Shaw 59), Olson embeds himself at particular “point[s] and point[s] in time.” He describes the dimensions of the “system” Maximus constitutes in a late poem dated “April 14 / MDCCCLXVI.” Looking out at the “light signals & mass points” of the night sky over Gloucester, Olson sees the “normal mappings of / inertia & every possible action / of aether and of / change.” The relations of the stars suggest a system for making sense of everyday experience. He overlays three scales of understanding in the second half of the poem: the galactic, the personal, and nuclear.

II

to perambulate the bounds
  closed in both respects
a cosmos
  both laterally &
up & down bonded
  up & down
  determined
  Eternal
  side on side
(Maximus 516)
Recalling “On first Looking out” in its attention to “mapping” and circumnavigation, the poem focuses on the “cosmos” contained in the “up & down” movements of quarks, the smallest of nuclear particles. In mapping “inertia” and “change” across time and space, the poem suggests an urban landscape construction from the “complex of occasions” that grounds human experience across scales and dimensions. “Perambulat[ing] the bounds” of this urban “cosmos” alongside readers rather than defining them or fixing them in place, Olson enacts his commitment to the idea that “no event // is not penetrated, in intersection or collision with, an eternal / event,” as he claims in a January 15, 1962 poem (Maximus 249). He demands that readers approach The Maximus Poems in a similarly open-ended way. Since they are a “saturation job,” the term he uses to encourage Dorn in his research, they activate readers’ senses of empathy, self-awareness, and discovery. The corresponding promise of the poems, as Olson explains in the 1958 letter to Ginsberg cited above, is to provide an experience of how such an accumulation of material as he provides might hang together like the “universe itself” while remaining “as open as, & be[ing] as firmly there as” reality itself (Selected Letters 259).

*Paterson and the “Shrouded Stranger”*

Twenty years old and an undergraduate at Columbia University, Ginsberg reviews Paterson Book I for the *Passaic Valley Examiner*, a local Paterson newspaper, in September 1946. As Jonah Raskin explains, the review is “sharply critical” (70). Labelling the poem “somewhat hazy” and “very complicated,” Ginsberg defends his home city as an “urbane and civilized” community that is “rapidly developing, teeming with prosperity, and noisy with the movements of commerce.” Williams’s poem, he concludes, signals a “stand-off” between the poet, who “doesn’t like what he finds in Paterson,” and residents of city, who “won’t like what [they] find in Dr. Williams” (7). Ginsberg blames the negative tone of the review on bad editing in a journal entry written on the day it was published:
I wrote the review; a neatly balanced, delicate essay in restrained burgher style complaining about Dr. William’s uncharitable position in regard to Paterson’s attempts to spread education to the masses. Published today in the Passaic Valley Examiner and edited by poor Mr. Zimel. It reads juvenile and blatant due to changes, deletions and—mercy me—additions! I should have known better; there is an issue of reaching the masses involved here, perhaps, but really, Allen! This will be a lesson. (Martyrdom 146)

He repeats this claim in a March 1950 letter to Williams, excerpted in Book IV of Paterson: “I went to see you once briefly two years ago (when I was 21), to interview you for a local newspaper. I wrote the story in fine and simple style, but it was hacked and changed and came out the next week as a labored joke at your expense which I assume you did not get to see” (P 173).

Local politics and youthful bravado aside, Ginsberg’s insight about the personal dimensions of Paterson is perceptive. Like Nardi, he senses that one of Williams’s main concerns in the poem is a personal “crisis.”

The Passaic Falls occupies a permanent place among the symbols of the book. Its [sic] exact meaning is not stated by the author, but several interpretations suggest themselves. First, the author is intrigued by the primitive barbarity and the power of this natural phenomenon, which is at the root of our more urbane and civilized development. He regards it, I regret to say, as a symbol for sexual crisis. (7)

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21A note in the Letters section of a subsequent issue suggests that the editors of the Examiner disliked Williams’s poem. The note, which responds to a letter defending the poem and criticizing Ginsberg, cites Randall Jarrell’s account of the declining place of poetry in the American consciousness in his otherwise appreciative review of Paterson in The Partisan Review. The editors write:

We were also impressed by what Mr. Jarrell said elsewhere in the same review: “Why don’t people admit what anybody must know: that here and now most people can’t and don’t read poetry, that the stupidest shepherd or potboy of any other age liked and understood poetry better than the average college graduate today? What does the public do for poets like . . . Mr. Williams . . . except mutter accusingly that it can’t understand them, neglecting to add that it can’t understand Blake or Donne or Hopkins or Shakespeare either? Today poetry, like virtue, is its own reward. The average reader is as likely to understand or honor . . . Mr. Williams . . . as is the average monkey.” (7, ellipses in original)
In Ginsberg’s reading, the conflict between “natural phenomenon” and “civilized development” embedded in Williams’s poem symbolizes failed relationships and their aftermaths.

Despite the patronizing tone of the review, *Paterson* seems to have fired Ginsberg’s poetic imagination. He refers to the poem frequently in his journals from 1949 to 1955, often in connection with his own urban epic, “The Shrouded Stranger.” In a July 1954 entry, for example, he proposes to “recreate Paterson in my own image” by relating “my wanderings and accomplishments in the Great city and otherwhere.” Conceived as a novel, the book is to be an “experiment with a different approach or style” that will show Paterson in a different light. Paterson, of course, is Ginsberg’s hometown, but the titles he brainstorms for the work suggests he has both the city and Williams’s poem in mind: “Paterson Revisited,” “Paterson thru the eyes of one who knew it well,” “Paterson in Heaven,” or “Visions of Paterson, or The Shrouded Stranger of the Night.” (*Early Fifties* 85-86) The link between the projects is particularly clear in a September 1950 entry titled “Notebook for the poem ‘Shroudy Stranger of the Night’” that consolidates fragmentary ideas and influences in an outline for a project intended to “restore a plot to long poetry” since “Stevens, Crane, Pound, Williams, Eliot, St. Perse, etc. have no human plot” (*Martyrdom* 335). Ginsberg explains the goal more concretely in another journal entry, written in the months before he composed “Howl”: “What is needed in a poem is a structure (magical, miracles in the head) of clear rational actualities put next to one another to suggest (in the eclipse of Time between the images) Eternity” (*Mid-Fifties* 137-138). If “Howl” represents, as Breslin explains, a successful juxtaposition of the “visionary and the concrete, the language of mystical illumination and the language of the street,” the “Shrouded Stranger” project is the “poetic laboratory” through which such innovations were forged (97; 93). Defining its scope in relation to *Paterson* over several years, Ginsberg

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22 Writing to Williams five years later, in January 1959, Ginsberg describes “Kaddish” in similar terms: “mostly straight Paterson-Newark narrative . . . history of my mother, my family, my brother working in Newark on an elevator—Paterson scenes, rides thru N.J. to Greystone Hosp, family bedroom puberty secrets, etc. . . . Interspersed with Hebrew mooney hymns, chants & death threnodies for my mother who died 3 years ago in a NY Hospital” (Ginsberg to Williams, January 23, 1959, WCW Papers).
adapts and repurposes Williams’s influence in search of a new poetics aligned with more personal dimensions.

As noted above, Williams uses the figure “Paterson” as a stand-in for both himself as man and poet and for the city from which he takes his name. Ginsberg’s “shrouded stranger,” by contrast, is an externalization of an inward struggle over developing a poetic identity from what, in the early 1950s, were dangerous aspects of his personal experiences. The stranger haunts Ginsberg in the aftermath of his arrest for burglary in April 1949 with Herbert Huncke, Jack Melody, and Priscilla Arminger. He describes the circumstances of the arrest in a long reflection titled “The Fall.” The story begins when Huncke, whom Ginsberg had met through Lucien Carr while a student at Columbia, is released from Riker’s Island. He convinces the poet to allow him to use his apartment as a place to store stolen goods there and stay for extended periods of time. When it becomes clear that Huncke’s activities are attracting police attention, Huncke directs Arminger, Melody, and Ginsberg to help them move the stolen goods to a safer location on Long Island. The day of the move, Melody loses control of his car and crashes after making a wrong turn in Queens. He and Arminger are arrested at the scene, but Ginsberg escapes the accident unhurt and returns home. He is arrested at his apartment later the same afternoon. Through the efforts of his father and professors at Columbia, he is confined for eight months to the inpatient psychiatric unit at the New York Psychiatric Hospital rather than jailed. (Martyrdom 307-313; Raskin 82-89)

In addition to documenting his involvement with Huncke’s circle, “The Fall” also details Ginsberg’s attempts to begin writing a new kind of city poem.

I was thinking of writing a long piece and trying to find some hint or manner or method to harness my energies to extended work. I had hoped to do so in New Orleans. Conditions were not propitious in New York. That was really all I cared or worried about seriously, aside from the state of my soul, which I felt would be helped only by getting down to some real solid work.
However it is just the surface of a deeper sexual problem, a problem of feeling and expressing real human love emotions which cannot be solved in jail. That is why I do and do not want to go to jail. (*Martyrdom* 297)

As the note suggests, he hopes to “harness” his energies in the new poem toward addressing and managing the “deeper sexual problem” of reconciling homosexual desire and heterosexual conventions. Even before his arrest, Ginsberg had begun to keep a set of notes “put down in all their reality, artistic or not, against the day when I would be able to use them for a large autobiographical work of fiction,” a project he believed would only come to fruition when he felt “enough at peace with myself and self-satisfied to actually be able to conceive myself as a hero of a book” (*Martyrdom* 302). In the weeks before the accident, he gathers these notes and related letters and journal entries—“hot” manuscripts, as he calls them—in a plain envelope and makes plans to hide them at his brother Eugene’s (*Martyrdom* 309). He loses most of the material in the accident.

The “shrouded stranger” appears for the first time in Ginsberg’s journals soon after the events documented in “The Fall,” during the poet’s stay at the New York Psychiatric Hospital. At first a “phantom who will appear at his own desire” (*Martyrdom* 325), Ginsberg portrays the figure as a stranger walking down Paterson’s River Street at night in an October 1949 prose poem:

> He wandered moodily along the hedged rural avenues of the outer night shadowed areas of Silk City passing one by one the familiar mansions of the mysterious order of the Masons, the secret Romanesque pile of the church, and among these many hoarily conceived relics of time, the gloomy funeral home with its shaded and curtained inner sanctum wherein no man knew what mortal fleshy rituals were enacted over the surrendered bodies of the dead, beyond shuddering mills where the patient silken labors of the ancient worm were manufactured further into the brocaded winding sheets to cover the dead and living, beyond the last block of River Avenue where the petalled lamplit radiance of the mist wave blooms [above] the Great Falls, and he did enter into the very hood of its whiteness, and stand meditating hidden like an ancestral traveler of the night come at last upon the end of his pilgrimage unto a palmy oasis of light, upon the barren firmamental plain of his eternity. (*Martyrdom* 327)

In a revised, lineated version of the poem, he identifies the figure as the “Shrouded Stranger.” The stranger revels in the mystical resonance of the architecture and geography of the “Silk City,” especially
the “petalled lamplit radiance” of Paterson’s falls. Ginsberg confirms the city’s epic dimensions by describing the stranger’s walk as a “pilgrimage” to the “plain of his eternity.” (Martyrdom 493-94) The poem is the first draft of a larger project that will eventually grow to encompass a network of cities across the United States. Like Williams’s “Paterson,” who is seen “standing, shrouded there, in that din” above the falls in Book I, the stranger takes various forms in later versions of the poem, becoming a predator “whoring into the night” and an “abhorred” figure consumed by shame in later iterations (P 39; Collected Poems 26; 47).

Ginsberg sends Williams a new “Shrouded Stranger” poem, composed in rhymed quatrains as part of the group of poems later published as The Gates of Wrath, in March 1950. In the accompanying letter, which Williams excerpts in Paterson Book IV, Ginsberg summarizes the poem as “the shroudy stranger speaking from the inside of the old wracked bum of a paterson or anywhere in america.” Bringing such a “bum of paterson” to voice, Ginsberg suggests, makes him “one actual citizen of your community [who] has inherited your experience in his struggle to love and know his own world-city, through your work.” (P 173-4) What had been in the earlier prose poem a tentative embrace of urban mystery becomes a frank meditation on shame and solitude:

Who’ll go out whoring into the night
On the eyeless road in the skinny moonlight
Maid or dowd or athlete proud
May wanton with me in the shroud

Who’ll come lie down in the dark with me
Belly to belly and knee to knee
Who’ll look into my hooded eye
Who’ll lie down under my darkened thigh? (Collected Poems 26)

Suffused with a “gloomy consciousness of temporality and death,” the poem invokes a mood of penitence and suffering. It is typical of the poems of The Gates of Wrath in this respect, as Breslin suggests, because it represents a “willed effort to lift the vulnerable, agonized human self out of space,
out of time, into the more secure mansions of eternity” (84). In the final stanza, Ginsberg seems to wince at his experiences with Huncke and his circle. “Who’ll look into my hooded eye,” he asks, worrying that his involvement with the “shrouded stranger” and his urban milieu has diverted his energies from more productive poetic experiments.

The “Stranger” symbolizes failure and regret in an expanded and revised version of the poem Ginsberg shares with Williams in March 1952. Published a decade later in *Empty Mirror*, the poem describes an encounter with the “stranger” at Paterson’s “city dump” that leads Ginsberg to acknowledge the limits of his earlier ambitions. Prompted by a dream, the poet searches the city for the “stranger.” When he finds him, “trembling” in the rain “under an iron viaduct,” he discovers that rather than an external influence, such as Huncke or Williams’s “Paterson,” the “stranger” is instead an aspect of himself. The encounter constitutes the third of the poem’s four sections:

> I dreamed I was dreaming again  
> and decided to go down the years  
> looking for the Shrouded Stranger.  
> I knew the old bastard  
> was hanging around somewhere.  
> I couldn’t find him for a while,  
> went looking under beds,  
> pulling mattresses off,  
> and finally discovered him  
> hiding under the springs  
> crouched in the corner:  
> 
> met him face to face at last.  
> I didn’t even recognize him.  
> 
> “I’ll bet you didn’t’ think  
> it was me after all,” he said.  
> 
>(Collected Poems 48)

In some ways a “rescue operation” that transforms the symbolic lamentations of 1949-1950 into straightforward narrative, the new poem sketches an even longer version yet to come (Breslin 91). It is a “raw-sketch practice poem,” as Ginsberg describes it, which proposes a transformation of the
“Shrouded Stranger” from a haunting “hollow voice” into fully realized autobiographical figure, a transformation which begins in conversation with Williams about the relative importance of plot and “measure” in long poetry a year earlier. Accepting Williams’s challenge of shaping “symbols” into “things,” Ginsberg considers new dimensions for the “Shrouded Stranger” project in his journal. He questions the relationship between the story he expects to tell in the poem and the “history of poetic language and wonders whether shifting his conception of the stranger will permit him to “transfigure” his poetics: “Conversation with Williams—don’t know Eliot isn’t right? His suggestion—transfigured—(measure). As I transfigure the shrouded stranger, I transfigure the verse [. . .] Begin with symbols and end with things” (*Martyrdom* 342).

Breslin notes a resemblance between Ginsberg’s “Shrouded Stranger” poems and Williams’s early autobiographical poem “The Wanderer: A Rococo Study.” Though Ginsberg’s project collapses “under the weight of its own ambitions,” he continues, in particular in the notes he keeps about it in his journals, the “Shrouded Stranger” serves as an “important poetic laboratory . . . a place for experiments in spontaneous writing and intimate revelation” (93). Section Four of the *Empty Mirror* version of the poem outlines the parameters of an expanded project:

*Fragmenta Monumenti*

It was to have a structure, it was going to tell a story; it was to be a mass of images moving on a page, with a hollow voice at the center it was to have told of Time and Eternity; to have begun in the rainfall’s hood and moon, and ended under the street light of the world’s bare physical appearance; begun among vultures in the mountains of Mexico, traveled through all America and ended in garbage on River Street; its first line was to be
“Be with me Shroud, now—"
and the last “—naked
on broken bottles
between the brick walls,"
being THE VISION OF
THE SHROUDED STRANGER OF THE NIGHT
(Collected Poems 48)

Merging the “stranger” into the poet’s own identity, the sketch represents “an attempt to objectify autobiography” (Breslin 94). It follows-up an ambition recorded in a November 1951 journal entry that “perhaps form should be life work of A.G entitled ‘Journal of the Shroudy Stanger’ telling my most secret ambitions and vagaries” (Martyrdom 344). At the same time that it expands the potential geographic scope of the project to include all of North America, it is, as the title of the final section indicates, a fragment.

Ginsberg works closely with Williams during spring 1952 to revise the manuscript of Empty Mirrors, including the four-part “Shrouded Stranger” poem, for publication. Reflecting on the “Shrouded Stranger” project and Williams’s response to it during this period of revision, Ginsberg notes that the older poet seems engaged in a similar struggle to render personal experiences in his poetry. “The difficulty,” as he explains in an April 1952 journal entry, “is finding what is real in a book and inventing out of our own existence its core and purity putting it on paper. I keep thinking, after W.C.W, that is what other people are interested in” (Martyrdom 363). Williams advocates cuts in many of the poems, promising Ginsberg that “if you cut down everything no joking, no looseness, your book has a chance of making some kind of impression different from the general run” (Martyrdom 383). The “leaness” he insists on is “painful” to Ginsberg; the cuts make him feel “twisted and deformed, a cripple mental case” because they exclude so much detail from experience (Martyrdom 382). Ginsberg accepts Williams’s revisions and discovers, as he records in his journal, a conception of the post as more than a “mere conduit for reality from air to paper—a machine, an electrical wire” (Martyrdom 375). For Breslin, these
reflections mark Ginsberg’s application of Williams’s notion of form as a means of discovery for “confessional and visionary” purposes (97).

The changes Ginsberg made to “Shrouded Stranger” project through consultation with Williams on the manuscript of *Empty Mirror* extend an earlier trajectory of development triggered by encounters with Huncke and his circle in New York City. In “Ode to Decadence,” an apprentice poem written in 1946 but unpublished during his lifetime, Ginsberg presents a different vision of urban reality than exists in any of his published work. Unlike the “Shrouded Stranger,” which centers on Paterson, the “Ode” moves from suburban New Jersey into the center of New York City. The poem begins with the invocation of a city of terrifying dimensions.

This fabulous, unfathomable city;  
City of concrete images and mirrors;  
City of spiritual magic and general sorrow,  
Cleaving to one adventure, personal  
Trial and panoramic comedy;  
This pinnacle of agony of youths  
Potentially heroical; this port  
Of seasonal departures, this starry island.  

*(Martyrdom 419)*

The young hero of the poem is a “pure, romantic youth” who hews to the “stranger haunted sidestreets” and discovers a vision of “past-enchanted wandering,” “present hopelessness,” and “future loss.” Hunke’s apartment, a boarding house in Time’s Square, is “right around block” wherever the youth finds himself in the city, a place of escape and solace where marijuana and other drugs enable “false communion.” *(Martyrdom 420-426)* Recalling Williams’s “The Wanderer: A Roccoco Study,” as Breslin suggests, the “Ode” fuses anxiety, geography, and experience in a narrative of the initiation of an innocent young man into a fallen urban world.

Over the course of the “Ode,” Ginsberg describes joining the “posse of the damned,” an urban subculture to use Claude Fischer’s term, who see the “dying city” for what it is and use it
Recalling Whitman, Baudelaire, and Lorca, the poem celebrates gritty and surreal urban spectacles while at the same time warning about what the uninitiated stand to lose through immersion in them. It culminates in a litany of mirrors symbolizing decay, vice, and the futility of attempting to discover the “gleaming core of fate” that underlies the urban scene. “For of the city of reflective light,” Ginsberg suggests, “its mirrors are its greatest invocations” (Martyrdom 424).

Anticipating the landscape and cadence of “Howl,” the “Ode” introduces “prophets, raging in their sidestreet rooms,” “men of shadows; . . . / performing orgies in secluded corners,” and “agile fauns who danced the year away / Upon the Brooklyn Bridge, in bars and parks, / On avenues in love with self and stone.” Their fallen world is contrasted to the innocent solitude of the “children of despair” who possess souls of “power and creativeness” and resist the tragic indifference that surrounds them. (Martyrdom 425-426) The choice these children face between maintaining their innocence or submitting to the temptations on offer at “Huncke’s pad” mirrors, to apply the poem’s central symbol, the choice Ginsberg faces in developing his poetic identity, as he signals in a series of questions that form the climax of the “Ode”:

Who am I there, intense, assuming, and Semitic? Laughing child of affection, Confidently grimacing, intending compliments? Or paranoiac snickering to myself, Lowering eyelids before the mirror, Sneering, knowing of my own presumption? Or am I hero there, haunting self In mirrors, moved, and even weeping now, Recognizing my own tragical, Pathetic face apart? And now again Myself, self aggrandizing, avaricious, Sensually craving for affection? Or this my soul, O vision of the mirror,

23 Fischer argues that the presence of subcultures explains why higher rates of deviant behavior are observed in cities than in other geographic areas. He challenges Louis Wirth’s claims in the 1938 essay “Urbanism as a Way of Life” that urban alienation and anonymity are the root causes of unconventional behaviors. Fischer suggests that rather than these factors, it is the density of urban populations and the likelihood that like-minded individuals will find each other that promotes such behaviors. (1324-1325)
This moodful and despondent visage,
Tranquil with remoteness and departure?
How shall I seek; and what identity
May I assume? For now I am unwhole,
Unfound, and unreflected in myself,
Multiple-masked, indecisive in desiring—

(Martyrdom 425)

Characterizing the tumult in his mind as “paranoiac snickering,” Ginsberg recognizes that what he feels is most authentic in himself—his intensity, sensuality, and presumption—are qualities that align him with Huncke and other “men of shadows.” The city mirrors these qualities back to him, which, in turn, forces him to recognize that until he allows them to guide his behaviors and poetry, he will be “unwhole / Unfound, and unreflected,” in other words, a stranger to himself.

Despite its ambition, the “Ode” fails, in Ginsberg’s view, because it relies on symbols rather than “clear rational actualities.” As he explains in an October 1950 journal entry, over time he comes to understand it as an attempt to escape reality by rendering it in verse: “I realized that all along when I was fighting off recognition of the reality of the world of appearances that my poetry was an escape from it.” As its questions about identity suggest, the “Ode” exposes conflicts within the poet and in his relation to the city. It offers beauty and temptation in equal measure and confronts him with the reality of his desires. Rather than absorbing what he learns about himself through Huncke’s circle, however, Ginsberg refracts the possibility he has become a member of their community into the poem’s symbolic mirrors, replacing lived experience with poetic abstraction. He resolves to integrate the experiential and the poetic in future work:

I shall try to set down in these notes (for a poem perhaps) the situation as it stands, admitting, for once, that I am weak and not strong. For all that I have mythologized myself (both poetically and theologically) and elevated my weakness to dignity as perception of absolute divine world and contempt or lamblike weakness in real world others live in, now that the transfiguration to acceptance has taken place, and become real, I am no different from other men whose
sufferings were like mine, which they understood without my confusion; and they accept the mortal lot without so much of the painful selfhood preservation that I allow myself. (*Martyrdom* 335)

Proposing to record his experience of the world “as it stands” rather than transforming it into poetry, Ginsberg outlines a writing practice that shapes the “Shrouded Stranger” project and comes to fruition in “Howl” and later city poems. As much as the discoveries recorded in the entry pertain to Ginsberg’s “acceptance” that he is “no different from other men whose sufferings” are like his, they also represent a changed understanding of the dimensions of urban experience. The city of the “Ode” is primarily a city of dark alleys and secret rooms that offers refuge for urban subcultures. Just as Ginsberg recognizes he has “mythologized” himself in the poetry leading up to *Empty Mirror*, he sees that he has “mythologized” the city, as well.

Ginsberg urges Williams to adopt a similar attitude toward the city in his poetry during the same period. In a June 1950 letter, for example, he criticizes *Paterson* for its limited geographic reach. He asks the older poet if he knows the area around “the great Mill and River streets” and encourages him to visit the area’s bars and jazz clubs because they are “at the heart of what is to be known” about the city.24 Williams changes Ginsberg’s phrase “what is to be known” to “what is to be seen” in *Paterson*, suggesting that while loitering with an “incoherent bartender” at work “in a taproom overhanging the river” is equivalent, for the younger poet, of knowing the heart of the city, Williams’s search for understanding extends beyond the everyday. He knows firsthand experience an element of Paterson’s culture that the older poet has not explored. Williams incorporates excerpts from the letter in Book IV and surrounds Ginsberg’s enthusiasm for River Street with sobering details about the area’s history from

24 The original letter is held at the William Carlos Williams Papers at Yale University. Ginsberg’s description of what he has seen on River Street recalls the litany of New York City sites he describes in “Ode to Decadence,” an important precursor to “Howl,” especially the symbolic mirrors with which that poem concludes.
1791 to the present, with a particular the sordidness the city’s development wrought on the “beautiful wilderness” that preceded it (P 192). He quotes from newspaper accounts of two murders committed nearby one hundred years apart, one in 1850 and the other in September 1950. While Williams uses Ginsberg’s letter to incorporate River Street, as a location, into his poem, his history lesson renders the richness of area’s culture and community marginal to his portrayal of the city.25

Two years later in February 1952, Williams queries Ginsberg’s father about the possibility of arranging a tour of River Street. He speculates that the area and its community might change the shape of his city poem: “I have been thinking of your son recently and shall want to get in touch with him before long . . . I don’t know what the joint [on River Street] is like or whether we’d be welcome there, but if it’s something to experience and to see I’d like to see it for I want to make it the central locale for a poem which I have in mind—a sort of extension of Paterson” (quoted in Mariani 702). They visit the area in the spring of 1952, at the same time they are working together on preparing Empty Mirror for publication, but come away dissatisfied with the experience. Ginsberg recommends another bar to Williams in an unpublished August 10, 1952 letter:

If you have not left for Washington and you possibly can make a trip into Paterson to see a final sight, the great jazz negro bar, the Bobaloo, on 12th Ave. between Graham Ave. and East 18th, is in full swing now. Everything was actually rather dead on River Street when we went by. Try making a solitary trip in on a Saturday night and see it by yourself, the Bobaloo, I mean. I was there last night and had a good time. I think you really should if you can. (Ginsberg to Williams, WCW Papers)

If the younger poet fails in his first attempt to introduce Williams to a new “central locale,” he succeeds in shifting his mentor’s understanding of the dimensions of his poetic subject. Similarly, if Williams fails

25 I am grateful to Christopher Patrick Miller, University of California-Berkeley, for pointing out the subcultural dimension of Ginsberg’s references to River Street.
to contain the younger poet’s exuberant experimentation with the poetic line, he shapes Ginsberg’s sense of the scale. Instead of being a secluded alley where the “Shrouded Stranger” can retreat after his secrets are found out or a forbidden neighborhood “Paterson” avoids because of what he knows of its reputation, River Street becomes for both poets a place of encounter and a site of mutual influence.

In Poetic License, Marjorie Perloff suggests that “Howl” is “one link in the larger autobiographical chain that constitutes” Ginsberg’s poetry (200). She notes that “Paterson,” a short poem included in Empty Mirror, marks a beginning of the chain and represents an early experiment with the prosodic techniques of “Howl” (207). Like the last of the “Shrouded Stranger” poems, “Paterson” extends beyond Ginsberg’s home city to other places, Cincinnati, Denver, Galveston, and Los Angeles.

The long lines and frank references to drug use and sexuality anticipate “Howl.”

I would rather go mad, gone down the dark road to Mexico, heroin dripping in my veins, eyes and ears full of marijuana, eating the god Peyote on the floor of a mudhut on the border or laying in a hotel room over the body of some suffering man or woman; rather jar my body down the road, crying by a diner in the Western sun; rather crawl on my naked belly over the tincans of Cincinnati; rather drag a rotten railroad tie to a Golgatha in the Rockies . . . .

(Collected Poems 40)

It’s hunger for experience and urge to travel contrasts with the stifling enclosure of other poems in the collection, “Sunset,” for example, which compares a trip from New York City back to Paterson to a descent into industrial confinement:

Sunset

The whole blear world of smoke and twisted steel around my head in a railroad car, and my mind wandering past the rust into futurity: I saw the sun go down in a carnal and primeval world, leaving darkness to cover my railroad train because the other side of the
world was waiting for dawn.  

(Collected Poems 37)

For Perloff, Ginsberg’s poems, starting with “Howl,” convey an “extraordinary sense of the moment” that cuts through lingering anxieties and frustrations, placing the poet “at the center of the vortex” and producing a centripetal force that binds their observations into a “living whole” (Poetic License 215; 221, italics in original). “Never the poet of collage, of fragment, of layering and splicing,” in Perloff’s view, Ginsberg adapts techniques, like Whitman’s long line and Williams’s modes of observation, that enable him to fully integrate everyday experience in coherent and balanced poetic forms (Poetic License 222).

The unity of Ginsberg’s city poems represents an adaptation of the poetics of accumulation Williams practices in Paterson. Rather than putting the city at the center of his poem in order to objectify the contents of his mind, as Williams had in Paterson Books I-IV, Ginsberg puts himself at the center in order to discover and expose the contents of the larger culture. Though the encyclopedic array of historical and contemporary details in Paterson is dazzling, the poem fails, in Ginsberg’s view, because it lacks “beat,” a quality that would bring readers inside its dimensions. As he explains in a 1951 letter to Ezra Pound, Williams “did everything he could to sacrifice longing for irrelevant metaphysics and imaginative splendor in language to get at truth, but that’s one phase, step, for him, and the local scene is covered. And he has no bounce, no beat (I’m not talking about iambic). Maybe I’m asking too much (not of him but next year’s poetry)” (Letters 73). He asserts a similar criticism to in an unpublished 1955 letter to Williams explaining the form of measure he uses in “Howl”:

Am reading Whitman through, note enclosed poem on same, saw your essay a few days ago, you do not go far enough, look what I have done with the long line. In some of these poems it seems to answer your demand for a relatively absolute line with a fixed base, whatever it is (I am writing this in a hurry finally to get it off, have delayed for too long)—all held within the elastic of the breath, though of varying lengths. The key is in Jazz choruses to some extent; also
to reliance on spontaneity & expressiveness which long line encourages; also to attention to interior unchecked logical mental stream. With a long line comes a return, (caused by) expressive human feeling, it’s generally lacking in poetry now, which is inhuman. The release of emotion is one with rhythmical building of long line. (Ginsberg to Williams, December 9, 1955, WCW Papers)

Citing the “spontaneity & expressiveness” of jazz, the “interior unchecked logical mental stream,” and the “elastic of the breath” as the governing principles of his long line, Ginsberg connects his use of the line to Williams’s late-career exploration of variable measure. At the same time, he distinguishes his experiments with “expressive human feeling” from the “inhuman” order of Williams’s own.

The Late Style of Paterson Book V

Williams wrote important poetry in the ten years between Books IV and V of Paterson, including The Desert Music (1954), Journey to Love (1955), and many of the short poems published in 1962’s Pictures from Brueghel for which he was posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize. Utilizing a triadic, step-down line first employed in Paterson Book II, these collections are distinctly personal and charged with emotion. For example, in the famous long poem “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower” Williams confesses his love for his wife and acknowledges infidelities while also meditating on nuclear war. In “The Sparrow,” he explores his fraught relationship with his father. Beginning in conflicting emotions, many of the poems of The Desert Music and Journey to Love move toward resolution and renewal, perhaps not unexpected trajectories given they were composed while the poet was recovering from a major stroke and depression that resulted in an 8-week hospitalization.26 By contrast, some poems from the period,

26 Mariani chronicles this period of Williams’s life in relation to the composition of The Desert Music and Journey to Love (630-694).
especially *Paterson* Book V, voice the kinds of “intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction” that Edward Said suggests are characteristic of “late style” (7).  

After completing *Paterson* Book IV in fall 1950, Williams gave a series of readings and lectures on the West Coast, including one at the University of Washington where he had read “The Poem as a Field of Action” in 1948, and others at the University of Oregon, Reed College, and UCLA. Before returning to New Jersey, he and his wife stopped for several days in El Paso to visit long-time friend Robert McAlmon. Williams describes part of the visit, an evening trip across the Mexican border, in 1951’s “The Desert Music,” his first new poem after Book IV (Mariani 622). The party, which included Williams, Floss, McAlmon, and four others, walked across a bridge from El Paso, ate dinner in Juarez, and then returned home the same night (Mariani 626). In part a meditation on poetics, the poem centers on a “form / propped motionless” on the bridge, as Williams explains:

Wait!  
The others waited while you inspected it,  
on the very walk itself.  

Is it alive?  

—neither a head,

---

27 Peter Middleton applies Said’s rubric to “The Desert Music” (169-71). He focuses on the irony in Williams’s juxtaposition of lyric poetry and the everyday “soundscape” of Juarez, Mexico. I am using Said’s conception of “late style” in a broader sense to suggest that Williams’s poetry after *Paterson* Book IV represents a reassertion of lessons from his career-long experiments with poetic language he saw being surpassed, in particular, in the city poems of Olson and Ginsberg, after 1950.

28 Mariani describes the trip in detail in *William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked* (623-627).

29 Williams met McAlmon in New York in 1920 and, for the next year until McAlmon left for Paris, co-published with him the small magazine *Contact*. The two remained friends and correspondents for 30 years (Mariani 172-179). Williams identifies McAlmon, along with Pound and Charles Demuth, as one of the very few “intimate” male friends he enjoyed over the course of his life (A 55). He describes their work on *Contact* in 1920-21, as well as their interactions in Paris and New York in ensuing decades, throughout the *Autobiography* (A 173-179 and passim). He remembers McAlmon “grinning up the platform” in El Paso when they arrived in 1950 (A 388). Eric White relates McAlmon’s career as a publisher in 1920s Paris to his own experimental works. *Contact* Editions, McAlmon’s company, published Williams’s *Spring and All*, Gertrude Stein’s *The Making of Americans*, and other modernist works before ceasing operations in 1929.
legs nor arms!

It isn’t a sack of rags someone
has abandoned here . . . torpid against
the flange of the supporting girder . . . ?

an inhuman shapelessness,
knees hugged tight up into the belly

Egg-shaped!

(PB 108)

The figure on the bridge attracts the poet’s attention because it is “shapeless” and unidentifiable, “too small for a man. / A woman. Or a very shriveled old man. / Maybe dead” (PB 110). Exploring the new and unfamiliar territory of the desert borderlands south of El Paso, Williams orients himself by examining the figure, “recognizing and maintaining [its] unique particulars” in his mind as he looks (Bremen 161). While his description of the figure suggests the possibility of empathic connection, the poet remains at a distance, measuring it in relation to the surrounding landscape.

Later in the poem Williams describes a dancer his party sees at a bar before dinner in similar terms. As with the figure on the bridge, he maintains at a careful distance throughout the encounter and calls attention to ambiguities in her appearance.

Do you mean it?  Wow!  Look at her.

You’d have to be
pretty drunk to get any kick out of that.
She’s no Mexican. Some worn-out trouper from
the States. Look at those breasts.

(PB 114)

While the dancer is clearly a woman, she is, like the figure on the bridge, out of place: an American stripper in a Mexican club whose “worn-out” breasts are enticing only to the drunkest patrons. In addition to her breasts, Williamscatalogues her hips, belly, eyes, feet, and the “bright-colored candy / of her nakedness” (PB 114-116). He challenges himself in the midst of this description for objectifying the dancer and seeks an explanation in poetics:
In the street it hit me in the face as we started to walk again. Or am I merely playing the poet? Do I merely invent it out of whole cloth? I thought.

What in the form of an old whore in a cheap Mexican joint in Juarez, her bare can waggling crazily can be so refreshing to me, raise to my ear so sweet a tune, built of such slime?

(PB 116)

He hears “another music” in the dancer’s movements that enables him to integrate her out-of-placeness into the landscape of his poem, an inspiration that hits him “in the face” when he joins the rest of the party outside. It is a troubling kind of inspiration, though, because, as Williams acknowledges, its source is the debasement of an “old whore” in the “slime” of a “cheap Mexican joint in Juarez.” In the poem he tests the possibility that “in her mockery of virtue / she becomes unaccountably virtuous” but cancels it a few lines later: “Let’s get out of this” (PB 116).

The scene and, in particular, the suggestion that the dancer’s “virtue” derives from her debasement, recapitulate the “Beautiful Thing” section of Paterson Book III and anticipate lines from the final section of Book V that characterize the male viewpoint on marriage: “every married man carries in his head / the beloved and sacred image / of a virgin // whom he has whored” (P 231). As Williams writes elsewhere in Book V, the whore and the virgin are two components of an “identity” he both seeks and struggles to disentangle as he expands Paterson but from which he expects he “will not succeed in breaking free” (P 208). The Juarez dancer, like the “young woman / with rounded brow / lost in the woods (or hiding)” in the Unicorn Tapestries, reminds Williams, at 67, to keep his “pecker up / whatever the detail!” (P 234). But even as she provokes a sexual response—or rather, even as Williams defines her and many of the women in Paterson through their compromised sexuality—, the dancer turns the poet on to something fundamental about Juarez and the surrounding landscape. By the end of “The Desert Music,” in fact, when Williams and his companions cross back to El Paso, her dance becomes a
“protecting music” that surrounds the “shapeless” figure slumped on the bridge, transforming it from a corpse to a “child in the womb.”

There it sat
in the projecting angle of the bridge flange
as I stood aghast and looked at it—
in the half-light: shapeless or rather returned
to its original shape, armless, legless,
headless, packed like the pit of a fruit into
that obscure corner—or
a fish to swim against the stream—or
a child in the womb prepared to imitate life,
warding its life against
a birth of awful promise. The music
guards it, a mucus, a film that surrounds it,
a benumbing ink that stains the
sea of our minds—to hold us off—shed
of a shape close as it can get to no shape,
a music! A protecting music

(PB 119-20)

Lacking a discernable body, the slumped figure is given “shape” by the dancer’s movements and resonates with her music. The description suggests a child dripping with amniotic fluid in the moments after birth. Indeed, Williams is overcome, at the poem’s conclusion, by the “birth of awful promise” the figure portends.

The mood of the second encounter on the bridge resembles the apocalyptic anxiety of Yeats’s “Second Coming” and, at the same time, the confident anticipation of the “Preface” to Paterson: “Yet there is / no return: rolling up out of the chaos, / a nine months’ wonder” (P 4). Despite the moment’s ominous possibilities, the “protecting” music carries Williams’s mind to his identity and practice as a poet. “I am a poet! I am. I am a poet!” he affirms, and then condenses impressions gathered over the course of the evening in a final reflection on craft:

Now the music volleys through as in
a lonely moment I hear it. Now it is all
about me. The dance! The verb detaches itself
seeking to become articulate.
And I could not help thinking
of the wonders of the brain that
hears that music and of our
skill sometimes to record it.

(PB 120)

Peter Middleton describes “The Desert Music” as a staging of the “verbal and sonic diversity” of poetry within the “beguiling cacophony of an acoustic space” and suggests that Williams’s experiment with the various music of Juarez “might help us imagine more realistically the actuality of any public sphere where poetry has to hold its own in performance” (176). Perhaps to reinforce the variety of Juarez or the varied impressions he took from the visit, Williams connects three artistic modes in the poem: hearing music; seeing dance; and writing poetry.

Williams’s descriptions of the Unicorn Tapestries in Paterson Book V follow the multimodal model introduced in “The Desert Music,” contrasting sharply with the speculative observations of Books I-IV and the personal and ecological approaches Ginsberg and Olson apply in their own city poems. Depicting a hunt in which a unicorn is wounded, fights back, is betrayed by a virgin maiden and killed, then resurrected and kept in a pen at the castle, the tapestries appear throughout Book V, interwoven with reflections on visual art and everyday experience. Williams refers to six of the seven tapestries in Book V, but rather than focusing on the famous seventh tapestry, which depicts a wounded unicorn in captivity, he concludes Paterson with a meditation on the two surviving fragments of the fifth in the sequence.  

The first fragment, from the left side of the original fifth tapestry, depicts a male courtier carrying a staff and blowing a horn. Having found the unicorn in the woods, he calls to the hunters to bring them near. In the second fragment, the unicorn is attended by a woman in an elegant red dress

30 Weaver and MacGowan identify some of the references: “The Unicorn is Found” (P 213); “The Unicorn is Attacked” (P 206); “The Unicorn Defends Itself” (P 207); “The Mystic Capture of the Unicorn” (P 213; 233-34); “The Unicorn is Killed and Brought to the Castle” (P 231-33); and “The Unicorn in Captivity” (P 209; 229) (Weaver 218; MacGown 296; 306). There does not seem to be a direct allusion to the first tapestry, “The Hunters Enter the Woods,” in the poem. Images of the tapestries and a description of the narrative are available at <http://www.metmuseum.org>.
who also seems to be signaling the hunters and two dogs who are licking its wounds. A third figure, the maiden who has pacified the unicorn after it escaped, wounded, from the earlier stages of the hunt, is barely visible at the right edge of the fragment. Only her hand and arm can be seen. Williams focuses on the maiden in Book V, questioning her complicity in the hunt—is she “lost in the woods (or hiding)”?

and calling for her to “come out of it if you call yourself a woman” (P 234). Though traditionally she symbolizes the Virgin Mary, for Williams, she is a late representation of the “Beautiful Thing” that had been at the center of Paterson’s first four books. Indeed, in Book V she stands in for both Nardi, a woman described in an earlier passage as someone Williams had “neglected / to put to bed in the past” (P 227), and Ginsberg, identified in the passage as a “young man / sharing the female world / in Hell’s despight” (P 234). The maiden’s absence from the scene makes it impossible for Williams to blame her for unicorn’s capture. No longer a clear case of a man debasing natural beauty or of a city ruining a marriage, Williams’s account of the scene suggests what Olson would call a “complex of occasions”: the maiden is both virgin and whore; the unicorn is both victim and hero; the poet is both male and female.

Quoting from a 1956 letter to Denise Levertov written while he was working on Book V, Mariani suggests that Williams ultimately rejected the “sterile androgynetic mode” of Books I-IV in favor of a conception of poetic identity that involves the “complementation” and “interpenetration” of masculine and feminine drives and characteristics (711). He further argues that Williams uses the Unicorn Tapestries in Book V in order to break down or “decreate” the symbolic order of Books I-IV so that readers might see “instead” the particulars of a place: a “French landscape people by fifteenth-century kings and huntsmen and women” or, more exactly, a retired doctor standing in a New York City museum contemplating such a landscape as depicted in the Unicorn Tapestries (700). The gesture represents the fulfillment of Nardi’s call for unifying poetry and everyday life and bears the influence of both Ginsberg’s and Olson’s experimental urban poetics. Like Gloucester’s landscape in The Maximus Poems, the tapestries serve as a site of convergence where figures from Paterson, for example, Nardi, Ginsberg,
Williams, and the “Beautiful Thing,” intermingle. To the degree that they show an artwork condensing from a specific reality, they also permit Williams to refresh his inaugurating intention for *Paterson*: “to make a start, / out of the particulars / and make them general / rolling up the sum” (*P* 3). Most importantly, they provide an alternative to the “shrouded” analogies that govern Books I-IV, allowing the poet, at last, to directly explore his core concerns.

Olson reviews *Paterson* Book V for *Evergreen Review*. At first, as he explains in a November 1958 letter to Ginsberg, he regrets the task because it should have been assigned to “some younger person who is coming-on to [Williams], rather than I who (despite all statements by others) never seem to have picked up on him as much—love the man, that’s all (as I gather you, too, no?)” (*Selected Letters* 260). Williams’s engagement with the Unicorn Tapestries is confusing to Olson because it suggests he has turned away from his inventive exploration of the city and toward the “power position” of the “prophetic” (*Selected Letters* 259). The review starts in a similar direction: “I tread the steps of this poem. I didn’t find it easy just where the poet would seem to have put the weight: the passage of the Cloisters’ tapestry on the hunt of the Unicorn” (*Collected Prose* 288). Trained by the preceding books to observe *Paterson* through the objective and objectifying distance of Williams’s man as city and city as marriage analogies, Olson objects to the intimacy of the visits to the Cloisters. Even so, he declares Book V an “uncanny triumph” and marvels at the shift it represents in Williams’s practice.

When one walks the tapestry passage literally syllable to syllable, flower word to flower word, etc., the intention of the poet as well as his statement of the one thing life (or it is actually death) has taught him, is what one finds he has made you do. It is no longer a matter of a thing. It is only a track, a pi-meson movement (after the collision) which he has laid down—yield, like it or not, to the step of it, from nothing outside it, including yourself & himself, and take nothing from it but itself, away.
In other words, he explains, Book V presents “an objectivity (which is there not other than anti-matter) which forces you, by an unexampled subjectivity of (whom Williams calls) ‘I, Paterson, the King-self’ to bring you to his line.” Olson recognizes the allusion to Maximus, which comes in the final section of Book V, and the merging of poet and persona that it represents. Collapsing the complex analogies of the preceding books onto a single plane, the tapestries reveal a unifying force in Paterson that had been obscured before. “In appearing to contradict all that Paterson was verse-wise before Book Five,” he concludes, “Actually and solely, & quite exactly, & intact, the poem offers nothing but the path of itself.” (Collected Prose 289) For Olson, what the poem provides, in the end, is an experience of space, of having one’s awareness shifted from one space to another, rather than an analysis of the “substance historical of one city,” as he had characterized the earlier books to Creeley in 1951.

Walking the “path” of the tapestries challenges Olson to rethink the trajectory of Williams’s prior experiments because it reduces the distance between poet and reader and between the “corrupt” city of Paterson and the “Beautiful Thing” at their core to “instantaneous presence.” Rather than wholly eliminating these dichotomies from Book V, however, Williams composes what Said identifies in Cavafy’s late poetry as an “ambiguous yet carefully specified poetic space” defined by “equal forces straining in opposite directions” (146-48). Olson notes the “opposite directions” of Book V by contrasting Williams’s description in the poem of following a businesswoman through the streets of Paterson to his use of the tapestries. Noting the distance Williams maintains from the woman, he describes the dynamic between them as the “point of the old poem,” namely: “to seek a language to deliver men & women from the lump their lives were without it, in the city by the river which bore them to an end in the hostile sea [. . .] to find the meaning & lay it white, beside the sliding water” (Collected Prose 288). He contrasts Williams’s unidirectional pursuit of the woman with the “pi-meson” oscillation of the tapestry passages. “It no longer the matter of a thing,” Olson explains, “it is only a track, a pi-meson movement (after the collision) which he has laid down—yield, like it or not, to the step of it, from
nothing outside it, including yourself & himself, and take nothing from it but itself, away" (Collected Prose 289). His reading suggests that the set of relations the poem measures—the ways it invites readers to “dance” its spaces—will be the lasting marker of its achievement (P 236).

In the final section of Book V, Williams quotes from “The Wanderer,” his earliest Paterson poem and one that is specifically engaged with the “corrupt” landscape of the city. Describing the Passaic River as Ouroboros, a mythical snake eating its own tail, he transforms the loss of innocence into a ceremony of knowledge and adaptation. The river’s progress from the landscape above the falls through the polluted center of Paterson and out to the Atlantic Ocean had provided an outline for the narrative of the longer poem (CP2 57-58). In his rewriting of “The Wanderer” in Book V, Williams reshapes the river’s linearity into an encompassing system:

The (self) direction has been changed
the serpent
its tail in its mouth
“the river has returned to its beginnings”
and backward
(and forward)
it tortures itself within me
until time has been washed finally under:
and “I knew all (or enough)
it became me . . .”

(P 229)

As Nathaniel Mackey explains, while “ominous,” the figure of Ouroboros carries “unitive” connotations in postwar American poetry (91). Williams’s “serpent” washes time under, instilling through its movements “all (or enough)” knowledge to allow him to understand the changes he has undergone, as a

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31 Mackey uses the figure of Ouroboros to illustrate Robert Duncan’s practice of imitating and repeating his own and other poet’s idioms and themes. He argues that Duncan’s repetitions, which, Mackey argues, derive from his readings of Williams, Pound, and H.D., reflects a complex understanding of the “iterative nature of originality” (103). Mackey implies that Paterson Book V reflects a state of “exhaustion and limitation” (91). While consistent with the idea that Williams’s develops a “late style,” Mackey’s reading contrasts with my assertion that Book V extends Paterson into new territory.
poet and a man, since beginning his engagement with it. The forty-year backward glance continues with an update on treatments for venereal disease:

— the times are not heroic
since then
but they are cleaner
and freer of disease
the mind rotted within them .
we’ll say
the serpent
has its tail again in its mouth
AGAIN!
the all-wise serpent.

(P 230)

Benefitting from advances in medicine, the serpent-river is “cleaner / and freer of disease” in Book V than it had been in “The Wanderer,” where Williams addresses it as “that filthy river” (CP1 34). Whereas the Passaic flows in one direction throughout Paterson, in this segment from “The Wanderer,” it moves both downstream to the Atlantic and upstream toward its “beginnings” in an oscillation that fits Olson’s description of the “pi-meson” movement of Book V.

“The Wanderer” is an apprentice poem, a “study in the line itself,” as Williams explains in the Autobiography, written after he had abandoned a long narrative poem modelled on Keats’s “Endymion” (A 59-60). The poet seeks and finds his Muse over the course of the poem, an “old queen” disguised first as a bird and then as a prostitute, and tours Paterson and its environs at her direction. They see the pageantry of New York City’s Broadway and visit silk workers on strike in downtown Paterson before settling on the banks of the Passaic to commune with the river. Fulfilling a commitment to the river, personified as a man, the woman identifies the poet as the “youth you long have wanted” and immerses him. Williams describes the experience of baptism:

Then the river began to enter my heart
Eddying back cool and limpid
Clear to the beginning of days!
But with the rebound it leaped again forward—
Muddy then black and shrunken

Then the river began to enter my heart
Eddying back cool and limpid
Clear to the beginning of days!
But with the rebound it leaped again forward—
Muddy then black and shrunken
Till I felt the utter depth of its filthiness,
The vile breath of its degradation,
And sank down knowing this was me now.
But she lifted me and the water took a new tide
Again into the older experiences.
And so, backward and forward,
It tortured itself within me
Until time had been washed finally under,
And the river had found its level—
And its last motion had ceased
And I knew all—it became me.

(CP1 35)

Williams’s quotation of the poem in *Paterson* is inexact. He includes a line that does not appear in the original, “the river has returned to its beginnings,” and reduces the baptismal context. Carrying him through present-day “filthiness” and “degradation,” as well as “older experiences” that resolve in the river’s “last motion,” the tide reorients the poet’s soul. In its movements, the river resembles the “dance” of a locust tree swaying “upward and about and / back and forth” that concludes *Paterson*. The oscillations convert concerns about development along the linear Passaic into observations about movement through space, exactly the kind of “measure” Williams tracks across his late-style poems and the “path” Olson walks reading Book V.

**Coda: Paterson and Urban Development**

Williams has long been celebrated for his insistence on the critical importance of the “local” for understanding and representing contemporary experience. Kenneth Burke, for example, a lifelong friend and correspondent, relates Williams’s local poetics to an activist critique of urban and industrial development in an essay commemorating the poet’s death. Noting that Williams grappled throughout his career with the spoliation of New Jersey’s natural environment, Burke suggests that, especially in *Paterson*, “there’s the thought that never left him, the beauty and cleanness of the river around the falls at Paterson, before its rape by the drastic combination of raw politics, raw technics and raw business.”
The center of Williams’s critique, for Burke, is the “the poignancy of what is lost” (np). Wendell Berry suggests that the “effort to adapt the economic life of a human community to the nature of its place” is Paterson’s motivating concern (11). Even as it is possible to identify, with Burke and Berry, a strong environmentalist ethos in Paterson, it is also important to recognize the radical reconstruction of the modernist city poem it represents. Through its play of voices and “scattered discourses,” as Rise and Steven Axelrod suggest, Paterson proposes a mode of critical participation in everyday life that overturns traditional hierarchies of urban and literary power by drawing attention to the city’s ambiguities, disconnections, and contradictions (123-125). This openness, constrained in Books I-IV by the man as city and city as marriage analogies, models an urban poetics that is founded on possibility rather than lament.

Departing from similar rejections of outmoded poetic forms, Williams’s, Ginsberg’s, and Olson’s later city poems outline three strands of experimental American urban poetics that intersect contemporaneous and subsequent developments in the fields of urban planning and design. Williams’s emphasis on vernacular storytelling and the rooting of knowledge in personal experience echo, for example, in the progressive approaches to urban planning Leonie Sandercock advocates in Towards Cosmopolis (1998) and Cosmopolis II (2003) and that the poet Brenda Coultas enacts in her 2003 urban archive poem, “The Bowery Project” (see Chapter 5). Ginsberg’s insistence on relationships between individuals and between cities anticipates Claude Fischer’s notion of “urban subcultures” and follows a similar logic as the critiques of rational comprehensive planning advanced in the work of Jane Jacobs and Herbert Gans during the 1960s. Relationships like the ones Ginsberg developed as he traveled across the country and the world at the height of his fame play out at neighborhood scale in the

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32 Comparing Williams’s poem to Mike Davis’s cultural history of Los Angeles, City of Quartz, the Axelrods further suggest that Paterson presents “a compound of atomized counter-publics, sedimented together over time in a shared space, unable either to disperse or to melt into one” and a “site of neither dystopic despair nor utopic redemption but rather a decaying regional city notable only for its ordinariness” (128).
overlapping communities of Los Angeles poetry in the 1960s and 1970s (see Chapter 2) and in the performance aesthetics of the Nuyorican poets during the same period (see Chapter 4). Finally, Olson’s experiments with the archaeology and language contrast with similar critiques of “urban ideology” in the city poetry of George Oppen and the critical work of French urban theorist Manuel Castells (see Chapter 3) and reach activist fulfillment in Lewis MacAdams’s long poem *The River* (see Chapter 5). Taken together, these poetries propose strategies for relating to urban environments that challenge the exploitative neoliberalism of both the “Ecological” and “New” urbanisms taking hold in the 21st century. In each of the following chapters, I focus on one of these inheritances, demonstrating links between the urban poetics Williams, Ginsberg, and Olson inaugurate and the associated problems and opportunities of American cities.
Chapter 2: Community and Crisis in Los Angeles Poetry

My life is so entwined with this city that I can’t talk about it without talking about myself—I can’t talk about myself without talking about it. This is my art. I know no other terrain—so intimately. Its violence is my violence.

— Wanda Coleman, Native in a Strange Land: Trials and Tremors

Urbanists describe Los Angeles as a geographically dispersed and culturally fragmented place. The city’s sprawling size, history of conflicts over development and cultural preservation, and place at the center of global mythmaking make it a “paradigmatic” American city of the late 20th and early 21st century (Soja 221; Nijman 135). Through popular films such as Blade Runner and the Terminator series it has become synonymous in the public imagination with cataclysmic violence. At the same time, it is also strongly associated with the saccharine utopias of Disneyland, Hollywood, and Beverly Hills. Portrayed as a negative example of the future of global capitalism and, conversely, as an incubator of multicultural harmony, Los Angeles is a proving ground for economic and environmental justice. Los

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33 Michael Dear takes an optimistic view in The Postmodern Urban Condition where he identifies Los Angeles’s “social heterogeneity and spatial extensiveness” as potential “harbinger[s] of a new style of decentered politics” (14). Edward Soja, by contrast, argues in the concluding chapters of Postmodern Geographies that the city’s gleaming surfaces mask “intensifying urban stress that cuts across class, race, and gender” produced through interconnected processes of demographic and economic change (220). More pessimistic than Soja, Mike Davis traces the conflicted cultural history of the Los Angeles in City of Quartz and The Ecology of Fear, claiming that the predominant trajectory of the city through the end of the twentieth century is toward a violent eradication of difference. Dolores Hayden’s description of successful campaigns to preserve locally important buildings and public spaces in The Power of Place suggests that while there are tendencies toward the dystopia Davis fears, Dear’s optimism about local autonomies is not entirely misplaced.

34 Soja and Nijman use “paradigmatic” to refer to Los Angeles as a city that “displays more clearly than other cities the fundamental features and trends of the wider urban system” (Nijman 135). Soja highlights processes of spatial and economic restructuring that have disempowered working class minorities while increasing employment and profits in the high-skill service and technology sectors as prototypical characteristics of the post-fordist American city (190-221). Nijman identifies four trends visible in Los Angeles and, she argues, even more so in Miami: late-stage capitalism; a built environment that reflects accelerated social and economic development; a globalized population; and cultural postmodernity. I am using the term in a slightly different sense in that my focus on subjective experiences rather than abstract conditions.
Angeles poetry emerges from points of contact between these various visions, experiences, and theories. The city’s poets have generated an important body of knowledge about Los Angeles that is in permanent dialogue with ideas produced through other modes of inquiry by integrating everyday circumstances; personal, local, and national histories; and aesthetic and political commitments in their work.

The first position for Los Angeles poets is isolation: from each other, from poetic communities centered elsewhere, and from the country’s economic and cultural mainstream. For some, this isolation is catalytic, for example, the artistic communities that grew at the city’s western margins and along La Cienega Boulevard starting in the 1950s. For others, however, the city’s built environment and social geography present challenges. Poet and historian Bill Mohr acknowledges the difficulties Angeleno poets face in the introduction to his 1978 anthology The Streets Inside. Mohr notes the exclusion of non-white writers from most discussions of the city’s poetic community and the incomplete picture of the city that results. “The fact remains that the white poets do not know the same streets that the Black, Chicano, and Asian poets know in this city; and the absence of those streets results in a poor map” (n.p.). The streets missing from Mohr’s poetic map are the streets of non-white neighborhoods like Watts, in South Central Los Angeles, where economic exclusion, failed housing and social policies, and violence, including major outbreaks in 1965 and 1992, constrain residents’ lives. The absence of Watts

Historians and social scientists use different terms to refer to the events of 1965 and 1992, in particular: riot, unrest, conflict, and rebellion. As Janet Abu-Lughod explains in Race, Space, and Riots, the term used signals the overarching understanding the author brings to bear:

Each author defines and frames the event differently. The first accepts, however critically, the definition of events as violations of law and order, and places the onus on the actors themselves. The second set is clearly ambivalent, employing mixed terms. The third set uses more neutral distancing terms, as a claim to greater “scientific objectivity.” And the final set defends militancy as a “legitimate” means of last resort to achieve necessary deep structural changes. (252)

I use the term “uprising” for the events of August 1965, because, following historian Gerald Horne, I understand the violence as both an expression of “decades—if not centuries—of pent-up rage” and a strategic, if not planned or coordinated, confrontation with oppressive structures of power (302). I use
from broader discussions of the city’s poetry is curious given the attention generated by the Watts Writers Workshop and other community-based arts organizations in the aftermath of the 1965 uprising. While Mohr and fellow anthologist Douglas Messerli, along with critics Daniel Widener and Evie Shockley, have begun to address this lack, non-white poets continue to be considered in isolation from white peers.²⁶

Given the divergent conditions of Mohr’s “streets” and the continuing poverty of South Central Los Angeles, it is urgent to take seriously the perspectives on the city that emerged in Watts in the 1960s and resound today in Wanda Coleman’s work. Their poetry provides an important proving ground for the claim that poetry can function as a means of analysis rather than merely as a witness to events or a rallying cry for collective action. This chapter charts the parallel development of poetics of community and crisis in Los Angeles from the 1950s through the 2000s in light of John Dewey’s argument for the interrelatedness of aesthetic and everyday experience and the principles of Charles Olson’s “projective verse.” Dewey and Olson suggest that poetry is a social practice when it engages lived experience and relies on insights from individual subjectivities rather than prescribed forms for its governing logic. The first section focuses on the efforts of groups of writers and artists to establish communities of practice in Los Angeles in the period immediately following World War II: Thomas McGrath and the poets he influenced, Lawrence Lipton’s Venice Beats, and Wallace Berman’s Semina circle. None of these

the term “riot” for the events of April – May 1992 because it has stuck with me from watching CNN’s live coverage and because, as Abu-Lughod explains, demographic shifts between 1965 and 1992 make the causes and circumstances of the South Central Riots more complex than dichotomous terms such as “uprising” or “rebellion” suggest (237-248).

²⁶ Messerli includes black poets Will Alexander and Wanda Coleman, who were living in Los Angeles in 1965, and Harriet Mullen, who was not, in his 2005 anthology Intersections: Innovative Poetry in Southern California. In Hold-Outs, Mohr provides a material history of arts organizations active in Los Angeles from the 1950s – 1990s. The study emphasizes cross-cultural connections made within and across organizations in the 1970s and 1980s. Widener’s Black Arts West situates the poetry of Watts in relation to black cultural production in the greater Los Angeles region in the period after World War II. Shockley’s Renegade Poetics challenges conventional understandings of black poetics by reading experimental writing alongside traditional lyric verse.
communities survived their founders, but their “mysterious chemistry” and their members’ commitments to each other influenced a second generation of Los Angeles poets that includes Charles Bukowski, Kate Braverman, and anthologists Paul Vangelisti and Bill Mohr, among others. The second section analyzes urban geographies these second generation writers propose in their work and suggests that Los Angeles poets adopt a particular stance toward urban environments because their city is so difficult to understand and navigate. Turning from Los Angeles poets, generally, to Watts poets, specifically, the third section considers differences among the streets Los Angeles poets inhabit and their implications for neighborhoods and poetic communities. The Watts writers demand attention for their commitment to conveying the effects of persistent economic inequality on a community and the deftness of their critique. Wanda Coleman’s work, in particular, presents a poetics of crisis that enacts Henri Lefebvre’s “right to the city,” the claim that the ability to use the city for invention and self-definition is a prerequisite for social justice. Read in this light, Los Angeles poetry offers insights urban experience that might inform planning, design, and political action in the contemporary moment.

“Some Mysterious Chemistry”: The Beginnings of a Los Angeles Poetics

Conflicting forces shaped the development of artistic and poetic communities in Los Angeles in the decades following World War II. Primary among these forces were paranoia fueled by the investigations and actions of the House Un-American Activities Committee, de facto segregation enforced by restrictive housing policies and racist urban redevelopment schemes, and the militarization and concomitant radicalization of American society in the lead-up to and escalation of the Vietnam War. Artists and poets confronted these constraints on community in different ways based on how they were positioned, forming formal and informal reading series; founding galleries and publishing enterprises; and producing collaborative journals. Thomas McGrath, who lost a teaching job at Los Angeles State College after refusing to testify before HUAC in 1954 and ultimately left Los Angeles in 1960, led a
loosely-affiliated group of poets whose work appeared in *The California Quarterly* (1952-1956), *Coastlines* (1955-1964) and the Poetry Los Angeles reading series and its 1958 anthology *Poetry Los Angeles I*. During the same period, Beat writer Lawrence Lipton, author of the movement-defining *The Holy Barbarians* (1959), promoted Venice Beach as a radically open and generative center of the written and visual arts. The site of a mostly failed “early twentieth-century urban-bourgeois fantasy” real estate development scheme, by the 1950s Venice Beach offered low rents and abandoned structures that attracted artists seeking to opt out of the dominant culture (Schrank 107). At the intersection of the scholarly poets of McGrath’s circle and the more radical artists circulating through Venice Beach, Wallace Berman created *Semina* (1955-1964), a multimodal journal in fragments that “stitched together” the Los Angeles and San Francisco scenes for an audience of poets and visual artists that included Ed Kleinholz, Robert Duncan, and others (Schrank 120). While the three groups were not in direct dialogue with one another or, except for perhaps Lipton’s Beat acolytes, formally constituted, they shared commitments to using poetry and art to investigate contemporary life and propose alternative arrangements, foreshadowing the more direct critiques of the Watts writers and influencing subsequent generations of Los Angeles poets.

The mission statement of *The California Quarterly*, a journal cofounded by McGrath that published in its first issue in 1952, positions poetry as a mode of inquiry. “The most enduring art is an imaginative re-creation of real life. [I]t will reflect not only the complexity and contrariety of immediate experience, but also the simplicity underlying the turbulent history of men in whatever period, their

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37 Ellen Gershgoren Novak identifies McGrath as the “center of the community of poets in Los Angeles in the 1950s and of the community of poets that continued after his departure into the early 1970s” in the introduction to her anthology of the *California Quarterly* and *Coastlines* writers, *Poets of the Non-Existent City* (18).

38 Richard Candida Smith details Berman’s life and career and describes the experiments of *Semina* in *Utopia and Dissent* (212-298). Smith’s discussion of Berman is particularly instructive because it relates his perspective on the relationship between visual art and politics to Robert Duncan’s more developed poetic critique of the radical left.
unquenchable will to make a better life and their capacity to progress toward it” (quoted in Novak 12).

The editors propose to seek work that represents “real life” in order to cut through the confusion of experience to the “simplicity” of the forces shaping it. They regard experience as a stimulus for poetry, but also as “complexity and contrariety” that inhibits understanding and can only be penetrated by poetry. In this, the mission statement relates to Dewey’s conception of art as means of integrating experiences in order to produce new knowledge. Dewey explains, “art is fine when it draws upon the material of other experiences and expresses their material in a medium which intensifies and clarifies its energy through the order that supervenes. It enables us to share vividly and deeply in meanings to which we had been dumb, or for which we had but the ear that permits what is said to pass through in transit to overt action” (253). The “new modes of experience” that art enables in Dewey’s and The California Quarterly editors’ views make it possible to understand the circumstances of our individual and collective lives more critically by setting them in relation to other, perhaps more favorable, arrangements of circumstances.

For Dewey, the critique of everyday life poetry and art enable must derive from “common life” and be “widely enjoyed in a community” in order to be effective (84). McGrath, James Boyer May and Peter Yates make a similar point in the brief introduction to their 1958 anthology Poetry Los Angeles, which presents work gathered from 18 poets who participated in the Poetry Los Angeles reading series. The introduction appears on the inside front cover of the volume:

New poetry from Los Angeles, representing work heard during the past year at public readings of Poetry Los Angeles, chosen by the authors and arranged by the editors, James Boyer May, Thomas McGrath and Peter Yates. The poems, as grouped here, do not represent any predetermined thesis or posture. The editors accept no responsibility for the manner or content of any poems but their own. Poetry Los Angeles was founded to help poets engross their work
by reading it aloud. This book is an extension of the same mutual self-interest. A poet is one who in company thinks alone and offers his experience as a poem.

Despite the disclaimer that no “predetermined thesis or posture” is intended, the editors suggest the group shares a common orientation toward the purposes and functions of poetry: as a means to interpret individual experiences for the benefit of a community. The verb “offers” implies an expectation that each poet in the community accepts the others’ rights to “participate in contumacious, poignant dialogue” (Mohr, Hold-Outs, 45). Listening “in company” as others read and thinking about the range of interpretations of experience the poems provoke is a community-building act for McGrath, May and Yates. While they experience their lives and compose poems “alone,” they rely on communication with each other, the sharing of clarified experiences through poetry, to complete their work.

In the introduction to Poets of the Non-Existent City, an anthology of poetry from The California Quarterly and Coastlines, Ellen Gershoren Novak identifies the run of the journals as the moment “poetry took root in the city and became its literary and social conscience” (4 – 5). McGrath’s description of Los Angeles as a “vertical city shaped like an inverse hell” in Part II of Letter to an Imaginary Friend provides an example of this function:

Windless city built on decaying granite, loose ends
Without end or beginning and nothing to tie to, city down hill
From the high mania of our nineteenth century destiny—what’s loose
Rolls here, what’s square slides, anything not tied down
Flies in . . .
   kind of petrified shitstorm.
Retractable
Swimming pools.
Cancer farms.
Whale dung
At the bottom of the American night refugees tourists elastic
Watches . . .

Vertical city shaped like an inverse hell . . .
(L.A. Exile 189)
Los Angeles appears here with many faces: the culmination of Westward Expansion, an idyllic tourist destination, a transient artificial environment, and a last haven of boosters and refugees. The city, in McGrath’s analysis, has three layers that correspond to Marxian categories. First, “at three feet above tide mark, at hunger line, are the lachrymose / Cities of the plain weeping in the sulphurous smog.” The hungry working classes suffer the “shitstorm” and smog that characterize Los Angeles, an inevitable byproduct of the manufacturing industry they sustain. Further inland from the coast, a second layer is inhabited by “the petty B’s . . . The Johnny Come Earlies of the middling class” who shield themselves from reality with religion and material success. In “Cadillac country,” perched on the hills surrounding the city, an elite third group profits from unscrupulous labor practices, steaming the “blood from the bills” under cover of fantasies of a natural social order of “mental muscles” and “demi-virginity” produced by “Rand Corpse wise men,” architects of the region’s war machine.39

McGrath extends his tripartite characterization of Los Angeles’ economic geography by returning from the elite enclaves on the hills to the experience of smog at the coast:

—They dream of a future founded on fire, on a planned coincidence
Of time and sulphur...
Heraclitian eschatology...

And over it all, god’s face,
or perhaps a baboon’s ass
In the shape of an IBM beams toward another war.
One is to labor, two is to rob, three is to kill.
Executive
legislative
judiciary...
—muggery, buggery and thuggery
All Los Angeles
America
is divided into three parts.

39 Los Angeles benefited substantially from investments in weapons and other military manufacturing for the Pacific Theater of World War II (Soja 200-208). The availability of manufacturing attracted large numbers of black migrants from the American South. Changes in the industry after the War and the city’s limited housing stock and racist housing policies isolated these migrants and their families in Watts (Davis 163; Horne 50-51).
Smog becomes nuclear aftermath in this apocalyptic vision of an end of history centered in Los Angeles. Though McGrath’s critique is overheated, it precipitates from “immediate experience” of smog, factory labor, beach movies and anti-communist hysteria. Unlike Lipton’s disaffected Venice Beats, McGrath remains conscientiously engaged with society as it exists, exchanging the official names of branches of government for the charmingly cynical “muggery, buggery and thuggery.” McGrath overlays sensory experiences in Los Angeles’s “sulphurous smog” with references to consumer culture, a condensed history of the region, and an indictment of military power. Stepped indentations throughout the poem hurry the eye to its right margins, up the slopes of the city’s “inverse hell,” while repeating sounds punctuate the poet’s condemnation of Angeleno’s complicity in the status quo. *Letter to an Imaginary Friend* is poem of protest that integrates “actuality and possibility or ideality, the new and the old, objective material and personal response, the individual and the universal, surface and depth, sense and meaning” in a multifaceted whole that connects reading, everyday life, and political critique (Dewey 309).

Wallace Berman’s experiments with installation art and printed assemblages of poetry and visual art provoke similarly integrative experiences. The critique of society he offers in his work is more subtle than McGrath’s, but it is perhaps more empowering for viewers/readers because it relies more explicitly on their active participation in making meaning. Arrested on obscenity charges in 1957 for an installation work at the Ferus Gallery featuring explicit sexual imagery, Berman retreated from public life but remained in close contact with a group of poets and artists that included Robert Duncan and his partner Jess, Allen Ginsberg, Michael McClure and Philip Lamantia, among others, through his journal *Semina.* Published as an unbound collection of papers and cards of varying size, *Semina* encouraged

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40 Smith describes the circumstances surrounding Berman’s arrest in *Utopia and Dissent* (225-231). Schrank situates Berman’s work in relation to the broader Los Angeles art scene in *Art and the City* (119-
“reading as a visualizing of a field of connections that were continuous, multiple, and shifting [across] a potentially infinite field of meaning” rather than as a linear progression from the concrete to the abstract or from observations to critique (Smith 236). Like the “open poem” Olson describes in “Projective Verse,” Berman’s installations and the nine issues of Semina create experiences for viewers/readers rather than confronting them as discrete aesthetic objects. As Richard Candida Smith argues, Berman’s art “create[s] an empowered subjectivity by giving [the viewer/reader] less a point of view than a point of viewing” that invites them “to become present within the scene so that they could determine each in their own ways, in connection with other experiences, what might be happening—or even if it is a meaningful event” (240). Free to relate the images and poems in an issue in multiple ways, the reader is forced to take an active part in making meaning from the assemblage.

Influenced by the surrealist experiments of André Breton and Antonin Artaud, Berman and his circle assembled objects and language from everyday life in collages that brought “‘new meaning’ to a mundane reality lived amid the detritus of California urban existence” (Fredman n.p.). For example, Semina 8 includes poetry by Artaud, Duncan, McClure, John Wieners, Kirby Doyle, Elias Romero, Aya Tarlow, Zack Walsh, and Jerry Katz. The poems are paired with drawings, photographs and collages by Dean Stockwell, Jess, Cameron, William House, Lyn Foulkes, and Berman himself. Each element in the issue relates to every other element in multiple ways. Duncan’s poem “Increasing” describes a “hectic” and anxious scene that contrasts sharply with an accompanying photograph of the poet floating nude on his back in a pool.

Increasing the orange wild arrangements of animal forms are merged in tallow
Increasing a grade until numbers sound as tones alike in wandering
Increasing knots until the orange current is built perpetual upon the hectic,

123). The exhibition catalogue for the Santa Monica Museum of Art’s Semina Culture: Wallace Berman and His Circle inventories the content of the journal’s nine issues (49 – 69).
Increasing the ocean is boxed in ties to others and machines as mothers

(67)

The conflicting senses of restriction and constructed leisure in these lines appear in altered form as disability and imperial power in a collaged photograph featuring a headshot of blind musician Ray Charles and a separate image of white horses leading a chariot printed alongside Wieners’s poem “Le Chariot”.

A flame burns in the morning
It is the empty bag of horse

That carries the sun across the sky
And lights the love that blinds your eye.

And turns the night to infinite noon.
Changes the course of the unearthly moon

To ride in your heart instead of heaven
This is the card that reads as seven.

(68)

Further resonances emerge in a poetic fragment from Artaud on the topic of the “last judgment,” an accompanying photograph of a mummy wearing a dress, Cameron’s drawing of a large-bosomed Sphinx, and the issue’s cover photograph, a murderer confessing his crimes. Read together, the elements of the issue present an alternative “context” for meaning-making where contradictions merge into critique: capitalist excess is constraining and liberating; female sexuality is arousing and perplexing (Robert Duncan, quoted in Fredman n.p.). Like the Poetry Los Angeles reading series and the anthology organized by McGrath and his colleagues, the issue’s assemblage of materials serves as a provocation to individual understanding and an invitation to readers to join in community. Just as Semina brings the artist and the reader closer together, it also integrates the aesthetic and the everyday. For Berman’s reader, creating connections among the elements of the journal serves as a model for integrating perceptions and moments from everyday life.
Olson’s description of the “tensions” that hold projective verse together is instructive here because it relates Semina’s collage logic to Dewey’s definition of art as experience: “Every element in an open poem (the syllable, the line, as well as the image, the sound, the sense) must be taken up as participants in the kinetic of the poem just as solidly as we are accustomed to take what we call objects of reality” (391). Olson, Berman and Dewey locate aesthetic experience within everyday life rather than treating it as a special category. Fully integrated within “mundane reality,” poetry becomes a tool of inquiry and analysis deployed in and by communities and geared toward critical understanding and political action. In order to effect this integration of the aesthetic and the everyday, Olson prescribes a compositional process that follows the logic of relations:

The objects which occur at every given moment of composition (of recognition, we can call it) are, can be, must be treated exactly as they do occur therein and not by any ideas or preconceptions from outside the poem, must be handled as a series of objects in field in such a way that a series of tensions (which they also are) are made to hold, and to hold exactly inside the content and the context of the poem which has forced itself, through the poet and them into being. (391)

Olson’s “open poem” reorders reality rather than imitating or reflecting it, activating tensions between what the poet experiences as he writes, what he has written so far, and objects in the world. The poet “offers his experience as a poem” in order to set his private arrangement of the world in relation to at least two other arrangements: the world as it actually exists and the world as it exists in readers’ understandings (Poetry Los Angeles n.p.).

This set of relations, rather the poem itself, introduces new possibilities for experience, as Dewey explains:

Poetry is a criticism of life [. . .] not directly, but by disclosure, through imaginative vision addressed to imaginative experience (not to set judgment) of possibilities that contrast with
actual conditions. A sense of possibilities that are unrealized and that might be realized are when they are put in contrast with actual conditions, the most penetrating ‘criticism’ of the latter that can be made. It is by a sense of possibilities opening before us that we become aware of constrictions that hem us in and of burdens that oppress. (360)

Curtis Zahn’s poem “Southern California as the State of the Union,” published in *Poetry Los Angeles*, presents a Deweyian contrast of possibilities. Anticipating postmodernists such as Dear, Soja and Jameson who claim Los Angeles as the type toward which American cities will tend under late capitalism—sprawling, auto-oriented, multi-centered, integrated into global commerce—Zahn projects the state of Los Angeles as the state of the country.

Southwesterners
Who’d avoid clobbering doves on Sundays
Must forget remembering East
When an afternoon’s wry glean was crossfiled with Neo Geo—
Political webbery; their humbled sky sucks
From exhausted Buicks
Some mysterious chemistry. And sad steel towers
Have their backs to the wall
Heads in the clouds; it is Time for Life
And ultrasimplification.
To reduce thought down to its lower common denominator
The highest brains draw tall salaries.
The months path through Whistling sternly.
A splendid year for removing old promises
For exorcising promiscuity from the premises.
And ashore, in the absolute west
Birds on spindles
With sticks for beaks bleat
For tidal deposits of paper milk cartons.
Exclamatory gulls commute to work
In the city’s playinggrounds
And the tested Coast comes a land of e-flat alto saxes.
Still a great Cadillac country
Reverberating its echoes to the forgotten east
Where remain
Secret wetnesses
On posteriors and exteriors
And there exist acrid stratas, and ochre afternoons
In Pasadena’s washes,
And high tension wires, and Ford-owners
Who perforate beercans with .22s
Their radios running full volume, unattended
And falling onto the Sunday side of it all. Sunday?
The children nagging donkey-rides; the parents
Hurrying home for factory-fresh clichés
And all
Promised always
The classified superiority of practically everything.

Like McGrath, Zahn objects to the pervasiveness of commercial culture and the control the interests of growth-oriented development exert on the city’s built environment. The Buicks, Fords, Cadillacs, and “factory-fresh clichés” the poet mentions hollow out experience in Los Angeles, “reduc[ing] thought down to its lower common denominator. Residents are docile consumers chasing the “promise” of satisfaction through consumption. Their disempowerment sets the stage for the powers-that-be to renge on promises made to communities in favor of promoting economic growth. It is a “splendid year for removing old promises / For exorcising promiscuity from the premises” the poet suggests, referring to urban redevelopment projects such as the levelling and subsequent rebuilding of the Bunker Hill neighborhood north of downtown Los Angeles which began in 1955. As Zahn suggests, urban renewal destroys the spirit of the area, not just the buildings; it exorcises rather than simply flattening.

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41 Bunker Hill was a fashionable residential neighborhood on a hill above downtown Los Angeles in the early 20th century. By the 1950s, according to the Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA), it had deteriorated into an “aging, hilly pocket of downtown filled with rooming houses, residential hotels, and run-down corner stores” (Fact Sheet 1). Kevin Lynch describes the confusing spatial organization of the area, including its primary public space, Pershing Square, and the area known as “Skid Row,” in 1960’s The Image of the City (32-42). With funds obtained under Title I of the Federal Housing Act of 1949, the City evicted residents, demolished structures, and reengineered the neighborhood’s topography to pave the way for private development (Amended Redevelopment Plan 6 – 12). Kent MacKenzie’s short film “Bunker Hill 1956” provides a first-person view of everyday life in the neighborhood before the redevelopment project began. Once again fashionable, Bunker Hill is now the site of Los Angeles’s Museum of Contemporary Art and the Frank Gehry-designed Walt Disney Concert Hall.
While the Zahn’s disgusted tone portrays Los Angeles as a cultureless wasteland, secrets and mysteries persist in the region’s geography and residents’ orientation toward new beginnings. Downtown’s “sad steel towers” stand alongside “playinggrounds” that serve as a backdrop for flowerings of jazz and the movements of gulls across the sky. Descriptions of afternoon light punctuate the poem’s critique of commodity culture: its “wry gleam” complicates Zahn’s political analysis and its “ochre” hue, even though it is a product of McGrath’s “sulphurous smog,” lends the otherwise vacuous weekend activities of shooting beer cans and riding donkeys a special significance. The persistence of the natural in Los Angeles and the possibilities of leisure it contains is one of the “promises” that draws migrants to the city from the East. Residents exchange the constraints of their former lives for the dreams of the “superiority of practically everything” out West. While the “secret wetnesses” of the city are natural marshlands remaining in place despite sprawling development, they are also signals of debasement and unrestrained desire. Home to birds, jazz musicians, litter, parents, children, and “high tension wires,” they are Deweyian sites of contradiction and possibility hidden within the city’s chaotic built environment.

“The Words We Inhabit Here”: A Second Generation

Poet and activist Lewis MacAdams condemns the development three decades after Zahn’s poem of the Playa Vista neighborhood on the western edge of Los Angeles in “To Hughes Tool Company,” a poem collected in Mohr’s 1984 anthology *Poetry Loves Poetry.*

> At the very last minute
> I grab a bite to eat
> and rattle into Playa Vista.
> Wasted days and wasted nights and days is how I cruise
> the urban wreckage, sift through the stimuli for ideals: Fox won’t have a place to creep,
> Hawk bereft of hunting grounds, no place for mallard duck
> to rest on his migrations. I mean,
> what’s more important? Real estate millions
> or the way sunset emblazons puff balls in the Ballonas Wetlands [. . .] MacAdams’s activist work to restore the natural habitat of the Los Angeles River and the book-length poem *The River* that chronicles it is discussed in chapter 5, “Poetry and Progressive Planning.”
Through reading series, journals, and small presses, a second generation of poets and artists extended McGrath’s, Lipton’s, and Berman’s commitments to “accessibility, surrealism, the metaphysical conceit, liveliness, relevance, and experimentation” in the 1970s (Novak 13). Pursuing “a socially conscious humanism that never wavered in its attention to the things of this world and its people,” Charles Bukowski, Paul Vangelisti, and Bill Mohr joined poets from the city’s diverse communities and by 1984 had produced four significant anthologies of Los Angeles poetry (Novak 49). A total of 96 poets appear in *Anthology of L.A. Poets* (1972), edited by Bukowski, Vangelisti and fellow poet Neeli Cherry; *Specimen ’73* (1973), edited by Vangelisti and published by the Pasadena Museum of Art; and two volumes edited by Mohr, *The Streets Inside: Ten Los Angeles Poets* (1978) and *Poetry Loves Poetry* (1984). Counting the retrospective Novak (2002) and Messerli (2005) collections, the number grows to 122. Thirty-two poets appear in more than one anthology, and four appear in four of the seven: Charles Bukowski, John Thomas, Holly Prado, and Paul Vangelisti. Applying a range of approaches and interests in interpreting Los Angeles, the second generation explores a larger portion of the city’s geography than its predecessors. Even so, as Mohr suggests in his introduction to *The Streets Inside*, certain streets receive greater attention than others. This section considers the second generation’s expansion of the Los Angeles poetics McGrath, Lipton, Berman, and their peers invented and points to limitations of their projects that are taken up in the final section.

43 Mohr provides a material history of the poets and independent presses active in and around Los Angeles during this period in *Hold-Outs*. He was an active member of the community for most of the period he documents. Following Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Mohr argues that focusing on the “time and labor required to convert authorial intent into social dialogue” in addition to “strict aesthetic procedures” when writing literary history is a mechanism for ensuring that a diversity of voices is included (xviii). The depth of detail his study provides about poetic and artistic communities in Los Angeles and the relationships of their members is unmatched. I take seriously Mohr’s injunction to “avoid oversimplified or reductive binaries” in describing Los Angeles poetry (12). The groupings I propose, first generation, second generation, and Watts poets, are not intended to suggest commonalities of purpose except in the broadest sense. Each group, as I try to demonstrate, included from a range of backgrounds and with a range of topical and aesthetic interests.
Like McGrath, Lipton and Berman before them, the second generation defined themselves in relation to New York and San Francisco and developed communities of practice despite Los Angeles’s sprawling geography and cultural and economic contradictions. In the introduction to *Anthology of L.A. Poets*, Bukowski characterizes the experience of living in the city as both freeing and inhibiting due to its lack of a defined cultural center:

> I think that it is important to know that a man or woman, writer or not, can find more isolation in Los Angeles than in Boise, Idaho. Or, all things being fair, he can with a telephone (if he has a telephone) have 19 people over drinking and talking with him within an hour and a half. I have bummed the cities and I know this—the great facility of Los Angeles is that one can be alone if he wishes or he can be in a crowd if he wishes. No other city seems to allow this easy double choice as well. This is a fairly wonderful miracle, especially if one is a writer. (n.p.)

Los Angeles is uniquely suited for poets, in Bukowski’s estimation, because it offers equal measures of isolation and community. His experience is central to his analysis. He has “bummed the cities,” sustaining himself on little to nothing by remaining on the move and accepting kindness and support from others. It is a vision of complete mobility that recalls both the Beats’ rejection of mainstream values and mainstream myths of the American frontier. Location is irrelevant to Bukowski because he controls his own destiny no matter where he ends up: “Cities are no more than dwellings, places of business, streets, cars, people—people set down somewhere into all the agony and trouble and love and frustration and death and dullness and treachery and hope that they can get into” (no page). In other words, there is nothing special about New York or San Francisco; Los Angeles might serve just as well. Bukowski, in particular, but the second generation, more generally, had ambitions of establishing a poetry scene in Los Angeles that would attract national attention.

John Thomas’s commitments to nonconformity and collaboration link the community-mindedness of the first generation of Los Angeles poets and the regional ambitions of the second. A
reluctant member of the Venice community for several months in 1959, Thomas left Los Angeles for San Francisco in October 1960. He rejected the pretensions and drug use that characterized the Venice scene because, as historian John Maynard writes, he “had done enough reading to know that most of the art being produced around him was neither particularly good nor particularly innovative” (118). Nevertheless, when he returned to Los Angeles in 1965, he contributed actively to the community’s projects, collaborating with Lipton, first on the Free University of California and later on the *Free Press*, until the latter’s death in 1975 (Maynard 196-199; *L.A. Exile* 281). Included in the Bukowski, Vangelisti and Mohr anthologies, Thomas published four books of poetry in his lifetime, including *Abandoned Latitudes* (1983), a co-production with Vangelisti and Robert Crosson published as volume three of Vangelisti’s series *Invisible City.*

Thomas asserts a poetics of everyday experience in “Apologia,” the final poem of Vangelisti’s *Specimen ’73* in a meditation on writer’s block and the difficulties of breaking with traditional modes of thought and expression. Taking up Bukowski’s claim that any scene and community might serve poets equally well, the poem shifts attention from the circumstances of the poet’s life to the elements of his practice as necessary conditions for his art. In the poem’s first two sections, Thomas questions the cultural and material “detritus” of Los Angeles, to use the word Fredman applies to Berman’s assemblages. In the third, he reverses course, concluding that the challenges of craft are sufficient in and of themselves to motivate and sustain good writing. In contrast to Bukowski’s reliance on mobility across cities, Thomas’s conclusions about his practice depend on the specific circumstances of life in Los Angeles, suggesting a direct link between everyday life and aesthetic production.

The poet pleads with his Muse to “grant me a / poem” in the poem’s opening lines, despite the disenchantment of Venice mornings. He hears birdsong as “their way of shrieking / about their hunger cramps” rather than some sort of magic song and seems to be struggling against himself: “I think maybe today a poem I hope / after breakfast I start trying / pulling it out of my own gut / mostly by force.”
Writing is a morning constitutional in this description, a process of resolving discomfort by forcing something out from the inside. Thomas reports that he is usually unproductive in his efforts and then assigns his inability to write to a lack of material:

```plaintext
most days even all my strongarming
doesn’t help me & I
give up, read, or
whine about it in my journal
& piss away the day
swimming / eating / sneering around in a coffeehouse
because
what is there to sing
now that I can’t sing of
St Elizabeth how the breadcrusts
became roses to cover
her saintly life?

what for, really, if I can’t write
that St Francis Borgia died young &
pure as a tiger cub?
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Catholic guilt lingers over these stanzas, but there is a comparison between the poet’s guilt and his frustration about the materials and context available for poetry. “What is there to sing,” Thomas asks, in “swimming / eating / sneering around” coffeehouses? These activities, repeated day after day, offer little that might “charge my afternoons with metaphor” because “Venice California is a very murky universe for / man-alone and no god around.”

Douglas Messerli pursues a similar line of inquiry in the introduction to *Intersections*, an anthology of “innovative” Southern California poetry from the 1950s to the present. For Messerli, the main problem facing Los Angeles poets is the city’s geography and what it entails for everyday life. The “very complexity” of living in Los Angeles requires the invention of new lifestyles, of new “art[s] of living” (19):

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In short, the city is not only an architectural perplexity, but it also [sic] a social conundrum. Accordingly, in attempting to understand this city, one must travel out from one’s own
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neighborhood in all directions, day by day piecing the constantly shifting pieces of a puzzle together. The only way anyone wanting to comprehend the experience of living and surviving in southern California can come to terms with the place is to create a narrative of sorts, to piece together the area, bit by bit, sharing small common experiences with friends. Narrative becomes a survival strategy, a way of making sense of the overload of visual and temporal possibility. At the same time, it allows one to make sense of the past, to piece together what was once here and where it has gone. (31-32)

Where Thomas sees a lack of material, Messerli sees an overabundance of “stimuli” in Los Angeles that poets struggle to manage. His point seems to be that Los Angeles poetry begins in the divergence of possibilities: which neighborhoods to visit, which friends to meet, which histories and geographies to privilege. That these puzzle pieces are “constantly shifting” means that poets use poetry as a means for making sense of experience and establishing a context for their lives. The flipside of this opportunity is that disintegration looms for those who lack the capacity or will to reinvent or resituate themselves on a daily basis. Los Angeles poets address this problem of possibilities by proposing narratives at the individual, neighborhood, city and regional scales. “With its structures of repetition, episode, catalogues, brief remembrances, and yes, sayings and aphorisms, into their works [even] where most seeming narrative connections have been erased, the work retains a strong sense of narrative possibility and urgency. (29) In Messerli’s view, the main project of Los Angeles poetry is to connect experiences at disparate sites into coherent narratives. Rather than making explicit connections, the best poetry, in his view, subsumes narrative in experimental verse that interrogates received wisdom about Los Angeles and proposes alternative understandings. This is a typically Deweyian framing of artistic production: everyday experiences provoke discomforts that artists analyze and resolve in the realm of the aesthetic.

It is easy to imagine how this kind of disjunct experience might be empowering, especially for artists like Berman who invite audiences to collaborate in constructing their experience of aesthetic
objects. If we follow Messerli’s suggestions that there are multiple points of contact between the different episodes of life in Los Angeles that beg alignment through poetic narrative, poems begin to take on the functions of everyday life. It is just as easy, however, to see the city’s disorienting spatial organization as disruptive to identity and experience. Vangelisti explains this perspective in the introduction to *L.A. Exile*:

> In Los Angeles, we write as necessarily absent and present: present in the fundamental passion for the craft perhaps felt no more intimately and immediately than in such ‘splendid isolation’; absent from the fake history, the boosterism, the ever-more insidious banality of what most familiarly, in this town, is called the Business. . . . Thus, what makes for isolation and instability—the demand the surroundings put on the writer to be both here and elsewhere—is an essential fact of existence. . . . Exile, then, does not seem to be so much a condition as a basic form or, perhaps, situation to be explored. Whether in fictive definition or poetic contradiction, the urge to be elsewhere—both here and there—is where life and work, however tenuously, come together. This unfinished world, this adventure in which a writer habitually risks his or her sense of place and self, is where many have finally come to dwell. (16-18)

The city’s geography and culture—and the degree to which both are prefigured by Hollywood’s exaggerated fantasies—make it a difficult place to be a poet. It destabilizes residents’ senses of their identities to the point of alienation. In this, Los Angeles is “the ultimate American city,” according to Vangelisti, a “‘last place,’ spatially as well as culturally,” where poets are “up against a dislocation so profound that absolute invention, of the self and its relationship to language, is indispensable to artistic survival” (13). In both a cultural and geographic sense, then, Los Angeles is a blank canvas where poets and artists invent identities and pursue collaborations under constant pressure of dissolution. Los Angeles is an “unfinished world” at the intersection of poetics and everyday life where poets “demand
to know what it is to make a poem” in order to resolve its temporal and cultural contradictions
(Vangelisti, Specimen ’73 18).

Thomas testifies to the challenges and possibilities Messerli and Vangelisti describe in the third section of “Apologia” (quoted in full):

These desperations
are not unique
I don’t say that
I only make affidavit of their solidity
only testify to the reality
of a certain kind of sullen rage
that grows out of having only such
trifles to work with as

the twentieth century
squirmings of two people in a bed
that mountains are big
that pain hurts
that friends die

& I tell you
all that keeps me at it is
that to form a living poem
of such flimsy material
to make it breathe & sing
under these conditions
is so preposterously difficult that
it is an undertaking
not unworthy of a man

Like Davis, Dear and Soja, Thomas sees Los Angeles as the apotheosis of twentieth-century American urbanism and the logical endpoint of the trajectories of modernism. The city is flat, disenchanted, mundane. Not only is the geography of Los Angeles disorienting, but its history, and thus the context it offers for experience, is also unstable and contested. Because “each new wave of immigrants alters the makeup of the city,” as Messerli explains, “shared experiences and institutions of the earlier times are forgotten” (32). From sex to religion and from the natural world to human relationships, there is a risk in Los Angeles that everyday experience might become merely a sequence of events devoid of meaning.
and feeling. Despite this air of banal contingency and the city’s “flimsy materials,” Thomas embraces
everyday life in Los Angeles taking its mundaneness as a provocation. Since life in the city jumps from
one scene to another erratically, he suggests, its poets shoulder the responsibility to make “true
connections” between its component parts (Vangelisti, Specimen ‘73, 29).

Thomas takes up the challenge of Vangelisti’s introduction in earnest: how can poetry be made
out of the “words we inhabit here” in Los Angeles? He rages at the way meaning has been severed from
religion and sex in contemporary experience. Rather than retreating into sarcasm, however, he resolves
to make “living poem[s]” from what he encounters in his everyday life. Embodying Olson’s claim that
projective verse lends the poet’s voice a “seriousness sufficient to cause the thing he makes to try to
take its place alongside the things of nature,” Thomas’s poetry lends his experiences “solidity” by
integrating them into a larger whole (Collected Prose 247). Because the task is “preposterously difficult,”
it is worth attempting. As Vangelisti and Messerli suggest, living in Los Angeles exposes poets to risks
that they might not face in other places, for example, isolation, instability, and disorientation. For
Thomas, who accepts these risks as stimuli through which to create, writing poetry in Los Angeles is
identical with making a life there.

Mohr explains the development of poetics like Thomas’s in Los Angeles to the qualities of the
city’s geographic and economic order in the introduction to Poetry Loves Poetry. Describing a general
lack of community among the city’s poets he writes: “Los Angeles tends to attract poets who are loners .
. . In fact, there isn’t a social scene among poets here. Unlike San Francisco or New York, there is not a
single bar in all of Los Angeles where the poets in this anthology meet. . . The distinct lack of a ‘social
scene’ is unlikely to change no matter how many poets are working here.” For Mohr, as for Thomas and
Bukowski, Los Angeles attracts poets who aim for self-sufficiency, who do not need “to be around other
artists in order to reassure [themselves] all is well with the imagination” (iii). In pointing to the lack of a
central gathering point for poets, Mohr taps what urban planner Michael Dear calls the city’s
“polycentric, polarized, polyglot” nature, its lack of an identifiable core or integrated structure (111). Spread over more than 400 square miles, Los Angeles separates even the like-minded poets Mohr suggest might desire a “social scene” through which to support and encourage each other’s work. Because of this geographic isolation, the city’s poets invent alternative modes of community. The portraits gathered at the end of Poetry Loves Poetry bring Mohr’s claim that the dominant Los Angeles poetics is one of “Existential Romanticism” to life:

If I had to describe the poetics of a large number of poets in Los Angeles in two words, I would use ‘Existential Romanticism.’ The existential factor is so obvious that it is easy to overlook, which is a serious mistake [. . .] The romantic counterbalance is the artist’s attempt to soothe the alienation with an outburst of autobiographical emotion [. . .] The first person narration of many Los Angeles poets’ work can be deceiving. Rather than autobiographical, I prefer the term self-portraits. Unlike painters’ canvases, the poems are not limited to one face, using instead a wide cast of characters and favoring a depth of field approach with this city’s layers of pointillistic motion in the background. (v-vi)

This description of the state of poetic affairs in Los Angeles echoes claims made by other anthologists. First and foremost, by applying the term “existentialism,” Mohr foregrounds the anxiety and discomfort Vangelisti and Messerli identify. Los Angeles poets write because they are provoked by the circumstances of their lives. The results of their efforts are narratives, as Messerli suggests, that frame and arrange the circumstances of everyday life in the city in ways more favorable to poetry. Like Berman’s Semina and McGrath’s poets thinking alone in community, the existentialist narratives of Los Angeles poetry “are not limited to one face.” Rather, they point in many directions at once and can be read as encapsulating divergent perspectives. Los Angeles poets disclose, as Dewey would urge, “a sense of possibilities that are unrealized and that might be realized.” These possibilities, in turn, have the power to make us “aware of constrictions that hem us in and of burdens that oppress” (360). At the
same time that Mohr’s poets construct private psychologies, then, they are proposing trajectories through Los Angeles, movements from point to point that accumulate to form alternative urban geographies.

Mohr aligns the spatializing tendency of Los Angeles poetics with the work of three predecessor poets, Whitman, Williams and Olson. He notes that Whitman and Williams “redefined the function of sentences in poetry” in ways that serve the kinds of narrative experiments underway in Los Angeles and suggests that the latter two poets would also recognize the “obscurity” and “difficult path[s]” he and his fellow Los Angeles poets have chosen (Poetry Loves Poetry vi; xiv). According to this genealogy, narrative self-invention appears in Los Angeles poetry for at least two reasons. First, the city is a vulnerable elsewhere at the margin of American cultural production subject to rapid economic and demographic shifts, as well as to natural forces such as earthquakes and wildfires. Living and working there represents a risk for poets that finds its rewards in writing that eschews the “fashionable” in favor of the authentic and enduring (Poetry Loves Poetry xiv). Second, because Los Angeles is so expansive, it contains spaces wherein poets and artists have freedom to develop autonomous communities “interlinked by friendships” and personal connections rather than formal affiliations (Messerli 9). For the same reason that it inhibits the formation of a single cultural center, the geography of the city enables a partitioning of private space “within which the public sphere [cannot] intrude” and, as a result, the development of a belief among poets and artists in the “inviolability of personal freedom and experience” (Smith 142).

Many of the poems in Mohr’s anthologies map Los Angeles’s alternative spaces. Through projective narratives, Mohr’s poets clear ground for self-understanding and community affiliation by integrating their otherwise discrete experiences into comprehensible and communicable wholes. Their attempts to project a poetic geography of Los Angeles that merges subjective experience, direct description and human interaction builds on the principles of projective verse Olson outlines. At the very root, Olson suggests, poetry is a means of transferring the energy of insight and experience from “where
the poet got it (he will have some several causations) [. . .] all the way over to, the reader” (Collected Prose 240). Advocating a renovation of poetic practice, Olson identifies several characteristics in post-war American poetry that constrain this energy transfer: the use of received forms such as the iambic pentameter line; the separation of content, or what the poem is, from form, or how it exists in the world; and the reliance on a reflective rather than engaged stance toward reality. In addition to advocating internal logics—the logic of breath, for example—over external forms, Olson urges poets to relate to the elements of their writing and their experiences as objects in perpetual tension.

The “layers of pointillistic motion” Mohr glimpses along Los Angeles’s freeways resemble the perceptions Olson encourages poets to incorporate. “ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION,” he urges, describing both the process of composing a poem and the experience of reading one.

It means exactly what it says, is a matter of, at all points (even, I should say, of our management of daily reality as of the daily work) get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed, the perceptions, theirs, the acts, the split second acts, the whole business, keep it moving as fast as you can, citizen. And if you also set up as a poet, USE USE USE the process at all points, in any given poem always, always one perception must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER! (Collected Prose 240)

The “management of daily reality” consists of the same “daily work” as writing poetry, in Olson’s account, because it begins from the same sequence of perceptions and experiences. What matters for the poet and non-poet alike is allowing these perceptions and experiences to bloom into complexity rather than wrenching them into predefined shapes through the “lyrical interference of the individual as ego” (Collected Prose 247). The urgency of Olson’s prose models the accumulating intensity of sensory and intellectual experience in projective verse. Moving “instanter” from perception to nervy perception
increases the possibility that poet and reader will meet in the poem’s energy rather than abstracting themselves in contemplation.

Mohr’s self-portraits are open in this sense because they incorporate the city itself, the objective reality poets and readers share, as an integral component and ground for connection. While McGrath describes the shape of Los Angeles in *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, his city is primarily allegorical. As critique, *Letter* exists in a “separate realm, where it is cut off from that association with the materials and aims of every other form of human effort, undergoing and achievement” (Dewey 2).

The poem’s Cadillacs and smog are real enough, but their primary function is symbolic. They bring the reader into McGrath’s perspective in order to reinforce his arguments rather than turning the reader back out into the city with renewed energy and understanding. By contrast, the poets in Mohr’s anthologies, Holly Prado and Kate Braverman, for example, present concrete geographies, inviting readers to explore the boundaries of their particular city and to follow along their unique courses through it. “The Hill” and “Faircrest Avenue,” published in *The Streets Inside*, focus on personal experiences in different corners of the city, a hillside neighborhood Prado visits with a contractor friend and the street where Braverman grew up. The poems take up Dewey’s challenge to “restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art” by merging description and perception in casually complex verse (2).

Dedicated to a friend, John Kelly, Prado’s “The Hill” narrates a walk home on a rainy night “up and up / stone stairs” through a neighborhood overlooking Los Angeles. A branch has fallen on the stairs, obstructing Prado and Kelly’s path, so they have to “crouch through” a section of the steps in order to reach their destination. The branch, and the way it changes the shape of their walk, gives rise to a reflection on chance that forms the bulk of the poem. Through syntax that points in many directions at once, Prado explains a way of being in Los Angeles that is open to external forces and influences, susceptible to being shaped and changed from moment to moment. The poem in full:
one thing moves it changes the whole thing it shifts in the
one thing today is rain
he said “I like dangerous singers”
dangerous and singers those odd words together they echo
how can singing be other than lyrics but I know what he means
the rise of notes higher then plunging then the rain

if I could answer what I ask every day
I would probably die we live in the tension of questions
it leads us it leads me it leads him
he tears down walls of houses puts them up again
fresh sheetrock walls fresh in the painting in how
a hand wipes with its brush of color

last night he and I walked
up and up
stone stairs I know them as five hundred walks
it takes only one things
the eucalyptus branch huge fallen over the stairs and to crouch through it
he gestured to a house where he’d built a deck a view
I will remember that house the next time as his it only takes
one remark to make another design of the notes
as the singer dives through the melody every wave you can be
knocked down you can be nuzzled to shore you can be teased into
every question
they collide they come together these houses these branches fresh walls
I walk all the time keeping an eye on the trees
possible thunder the cracking of questions
I cannot build anything with my hands
I lift only the ache of words and some heavenly laugh I’ve been
growing awhile
It takes one thing and all the invisible walks
it takes eucalyptus in rain the downed wood to crawl through
it takes some singing

(56 – 57)

The poem’s driving idea is that chance alters the course of thoughts, writings, lives, and history: “one
thing moves it changes the whole thing it shifts.” The “one thing” takes many forms: a branch fallen on
the stairs, the deck Kelly has built, the “design of notes” the improvisational singer develops to move the
melody forward, the vulnerability the poet experiences when thunder crashes. Visible in the world or
invisible in the poet’s experience, each of these things “changes the whole thing,” forestalling the
answers Prado fears would extinguish her sense of Los Angeles’s poetic possibilities. “I cannot build
anything with my hands,” she explains, contrasting the ephemerality of her “ache of words” with the solidity of the “sheetrock walls” Kelly works with every day. Rather than subordinating the aesthetic labor of poetry to the physical labor of building houses, Prado suggests that “they collide they come together,” Olson’s perceptions moving “instanter” on one another.

The syntax of the poem and the lack of punctuation create a similar experience of dislocation and adaptation available to the reader. At several moments, Prado creates expectations of meaning at the ends of lines then redirects them. For example, the second and third lines of the poem bear little relation to one another, “one thing today is rain / he said ‘I like dangerous singers,’” the former inviting the reader into contemplation of the environment while the latter reports an unrelated conversation. The shift from one kind of awareness, exploring internal thoughts, to another, listening for resonances in what a companion says, is mediated by a line break, putting the reader in a position to experience multiple levels of understanding in the same moment. There are at least three levels of meaning at work in Prado’s poem: the narrative of the walk up the hillside, Prado’s meditation on poetry’s role in the world and the reader’s attempt to make meaning across line breaks. Because of the branch, what should be a domesticated and ordered space, stairs built into a hillside, has become, because of the fallen branch, more dangerous and more meaningful. The fallen branch reveals the limits of human ability to construct durable urban spaces and surrounds the pair with a “tension of questions” about the contingency of the relations between the body, the city, and the natural world.

“The Hill” takes place in an upper-class neighborhood overlooking the city, an upper circle of McGrath’s “inverse hell.” Braverman’s “Faircrest Avenue,” by contrast, is set in a middle-class development on the city’s western side. More directly than Prado, Braverman addresses the interpenetration of physical environments and subjective experience. She acts as a reader of the neighborhood around Faircrest, investing buildings and street corners with private meaning, while also posing questions about how others, her parents, for example, might interpret the same structures.
Braverman asserts her narrative more directly than Prado; there are no openings in her syntax where
the reader must invent connections between one thing or context and another. In this, “Faircrest
Avenue” recalls Thomas’s “Apologia.” Rather than enacting the kind of susceptibility to influence so
important to “The Hill,” Braverman presents an inventory of divergent strands of her experience in a
specific place in Los Angeles at a specific moment in time.

Returning to the Faircrest neighborhood as an adult, Braverman remembers the ambitions that
brought her parents to Los Angeles and the abuse and alcoholism that constrained their experiences.

Here is the path down
to Faircrest Avenue.
Faircrest.
What did it sound like to her?
   Collecting the down payment.
   Promising them anything
   after the Bronx childhood
   of cold stoops and red bricks.
   after the hospitals.
Faircrest.
   The curling of clear blue
   mountain air in a kingdom
   nestled between Pico and Olympic
   where the past overlaps.
And him? The master at last
   with build in barbecue
   rainbirds, leaves to sweep.
   A man of property
   in a land of second chances.

(173)

The family moves to Los Angeles to pursue their version of the American dream in a “kingdom / nestled
between Pico and Olympic.” Faircrest Avenue, the street rather than the poem, represents a dream life
and a second chance, the fulfillment of a promise the parents made to each other when they left the
Bronx. Unfortunately, the family’s experiences on Faircrest contrast sharply with their hopes for
domestic fulfillment. The father sits “fermenting near the wall!” most days in an alcoholic stupor and
abuses his wife so loudly that neighbors call the police twice (170). From Braverman’s description, it is
apparent that the family is dysfunctional. Their home is a mask they wear to conceal their problems:

“Here is the house at dusk. / Innocuous, the shame covered, / with fresh pastel paint. / Here is the hate” (172-3).

Exterior calm and conformity conceals violence, hatred, shame and abuse.

This is a dark vision. Like Prado taking the fallen eucalyptus branch as a spur to meditation, however, Braverman inhabits the contradictions of her childhood in order to assert mastery over the uncertainty they produce. The final stanza of the poem is a ride through the neighborhood that evacuates it of negative associations.

But I am back,
back with a bus.
And everyone is coming.
    My father. The newspaper boys.
    My mother. The rabbi with his dog.
    Yes, the dog is coming.
The bus is taking everything.
    The Christmas lights.
    The summers.
    The goddamn ivy.
It’s all of Faircrest Avenue
in the blue bus of my youth.
And finally I am driving,
taking them all down Pico Boulevard
and not stopping.
    Do you understand?
    Not for popcorn or the highway.
    Scream all you want.
This bus is going out to sea.

(174)

Braverman’s staccato declarations—nearly every line ends with a period whether or not it is a sentence—recall a parent speaking to a child, but the relationship has been inverted. Pairing a narrative that begins at the left margin with indented secondary details, the poet defines for herself her parents’ dysfunctions and the meanings Faircrest evokes. The confidence of the stanza’s opening lines becomes aggression as details accumulate until everything, including the reader, is locked in “the blue bus of my youth” by the end. Braverman drives the bus due west on Pico Boulevard to its terminus at the Pacific,
completing the trajectory her parents began. Like Prado, Bukowski and Thomas, Braverman struggles with the buildings and objects she encounters in her everyday experience. The city’s built environment is at once too oppressive in the meanings it suggests and too banal in its perpetual summer and “goddman ivy.” Through the narrative she offers, Braverman isolates objects and meanings, past and present, so that rather than some integrated vision of a Hollywood future or a postmodern apocalypse, what comes through “Faircrest Avenue” is a set of possibilities for integrating the various elements at play “by bus / even when I walk / or drive my car,” depending on the moment (169).

By listening for resonances between experiences, meditations on them, and what other poets and readers might offer, Braverman, Prado, Bukowski and Thomas propose alternative frames for understanding the contradictions of Los Angeles. Isolated, in some sense, from poetry’s mainstream, they have benefits of free association and seemingly perfect mobility. The second generation of Los Angeles poets bears the influence of Olson’s projective verse, especially his emphasis on breaking through conventions to compose poetry that follows the logic of the individual voice. While they “think alone in company” like McGrath, Lipton, Berman and their circles, and share the earlier generation’s commitment to public forms of poetry, they are both more personal in their poetics and more willing, as Dewey counsels, to integrate the aesthetic and the everyday in their work. The “words they inhabit” became communities through narrative inventions and propositional self-portraits within which they critique and celebrate Los Angeles’s possibilities. Even so, their poetics are limited by the fact of their socioeconomic positioning: they write from positions of relative privilege with Los Angeles that many residents and fellow poets do not share.

“I Will Factor-In Feeling”: Watts and the Poetry of Crisis

Crises of public life erupt when communities refuse to accept substandard conditions and demand the right to determine the shape of their lives and futures, to demand what Lefebvre calls the “right to the
city.” The Watts uprising in August 1965 and the South Central riots in April/May 1992 follow this pattern. Summarizing interviews conducted by sociologist Nathan Cohen, Janet Abu-Lughod lists four main triggers for the 1965 uprising: “poor conditions of streets and housing, “mistreatment by whites (including discrimination and police malpractice), economic conditions (low pay, high prices and rents, lack of jobs, etc.), and lack of public facilities (transportation, schools, shopping, parks, etc.)” (217). The McCone Commission, charged by the governor to investigate the uprising, reached similar conclusions in its deeply flawed report, identifying “the dull, devastating spiral of failure that awaits the average disadvantaged child in the urban core” as a chief cause and prescribing action on three fronts: employment, education and police-community relations (n.p.). The poets of Watts provide an alternative analysis of the crisis by reporting individual experiences and the intersections of their lives with larger social and economic structures. Their sustained descriptions and charged personal narratives characterize a poetics of crisis geared toward: defining spatial and cultural boundaries, creating communities with common purposes, and preserving time and space for individuals to define themselves.

Arts organizations flourished in Watts after the 1965 uprising, including some, such as Studio Watts and the Watts Tower Arts Center, which were founded before the uprising and directed by community members, and others, such as the Watts Summer Festival and the famed Watts Writers Workshop, which were launched in its aftermath and led primarily by nonresidents. The political atmosphere was charged, especially among young black men in the community. While outside organizers and many residents advocated nonviolence and incremental reform as the way forward,

44 The McCone Commission “blamed the victims” for the violence of the uprising to the Watts community (Abu-Lughod 214). In their analysis, residents were “caught up in an insensate rage of destruction” from August 11 – 18, 1965, incapable of distinguishing between personal frustrations and the best interests of the community (n.p.). As Abu-Lughod and Horne demonstrate, the report ignores larger structural problems of racism and generational inequality and inappropriately absolves the Los Angeles Police Department of wrongdoing. Abu-Lughod describes the scholarly response to the report in Race, Space, and Riots (215-221).
residents and community leaders influenced by black nationalism viewed the uprising as the beginning of a broader insurrection. As historian Gerald Horne writes, “there was a battle for the hearts and minds of many gang members and would-be gang members after August 1965, between cultural nationalists and those within the orbit of the Black Panther Party” (202). Participants in many arts organizations favored the former approach, viewing art as a “means of social change and hope in the lives of individuals” that would create real effects in the community by promoting “improvements in self-image and community identity” (Carter 14). Those influenced by the Black Panther Party “recognized the explosive potential of the Watts rebellion as a political force and developed a program and activities to organize black folks on the street” (Bloom and Martin 143). Differences in the perspective and tone in the poetry published by community arts organizations track these political differences.

Hollywood screenwriter Budd Schulberg founded the Watts Writers Workshop in the immediate aftermath 1965 uprising to provide a therapeutic space where residents of the community could be heard and respected and where anger and pent-up energy that might produce more violence could be channeled to more productive ends.

Think of finding these young men of mysterious depths, of talents neglected, before the poet or the lute player goes to his pauper’s inglorious grave. He may be only one among a thousand, or ten thousand. But he may find, like an Ellison, a Claude Brown—perhaps now a Harry Dolan or a Johnie Scott (workshop participants)—that he speaks for a hundred thousand, or for twenty million. His single candle may light a thousand thousand candles. And the light and warmth of these candles may help redeem and regenerate the core of the ghetto, that decomposed inner city, waiting either for a phoenix to rise from the ashes, or for bigger and more terrible fires. (23)

The thrust of Schulberg’s call to awareness is that Watts and neighborhoods like it in other American cities are sites of creative potential that might be channeled toward a healing artistic renaissance but, if left untapped, will lead to “bigger and more terrible fires.” While the workshop writers are not
unanimous in their diagnosis or approach to the community’s problems, because they share a common experience, Schulberg suggests, their writing can serve as a foundation for renewal by engaging the community in the development of self-knowledge and solidarity. Writing and experiencing poetry can defuse anger, frustration, and discontent and also shoulder the responsibility of disseminating the truth about Watts to the broader public.

Schulberg directed the Workshop for four years, garnering attention from the national media, support from Hollywood contacts, and federal and philanthropic funding before abandoning it in 1970 amid internal conflicts declining interest from residents and funders. The Workshop’s use of creative writing as a “path toward social equality offered a novel vision of local antipoverty politics” integrated reform and more radical activism, but, according to historian Daniel Widener, Schulberg left a mixed legacy (666). Because he insisted on separating artistic from political activities, the net effect of his work was to channel the “angry voices of Watts” through poetry rather than providing a foundation for social change. While the Workshop promoted black cultural production as “part of the solution to rather than as a primary cause of urban poverty and social strife,” it inhibited authentic forms of solidarity and empowerment (680-682).

Quincy Troupe and a group of thirteen Workshop members broke from Schulberg in 1967, forming the Watts 13. The group published Watts Poets, a collection of their work, in 1968. The collection is dedicated to Thaddeus Morgan Brevard, a Watts resident who survived being shot by police in November 1967. The dedication, printed with irregular line breaks on the inside back cover, proposes an urgent line of inquiry:

What we want to know as recorders of these times, as poets and essayist, is why a man, when he is on his knees has to be shot nine times????????

“WATTS FATS” was on his knees, got shot by those paid to PROTECT HIM!!!!
We as members of the Black
community ask WHY???
This book is also dedicated to all similar incidents.

Calling themselves “recorders of / these times,” the Watts 13 position themselves as witnesses and primary investigators of life in Watts. They are writing as much to expose the discrimination and brutality to which they are subject as to challenge incrementalist approaches to reform. The repeated question marks in the dedication, nine to match the nine shots Brevard survived, indicate the degree to which the logic of community had broken down in Watts in the period after the uprising. Where Schulberg organized his Workshop as a way to change the course of individual lives in Watts, Troupe and the Watts 13 aim to rally the community to action. As a whole, the volume presents a poetics of crisis grounded in an urgent need for self-definition: only when residents demand control over their own daily lives can the work of rebuilding the community begin.

Writing in Paris at the same time as the Watts 13’s break from Schulberg’s Workshop, Henri Lefebvre asserts a broad list of rights that attach to urban life. His definition of the “right to the city” links objective circumstances such as access to housing and employment to subjective conditions and experiences, the sense we have of the possible trajectories our daily lives might follow.

The urban cannot be defined either as attached to a material morphology (on the ground, in the practico-material), or as being able to detach itself from it. It is not an intemporal essence, nor a system among other systems or above other systems. It is a mental and social form, that of simultaneity, of gathering, of convergence, of encounter (or rather, encounters). It is a quality born from quantities (spaces, objects, products). It is a difference, or rather, an ensemble of differences. . . . It is a field of relations including notably the relation of time (or of times; cyclical rhythms and linear durations) with space (or spaces: isotopies and heterotopies). (131)

Lefebvre distinguishes the “urban,” the “mental and social” experience of urban life, from the “city,” the built environment and spatial organization of particular urban areas (103). Contrasted with the physical
circumstances of life in the city, the urban, an experiential dimension, becomes a “place of desire, permanent disequilibrium, seat of the dissolution of normalities and constraints, the moment of play and of the unpredictable” (129). While it is a highly abstract conceptualization that is easier to apply at the aggregate level, across a whole city, Lefebvre’s idea of the urban as a “field of relations” is relevant to neighborhoods, especially places like Watts where the built environment and public services are insufficient to meet the community’s needs.

From the 1930s through World War II, Watts was a thriving working class neighborhood at a key intersection of Los Angeles’s intercity rail system that attracted black migrants from the American South. Most residents worked in factories tied to the defense industry in the immediate vicinity of their home (Horne 23-42). After World War II, changes in the economic and spatial organization of Los Angeles cancelled the neighborhood’s “locational advantages—its proximity to industrial jobs and its convenient access to downtown” (Abu-Lughod 200). As factories moved to less expensive sites in the outer suburbs and the city constructed freeways that replaced its public transit system, including the Harbor freeway that bisected Watts, residents experienced reduced access to jobs and services (Abu-Lughod 199-201; Davis 163-166). The voters’ approval of Proposition 14, a proposal to repeal a fair housing act which entrenched racial discrimination in housing, in 1964, essentially trapped underemployed black families in a neighborhood with declining prospects (Davis 296; Horne 249). Rampant police misconduct throughout the 1950s and increases in gang violence made Watts a dangerous place by 1965, as Wanda Coleman reports in “Native in a Strange Land”: “It was synonymous with violence, death, drugs, gang warfare and the worst ‘culturally deprived’ colored/Negro stereotypes” (28).

In Lefebvre’s analysis, two processes, industrialization and urbanization, produce neighborhoods like Watts that limit the choices city residents have in making urban lives. Industrialization creates a need for rationally organized labor power in direct proximity to sites of production, initiating urbanization, the formation of denser and denser communities that ensure the productivity of the labor
force while minimizing costs. As the scale of production increases, “the city, or what remains of it, is
built or is rearranged” such that “a feeling of monotony covers [its] diversities and prevails, whether
housing, buildings, alleged urban centres, organized areas are concerned.” The urban, in turn, is
“corroded and gnawed” and loses the “features and characteristics of the œuvre, of appropriation.
(127) Lefebvre conceives of industrialization and urbanization as in conflict with the typical course of
urban life, the trajectory toward “appropriation,” or the use people make of the city in creating their
lives. In this view, communities and the interactions they sustain are antagonistic to production. A place
like Watts, then, left behind when factories moved to the suburbs and isolated through changes in the
city’s spatial and political organization, is a terrain of conflict over how individuals are valued, whether
for their labor power or their innate productivity, in other words, over how the city and the urban
interact.

Lefebvre develops his diagnosis of these conflicts further in *The Production of Space* where he
theorizes space as consisting of three intersecting levels of awareness and experience. The layers are the
perceived, which corresponds to a place’s physical form, for example, Los Angeles’s elevated, multi-lane
highways; the conceived, which corresponds to function, the way those highways organize movement
through the City, isolating some neighborhoods and connecting others; and the lived, what we do in
spaces and what we see, hear and feel there (245-246; 369-372). The three layers are isolable in the
abstract, but they are difficult to distinguish in experience. The challenge, Lefebvre explains, using
language that recalls Dewey’s insistence on the integration of the aesthetic and the everyday, is to find
ways to “relate these spheres to one another, and to uncover mediations between them” (298).
Thinking with and through overlaps of the perceived, conceived, and lived layers brings to the surface
contradictions that are otherwise concealed. In this, the theory extends the everyday poetics implicit in
Olson’s “Projective Verse” to the urban scene. What we do with urban spaces, like what poets and
artists do with the qualities of their everyday lives, becomes more important than the forms those spaces take at any given moment.

The key point of Lefebvre's argument in both *The Production of Space* and “The Right to the City” is that the shape, function, and experience of a given space are always being contested, which means different constituencies are always making claims on its use. Lefebvre explains:

> The contradictions of space . . . make the contradictions of social relations operative. In other words, spatial contradictions ‘express’ conflicts between socio-political interests and forces; it is only in space that such conflicts come effectively into play . . . . (*Production of Space* 365)

Exposing the contradictions of space, then, creates the potential for social change because it reveals the contingent nature of the status quo and opens a gap through which communities can take directed action. McGrath attempts to expose Los Angeles's contested social geography in the “inferno” section of *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, but his critique remains at the level of abstract perception because it relies on symbolic rather than everyday objects. Berman and Lipton forge alternative communities through their work, proposing structures derived from lived experience and rejecting interference from external constituencies such as the police and the academy. As influential as their experiments have been in some circles, their visions are isolating rather than inclusive, depending on a contrast with dominant structures rather than a renovation of them. For their part, Thomas, Prado and Braverman commit themselves to analyzing lived experience and advocating empowerment. Their poetry challenges national and regional preconceptions of Los Angeles and clears space for the invention of local identities, but while their work is both radical and grounded in the everyday, their geographic narratives depend on perfect mobility, a condition that separates their innovations from the realities of life in communities like Watts.

Eric Priestley describes experiences on the streets of Watts after the 1965 uprising and emphasizes the role of personal responsibility in building a better future for the neighborhood in “Can
"You Dig Where I'm Commin' From?" a poem included in *Watts Poets*. His description focuses on the neighborhood’s decrepit physical appearance and the effect living in such a place has on residents’ attitudes: “a jungle / of empty whiskey and wine bottles” populated by “the shadowed forms / of my people, / who had nothin' to do all day, / but sit on old milk crates and beat up boxes.” The speaker of the poem, an unemployed young man, imagines the older men in the community watching “crawling along the razor edged / knives of reality” and then imagines himself becoming one of those older men, never having built a life due to poverty, inefficient public services, and a general lack of opportunity. The title and refrain, “Can you dig where I’m commin’ from,” is what he imagines the older generation thinks, “the words trembling through their minds / as they sat thinkin’,” as they watch members of his generation walk the streets.

The tone of the poem is defiant. Amid the “flames and smoke” persisting in the community after the uprising, the young speaker turns away from the escape he had found in drug use, addressing an unspecified “you” with this assertion:

You can no longer
squeeze me out of your red and white tube.
Put me in your little brown paper sack, and sniff me.
No longer put me into a rubber balloon. Sell me,
and shoot me through
the dirty needle of some dumb ‘hype’.

The speaker admits drugs “were all merely ways I used to run away, / cause I was ‘blue’ all through / . . . / . . . excuses I’d used in place of living” and turns the repeating question of the poem outward to his readers, challenging them to make sense of his origins, where he “believed / I was nobody, but mud,” and his future. The poem advances a structural critique of lived experience in the Watts community along the lines of Lefebvre’s tripartite explanation of spatial experience. Priestley’s perception is that Watts is a “jungle” outside the general order, a refuge for the “poor,” “wrinkled” and “tormented” that has been left out of the city’s economic redevelopment. Its empty lots are “burned clean” three years
Horne attests to this assessment: “the process of urban renewal, which often was packaged as a benevolent reform, devastated South LA in the wake of August 1965” (353). Rather than condemning the community or external forces, however, Priestley opens a line of questioning, “can you dig where I’m commin’ from?” that looks back to explain how things have come to be the way they are and points forward to choices the community faces. (15 – 16)

Vallejo’s “Locust of Satan, Part 1” contrasts Priestley’s individualistic optimism, locating the root of Watts’s problems in broader structural problems. Where Priestley suggests possibilities of renewal and improvement through changes in residents’ views of the community and themselves, “Locust of Satan” depicts a continuing sense of anger and bitterness that Vallejo predicts will be a prelude to more violence. Like many of the poems in Watts Poets, “Locust of Satan” exposes disgusting living conditions and desperate residents:

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piss stained walls—
The place where germs walk around disguised
As people—
A place where people go slyly thru cracks
In the wall
To drink vomit with gusto—
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As in Priestley’s descriptions, there is disorder, “Litter runs the streets as small children at play,” but here conditions appears to be so severe that the whole neighborhood is doomed. Vallejo assigns blame for Watts’s circumstances to the powers outside the community, especially the police and predicts more violence, almost relishing another uprising. “[E]nergetic zombies wait[ing] around / To die again—” replace the old men Priestley sees sitting on buckets and boxes, while “Faith – Trust – love” disappear entirely from the community. In this, Vallejo gestures toward the kind of allegory McGrath deploys in Letter to An Imaginary Friend, offering a critique of present circumstances that might shape readers’ understandings of possible futures:

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I expect HATE’s company for dinner tonight—
The Cannibals who devour my kind are the main course,
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Jugs of blood fill, my winery—
Vintage years ’65, ’66, ’67—
We will use the fire of looted stores as candlelight—
While from my stereo we enjoy
The “Beautiful Sounds of Riots,”—
windows breaking, shouts of ‘kill whitey’ and sirens) with the background sound of buildings
Falling, crumbling to the ground—

There is no sense of regret in the poem’s fantasy of destruction, nor is there a vision of an alternative to the “desert waste land” the neighborhood has become. The community’s tears produce a “crop of HATE AND FEAR” which makes Watts into a “farm of deceit” where residents betray each other to the “Masters of Guile” who purchase from their farm stands.

Vallejo’s insight, much like McGrath’s about Los Angeles as a whole, is that circumstances in Watts have more to do with the economic structure of the region than with anything going on in the community. Where Priestley looks inward for solutions, Vallejo relishes the “Beautiful Sounds of Riots,” introducing a broader frame of understanding the uprising. The sounds Vallejo remembers signify collective action and are, for him, a source of pride despite their costs in lives lost. Vallejo’s commitment to action fits Horne’s account of community sentiment: “the revolt unleashed a torrent of boycotts and protests . . . an outgrowth of an increased solidarity. Those in Watts, who felt that they lived in a backwater, now could feel they were on the cutting edge of Black America” (341). Like many who witnessed the uprising, Vallejo demands immediate and violent action targeting external oppressors rather than counseling patience or expressing hope for gradual improvement.

An essay by Milton McFarlane, “To Join or Not To Join,” serves as an introduction to Watts Poets. The essay condemns Western capitalism and imperialism underscores Vallejo’s commitment to action.

We black people have come to know by experience that death is death plain and simple. And any system, institution, man, disease [sic], or what have you, that again and again promotes,
causes or participates in the wanton destruction of human life for any reason whatsoever must be feared and ultimately rejected by all of us. No cause can be so great as to warrant of [sic] justify the wholesale destruction of lives that distinguishes the white man from all else. No piece of gold or stretch of land is worth the aftermath they call Flanders or Buchenwald or even Hiroshima. No talk of ‘survival” and “rights” and the “fate of infidels,” to say nothing of the host of other excuses usually given, can ever serve to justify the unspeakable loss we all must suffer and have suffered as the result of the deaths and destruction foisted upon the world by American and the Western world. (8-9)

The essay bears the influence of the Black Panther Party, especially its recognition that “many black people already lived in a state of war” by the 1960s and its hope that the forces that produced rebellions like Watts “could be organized . . . into powerful political resistance” (Martin and Bloom 146). Described in the contributors section as a “playwright/essayist” and “intake counselor for South Central Los Angeles Service Center,” McFarlane embodies aesthetic and personal commitments to Watts, identifying a need for revolutionary change rather than incremental improvements. It is easier to imagine his words shouted from a podium than shared in a lounge at Frederick Douglass House during a session of Schulberg’s workshop. While McFarlane rejects the outright violence Vallejo endorses, his rhetoric suggests a gathering of forces rather than a flowering of individual creativity.

As an alternative to the capitalist cycle of acquisition and destruction, McFarlane offers a specifically black communalism rooted in local control over resources, empathy and shared responsibility. Black communities are uniquely positioned to introduce these practices and become both the “conscience” of society and the “salvation of this country” because of their roots in Africa.

Therefore rather than joining in this madness, black people must return to their own tradition:

To the tradition of responsibility to life, to the practice of co-operation that eschews wanton competition and destructive rivalries, to the building of an economy based on human needs and
not on selfish greed. For on this alone hangs our salvation and the salvation of this country and the world; because we are well placed not only to be the consciences of this jaundiced society, but most important of all, we are placed by history in this awful time to usher in a spiritual renaissance and return mankind’s ultimate concern to man. And we can do it all, if we refuse to join whitey in his thing and concentrate on that which has been best about our tradition. (9-10)

This, too, follows the lead of the leaders of the Black Panther Party at the time. As Bloom and Martin explain, the Party’s community service programs were, by 1967, “revolutionary, not reformist” in orientation “part of a broader insurgency to change the American capitalist system to a more equitable socialist one” (195). The types of social organization McFarlane and the Black Panther Party propose center on individual needs rather than external hierarchies or abstract ideas about justice. It employs a poetics of crisis toward a call for immediate action.

Blossom Powe’s “It Was Here” extends Priestley’s, Vallejo’s, and McFarlane’s analysis through specific consideration of the circumstances and effects of the 1965 uprising. The poem is intricately constructed, suspending ideas across many lines through enjambments that disrupt and extend syntax. Several end words repeat in each stanza: “onto the streets like rain” (6th lines); “blood” (7th lines); “ties” and “lives surrendered” (8th lines); “hot!” (9th lines); “nightwinds” or “nightwind’s” (13th lines); “currents” (14th lines); and “hungry streets of Watts” (16th and last lines). Each stanza turns on “surrendered,” a word that accumulates meanings over the course of the poem. In the first stanza, residents surrender the “ties” that bind them to one another, locating the onset of the uprising’s violence in a cleaving of the community.

And then. . . .
The bus-stop benches were quiet, unreal
No sanity was found!
This was where
Scattered people went past
Lured on the streets like rain,
Giving up their human blood
And ties surrendered
When their aims were hot!
And a truth, born out of friction,
Was that placating lies
From angry, twisted faces
Like bells, tolled on nightwinds
To hide decay that bred in currents
Hammering the blame
On the hungry streets of Watts.

Seeing Watts in relation to a larger world, Powe accuses external actors of “luring” people onto the streets and seducing them toward hot aims with “placating lies / From angry, twisted faces.” The lies are particularly pernicious for Powe because they further dissolve bonds of family and community in the neighborhood into atomized anger. Starting with the McCone Commission report (1965), Los Angeles politicians promised improvements in Watts but little rebuilding had been attempted, let alone accomplished, by 1968 (Horne 226-227; Abu Lughod 202-203). As Powe observes, city officials blamed residents for the violence in order to “hide decay that bred in currents,” shifting responsibility from structural problems to individual actions.

Rather than the bonds of community, lives are surrendered in the second stanza, “splattered brothers . . . / Nailed onto the streets like rain.” Powe laments the destruction of the neighborhood, which, in the aftermath of the uprising, is now suffused by the “galling stenches of riot.” As in the first stanza, there is regret and anger at the senselessness of what happened: blood is “wasting;” “souls of black clay” are “drowned;” and the town is “smothered.”

And then . . .
The galling stenches of riot smelled real
As they smothered the town!
It was here
Splattered brothers fell fast
Nailed onto the streets like rain,
Wasting all that precious blood
In lives surrendered
When the game was hot!
And a truth, from old predictions,
Was that steel-bullet eyes
Long hid from human graces
Devoured cold the nightwind’s
Souls of black clay who drowned in currents
Vilifying Cain
In the hungry streets of Watts.

Powe contrasts the brutality of the uprising with “humane graces” that are both “hid” and “devoured” elsewhere in the community. On one level, residents create havoc; on another, “steel-bullet eyes,” a metonym for the police, confirm the deep truths of their racist beliefs; on yet another, young black men are crucified by forces beyond their conception. Powe points to a truth about Watts that the carnage and destruction of the uprising only partly obscures: it is community of souls knit together by individual hopes and capacities. Where Vallejo interprets the lives lost in the uprising as harbingers of future violence, Powe explains them as so many sacrifices, “lives surrendered” so that larger community might benefit. The analogy to Christ on the cross suggests the sacrifice has to do with a coming-to-terms with evils done in the past, as well as the consecration of a new commitment to the future.

Extending the cycle of violence and aftermath, the poem’s final stanza frames the uprising as unextinguished. The neighborhood is a “weird battleground” where “eerie cries” still echo after three years on the “same / Tired, old, hungry streets of Watts.”

And then . . .
The asphalt trenches were quiet and still
Like such weird battlegrounds!
Here and there
Shattered window-pane glass
Pour’d onto the streets like rain,
Covering dried pools of blood
From lives surrendered
When the flames were hot!
And a truth, stranger than fiction,
Was that the eerie cries
From tortured, dying faces
Still echoed on nightwinds
That blew debris in restless currents
Up and down the same
Tired, old, hungry streets of Watts.
The “restless currents” that blow through the streets might be the stirrings of Vallejo’s revolutionary violence, McFarlane’s philosophical analysis, or Priestley’s individual responsibility. Powe’s repetition of words across the poem’s three stanzas includes these possibilities and evokes the “complexity and contrariety of immediate experience” in Watts, as the editors of The California Quarterly would approve, without forcing a particular understanding of the neighborhood on the reader. A sense of loss persists in the echoing cries Powe hears in the streets of Watts, but rather than consolidating her observations in a single critique, she animates mysteries “stranger than fiction” through formal experiment. To the degree that “It Was Here” relates to the other poems collected in Watts Poets, it is a site of community, a place where individuals with different viewpoints but similar aims might come together around a common purpose.

Hailed as the “unofficial poet laureate of Los Angeles” and the “conscience of the L.A. literary scene” on her death in November 2013 (Ulin n.p.), Wanda Coleman witnessed the 1965 Watts uprising and played an active role in Los Angeles’s political and artistic communities, including the Black Panther Party, throughout her life. Frequently invited to reflect on the legacy of the uprising, especially after the South Central riot, Coleman probes everyday experience at all three of Lefebvre’s levels—perception, conception and lived experience—in her work, applying a future-oriented critique of the urban that acknowledges the urgency of social change. The problems of Watts, as she explains in 1994’s “Devaluation Blues,” result from the dual operations of racism and capitalist exploitation that constrain black lives at the spatial and experiential levels. Black Angelenos exist in a specific relation to the dominant society that bears the “resonances” of slavery and thus begin their lives in a position of subjective devaluation that is subsequently reinforced through economic and police repression. They cannot exercise their “right to the city” because they cannot develop consistent and productive relations among themselves.
The act of enslavement has served to humiliate, demean and dehumanize all Blacks—male and female alike. Black men were stripped of their ability to protect their women, or psychologically castrated. The ultimate devaluation of the Black male and now the Black female has served to weaken both—coercing them to assume the only postures that will allow the entire race to survive. Under intense and artificially generated social pressures, he (with few exceptions) is forced to accept his passive-aggressive socioeconomic status as a son-of-a-bitch; and she is forced to accept her aggressive socioeconomic status as a bitch—those both have been effectively reduced to animal/subhuman level. (71)

The different ways men and women experience the limitations of racism and exploitation produces toxic results in black communities. In order to “allow the entire race to survive” in the face of multiform oppression, they adopt roles, the “son-of-a-bitch” and the “bitch,” that function to sustain the structures of power that oppress them. This cultural diagnosis matches Vallejo’s and McFarlane’s structural analysis: black communities are caught up in the operation of a set of relations that include them only as a way to define their external margins.

Writing decades after the 1965 uprising, Coleman injects gender difference into the revolutionary politics of the Black Panther Party. Huey Newton published four articles in the Black Panther in the summer of 1967: “Fear and Doubt,” “The Functional Definition of Politics,” “In Defense of Self-Defense,” and “The Correct Handling of a Revolution.” According to Martin and Bloom, the articles represent the clearest articulation of the Party’s community-centered approach to liberation because they apply applies insights about the psychological effects of colonization to the conditions of everyday life in American ghettos (66 – 73). For Newton, the revolutionary aspect of the Watts uprising is that it invites residents to conceive of the neighborhood as a contested territory, the equivalent of a colony, which must be recaptured. Through this frame, the built environment and spatial organization of the neighborhood become a setting for the development of community, a beginning point rather than an
obstacle to be overcome. Lefebvre’s explanation of the relation of the “city” to the “urban” follows a similar logic: the physical city exists to be appropriated by communities that develop at the intersections of urban lives. Coleman merges Newton’s call for a revolutionary black psychology and a Lefebvrian sense of the limits and possibilities of urban space in her portrayals of everyday life in Watts. She approaches the neighborhood as fertile ground for invention and community despite its economic and cultural marginalization.

“Rapid Transit,” a short story published in 1987’s Heavy Daughter Blues, narrates a trip Raylene, a middle-aged black woman, attempts by bus across Watts to visit friends. The trip is ultimately unsuccessful because of the poor condition of the neighborhood’s transportation infrastructure: “the buses were often hours apart even on the most heavily trafficked boulevards” (73). The different elements and events of story correspond to the perceived, conceived and lived levels of Lefebvrian analysis. First, at the level of the perceived, the city’s geography is unmanageable. Raylene does not have a car, so she relies on city’s inefficient public transit system to get from one place to another. Needing two buses to reach her destination, Raylene encounters two unhelpful drivers. The first, “not bad looking, in his late 20s with honey-colored skin and eyes,” does everything slowly, prompting Raylene to curse to herself “Why don’t the son-of-a-bitch drive faster?” (76). The second teases her, almost catching her foot as he snaps the door “viciously shut” and “in a sudden burst of speed” departs, “roar[ing] past . . . northward into the night,” leaving Raylene at the curb screaming “curses in its wake” (77). That both drivers are black compounds her frustration.

As her experience with the drivers suggests, there is no feeling of community in Raylene’s Watts. Each person she meets on the street during her trip attempts to take advantage of her or do her harm. Waiting for the first bus, she encounters a “tan-skinned wino [. . .] clad in a second-hand suit one size too small.” He makes a “calculated slide towards her end of the bench,” propositioning her, and “spew[ing] forth a gust of stench and words.” She shrinks away, watching “in shame (that one of her
people should be so disrespectful of hisself” as he stumbles along “in a series of spasms” and then feeling repulsion dance “along her skin” before she escapes to the next bench (73). Almost immediately, a man pulls up in a “pitch black, silver chromed Cadillac El Dorado” to solicit sex. While Raylene thrills to the car’s “showroom-fresh beauty” and the “snazzily dressed, balding ebony man in his late 50s,” she declines his offer of a ride because she fears “what he wanted” in return. Through these encounters, she fears the night and her surroundings, whether the “loud fierce barking” of what might be a rabid dog or the “raucous merry-making mingled with music flowing” from a club across the street from the bus stop. She watches people waiting in line at the club but what catches her eye is the uniformed guard at the doorway, “a gun and nest of bullets holstered at his hip” (74). Coleman portrays Raylene as a black woman alone in a hostile, dangerous territory where would-be community members are isolated from each other.

When she finally boards the bus, Raylene chooses a seat that will allow her to watch “people’s faces as they got on” because she enjoys “reading them” (75). She is a spectator, at a remove from her community. What she sees on the bus are “three elderly chocolate-skinned washerwomen” sitting “numbly together . . . overloaded with chin, breast, hip and thigh;” a young black woman in an afro who listens to music and is “oblivious;” a mother-daughter pair sitting “mutely;” a “sweet-looking, olive-skinned old man [with] caucasian features;” and a pair of friends sharing a story (75-76). Raylene feels comfortable enough in this company to briefly fall asleep, but there is no interaction or even acknowledgement among the numb, mute, oblivious company during the ride. By the time the second bus speeds away, and with it the connection Raylene needs to reach her destination, she is left alone on the street again, “resigned to her fate” searching the hostile “black vista” for another bus (77). Her lived experience of crossing Watts by bus contradicts her expectations of mobility. The story exposes overlapping conditions that contribute to Raylene’s experience: the city’s car-centered geography and
inefficient transit system; the neighborhood’s culture of alcohol, sex, and violence; and the isolating atmosphere of self-protection and spectatorship that characterizes the community.

Two short poems that appear later in the same collection describe the degraded character of the streets of Watts by the 1980s. “Figueroa” is particularly explicit:

vamp 1970 south on motel row
along the funk stretch twixt Olympic on the N
and El Segundo on the S
lay scratch on the snatch—fellatio video
neath mirrored ceiling to the piped in jizz of jazz
nasty the water bed or goose down
barbecue sparerib or broasted chicken sniffin’
LIQ galore
need to do it dirty? Nowhere else to do dirty better
in fishnets garter belt spike heeled boots
and a wiggle than never quits (153)

The blocks between Olympic Boulevard and the El Segundo Freeway are a marginal site, a “funk stretch,” that fulfills Los Angeles’s “need to do it dirty.” What can be done “nowhere else,” prostitution in hourly motels, is done here. “Motel” takes the reader further inside the desperate landscape:

salacious tongues of neon lick cheap plastic shades
promise air-conditioning video king-sized sleep
and gideon
the cognition of other lonelineses

a litany of smokes. enameled nails. slacks too snug
the clack-clack of heels. the driving heat the bitchin’
driving heat/black cat-scratch fever
rooms keys doughy faces making change

eaten by eyes

i check in alone

even the smell of old piss on the elevator up
is sugar-sweet (203)

While the speaker feels a sense of community in her motel room because she shares the place with “other lonelineses,” she “check[s] in alone,” noting only the signs of others, “a litany of smokes” and
“the click-clack of heels,” instead of interacting. She is more successful than Raylene at making do with
the city that presents itself, accepting immobility at the “motel” in order to take control in the moment,
but her actions isolate her in a “salacious” environment it seems unlikely she will escape.

Coleman agrees with Mohr’s observation that the streets blacks and whites know in Los Angeles
are different. As “Rapid Transit,” “Figueroa,” and “Motel” suggest, the main difference has to do with
residents’ abilities to move around the city and, therefore, the degree to which they can use the city to
pursue their needs and desires. In “Down the Rabbit Hole,” Coleman contrasts a black waitress’s
movements through city with those of a white Hollywood starlet. The waitress “tail[s]” the actress “thru
beverly hills” after an initial encounter in a diner.

oh I tailed her thru beverly hills her ashen blonde locks
my tar baby naps her pale silken face a full moon
my red-brown face mars her intelligent gray crystals my fierce
brown bricks her thin emotionless lips cloaked in a half smile
my thick taut lips parted in battle’s cry her voguish figure and
high-fashion boots my eternal diet and resoled wedgies she
climbed
into a chauffeur-driven limo i bandied along behind in my
tore-down
coupe she whipped into the penthouse suite and after lunch
signed
the contract i cleared the dining table and collected a
two-bit tip she flew to new york for the premiere then jetted to
brazil to recuperate from her migraine i got a job ghosting
reality
childless she gathers the attention of the world i crawl into
obscurity next to my mister and make babies she ships
champagne
i spill coffee on the rug

The actress’s world is expansive, ranging from a “penthouse suite” to “new york for the premiere” to
“brazil to recuperate from her migraine.” Wherever she is, she is a focal point that “gathers the
attention of the world.” By contrast, the waitress’s world is constrained to a “tore-down / coupe,” a
waitressing job, and an apartment she shares with her “mister.” Their lives impinge on one another
when the narrative shifts from one to the other in the middle of a line. Suggesting that the action of the
poem is a struggle for a territory. Rather than stewing in anger with Raylene and Vallejo or turning inward like Priestley, Coleman’s protagonist tracks the actress across the city, prying her world open with “resoled wedgies” in order to participate in her experience of free mobility. The distance between their lives is compressed by the lack of punctuation and the abrupt transitions it creates.

Lefebvre observes that the forces shaping cities—the rationalizing forces of capitalism and the chaotic forces of urban life—diverge more and more in the twentieth century leaving gaps in the urban fabric that individuals might exploit in making lives that correspond to fundamental desires for play and appropriation. “Social relations continue to become more complex, to multiply and intensify through the most painful contradictions,” he explains, with the result that “urban reality, at the very heart of its dislocation, persists and . . . becomes what it always ways: place of desire, permanent disequilibrium, seat of dissolution of normalities and constraints, the moment of play and of the unpredictable” (“The Right to the City” 129). Coleman’s waitress critiques the actress and the organization of space through which she operates by mimicking her reality. The poem challenges the reader through its complementary objects to think of opulence and poverty as simultaneous rather than sequential and as collocated rather than isolated: “high-fashion boots” versus “wedgies” and a “chauffeur-driven limo” versus “tore-down / coupe.” Coleman’s Watts, in other words, exists within Hollywood and across Los Angeles rather than only in the 40-square-mile curfew zone the Watts 13 define. She makes the point directly in “L.A. Love Cry,” as essay first published in 1990 that echoes Dear and Soja’s descriptions of the city’s postmodern urban reality: “Loving [Los Angeles] is to embrace the irrational and the disarranged. Is to welcome halfway house refugees and hospice hangers-on. Is to spread joy among the homeless lining corporate buildings with their possessions of castoffs, soaking up the sun remaining captured in the mortar.” (21) Coleman points to the conceptual and physical gaps that emerge within homogenizing urban geographies and breed the potential for revolution. Exploiting these gaps requires, as Coleman suggests, the recognition that “refugees,” “hangers-on,” and “corporate buildings” are
aspects of a single, conflicted reality rather than features of separate geographies that must be reconciled.

As she explains in the passage from “Violence, Art & Hustle” that serves as the epigraph to this chapter, Coleman feels the city’s violence, the irrationality of its juxtapositions, so intensely that she wears it in her body. As a result, she grounds the call to action she asserts in her work in lived experience even as it responds to more abstract conceptions and perceptions of urban reality. Coleman proposes a role for poets in defining and exploiting the multiple realities of Los Angeles in two poems from 2001’s *Merchurochrome*, seeing clearly the forces that structure Los Angeles, especially the legacies of Watts and South Central. In “They Will Not Be Poets” she predicts:

```
they will arrive by helicopter before noon
the authorities will send them among us
they will storm our neighborhoods and cordon off connecting streets
they will come in camouflage helmets and suits
their tenderness protected by flakjackets
hands raised to halt the suspicious & the innocent
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Crisis looms for the city because “the authorities” propose to dispossess the community physically and subjectively of its ability to use the city for its own purposes. At a remove of forty years from the 1965 uprising, Coleman concludes that “the superficial fires of controversy” are merely precursors to the “displacement & relocation” that inevitably will be visited on the community. Watts is a site of military struggle populated in residents’ minds with “helicopters,” “cordon[s],” and “flakjackets,” and its poets have no greater purchase on the community than anyone else. “Run if you must,” the poem concludes, “but beware the circle.”

The pessimism of “They Will Not Be Poets” appears in “Paper Riot,” as well, but the latter poem articulates a perspective on urban change that follows Lefebvre’s insistence that art can serve as a “source and model of appropriation of space and time” that returns control over the physical city to
residents (“The Right to the City” 173). Coleman condemns the exploitation of black neighborhoods by “cultural tourists,” black intellectuals who advance themselves through association with places like Watts while at the same time “pen[ning] White lies for the press.” In contrast to these “lies,” Coleman asserts of Los Angeles as a site and product of conflict. Just as there is a problem with activists who offer assistance with their “dexter hands” while “cross[i ng] the fingers / on their sinister hands,” there is a problem with descriptions of cities, she suggests, that focus on abstractions rather than experiences. “Posers” who offer such descriptions win acclaim and attention for their engagement with black communities, in part:

(since experiences other than electronic transfer
and networking are
no longer of value particularly when not waxing inanely
and forever about
the connections between man and nature as if cities
are not by-products
of a dissatisfaction with precisely what’s found untamed/
precisely what bites,
like sole-eating viruses (imparting new meaning to
loose shoes), as if
something has been lost as opposed to overlooked or
deliberately omitted.)

(121-122)

The convoluted syntax of this parenthetical—two “as if’s” and a gerund phrase embedded within a larger dependent clause—is characteristic of the whole poem. It matches the complexity of the circumstances Coleman is trying to describe at the same time that it leads the reader to a concrete description of everyday reality: “cities are [...] by-products / of a dissatisfaction with precisely what’s found untamed.” Since cities themselves are products of conflict even at the broadest level of analysis, their conflicts should not be ignored or smoothed over. Instead, poets have an obligation to describe urban conflicts as directly and honestly as they can “until there are / enough looters present to make a respectable quorum.”
As Coleman explains in “Letter to Jamal,” an essay commissioned by *High Performance* magazine in the immediate aftermath of the 1992 riot that eulogizes Hakim Abdullah Jamal, a black nationalist active in Watts after the 1965 uprising, poets can serve a particular role in cities. Unlike planners or architects, they do not shape built environments, and unlike professional academics, they do not diagnose or treat social ills. “I’m not a sociologist or an urban planner so I don’t have any grand rebuilding schemes to offer,” she begins. Instead, “I will do my part to keep reminding those who have forgotten the lessons of that past. I will teach those who want to learn. And while I may or may not do that from a podium, I will do it in my work as a poet. I will factor-in feeling. I will do my level best to clothe those bone-cold statistics in human flesh.” (201) Having witnessed economic decline, cyclical bouts of violence, and official neglect as a resident of Los Angeles, Coleman, “The Lady in the Red Veiled Hat,” attests that “something significant has happened” (*Mercurochrome* 65). The “flesh” and “feeling” Coleman factors into her descriptions of Watts matter because they supplement analysis of the structural changes and policy decisions that have affected the neighborhood with insight from lived experience. Grounded in everyday life, her work challenges readers and peers alike to consider the origins of community and crisis in Los Angeles and the very different streets that compose its urban scene.
Chapter 3: The “Curious” Languages of New York: George Oppen’s City

In the parlance of the technocrats, the ‘city’ takes the place of explanation, through evidence of the cultural transformations that one fails to (or cannot) grasp and control.

— Mañuel Castells, The Urban Question

Poetry rouses the appearance of the unreal and of dream in the face of the palpable and clamorous reality, in which we believe ourselves at home. And yet in just the reverse manner, what the poet says and undertakes to be is the real.

— Martin Heidegger, “Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry”

George Oppen stopped writing poetry in 1933, the year he returned to New York from the French countryside and became active as an organizer for the Communist Party. It was a curious decision because his career as a poet was just beginning. He had been included in the 1931 “Objectivist” issue of Poetry, edited by his friend Louis Zukofsky, and Ezra Pound had written an introduction for Discrete Series, his first book. When he started writing again in 1958, he and his wife Mary were planning another return to New York. There are “complex, overlapping reasons” for the twenty-five year gap in Oppen’s writing, as Rachel Blau du Plessis explains in the introduction to the Selected Letters, including the poet’s rejection of “contemporary critical, poetic, and academic thinking,” his “choice of activism,” and “taboos and inhibitions around parenthood,” among others (xiii-xiv). On returning to New York fulltime in 1960, Oppen transformed the aesthetic, political, and personal conflicts that had occupied him during his hiatus into three remarkable books: The Materials (1962), This In Which (1965), and the Pulitzer Prize-winning Of Being Numerous (1968). While the city had changed considerably since the

— If Oppen “didn’t know enough” about the world in 1933 to continue writing, as he suggests in a 1980 interview with Burton Hatlen and Tom Mandel, by late 1965, as he worked through drafts of the long sequence “Of Being Numerous,” he had experienced so much—the Depression, political activism and persecution, World War II, and the beginnings of the Cold War—that he found it difficult even “to speak of poetry” at all (Man and Poet 25).
1930s, as the poet explains in a 1978 interview with David McAleavey, many of the problems that motivated his activism during that period were still apparent: “We came back to New York. Things had changed, and the monuments of our life had gone, and I tell about the brick buildings, and I walked down the terrible streets, Myrtle Avenue, and so on, and it was still terrible. Elevated trains still there and some black brick tenement hidden in this” (Swigg 164).

Perhaps because the scene was “still terrible,” questions about the condition of American cities recur throughout the later works, especially in the long series “A Language of New York,” “Of Being Numerous,” and “Route”. Unlike in his first collection, Oppen’s exploration of urban problems in the 1960s proceeds alongside equally urgent consideration of questions about the functions of language. Returning to New York from exile in Mexico, Oppen developed a sophisticated critique of urban experience through engagement with the fields of aesthetics and philosophy, in particular in the work of Martin Heidegger. Combining Heidegger’s aesthetic philosophy and his own commitment to social activism, Oppen presents cities in his poetry as prime examples of the human ability to shape the world according to collective needs and desires. At the same time, he warns that cities conceal the dangers of living in common and limit our ability to see ourselves as engaged in a shared struggle for survival. Oppen shares this latter insight with critical urban theorist Manuel Castells, who proposes in 1972’s The Urban Question, that public discourse about the “urban crisis” is an ideological technique that masks structural exploitation rather than a genuine engagement with social problems. He departs from Castells in suggesting that poetry, rather than theoretical research, can disrupt the ideological functions of everyday language and thus reveal the world as it exists.

Following Mary Oppen’s suggestion that “New York had meaning to George for his writing” because it was where he had “roots from which to write again,” this chapter explores the “curious” relations among the urban, aesthetic, and linguistic dimensions of Oppen’s poetry (205). I argue that understanding Oppen’s evolving engagement with the urban scene is crucial to understanding his
poetics. The first section focuses on representations of the urban scene and urban experience in *Discrete Series*. Through consideration of Oppen’s appreciation for Charles Reznikoff’s urban lyrics, I suggest that both poets approach the city with a skeptical eye and present city poetry as training in perception. In the second section, I read poetry from *The Materials* and *This In Which* in relation to Castells’s critique of “urban ideology.” Written in the context of emerging urban crises of the late 1950s and early 1960s, the poems describe the destructive effects of men’s attempts to control environments and communities through rational planning. While I acknowledge that Oppen shares Castells’s distrust of language, I suggest that he proposes poetic interventions in what Castells conceives as all-encompassing ideological structures. I follow-up this comparison in the third section by exploring the influence of Heidegger’s philosophy of language on Oppen’s poetic practice. Through analysis of “Route,” a long poem published with “Of Being Numerous” that describes Oppen’s experience of World War II, I argue that the poet shares Heidegger’s conviction that poetic language can be used to remake the world of everyday experience. In the final section I consider the revisions Oppen made to “A Language of New York” (*This In Which*), as he prepared “Of Being Numerous” for publication and suggest that the changes represent a sharpening of the poet’s commitment to language as a means for thinking though and creating the physical spaces of the city.

**Urban Questions**

The short, mostly un­ti­ttled poems of *Dis­crete Series* point to class as the chief determinant of urban experience. As Peter Nicholls explains in his essential study of the poet’s reading and influences, the poems enact a materialist confrontation with urban capitalism (15). Several poems describe bourgeois urban scenes, for example, a man’s commute to and from work in the city center by train (*NCP 25*); a party on a yacht “a half mile / out—” to sea from the city harbor (*NCP 15*); an afternoon spent shopping
In others, Oppen provides glimpses of working-class lives, the types of lives he identifies elsewhere as “the roots” of the city (NCP 76). A steam-shovel operator “in firm overalls” paves a city street in one poem (NCP 14), while in another a tugboat makes slow progress down the river at night (NCP 19). The twenty-sixth poem in the collection puts these different kinds of experiences in relation and situates the collection as a whole in the midst of the Depression.⁴⁷

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Bad times:
The cars pass
By the elevated posts
And the movie sign.
A man sells post-cards.
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(NCP 30)

Regardless of one’s socioeconomic position, the Depression’s effects are isolating. The occupants of the passing cars are seemingly less affected by the “bad times” than the man selling post-cards at the train entrance. While he is stationary and relies on passersby for an income, they move freely across the city, registering the circumstances of his life merely as scenery. However, even though their cars insulate the middle and upper classes from the noise of the train and the impersonality of the urban crowd, because they are driving rather than walking or taking the train, they are cut off from one another and from the unplanned and potentially beneficial interactions the city offers.

Cars and streets are regular features of Oppen’s urban scenes. He speculates further about the experience of automobile travel in the book’s seventh poem. Focusing on the enclosure of the car, which protects its occupants while also isolating them, the poet suggests that alienation from the larger community might be the price of increasing mobility.

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Closed car—closed in glass—
At the curb,
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⁴⁶ References to Oppen’s published poetry are taken from Michael Davidson, ed. *New Collected Poems*. Ed. Michael Davidson. New York: New Directions, 2002. They are noted as NCP in the body of the text.⁴⁷ Tom Sharp reads this poem as a “sign of the depression” (*Man and Poet* 292).
Unapplied and empty:  
A thing among others  
Over which clouds pass and the  
alteration of lighting.

An overstatement  
Hardly an exterior.  
Moving in traffic  
This thing is less strange—  
Tho the face, still within it,  
Between glasses—place, over which  
time passes—a false light.  
(NCP 13)

From the pedestrian’s perspective, the car is “a thing among others,” somewhat strange as it sits beneath the passing clouds and the day’s changing light but ultimately unremarkable. It fits the scene better when “moving in traffic” than when idle at the curb. From inside, however, the car is both strange and estranging. The key word in the poem is “closed,” as Oppen explains in a letter to McAleavey: “The car at the curb was closed, and later the man closed in it” (Selected Letters 293). While from the perspective of the pedestrian it is part of the scene that includes the clouds and the changing light, it is not the same kind of thing and should not be assimilated as part of the natural world. What makes the car different is the way it transforms the occupant’s relation to the rest of the scene. The fact of the car’s enclosure, its being “closed in glass,” forces a separation between the man inside and the urban scene and between him and the pedestrian-observer.

Oppen describes this effect further in the same letter. It is “joy, all joy, tending to the joy of prominence  And prominence becoming isolation, anaesthesia, ignorance. Ignorance. // Little less than terrifying” (Selected Letters 293). What is at first remarkable about the car is its “prominence,” or in other words, its having been built to serve a purpose rather than merely occurring like the clouds. This “prominence” becomes “terrifying” by the poem’s end because, in serving its purpose, the car isolates and desensitizes those who use it. Whereas on foot a man might stop at a post-card stand or sense the changing light of the afternoon, once inside, the man is removed from the scene. The separation is
terrifying for two reasons. First, the car reduces the man, from the perspective of the pedestrian, to a “face” reflected in the windows. Second, and perhaps more importantly considering the movement from exterior to interior in the poem, the car estranges the man from himself, numbing his senses and consciousness to “ignorance” of the world around him to the point that the light of the afternoon, a “joy” to the pedestrian, appears “false.” The man chooses the “device” or “dark instrument” of the car, as Oppen terms it other poems from *Discrete Series*, over exposure to the world because it serves his purposes (*NCP* 8; 11). He fails to realize while riding the “strange” effects it produces in his experience.

Light and the complications that cars introduce in human relationships also figure in eighth poem of the collection, which describes a steam-shovel operator paving a street. The poem’s “topography” requires that we “attend to the dynamics of urban experience that normally unfold just beneath the notice of consciousness, and to imagine our way toward an understanding of an emergent . . . order of existence” (Shoemaker 82).

```
Who comes is occupied
Toward the chest (in the crowd moving
opposite
Grasp of me)
   In firm overalls
The middle-aged man sliding
Levers in the steam-shovel cab,—
Life (running cable) and swung, back
Remotely respond to the gesture before last
Of his arms fingers continually—
Turning with the cab. But if I (how goes
it?)—
   The asphalt edge
Loose on the plateau,
Horse’s classic height cartless
See electric flash of streetcar,
The fall is falling from electric burst
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(*NCP* 14)

Oppen captures the steam-shovel in motion, just as it exposes the “loose” edge of the newly paved street. Describing the movements by which the steam-shovel operator controls the machine, he sets the
man apart. In fact, he is something of a linchpin in the logic of the poem because, as the final three lines suggest, his presence in the poem links several eras of transportation history, from horse-drawn carts to electric streetcars to private automobiles. Between the description of the steam-shovel and this conclusion, however, there is an extended moment of confusion: “But if I (how goes / it?)— / The asphalt edge / Loose on the plateau.” The momentum of the poem stalls as Oppen shifts attention from the worker to his work. Since, as Harold Schimmel observes, an identifiable speaking voice is “carefully absent” from the majority of the poems in the collection, the appearance here of the first-person pronoun is significant (Man and Poet 295; 308). The “I” marks a moment of discovery punctuated by the streetcar’s “electric burst.” Rather than simply describing, Oppen invites us to witness the urban scene in the process of its making.

Oppen describes the poem’s disclosures in a 1968 interview with L.S. Dembo originally published in Contemporary Literature:

There’s the asphalt but under it is really what was, or even is, just a prairie, just the raw land. There’s a double consciousness there where you see the road is a road and then begin to see just the raw land. . . . It’s just land after all, even though they’ve paved this thing and created all this complication on it. (Swigg 24-5)

In other words, the poem shows us the urban scene in a moment of transition from “raw land” to constructed environment: “what was, or even is, just a prairie” is being obscured by the asphalt and the sparks from the streetcar. As Shoemaker explains, the “giant machine of the city” becomes a “thin shell that can be peeled back” (80). Nicholls interprets this “double consciousness” as a Marxist repudiation of the “habitual tendency of modern capitalism to conceal its own processes beneath extravagant surfaces,” in particular, as expressed through the “mystifications of contemporary urban culture” (15). He points to the “shiny fixed / alternatives” of another poem as a direct application of this critique. The
second part of the poem counts the sleek design of modern appliances and the routines of lunch counters as evidence of the obfuscations “big-Business” visits in everyday life:

Thus
Hides the
Parts—the prudery
Of Frigidaire, of
Soda-jerking—

Thus
Above the
Plane of lunch, of wives
Removes itself
(As soda-jerking from
the private act
Of
Cracking eggs);

big-Business

(NCP 6-7)

Like “raw land” under the asphalt “complication” of the city street, the “parts” of the refrigerator exist and are necessary even though they are hidden from view. There is an insult in their being concealed and because the “prudery” which transforms them and the mundane activity of preparing lunch into aesthetic performances limits our perceptions of how the things around us work. It is through these limitations, Nicholls suggests, that commerce intervenes in our awareness of the world. According to this reading, appliance manufacturers, soda jerks, and steam-shovel operators share in similar ideological work: dissolving the parts and processes of everyday life into glossy abstractions.

Michael Davidson offers a similar reading of Discrete Series in his introduction to the New Collected Poems. Focusing on the way language works and fails to work in the poems, he suggests that Oppen refuses “the metaphysical lure of totality” implicit in what Nicholls terms modern capitalism’s “extravagant surfaces” (xxx). He notes that Oppen frequently invokes the hesitations of everyday
speech—for example, the two uses of “thus” in “Thus / Hides”—in order to draw attention to the ways our use of language affects our experience of the world around us (xxxii-xxxiii). The parts of the poems, including both their parts of speech and the parts of reality they represent, loom large because they are so often taken for granted. As Davidson explains, “Oppen is less interested in what is discovered than he is in the condition or mood in which things can be apprehended, in which things constellate a world” (xxxii). By presenting parts as parts rather than combining them in a simplified scene, Oppen demands that we adjust our typical modes of perception. Forest Gander suggests that Oppen’s syntax reinforces this effect: “The syntax of an Oppen poem rivets our attention to both word and world in an enactment of intentional consciousness, the very act of perception and thought coming into being, of language and feeling arising as experience” (126). Taken together, Oppen’s attention to parts and the challenges of his syntax suggest skepticism about the urban scene. The poems show that the abstractions of urban life are dangerous not only because they obscure the constructed nature of the city but also because they enlist our own mental processes, attention and perception, in producing this effect.

Seeing the “Bolt / In the frame / Of the building” rather than only the building itself, as Oppen proposes in another poem from Discrete Series, requires methodical attention (NCP 23). The density and speed of cities, especially New York City, make observations of this kind particularly difficult to achieve. Oppen describes his and Mary’s first impressions of New York in a 1970 interview with Charles Amirkhanian and David Gitlin broadcast on KPFA radio in San Francisco.

I had come to New York—we had come to New York—from San Francisco with the sense of the necessity of what one encountered, what one saw, the reality of the world. I was supposing there that possibly it can be, or it was in us, a Western confrontation. I mean, the mountains are extremely real to one in this place [San Francisco]. One imagines New York City dwellers are really involved most of the time with artificial concepts, with the game, with the definitions of how you do things, and very little with material objects. (Swigg 42)
By contrast with San Francisco, where “the mountains are extremely real,” New York seemed both artificial and abstract to the couple, a place where knowing the rules of “the game” was more important than trusting the data of one’s perceptions. When the couple returned to the City in 1933, the gap between “artificial concepts” and “materials objects” was even starker. The Depression, which struck while the Oppens were living in the French countryside, had changed “how you do things” so much that getting by had become nearly impossible. Mary describes the “overwhelming emergency” of the Depression and what they found when they returned to New York in *Meaning: A Life*: “The city had an air of disaster; the unemployed were the refugees who had exhausted their resources and did not know where to turn” (151). As a result, she explains, “people were frightened and helpless and in many parts of the country irregular ways of obtaining food seemed the only way to avoid starvation. The propaganda of fascism and the authoritarian state appealed to many who saw no other solution to the economic collapse of the United States” (147).

For a time after their return, the Oppens worked as organizers for the Communist party, first in Brooklyn and then in Utica, New York. Oppen recalls this work in “Blood from the Stone,” a four-part poem published in *The Materials* that was his “first new poem” since *Discrete Series*, in a February 5, 1959, letter to his half-sister, June Oppen Degnan (*Selected Letters* 26). In the second part of the poem, Oppen probes his perceptions of the urban scene for evidence of what it might conceal:

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48 Mary reports that the couple’s intuitions about the Depression and President Roosevelt’s early responses to it were a significant factor in their decision to return to the United States:

Roosevelt had been elected President of the United States in November 1932, and in that winter the Blue Eagle was introduced in the States. Blue Eagle posters were pictures on the front pages of Parisian newspapers, and the military-looking symbol frightened us. We were afraid it meant that fascism was rising in the United States too. . . . We could feel more than we could understand of the threat to Jews, to artists, to all freedoms. I was determined that fascism was not going to strike this pigeon. We say Jews, the lucky ones who had fled early. Born in Germany, they had been citizens, but they were now threatened, bewildered people who did not yet know the worst that was still in abeyance. We began to understand that this threat was portentous for us as well. We returned to Paris and took passage on the first ship home. We had to get home to see what had happened in the two years we had spent out of our own country. (138)
The Thirties. And
A spectre

In every street,
In all inexplicable crowds, what they did then
Is still their lives.

As thirty in a group—
To Home Relief—the unemployed—
Within the city’s intricacies
Are these lives. Belief?
What do we believe
To live with? Answer.
Not invent—just answer—all
That verse attempts.
That we can somehow add to each other?
—Still our lives.

(NCP 52)

The “city’s intricacies,” which the poet explains here as the context of the lives of individuals in the crowd, mirror the “complication[s]” of the paved street and steam shovel in “Who comes is occupied.”

In the later poem, Oppen struggles to distinguish “these lives” from the composite “spectre” of the city. The questions he poses—“Belief? / What do we believe / To live with?”—and his tentative answer—“That we can somehow add to each other?”—prefigure the ethical and metaphysical of his major sequence, “Of Being Numerous.” The difference between “invent” and “answer,” the verbs that intervene between the questions and the answer, recalls Davidson’s suggestion that Oppen is more interested in producing the “condition or mood in which things can be apprehended” though his poetry than in providing accurate descriptions. The poet rejects the possibility of inventing an explanation for the “inexplicable crowds,” of supplying an abstraction that would integrate individual lives and circumstances, in favor of plainly stating that they exist.

Nicholls explains this insight in the context of a broader attempt in Oppen’s poetry to separate experience from political argument: “This way of situating the subject emphasize[s] the irreducibility of experience to knowledge” and makes poetry the source of a “generative opacity within political
"thinking” associated with “indeterminacy and resistance” (53). Like Davidson, Nicholls focuses on Oppen’s acts of observation and perception rather than the political content of the scene he describes. In the fourth part of “Blood from a Stone,” Oppen describes how moving within urban crowds in the 1930s led him to discoveries about the conditions of his own existence.

Fifty years
Sidereal time
Together, and among the others,
The bequeathed pavements, the inherited lit streets:
Among them we were lucky—strangest word.

The planet’s
Time.

Blood from a stone, life
From a stone dead dam. Mother
Nature! because we find the others
Deserted like ourselves and therefore brothers. Yet

So we lived
And chose to live

These were our times.

(NCP 53-54)

We see the play of the streetlights as night falls and the “thirty in a group” gathered outside the Home Relief office. That Oppen recognizes himself as an individual among other individuals is just as important as the fact that he is describing work he did as an organizer for the Community party. Walking the “bequeathed pavements, the inherited lit streets,” he understands that he is just as much a “deserted” individual as others in the crowd. They are all “brothers” who might “add each to each other” by living in common.

The problems cities introduce in human relationships are important in “The Building of the Skyscraper,” as well. Unlike in “Blood from a Stone,” the artificiality of the urban scene in “Skyscraper” is startling in and of itself.

O, the tree, growing from the sidewalk—
It has a little life, sprouting
Little green buds
Into the culture of the streets.
We look back
Three hundred years and see bare land.
And suffer vertigo.

(NCP 149)

That the city sits on “bare land” means that it has been constructed in a certain way and might be
different than it is. Much like the precursor poems “Who comes is occupied” and “Bolt / In the frame /
Of the building—”, the majority of “The Building of the Skyscraper” focuses on one element in the scene,
a “steel worker on the girder” who has “learned not to look down.” Isolated from the building itself, the
“girder” serves as evidence of the constructed nature of the urban scene and the collective work men
have done to produce it. As a perch for the steel worker, it also serves as a physical instance of the
“vertigo” induced by contemplation of what preceded the urban scene. What the worker has learned is
to avoid questioning what he sees on the surface of the city, accepting it as it is and accepting his role in
it rather than seeking what lies beneath.

The “girder” on which the worker stands alludes to a two-line poem by Charles Reznikoff that
Oppen refers to repeatedly in letters and interviews. In Reznikoff’s poem, the girder is a remnant of a
building that has been demolished: “Among the heaps of brick and plaster lies / a girder, still itself
among the rubbish” (Poems 107). Oppen ascribes a “revelatory” power to Reznikoff’s “girder” in a
daybook entry:

I think that poetry which is of any value is always revelatory.
Not that I think it reveals or could reveal Everything, but it must reveal
something (I would like to say ‘Something’ and for the first time)

[. . .]

One can seldom describe the meaning—but sometimes one has stum-
bled on the statement made in another way. As Parmenides’ “the
Same is think and be” is Charles Reznikoff’s “… the girder, still
Itself among the rubble.”
What Oppen finds beyond description is the fact that Reznikoff presents the “girder” as identical with itself, “still itself among the rubbish,” rather than as a sign for something else. The reader experiences the girder in language just as someone might experience it in person when visiting the site. It is a single thing isolated from the urban scene. Oppen explains the revelation of Reznikoff’s poem as an effect of syntactical inversion in another daybook entry:

SYNTAX; here a two line poem in which the syntax is arranged to control the order of disclosure upon which the poem depends (Rezi’s Girder). It is simply an inverted sentence. The inversion and the prosody place an emphasis on the word “girder” without which the poem would have no discernible meaning.

In Oppen’s reading, the syntactical structure of the poem emphasizes the girder rather than the larger scene. The girder surprises the poet, in other words, because it is exposed and separate from the structure of which it is a constituent part. Seeing it confirms what the worker on the lofted girder in “The Building of the Skyscraper” has been trained not to acknowledge: since the urban scene has been constructed to serve a certain purpose at a certain time, it is impermanent.

Describing another Reznikoff poem from the same collection, Oppen marvels at the “modesty” of the poet’s language and the minuteness of his observations.

I think of Rezi coming out of the subway and seeing the moon. Now, there’s such purity in an image of the moon anyway, and in the modesty of his language, so that one really gets off—I mean, the face of it’s almost nothing, because it’s the tiniest incident he could find. It’s simply

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49 Davidson preserves the lineation of the page from the Daybooks. As he notes in the introduction to the *New Collected Poems*, Oppen substitutes “rubble” for Reznikoff’s “rubbish” here and in several letters that refer to the poem (xxxiv). “Rubble” suggests a resonance with the bombed European cities Oppen saw during his service in World War II. Kristin Prevallet explains the substitution of “rubble” as evidence of the importance of war and its consequences as an initiating fact of Oppen’s poetics (139-141). The first part of this daybook entry is repeated in a May 30, 1966 letter to Charles Hanzlicek (*Selected Letters* 133).
that it’s utterly convincing to me, Reznikoff’s moon—there’s no pressures, no pressures, and the subject of the poem tells you that. (Swigg 153)

In the poem itself, Reznikoff describes a moment of mistaken perception: “Coming up the subway stairs, I thought the moon / only another street-light— / a little crooked” (Poems 97). He distinguishes between the permanence of the moon and the impermanence of the “crooked” streetlight, signaling multiple layers of awareness in the moment. Since from long experience and familiarity with the city he expects to see a streetlight when he exits the subway, he sees one when he sees the moon. His expectations in effect hide the moon from his immediate perception, just as the skyscraper hides the girder from the worker in “The Building of the Skyscraper” and the asphalt hides the “bare land” beneath the city streets in “Who comes is occupied.” When Reznikoff recognizes the glow as the moon instead, he understands, to apply an explanation Oppen makes in a letter to his sister June, that the elements of the scene around him are “absolutely independent of [him]self, and, in some form, permanent” (Selected Letters 88).

Louis Zukofsky finds similar insight in Reznikoff’s poetics. As he explains in “Sincerity and Objectification,” an essay introducing the 1931 Objectivist issue of Poetry: “There is to be noted in Reznikoff’s lines the isolation of each noun so that in itself it is an image, the grouping of nouns so that they partake of the quality of things being together without violence to their individual intact natures” (278). The lines about the streetlight and the moon are, in fact, the final lines of a longer poem in a series of six that contrast the enlivening spirit of the natural world with the inanimate solidity of the city. In the preceding section of the poem, Reznikoff locates himself at the “loose edge” of the asphalt where cement and steel are replacing sky, earth, and trees:

    In steel clouds
to the sound of thunder
like the ancient gods:
our sky, cement;
the earth, cement;
our trees, steel;
instead of sunshine,
a light that has no twilight,
neither morning nor evening,
only noon.

(Poems 97)

Because Reznikoff’s city is constantly illuminated, both underground and above, there is “no twilight, / neither morning nor evening.” The constant noon is disorienting. What gives the poem its “revelatory” power is that in the final three lines, the ones Oppen singles out, Reznikoff sees through the city’s artificial light. He recognizes both that his experiences take place in time, that moon signals it is night instead of noon, and that the urban scene only partially covers the “bare land” on which it has been constructed.

For Oppen, Reznikoff’s poems induce discoveries about processes of perception. He sees the possibility of “thinking with things as they exist” in the way the older poet’s syntax reveals the urban scene for what it is: the product of human making rather than an atemporal and therefore permanent reality. For example, Reznikoff distinguishes between the subway rails as raw material and their appearance under “electric lights”:

Rails in the subway
what did you know of happiness,
when you were ore in the earth;
now the electric lights shine upon you.

(Poems 97)

The rails are raw material that has been modified and transported in order to serve a specific purpose. Like the “girder, still itself among the rubbish” and the “bolt / In the frame / Of the building,” they exist in themselves and as parts of a larger structure that fulfills a human need. “Regularly placed,” as Reznikoff observes in the next poem in the series, they suggest a satisfying order, but even as they indicate a certain kind of “happiness,” as the poet is careful to explain, it is illusory, a function of the “electric lights” rather than a condition of their being. Confusions about the levels of reality apparent in
cities and the meanings of urban experiences surface throughout Oppen’s poetry. His enthusiasm for the “revelatory” power of Reznikoff’s observations signals that he sees a role for poetic language in disentangling false perceptions. In *The Materials and This In Which*, the collections that mark his return to poetry, Oppen pays increasing attention to the elements that compose the urban scene and the labor that produces it. As in Zukofsky’s account of Reznikoff, the intersections of perception and poetics and of physical and poetic making are primary concerns.

**Urban Ideology**

Focusing on the period from the early 1930s, when Oppen published *Discrete Series*, through the late 1960s, when he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *Of Being Numerous*, critical theorist Manuel Castells identifies a contradiction in public discourse about cities in *The Urban Question*. Castells argues that describing the problems of everyday life as specifically “urban” problems rather than as deeper structural problems shifts attention from the forces that produced the problems to their effects and thereby authorizes interventions in cities that displace populations and consolidate power rather than addressing inequalities in the distribution of resources. Castells’s critique challenges the Chicago School approach to urban theory developed in the 1920s and 1930s in the work of Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, and Louis Wirth. He argues that the Chicago School model substitutes ideology for research in two central claims: first, that the built environments of cities evolve following an orderly, organic process as residential, commercial, administrative, and industrial uses shift across zones defined by their distance from the city center and second, that the actions, attitudes, and perspectives of city residents are determined by the qualities of the urban environments where they spend their time. Against this “culturalist tendency,” which, as he explains, “presupposes a correspondence between a certain type of production (essentially defined by industrial activity), a system of values (‘modernism’) and a specific form of spatial organization,” Castells asserts the primacy of the “social production of spatial forms” (9).
Rather than evolving toward ever more sophisticated and efficient forms of organization, he argues, cities are shaped by conflictual relations between modes of production: “The relation between society and space (for that is what urbanization is) is a function of the specific organization of modes of production that coexist historically (with a predominance of one over the others) in a concrete social formation, and of the internal structure of each of these modes of production” (64).

While the urban scene might be a terrain of conflict between modes of production, though, it is neither a cause nor an effect of this conflict because it is always undergoing processes of change. Believing that the city produces urban problems is an effect of ideology. Assessing the state of the urban policy and planning discourses of the 1960s Castells writes, “if there has been an accelerated development of the urban thematic, this is due, very largely, to its imprecision, which makes it possible to group together under this heading a whole mass of questions felt, but not understood, whose identification (as ‘urban’) makes them less disturbing: one can dismiss them as the natural misdeeds of the environment” (73). Because it offers a categorical explanation for complex problems, in other words, the urban ideology leads individuals, including academics and laymen alike, to dismiss feelings of “vertigo,” such as Oppen explores, that follow insights about the constructed nature of the urban scene and the contingencies of social relations. Further, Castells asserts, ideology transforms urban scene itself into a “locus of oppression” by reducing urban questions to minor discomforts and obscuring differences in class positions. “The social efficacity of this ideology,” he explains, “derives from the fact that it describes the everyday problems experienced by people, while offering an interpretation of them in terms of natural evolution, from which the division into antagonistic classes is absent. This has a certain concrete force and gives the reassuring impression of an integrated society, united in facing up to its ‘common problems’” (85). Even those most adversely affected by the social production of the urban scene—Oppen’s “inexplicable crowds,” for example—come to accept the ideological explanation for their experiences because it seems to be the only possible explanation.
The basis of Castells’s critique lies in an Althusserian analysis of urban discourse. Extending Marx’s analysis of the social reproduction of labor, Althusser argues that “the reproduction of labour power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order, i.e. a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression, so that they, too, will provide for the domination of the ruling class ‘in words’” (89). Ideology is “material” for Althusser because it is inscribed in individual actions and the social practices and systems of belief to which those actions give rise. There is no escape from ideology in his formulation because ideology creates “individuals as subjects,” supplying the conditions of consciousness while at the same time concealing their contingent nature. The net effect of ideology, Althusser’s account, is a double concealment: “what seems to take place outside ideology (to be precise, in the street), in reality takes place in ideology [and] what really takes place in ideology seems therefore to take place outside it” (118). Because we are aware of ourselves as individuals, we think our consciousness is prior to the practices and beliefs we encounter in society. This confidence in the independence of our self-awareness is false because consciousness itself arises from the fact of our being enmeshed in society rather than from some state of awareness that precedes social interaction.

Oppen shares Althusser’s and Castells’s critique of ideology and their understanding of the contradictory nature of Western capitalism. As Nicholls argues, he “associate[s] poetry with the acknowledgement of a certain indeterminacy and resistance that might save politics from ideology and mere ‘argument’” (53). Through its careful attention to syntax and clarity, however, Oppen’s poetry demonstrates an enduring commitment to the disruptive potential of poetic language and, in particular, to the role of language in the formation of oppositional communities. Whereas the poems of *Discrete Series* focus, for the most part, on physical elements of urban scene—the cars, streets, and architecture of the city—, the poems of *The Materials* and *This in Which* focus instead on the labor processes that
produce and sustain the city and the degree to which conceptions of labor correspond to conceptions of language. In “Rationality” from This in Which, for example, he describes the “shock” of automated manufacturing through the eyes of a “young workman.”

Rationality

there is no ‘cure’
Of it, a reversal
Of some wrong decision—merely

The length of time that has passed
And the accumulation of knowledge.

To say again: the massive heart
Of the present, the presence
Of the machine tools

In the factories, and the young workman
Elated among the men
Is homesick

In that instant
Of the shock
Of the press

In which the manufactured part

New in its oil
On the steel bed is caught
In the obstinate links

Of cause, like the earth tilting
To its famous Summers—that ‘part

of consciousness’ . . .

(NCP 136)

The poem trails off at “consciousness” as if to signal the limits of rationality for grasping the “shock” of the instant in which the “manufactured part” comes into being. Dripping with the oil that lubricated its pressing, the part makes the workman “homesick.” It is stillborn, doomed from the moment of its creation to serve a limited purpose. Further, it alienates the workman from his own skills and, in so
doing, distances him from the “massive heart / Of the present.” The factory operates according to an “accumulation of knowledge” rather than through the craft and ingenuity of individual workers. Because the application of skill is no longer necessary on the factory floor, time is compressed into repeatable instants that arrest the “tilting” of the earth toward “its famous Summers” and numb the workman to the possibility of human emotion. The cold “steel bed” of rationality that dominates the factory robs the young workman of the excitement that brought him to the job.

In a precursor poem, Oppen links the “part / of consciousness” that concludes “Rationality” with skilled handicraft. Published in *The Materials*, “Debt” charts a trajectory from the workbench to the factory and from the artisan to the engineer. “Consciousness” appears at the beginning of the poem rather than at the end and is connected directly with labor.

**Debt**

That ‘part
Of consciousness
That works’:

A virtue, then, a skill
Of benches and the shock

Of the press where an instant on the steel bed
The manufactured part—

New!
And imperfect. Not as perfect
As the die they made
Which was imperfect. Checked

To tolerance

Among the pin ups, notices, conversion charts,
And skills, so little said of it.

*(NCP 60)*

The perversions rationality visits on the manufacturing process and the worker’s experience of it emerge here in the oscillation of “perfect” and “imperfect,” a signal of the degraded nature of the “part”
suggested in the later poem. Rather than carrying the residues of care and skill, the “manufactured part” holds only flaws, oily imperfections that are ignored so long as they remain within the tolerances that allow it to function properly as part of a larger machine. Though they are “New!” the machine-produced parts are unremarkable for Oppen because they lack the mark of human making. The rationality of the factory replaces the atmosphere of skill and virtue surrounding the craftsman’s bench, “‘that part / Of consciousness / That works,’” with the detritus of abstracted attention, “pin ups, notices, conversion charts.” The careful work of shaping raw materials into useful products is replaced with calculation and calibration, kinds of engagement that alienate the worker from the making process and its products.

Consciousness is absent from an even earlier version of the poem published in the *San Francisco Review* as “The Manufactured Part.”

**The Manufactured Part**

So let us speak, and with some pride, of other men.  
Not passengers, the crew.

Or the machine shop. For the planet  
Isn’t habitable but by labor—

We are alone and live by labor—  
Benches, and the men,  
The noise, the shock  
Of the press where for an instant on the steel bed,  
The manufactured part!

New  
Newly made. Imperfect, for they made it; not as perfect  
As the die they made which was imperfect. Checked  
By some mechanic. What percent  
Of human history, so little said of it.

*(NCP 366-367)*

James Longenbach discusses the relationship between “The Manufactured Part” and “Debt” in *The Resistance to Poetry*. He argues that “Debt” displays a greater attention to language and line and is therefore more representative of Oppen’s mature style. “Debt” encourages us to “hear language at
work” through lines that “emphasize rhythmical units rather than complete syntactical units” (40-45). The pride expressed in “The Manufactured Part” is short-lived, in Longenbach’s view, because it results from a belated recognition that building and making things is a necessarily human occupation. In fact, as Oppen suggests in the poem, “the planet / Isn’t habitable but by labor—.” Since Oppen worked in airplane manufacturing before World War II and as a carpenter and furniture maker afterwards, it is not surprising that scenes of labor are so prominent in The Materials.50 “Oppen’s notion of craftsmanship,” as Tim Woods explains, “is not the Poundian angry denunciation of a philistine phase where art becomes mechanical as society values money more than life, or profit more than beauty.” Instead, Woods continues, Oppen attends to the “fingerprint of care in the handmade object, the endowment of an object in the world with personal and intimate knowledge” (459). The absence of this “fingerprint of care,” surprising in “The Manufactured Part,” becomes a symptom of alienation in “Debt” and “Rationality.”

The poems that follow “Debt” in The Materials cover similar ground. “Product,” which concerns boat building in New England, describes the bow and hull of a boat “Fresh from the dry tools / And the dry New England hands.” The boat is a fitting contrast to the manufactured parts of the modern factory. Reflecting on the relation between the shapes of the boats and the shapes of New England life leads the poet to thoughts about the circumstances of human existence. “The bow soars, finds the waves / The hull accepts,” he writes, and later, “What I’ve seen / Is all I’ve found: myself” (NCP 61). Oppen finds “beauty” in the way the boats fit their environments, “find[ing]” and “accept[ing]” the waves rather than confronting them or stamping them into submission like the factory press. The poet finds himself in

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50 Mary Oppen describes her husband’s work history in Meaning: A Life. Oppen left his job as a laborer at an airplane factory in Long Island for a job as a machinist and pattern maker in Detroit. He knew that leaving the job on Long Island would make him eligible to be drafted but believed the job in Detroit offered a better future for his family. On returning from the war, he built the family’s home outside Los Angeles and subsequently operated a furniture business while in exile in Mexico (169; 193).
the boats because he recognizes they are artifacts of attempts by New Englanders to make themselves at home in the world, to make their world “habitable.”

“Workman” extends this meditation on the fit between men and the worlds they make by relating carpentry to hawks and sea birds on the hunt.

Workman

Leaving the house each dawn I see the hawk Flagrant over the driveway. In his claws That dot, that comma Is the broken animal: the dangling small beast knows The burden that he is: he has touched The hawk’s drab feathers. But the carpenter’s is a culture Of fitting, of firm dimensions, Of post and lintel. Quietly the roof lies That the carpenter has finished. The sea birds circle The beaches and cry in their own way, The innumerable sea birds, their beaks and their wings Over the beaches and the sea’s glitter.

(NCP 62)

Like the boats of New England, the finished roof exists “quietly” as part of the broader landscape: it is expertly made and structurally sound. The carpenter’s “culture / Of fitting, of firm dimensions” contrasts with the clutter and lazy “tolerance” of the automated factory portrayed in “Rationality” and “Debt.” What matters most about the roof, it seems, is that it has been made by hand. The “post and lintel” support the roof and are parts of the larger whole, a simple shelter that serves its purpose. Their bond, the way they fit together, is prefigured in the bond between the hawk and its prey. The prey “knows / The burden that he is” to the hawk: its death sustains the hawk just as the carpenter’s roof and the New Englander’s boats sustain their communities. In each case, the bond is forged by hand rather than by machine, by craft rather than abstract rationality. Lying “quietly” beneath the sky and also in between the hawk, the carpenter, and the homeowner, the roof in Oppen’s poem links the physical act of building with more general processes of being in the world that are both personal and communal. Just as the carpenter creates a physical space for the homeowner, Oppen’s poem creates a conceptual space
in which the activities of the carpenter, homeowner, and hawk overlap. While their specific activities belong to separate spheres of experience, hunting, constructing, and commuting, their “dwelling” coincides.

Like Reznikoff, Oppen sees a correspondence, not always harmonious, between natural and constructed environments. The latter—boats, houses, and cities—are made to fit within the former—New England waves and the hawk’s domain—through labor. In “Workman,” the relation between environments is presented as a function of language. The “broken animal” the hawk carries in its claws as it flies over the house is “that dot, that comma.” As punctuation, the animal resembles the carpenter’s “post and lintel,” the structures he uses to fit the parts of the home he is building together. Though the finished roof lies “quietly” beneath the activity of the birds, by analogy with the hawk, it carries overtones of exposure and violence. “Alone” in the same sense as the crowds Oppen found on the streets of Brooklyn in the 1930s, the animal cannot access the solace and support of being “together, and among the others,” the condition the poet discovered in his work as an organizer. The contrast between animal vulnerability, the subjection of one individual to the will of another, and the possibility of community represented by human labor suggests that the alienating rationality of the factory is nascent in the carpenter’s careful, but equally rational, work. In other words, the violence of the hawk is contained in the roof of the house and in the instance of language, the “broken animal” comma, which links the two.

“The Undertaking in New Jersey” and “Vulcan” portray similarly conflicted worlds. In both poems, the construction of the urban environment, the forging of iron in the former and the construction of the New York City subway in the latter, is presented as divisive and disturbing. “The Undertaking” describes a morning commute through the “remnants / Of forge and coal yard” which constitute small towns outside New York City. The towns are “torn” by trucks that move goods and people to the City and by the division of labor which separates men, women, and their families. Like
Maude Blessingbourne in the opening poem of *Discrete Series*, wives look out longingly from windows imagining “Some task beyond the window glass / And the fabrics” after their husbands leave in the morning. Children resemble birds in the street “chirping / At curbs and curb gratings,” abandoned and struck dumb by the compromised state of their community. Transformed fully into birds by the poem’s end, these forgotten children “visibly move at sunrise,” escaping the denuded environment and the banality of the town only by forgoing, or being robbed of, their humanity. (NCP 63) The men, women, and children of the suburban New Jersey towns suffer for the ways their everyday experiences are shaped by industrial production, which brings changes to the physical landscape as much as to residents’ emotional lives.

Oppen assesses changes in urban infrastructure in “Vulcan” through the figure of a “crippled girl” hobbling “Painfully in the new depths / Of the subway.” He averts his eyes with other passengers to avoid contact. Despite his efforts the girl enters his consciousness. Like the “broken animal” in “Workman” the girl links the world men make for themselves, the “subway’s iron circuits,” and the world they inhabit, “that ice stiff / Exterior” in which each individual is exposed and vulnerable. The mood of the poem resembles the factory milieu of “Debt” and “Rationality.” The subway, like the die press described in those poems, is likened to a birth canal. But while the scene is as dystopic as the suburb in “The Undertaking,” on the whole “Vulcan” suggests that human connections are possible despite the mechanized and monstrous condition of the urban scene.

**Vulcan**

The householder issuing to the street
Is adrift a moment in that ice stiff
Exterior. ‘Peninsula
Low lying in the bay
And wooded—’ Native now
Are the welder and the welder’s arc
In the subway’s iron circuits:
We have not escaped each other,
Not in the forest, not here. The crippled girl hobbles
Painfully in the new depths
Of the subway, and painfully
We shift our eyes. The bare rails
And black walls contain
Labor before her birth, her twisted
Precarious birth and the men
Laboriously, burly—She sits
Quiet, her eyes still. Slowly,
Deliberately she sees
An anchor’s brute fluke sink
Thru coins and coin machines,
The ancient iron and the voltage
In the iron beneath us in the child’s deep
Harbors into harbor sands.

(NCP 67)

Layers of meaning suggest connections between the natural environment and the urban scene: “labor” means the work of building the subway and the crippled girl’s birth; “harbor” means the edge of the island and the shelter and community the girl finds, even though she is ignored, in the subway car. As he had while watching the boats at the New England shore, the poet identifies and empathizes with the girl’s circumstances. “We have not escaped each other,” he asserts, because we are fundamentally vulnerable despite the extraordinary infrastructure we have created. We are connected to each other across time through the labor of the men who welded the subway rails and through the labor of the women from whom we were born. The “iron” of the rails is product and material at once, something shaped by human hands and something with roots in a world that exists apart from his efforts.

Despite the “bare rails” and “twisted” tunnels of the subway the urban scene in “Vulcan” encourages empathy through the imprint it carries of “personal and intimate knowledge” of the “welder” and others who built it. The poem brings the poet (as “householder”) and the “crippled girl” together on “deep” common ground by infusing their shared commute with the personal histories of these laborers. The urban scene, in turn, serves as a stage for encounter rather than merely as a place to pass through. More so than in “Workman,” Oppen acknowledges the dangers of urban encounters in in “Vulcan.” Both the poet and the girl feel pain as much as empathy as they watch each other across the
subway car. But while the collective pronoun “our” separates the other passengers from the girl in the first half of the poem, the “us” of the second-to-last line includes her. Through the presence of the “laborious, burly” men who cut the tunnels and laid the rails, they all “sink” together “Thru coins and coin machines / The ancient iron and the voltage” into a shared experience of the “harbor sand” which lies beneath. The bond formed between the girl and the passengers turns on the capacity of language, in particular, the resonances of “labor” and “harbor,” to disclose commonalities of experience across circumstances. As in “Workman,” “The Manufactured Part,” “Debt,” and “Rationality,” the tension these terms reveal in “Vulcan” between the urban scene and the natural environment on which it has been constructed serves as a trigger for empathy.

Oppen ascribes this revelatory power directly to the “poetry of the meaning of words” in a late poem published as an epigraph to a special issue of Paideuma:

**The Poem**

A poetry of the meaning of words  
And a bond with the universe  

I think there is no light in the world  
but the world  

And I think there is light

*(NCP 309)*

The poet is carpenter and hawk here, bonding readers and himself to the larger world by disclosing or revealing the “meaning of words.” This procedure of disclosure, which he adapts from his reading of Reznikoff and explains in “A Language of New York” as restoring words “to meaning / And to sense” *(NCP 116)* is delicate because it involves identifying language as it functions to connect man to his world, like a carpenter fitting post to lintel, rather than applying language toward the production of tools for manipulating that world, like a machine operator pressing a part. In “The Poem” language is a “light” that reveals and constitutes the world visible from the poet’s window and, at the same time, that bonds
the poet to the universe as a whole. It is both a material and a technology, an element of the world and a tool the poet uses to make his way. Poetic uses of language are more suited to this work than prose because, as Oppen explains in “The Mind’s Own Place”: “It is possible to say anything in abstract prose, but a great many things one believes or would like to believe or thinks he believes will not substantiate themselves in the concrete materials of a poem” (Selected Prose 32). Poetry serves as a tool for thinking in this regard because it cannot sustain lazy or compromised logic, such as Castells identifies in his analysis of the “urban ideology,” because faulty correspondences between words and their meanings create poetic problems.

“The Poem” responds to concerns about the tendencies of language to lapse into ideology that figure prominently in “Leviathan,” the final poem of The Materials, and later in “Route.” In “Leviathan,” Oppen reports that he is “no longer sure of the words” he uses to represent and explore the “inexplicable” objects of the world. While he acknowledges in the poem that “truth also is the pursuit of it,” in other words, that the process of seeking correspondences between language and what it describes is as important as the correspondences themselves, he concludes that even the process “will not stand” because the “acid” of world events interferes. He worries specifically about his ability to mend language through poetry in order to prevent the further isolation of individuals.

**Leviathan**

Truth also is the pursuit of it:
Like happiness, and it will not stand.

Even the verse begins to eat away
In the acid. Pursuit, pursuit;

A wind moves a little,
Moving in a circle, very cold.

How shall we say?
In ordinary discourse—

We must talk now. I am no longer sure of the words,
The clockwork of the world. What is inexplicable

Is the ‘preponderance of objects.’ The sky lights
Daily with that predominance

And we have become the present.

We must talk now. Fear
Is fear. But we abandon one another.

(NCP 89)

Several fears are compounded in the final enjambment, about the usefulness of poetry, the inhostipability of the world, the sufficiency of language, and the possibility of community, among others. Oppen’s assessment of the situation is grim: despite the conviction that “We must talk now,” instead of finding ways to come together, “we abandon one another.” This failure of community is a failure of language in that “ordinary discourse” fails to provide access to the “inexplicable // . . . ‘preponderance of objects’” that confront us in everyday experience. Our communities fail because we have not created language sufficient to explain the physical and social worlds we inhabit as they exists in the “present.”

Castells identifies a corresponding problem in the field of urban research in the “Afterword” to the English translation of The Urban Question. “We are prisoners of . . . everyday language,” he explains, “usually dominated, as far as we are concerned, by the ideology of the urban.” Like Oppen, however, he is confident that there are ways to use language that can subvert the claims of ideology.

But let there be no misunderstanding. It is not a question of changing one term for another by bringing it closer to a language that is more familiar or more sympathetic (in terms of ideological affinity). It is a question of ensuring, in a parallel way, the development of certain concepts (and therefore not of ‘words,’ but of tools of theoretical work always referring back necessarily to a certain place in a certain theoretical field) and the intelligibility of these concepts in relation to everyday experience, by showing the community as a real object of reference between a particular concept and a particular ideological notion. (441)
What matters for Castells, as for Oppen, is developing an approach that will enable urban projects to link theory to practice in order to preserve community as a “real object of reference” rather than a rhetorical tool. For Oppen, the link to be made is one between words and the world; for Castells, it is between Marxian concepts and their effects in everyday experience. In the end, the linkages and the terms or levels of discourse and experience they connect, are closely related. Both thinkers rely on language, despite the problem of its susceptibility to corruption by ideology, to prepare physical and intellectual space for communities to come together. In Oppen’s case, as Heller explains, language serves this function only through the application of “curiosity,” “forward-looking vigilance,” and “willingness to see further and deeper in the hope of discovery and articulation” (143). Just as the carpenter and the welder relate to the urban scene in a different way than the factory worker, the poet, in his awareness that “words cannot be wholly transparent,” uses language in a different way than his contemporaries (NCP 194). His language, at its best, disrupts the “finite world” the rational mind creates in order to bring alternative possibilities to the surface of experience (NCP 199).

Poetry and Survival

Oppen’s exploration of language and ideology culminates in “Route,” a sequence of fourteen poems published in 1968’s Of Being Numerous. Like the longer title sequence, “Route” conveys a generally pessimistic view of the fate of humanity. Troubled by increasing US involvement in Vietnam and his own experiences as a soldier during World War II, Oppen suggests in the poem that “We are at the beginning of a radical depopulation of the earth // Cataclysm . . . cataclysm of the plains, jungles, the cities” (NCP 201). Yet despite this dark prediction and the bleak portrait of war that comprises the fifth poem of the sequence, there is also a sense of possibility in “Route” that emerges in reflections on language,

\[51\] I am grateful to Robert Farrell, Lehman College, for preliminary discussions of “Route” and Oppen’s reading of Heidegger that inform this section.
community, and survival. As much as it refers to the horrors of global war, “Route” also explores the precarious state of American society and tests contrasting explanations and paths forward. Cataloging the deterioration of urban environments with a “prescient grasp” of associated social fragmentation, the poem suggests that failing policies and weak political leadership are to blame for current state of American cities (Nicholls 98). “Route” also points to a breakdown at the level of individual relationships. Though we “try to understand” and “remain together,” Oppen suggests, we are increasingly isolated from one another (NCP 194). Some of the struggles of urban communities exist between and among residents, in other words, which means that strengthening those communities is possible despite the difficulties of infrastructure and politics.

Oppen links the experience of isolation to the problem of ideology in the final sections of the “Route.” He explains the connection most clearly in section 13 through an analogy with urban planning:

Department of Plants and Structures—obsolete, the old name
In this city, of the public works

Tho we meant to entangle ourselves in the roots of the world
An unexpected and forgotten spoor, all but indescribable shards

To owe nothing to fortune, to chance, nor by the power of his heart
Or her heart to have made these things sing
But the benevolence of the real

Tho there is no longer shelter in the earth, round helpless belly
Or hope among the pipes and broken works

‘Substance itself which is the subject of all our planning’

And by this we are carried into the incalculable
(NCP 201)

The urge to make plans begins in an attempt to avoid contingency, to live in a way as “to owe nothing to fortune, to chance.” As in “Rationality” where the logic of interchangeable parts alienates the young workman, here “planning” isolates the individual from “his heart / Or her heart” and the possibility of
direct connection with the “benevolence of the real.” This “real,” identified in the quoted line as “substance itself,” relates to the “roots of the world,” in the third line, and “the incalculable,” at the conclusion of the section. As the quoted line suggests, there are two planes of experience available in the poem and in cities themselves: the man-made and the natural or the asphalt and its “loose edge.” Though our attempts at “planning” disconnect us from the “roots of the world,” it is still possible for us to be “carried into the incalculable.” The “this” Oppen refers to seems to be the activity of planning: human actions directed at managing the risks of collective habitation of the world.

Oppen explains the origin of the quoted line in a note to himself published in full in the Selected Letters and in a shortened version in the New Collected Poems. He composed the line after spending an afternoon reading Heidegger. Though he subsequently worries he has stolen the line, when he re-reads the essay, he cannot find the source. (Selected Letters 136) Nicholls suggests Heidegger’s Introduction to Metaphysics as the probable source, but, like the poet, is unable to identify an exact quotation (81). In his note to himself, Oppen explains that the word “substance” comes from Heidegger but that the reference to “planning” is his own:

I knew I was envious of the phrase; it occurred to me that where Heidegger had used the word substance, I would probably not have thought of it, and would have used the clumsy word ‘matter.’ And I wrote ‘which is the subject of our planning’ with the knowledge that it was my own phrase, an alternation of his, but derived from some other sentence in his essay. (NCP 391)

The “Department of Plants and Structures” leaves only “indescribable shards” in the city in its attempts to align experience with the “roots of the world” rather than producing “shelter” or “hope.” Shoemaker argues that this misalignment and failure has to do with a difference between consciousness and history: “The grounding substance, ‘which has been the subject of all our planning,’ draws us out of the ‘man-made universe’ of the mathematical and into ‘history,’ the arena of human action” (65). Planning and public works fail to provide shelter because the ideology on which they rely is false; cities are not mathematical models. What the poem seems to
suggest is that more than physical criteria are at stake in making cities habitable and more than fortune and chance determine the conditions under which most city residents live.

The reference to planning in “Route” is metaphorical rather than direct, but there are important parallels between Oppen’s account of the failure of planning and public works and Castells’s critique of the “urban ideology.” In his analysis of the rhetoric of US urban planning in the 1960s, Castells identifies the “physical deterioration of the habitat” as one of the reasons most often cited by policy makers in support of urban renewal projects (287). Like Oppen, he concludes that rhetoric about the built environment masks other motivations, a deeper “substance.” He argues that rather than a crisis of infrastructure, such rhetoric marks a crisis of “urban centrality,” which he defines as the erosion of the city’s ideological function as administrative center and “cultural emitter” (298-299). In Castells’s analysis, preserving this ideological function is the underlying motivation that drives most planning decisions:

It is a question, therefore, not of saving the city, but of saving part of the heritage of the pre-existing urban forms, namely, certain functions that are still instrumental for the megalopolis and certain activities that are closely linked to the production of social values, to their social visibility and to their symbolic appropriation by certain social groups. (301)

Beauregard makes a similar point, explaining that political arguments about cities throughout the 1960s and 1970s refer to general fears about the trajectory of American society rather than specifically urban concerns: “Urban decline serves as a symbolic cover for more wide-ranging fears and anxieties. In this role, it discursively precedes the deteriorating conditions and bleak futures of the city [and] provides a spatial fix for our more generalized insecurities and complaints.” Following Castells’s suggestion that the “urban ideology” conceals exploitation, Beauregard concludes that the discourse of urban decline inhibits the emergence of a “more radical critique of American society” (22). As I have suggested above, the deeper conflicts and realities of urban experience that constitute this radical critique are the
“substance” of Oppen’s metaphysical exploration of American cities from *Discrete Series* forward. The contradictions of ideology are the “truth” he sets out to pursue in “Leviathan” and the “consciousness” he analyzes in “The Manufactured Part,” “Debt,” and “Rationality.” Like Beauregard and Castells, Oppen’s instinct is to aim for a “limited, limiting clarity” in his poems that allows the “subjects” of thought and discourse to be distinguished from ideological effects (*NCP* 193).

As in *Discrete Series*, streets, highways, and car travel predominate in “Route.” In each instance they suggest broader concerns about isolation, community, and the relationships between natural and built environments. In “Route” as in “Closed car,” for example, Oppen contrasts the comfort of automobile travel with the experience of alienation it produces. “Cars on the highway [are] filled with speech,” in “Route,” serving as moving enclosures in which people “talk, they talk to each other” (*NCP* 198). Voluminous though it may be, this chatter is purposeless in Oppen’s view, as becomes clear in the twelfth section of the poem, when “time” and outside circumstances impinge on automotive intimacy.

> Time remains what it was

> Oddly, oddly insistent

> haunting the people in the automobiles,

> shining on the sheetmetal,

> open and present, unmarred by indifference,

> wheeled traffic, indifference,

> the hard edge of concrete continually crumbling

> into gravel in the gravel of the shoulders,

> Ditches of our own country

> Whom shall I speak to

(*NCP* 200)

Reduced to the raw material of “sheetmetal,” the cars fail as shelters from the passage of time and the accidents of “fortune” and “chance.” They surround passengers with a false sense of privacy and
security which breaks down as soon as a door or window is opened. Even the highway itself comes in question: “the hard edge of concrete continually crumbles // into gravel in the gravel of the shoulders.” The gravel on the highway shoulders is the same “loose edge” that prompts Oppen’s reflection on the city in “Who comes is occupied.” In “Route” this edge also refers to the despair of isolation.

Oppen links American highways, the “ditches of our own country,” to occupied France during World War II, in “Route” by setting his memories of the war alongside analysis of the ideological conflicts of 1960s American urban discourse. The overlap is particularly apparent in a story Oppen hears from Pierre Adam, a “journeyman mason” living near Alsace, included in the fifth section of the poem.

During the occupation the Germans had declared Alsace a part of Greater Germany. Therefore they had drafted Alsatian men into the German army. Many men, learning in their own way that they were to be called, dug a hole. The word became a part of the language: faire une trou. Some men were in those holes as long as two and three years. It was necessary that someone should know where those whole were; in winter it was impossible for a man to come out of his hole without leaving footprints in the snow. While snow was actually falling, however, a friend could come to the hole with food and other help. Pierre, whom many people trusted, knew where some two dozen of those holes were.

(NCP 195; italics in original)

Living underground to avoid the control of an oppressive regime is, of course, of a different order of experience than driving down an American highway. As Oppen urges, however, the reader “must try to put yourself into those times,” as an exercise in empathy, if nothing else. The Alsatian tunnels function as shelters from the regime only because Adam conspires with their builders and visits them regularly with “food and other help.” Without Adam, the men in the tunnels would be forced to “come out of [their] hole[s],” exposing themselves and their families to Nazi aggression. Oppen records conversations Adam had with the men before they went into hiding: “Men would come to Pierre and they would say: I am thinking of making a hole. Pierre would say: yes. They would say then: but if I do they will kill my parents; or: they will take my wife and my children. Then Pierre would say, he told me: if you dig a hole, I will help you.” (NCP 195; italics in original) Adam responds clearly and definitively when asked for help;
he cuts through the men’s anxieties to their core concern, survival, by framing their choice in a simple logic: if you do this, I will do this. While his clarity does not lessen the horrors of the occupation, it makes taking action easier.

Oppen relays Adam’s story in conversational prose rather than verse and suggests that the episode on which it is based enters the French language as a phrase, “faire une trou,” a phrase that translates directly as “to make a hole” but also connotes “se créer une situation sociale, réussir dans la vie” or “creating a social situation; succeeding in life.” Given Oppen’s association of the specific circumstances in Alsace with this common phrase, his inclusion of the story in “Route” suggests a commitment to the power of language to sustain communities. The construction of the tunnels arises in language, through conversations with Adam, and the community-in-hiding is sustained by similar means: Adam’s “yes” and his commitment to each of his neighbors that “if you dig a hole, I will help you.” The tunnels offer more shelter than the cars, highways, and urban infrastructure of post-war American society because they give the Alsatians a way to maintain control over their minds and bodies despite the Nazi occupation. The story prefigures the nuclear “cataclysm” predicted at the end of “Route” by showing a community stretched to its limits. As an event of language, however, it also suggests that collective practices, even on a small scale, have the potential to mitigate the circumstances of the war.

The hopefulness of “faire une trou” is clichéd, but it refers in this instance to specific feats of survival. As Oppen suggests in a subsequent section, Adam and his neighbors approached their situation “in the manner of poetry” rather than losing hope:

Imagine a man in the ditch,
The wheels of the overturned wreck
Still spinning—

I don’t mean he despairs, I mean if he does not

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The phrase is listed as “faire son trou” in Larousse. Contrary to Oppen’s assertion, the phrase occurs earlier than World War II, for example, in Balzac’s Le Médecin de Campagne (1833), where it refers to finding peace and comfort (Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales).
He sees in the manner of poetry. (\textit{NCP} 198)

In these lines and throughout “Route,” Oppen makes a distinction between circumstances, “the overturned wreck,” and ways of approaching them, “see[ing] in the manner of poetry” rather than “despair[ing].” He suggests that language provides a way of managing difficult circumstances and converting them into opportunities for survival in community. To return to the metaphor of planning, seeing “in the manner of poetry” provides an alternative to the doomed rationalism of highways, urban renewal projects, and nuclear weapons. Oppen’s reflection on the Alsatian tunnels suggests that he understands, like Castells and Beauregard, that the “substance” which is the “subject of all our planning” is in fact our collective vulnerability rather than any possibility of perfection.

“Route” mirrors a critique of urban policy Heidegger proposes in “Building Dwelling Thinking,” a 1951 lecture on the topic of the housing shortage in German following World War II. The lecture diagnoses the housing shortage as a failure of the German people, as a whole, to “commit themselves to something larger than their own mortal selves” (Harries 106). For Heidegger, the housing shortage persists because the German people, especially its architects and politicians, frame it as a problem of resources rather than as a problem of the collective will. Heidegger argues that approaching the problem from the perspective of “dwelling” rather than from the perspective of “building” would make it easier to solve because it would permit the German people to devise new ways to live in community with one another. “Dwelling” is a creative activity that precedes “building,” which Heidegger defines as the physical processes of construction. While we “attain to dwelling, so it seems, only by means of building,” he explains, “building is not merely a means and a way toward dwelling—to build is in itself already to dwell” (\textit{PLT} 143-144).\footnote{53 The following abbreviations are used to refer to editions of Heidegger’s writing: \textit{EB}: \textit{Existence and Being}. Trans. Douglass Scott. Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery Company, 1949. Print. \textit{PLT}: \textit{Poetry, Language, Thought}. Trans. Albert Hofstadter. New York: HarperCollins, 1971. Print.} In other words, “dwelling” is locating oneself in the world and in
relation to other people. As such, it is at the root of “building” because it involves becoming aware of the limits of one’s own perspective and consciousness. Linking “building,” “thinking,” and “dwelling” in this way, Heidegger equates physical and mental activities much in the same way as Adam and his neighbors do out of necessity in “Route.” Indeed, the thrust of “Building Dwelling Thinking” is that spaces of thought or spaces of thinking—spaces we create through “dwelling” in common with one another—are real in the same sense that physical spaces are real and affect our everyday experiences in the same way.

The conception of consciousness Heidegger outlines in “Building Dwelling Thinking” suggests that defining the boundaries within which one’s life takes place is the “substance” of most human activity. Like the carpenter’s joining of post and lintel in Oppen’s “Workman,” Heidegger’s “dwelling” establishes “firm dimensions” for human experience while at the same situating individuals in relation to the world beyond them. “Dwelling” has relevance for my reading of “Route” and Oppen’s engagement with the problems of Castells’s “urban ideology” because it suggests that consciousness, and thus language, produces social realities. Heidegger addresses “dwelling” and “thinking” in relation to poetic language in essays published in English translation in *Existence and Being* (1949) and *Poetry, Language, Thought* (1971). For example, in “Language,” from latter collection, he writes: “Language goes on as the taking place or occurring of the difference for world and things . . . Its speaking bids the difference to come which expropriates the world and things into the simple onefold of their intimacy” (*PLT* 205-207). Language is a field of activity that brings “world” into being, in other words, rather than merely a means of expression.

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54 Nicholls establishes, through analysis of unpublished notes, that Oppen was reading *Existence and Being* as he wrote the poems collected in *This In Which* (81). *Poetry, Language, Thought* appears in English after *Of Being Numerous*. The essays were written in the early 1950s as summary treatments of the analysis of poetic language Heidegger introduces in “Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry,” published in German in 1936 and included in *Existence and Being*. 
Heidegger further distinguishes the “worlding” function of language from reference and expression in the next paragraph of the essay:

The word consequently no longer means a distinction established between objects only by our representations. Nor is it merely a relation obtaining between world and thing, so that a representation coming upon it can establish it. The difference is not abstracted from the world and thing as their relationship after the fact. The difference for world and thing *disclosingly appropriates* things into bearing a world; it *disclosingly appropriates* world into the granting of things. (*PLT* 200, *italics* in original)

Language is “thinking” because it enables our experience of the “things” around us rather than serving merely as a system of reference through which to designate or define those “things.” Saying that language “disclosingly appropriates” both the “world” and “things,” Heidegger is suggesting that language is the medium in which we register “things” in our conscious experience and through which we construct our “world.” “Language beckons us, as first and then again at the end, toward a thing’s nature,” as he writes in “... Poetically Man Dwells ...,” “but that is not to say, ever, that in any word-meaning picked up at will language supplies us, straight away and definitively, with the transparent nature of the matter as if it were an object ready to use” (*PLT* 214). While language is not so “transparent” as to correspond to the “things” we are thinking about, we are involved in language whenever we think. As he explains in “Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry, “Only where there is language, is there world, i.e. the perpetually altering circuit of decision and production, of action and responsibility, but also of commotion and arbitrariness, of decay and confusion. Only where world predominates, is there history. ... Language is not a tool at his disposal, rather it is that event which disposes of the supreme possibility of human existence.” (*EB* 300) Heidegger’s argument here is that the world of everyday life comes into being through language. “This in which” we exist, to use Oppen’s phrase, is an arrangement of things we propose and establish through our use of language.
The dangers that emerge in Heidegger’s account of language mirror the dangers Althusser and Castells identify in their critiques of ideology. For example, Heidegger writes: “The pure and the ordinary are both equally something said. Hence the world as word never gives any direct guarantee as to whether it is an essential word or a counterfeit. On the contrary—an essential word often looks in its simplicity like an unessential one. And on the other hand that which is dressed up to look like the essential, is only something recited by heart or repeated.” (EB 299) For Althusser and Castells, what is concealed by language is a structure of control; for Heidegger, it is the process of becoming conscious of the “world” itself. In the same way that consciousness arises through and is contemporaneous with social interaction for Althusser and Castells, the “world” of our experience arises in and through language for Heidegger. However, for Heidegger, being in the “world” is an ongoing process that transpires in language. His account differs from theirs in suggesting that language can be renewed and its dangers of concealment avoided. Because language is a process rather than a system of reference in Heidegger’s model, its continual emergence is fundamental: “language must constantly present itself in an appearance which it itself attests, and hence endanger what is most characteristic of it, the genuine saying” (EB 299). “Genuine saying” occurs when language is in process, when it is “worlding” and “thinging” and establishing the possibility and parameters of “dwelling” in the “world,” rather than when it is understood as a means for sharing information about that “world.” As a result, language permits us, as individuals and as a collective, to create “worlds” of experience. In fact, it must do so because, as Heidegger explains later in the same essay, “being and the essence of things can never be calculated and derived from what is present, they must be freely created, laid down and given.” (EB 305)

Heidegger’s theory of language requires us to think outside the terms of everyday experience in order to consider the possibility that, like the pedestrian at “loose edge” of the asphalt or the worker high up on the “girder” in Oppen’s poems, we have the capacity, in and through language, to make the “world” of our experience different than it is. Poetry is the quintessential use of language in this respect.
for Heidegger because it is through poetry that we exercise our “basic capacity for human dwelling”: our ability to propose, measure, and explore the “world” and our relations to the “things” of the earth (PLT 226). This possibility of renewal exists in Castells’s critique of ideology, as well, but only in a limited way. For Castells, as for the planners Oppen criticizes in “Route,” what is necessary for the creation of alternative worlds is analysis that cuts through ideological debris of language to the “substance” of urban experience. The theoretical work Castells advocates confronts language rather than working through it and thereby sets the physical and social facts of the city in opposition to what we say and think about them. Heidegger would agree with Castells that what we say and write about cities often fails to correspond to what exists in them and what we mean about them, but where Castells applies this insight to argue that urban discourse masks structural exploitation, Heidegger suggests that the world is in the process of becoming what we, through language, propose it to be. Language inaugurates processes of “dwelling,” in his account, including the physical acts of “building,” through which we construct the “worlds” of our conscious experience, so the separation of words from reality is unnecessary. Instead of conceiving of language as secondary to experience, Heidegger urges that we find ways to harness its world-making power.

David Nowell Smith suggests that the root of Heidegger’s theory is a practice of poetic reading that embodies this disruptive power of language. Analyzing Heidegger’s interpretations of Hölderlin and Trakl, Smith proposes that, as a reader, Heidegger submits himself to the “openness of beings the works brings about” rather than asserting exegetical certainties. As a result, his reading practice “allows [his] thinking, as it were, to think beyond its own limits” (17). Smith details how Heidegger “stands within” the poems he reads, for example, by charting complexities of syntax, listening for aural counterpoints, and seeking embodied articulations. Meaning emerges in these readings through the relations forged between the poems and the thinking they trigger rather than from discoveries about the ways in which they refer or fail to refer to the world. These reading practices align with Heidegger’s theory of
language, in Smith’s account, because they permit him to approach poetry as a mode of thought rather than as expression that corresponds to a preexisting world. In this way, “poetry brings thinking to encounter its own limits, to experience its own ecstasy within the language it inhabits” (147, italics in original). Rather than searching for meaning, then, Heidegger reads so as to preserve the “thinking” the poems enable through their complications, contradictions, and overlapping trajectories of meaning. To put it another way, Hölderlin’s poetry changes Heidegger’s sense of the possible by leading him to think differently about how the “world” of his conscious experience is constructed.

In “The Origin of the Work of Art,” an essay composed in 1935 but not published in English until 1971, Heidegger distinguishes between “artworks,” which enable the kind of world-making practices Smith explores, and “equipment,” which constrains thought by concealing our relation to the world. The things we use every day—tools, building materials, and figures of speech, for example—are equipment. They are things that have been made for a specific purpose, if not by us then by others, and we use them until they break down in one way or another, at which point we take up or make new things to fulfill their function. Equipment is dangerous for the same reason that it is useful. Like Castells’s “urban ideology” and Oppen’s “Department of Plants and Structures,” it suggests to our consciousness a false “appearance of mastery and of progress in the form of technical-scientific objectivication [sic] of nature” (PLT 46). In other words, our use of equipment deceives us about the basic facts of our “dwelling” as conscious beings. To demonstrate the difference between “artworks” and “equipment,” Heidegger compares the shoes a country farmer might wear to a Van Gogh painting. Whereas the shoes themselves permit the farmer to do his work by protecting his feet, “truth,” Heidegger explains, “happens in Van Gogh’s painting.” The “truth” here is not that the painting represents the shoes accurately or beautifully, but rather that the painting reveals the “equipmental being of the shoes” and, in so doing, allows “that which is as a whole—world and earth in their counterplay” to attain to “unconcealedness” (PLT 56). In other words, while the shoes permit the farmer to “dwell” on the earth
in a particular way, and thus constitute a part of the “world” of his conscious experience, the painting shows that the farmer’s world is constructed around the kind of “dwelling” practices he has chosen. The painting shows that the shoes are equipment and that the farm is the field of activity in and through which the farmer “dwells” on the earth.

Heidegger’s reading practice focuses attention on the way language is used rather than on language in and of itself. As Smith explains, “the saying of the truth of being (aletheia), far from constituting an ‘unmediated revelation,’ takes place as we attend to our own usage of words so as to reframe the boundaries of the thinkable” (106). Smith defines Heidegger’s linguistic intervention in the “world” as aletheia or unconcealment:

This is what constitutes the aletheic capacity of the artwork: if the artwork, through an engagement with its own earthly limit, can shape the parameters of its own autodisclosure, then it may also shape the parameters of autodisclosure as such. When the work’s gathering continually surpasses itself, it is precisely this limit that is surpassed, and at this moment, something that was hitherto beyond the bounds of world enters into appearance—for the first time. Contesting its own limit, the work offers to experience a different shaping or configuration of the open than had hitherto been possible or thinkable. (43)

Because it engages the limits of language, poetry, as “artwork,” is, in Heidegger’s words, “the establishing of being by means of the word” (EB 304). In other words, poetry is the field of activity in which language functions as “artwork” rather than as “equipment” and in which “the saying of language becomes ‘showing’ not as it ‘points’ to a preexistent referent already present [but as it] guides thinking toward the openness in which this being would give itself to be thought, and at the same time guides the being toward that openness in which it can be encountered” (Smith 71).

Nicholls suggests that Oppen responds to the “difficult texture” of Heidegger’s thinking because it creates new possibilities in his own thought: “Indeed, the notoriously difficult texture of Heidegger’s
thinking probably appealed to [Oppen] precisely because it seemed to resist facile appropriation and in that way to instigate a suitably complex and at time quite opposite thinking on the part of the reader” (76). Applying insight from Heidegger’s methods, Oppen develops a poetic approach that centers on consciousness as a process of relating to the world rather than as a fact of being. The “poetic thinking” at the root of Oppen’s work, as Nicholls explains, involves “deploying the resources of writing to disclose the texture of thinking as it takes shape” rather than “articulating a through already had” (72). DuPlessis describes the effect of reading Oppen’s poetry in a similar way: “The impact of Oppen’s poetry is not aesthetic only, but a kind of ontological arousal to thinking itself—not to knowledge as such, but to the way thought feels emotionally and morally and processually in time. The way it feels is moving, aching, startling, and barely consoling” (212). For the poet, then, writing serves as a means of thought. For the reader, it is an invitation to thinking, a beginning point that leads away from current understandings of the world in many possible directions.

Oppen suggests in “Route” that “seeing in the manner of poetry” is different from seeing in the manner of architects, planners, and theorists. He agrees with Althusser and Castells that language that has been corrupted by ideology destroys communities and that power operates beyond “the limits of reason” (NCP 202). At the same time, he also agrees with Heidegger that language is what brings us into awareness of ourselves as existing “on the earth as mortal” and thus provides some hope for our collective survival. Oppen acknowledges in “Power, The Enchanted World,” the penultimate poem in Of Being Numerous, for example, that the general state of American society is “not what we wanted,” especially because “now we do most of the killing / Having found a logic // Which is control / Of the world.” Even so, he suggests that survival is possible if we live “in the manner of poetry.” While the ideological power that constrains everyday life “hides what it can,” it also “ruptures at a thousand holes.” Neither the sentimentalism of “I love you” nor the childish nationalism of “Put your hand on your heart” is sufficient to produce these alternatives. What is needed instead is recognition of the
limits of mortality and an embrace of the malleability of the “worlds” in which we “dwell.” In order to
survive, we must think beyond the “useless” equipment of our words to the practices they enable.

The “Curious” Languages of New York

Oppen takes New York City as a field of inquiry in 1965’s “A Language of New York” and 1968’s “Of Being
Numerous,” a longer version of the same series published in the Pulitzer Prize-winning book of the same
name. Following the trajectory of insight initiated in Discrete Series and The Materials, “A Language"
offers a materialist critique of urban reality that peels back the “glassed in” surface of the city to expose
its underlying structures. The poem presents New York as a “city of the corporations” where “the news /
Is war / As always” (NCP 116-117). With 40 sections compared to the original 8, “Of Being Numerous”
expands from exploration of a single city to analysis of economics, politics, and language on a global
scale. Originally titled “Another Language of New York,” the poem reframes the urban questions of “A
Language” as questions about the possibilities of human community. Condensing the materialist critique
of the city in Discrete Series, The Materials, and This in Which into a focused meditation on the “curious”
properties of language, Oppen uses the city in “Of Being Numerous” to explore the central problem of
Heidegger’s notion of being: the idea that the “world” we experience is impermanent because we
construct it in and through our experiences. Castells’s critique of “urban ideology” represents one
approach to this problem as it affects the urban scene. Oppen’s poem represents another. As he

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55 An early version of this section was presented as “Materialism and Language in Oppen’s ‘A Language
of New York.’” at the annual meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association in New York,
NY, on March 23, 2014.

56 Nicholls explains the political context of the poem by noting a shift from the relative stability of the
1950s to the instability of the 1960s: “In the period during which “Of Being Numerous” took shape, it
was not only the Vietnam War that presented a spectre of national violence. With the faltering of
the Civil Rights movement after the gains of 1964 and 1965, American cities were poised on a wave of
rioting, while other oppositional groups—the women’s movement, the antiwar movement, student
activists—would become increasingly disenchanted with reformism. The consensus politics of the
opening years of the decade now swiftly began to unravel.” (98)
explains in the late “Statement on Poetics”: “actualness is prosody, it is the purpose of prosody and its achievement, the instant of meaning, the achievement of meaning and of presence, the sequence of disclosure which comes from everywhere” (Selected Prose 49). Rather than exposure, which is the purpose of Castells’s critique, “Of Being Numerous” proceeds according to the principle of aletheia, disclosing the “texture of thinking as it takes shape” (Nicholls 72). The poem suggests that rather than being fixed in place and situated at a distance, the city and the world of our experience takes the form we collectively choose.

Oppen explains his goals for “Of Being Numerous” in an October 4, 1965, letter to Rachel Blau DuPlessis, then a graduate student at Columbia. Referring to all of his poetry as a single “project,” Oppen summarizes the purpose of each of his books in a short phrase. Discrete Series is defined mathematically, “a series in which each term is empirically justified rather than derived from the preceding term.” The Materials is a “solid” restatement of themes. This In Which, the collection where “A Language of New York” first appears, represents a transformation of the project developed in the first two books: it “contains some private amusements in that it means also the achievement of form; that the materials in achieving solidity, form, appear in the light of the miraculous.” Oppen’s summary of This In Which suggests it offers a different experience than his first two books. Rather than confronting readers with ideas—ideas in things to follow the Objectivist dictum—it leads readers to perceptions and encounters that occur “in the light of the miraculous.” His description of the next book, “Another language,” as Of Being Numerous was then called, is vague: “Another language ----- is imperfect. Has to be, tho I don’t mean it’s not my fault. But to being: a looser, a more commodious language, to make possible at least one more book—” A postscript adds clarity: “There’s nothing very complex, nothing requiring tremendous aesthetic argument: we need courage, not ‘audacity’ – Pound’s word – but plain courage. To say what it’s like out there . . . . out here.” (Selected Letters 122) Writing in 1965 in New York, what’s “out here” for Oppen is a city once again in crisis. According to the letter, “Another
language” is an attempt to describe what he sees and experiences without aestheticizing or overcomplicating, an attempt to describe observations grounded in direct experience of the city’s “material substance.”

The pessimistic effects of this method are perhaps most evident in section 26 of the poem, the longest in the series and a section that does not appear in any form in “A Language of New York.” Seeking a purpose for poetry in view of catastrophic world events, Oppen compares American cities to the bombed European cities he encountered during World War II. He describes what it feels like to be a poet on that scene and concludes that “We stand on // That denial of death that paved the cities, / Paved the cities // Generation / For generation . . . .” (NCP 178). Urban experience, according to this view, is precarious because it is founded on a refusal to accept the “actualness” of human mortality. Events like the Depression, which Oppen encountered on his return to New York from Paris in 1931, and the world war, which he experienced firsthand, demonstrate that cities do not, in and of themselves, provide assurance that basic human needs will be met or that humanity will be protected from harm. Instead, the poem suggests, cities are merely places where lives are “paved” over, generation after generation, in fruitless attempts to forestall the inevitable.

Later in the section Oppen alludes to “Closed car,” a poem from *Discrete Series*. Whereas in the earlier poem Oppen focuses on the permeability of windows, in “Of Being Numerous” he depicts the cars as impenetrable and stuck. They are “equipment” in Heidegger’s sense, serving a purpose but also constraining passengers’ experiences.

Street lamps shine on the parked cars
Steadily in the clear night

It is true the great mineral silence
Vibrates, hums, a process
Completing itself

In which the windshield wipers
Of the cars are visible.
Instead of suggesting freedom of movement, the cars here represent isolation and impotence. Products
of human ingenuity, they are examples, for Oppen, of the insufficiency of the “Power and weight / Of
the mind” to mitigate the challenges of the “fatal rock // Which is the world—” (NCP 179). They isolate
their passengers from one another and present an inscrutable visibility to passersby. The “great mineral
silence” of the world, in turn, is its imperviousness to human invention and to any attempt we might
make, as individuals or in community, to interfere in the continual process of destruction and renewal.

Noting the frustration of these lines, Marjorie Perloff suggests that the climax of “Of Being
Numerous” comes in the next section, in Oppen’s meditation on the purposes of poetry. The first line,
“It is difficult now to speak of poetry—,” signals both an awareness of the difficulties glimpsed in section
26 and an intent to address them. In the prose that follows, Oppen describes poetry first as
autobiography, “One would have to tell what happens in a life, what choices present themselves, what
the world is for us,” and then as dwelling, “I would want to talk of rooms and of what they look out on
and of basements, the rough walls bearing the marks of the forms, the old marks of wood in the
concrete, such solitude as we know—” (NCP 180). That neither definition is satisfactory is suggested in
the conclusion where Oppen offers instructions on craft rather than a resolution:

One must not come to feel that he has a thousand threads in his hands,
He must somehow see the one thing;
This is the level of art
There are other levels
But there is no other level of art

(NCP 180)

Perloff compares the irregular structure of “Of Being Numerous” to the “fits and starts by means of
which his consciousness comes to terms with its new conditions” and concludes that the poem is a
“testimony to survival, to the ‘curious’ ability of the poet’s ‘numbers’ to interlock” rather than a call for
social transformation (197; 204). That Oppen’s attempt to “speak of poetry” in section 27 leads to the
solitude of a basement room suggests to Perloff that the poet ultimately fails to master the languages of New York. Alienated from the city and its people, he struggles through his poetry to “see the one thing” that would allow him to synthesize his aesthetic and social experiences.

Like Perloff, Burton Hatlen focuses on the poetics of section 27, but rather than pain or despair, he finds in the concluding lines a commitment to the power of poetry to bring isolated individuals together. Oppen’s language is “commodious,” in Hatlen’s view, rather than abstract or detached, because it initiates a thinking process that extends beyond the page. Rather than markers of solitude, the “marks of the forms, the old marks of wood in the concrete” in the section’s prose are “imprints” of the carpenter and mason who built the room the workman is sweeping (279). Indeed, as Hatlen explains, “in the moment that [Oppen] looks at what the workman has made and acknowledges him as a brother, the poet also implicitly passed beyond his solitude, achieves a measure of transcendence which makes possible a final affirmation of the poet’s singularity” (280). For Hatlen, “Of Being Numerous” represents a successful extension of the concerns of “A Language of New York” that enriches the earlier poem’s depictions of the “material substance of city” by showing how deeply the city is “permeated with our humanity” (287). The central issue of the poem, for Hatlen, is how “language incarnates our humanity,” in other words, how what we say and write about ourselves establishes the terms of our collective existence (292; italics in original).

Oppen explains the relation between language, consciousness, and collective experience as a function of the poetic process in his late “Statement on Poetics.” I quote from the “Statement” at length to draw attention to the spatial dimension of Oppen’s thought.

Prosody is a language, but it is a language that tests itself. Or it tests itself in music—I think one may say that. It tests the relations of things: it carries the sequence of disclosure. I am not speaking of a philosophic naiveté, I am not speaking of kicking the rock and saying By God, sir, that’s here, and certainly I’m not speaking of any remarkable philosophic sophistication. I am
thinking of actualness, not some toughness of “realism,” some manly toughness: I am talking of consciousness—which is to say, I am talking of experience, and THAT is to say, I am talking of emotion. Impossible to doubt the actualness of one’s own consciousness: but therefore consciousness in itself, of itself, by itself carries the principle of ACTUALNESS for it, itself, is actual beyond doubt. And actualness is prosody, it is the purpose of prosody and its achievement, the instant of meaning, the achievement of meaning and of presence, the sequence of disclosure which comes from everywhere; life-style, angers, rebellions—I am not apolitical, and it is possible to mock poetry just as there are times when one is sick of himself, but eventually, I think, there is no hope for us but in meaning. (Selected Prose 49, italics in original)

Oppen distinguishes his poetic project from the self-conscious adoption of a style, such as the “manly toughness” of realism or the academic abstraction of “philosophic sophistication,” in order to emphasize the link between poetry and thought. He insists that he writes about the “actualness” of experiencing the world and compares poetry to everyday language, emotion, and simply being in a particular place at a particular time. Meaning emerges in all of these situations in the same way, for Oppen, through a “sequence of disclosure,” that is unique to every individual, but poems focus our attention on this sequence and the “instant of meaning” in which “the truth of what is” emerges (PLT 72). Through this process of aletheia, for Oppen as for Heidegger, poetry provides a means of processing experience in the world that involves a “readiness to experience the ruptures and possibilities of our place and time” (DuPlessis 196). It reveals thought “as embodied in the irreducible spatio-temporal ‘thereness’ of the poem” (Nicholls 72). Poetry is a means of dwelling in exactly this sense: it is the field of activity through which poet and reader negotiate their relationship to one another and the world and the thought-in-process that leads to “the achievement of meaning and of presence.”
Both “A Language of New York” and “Of Being Numerous” conclude with the same quotation from an April 19, 1864 letter from Whitman to his mother:

The capital [sic] grows upon one in time, especially as they have got the great figure on top of it now, and you can see it very well. It is a great bronze figure, the Genius of Liberty I suppose. It looks wonderful toward sundown. I love to go and look at it. The sun when it is nearly down shines on the headpiece and it dazzles and glistens like a big star; it looks quite curious . . .’

(NCP 119)

Except for the misspelling of “Capitol” and the replacement of Whitman’s characteristic dash with an ellipsis as final punctuation, Oppen’s quotation from the letter is exact. The lines Oppen uses come from a longer paragraph in which Whitman describes debates in Congress about expelling members who challenged Lincoln’s prosecution of the Civil War and urged immediate recognition of an independent Confederacy. Whitman expresses disappointment with the quality of the debate:

I went down to the Capitol the nights of the debate on the expulsion of Mr Long last week—they had night sessions, very late—I like to go to the House of Representatives at night, it is the most magnificent hall, so rich & large, & lighter than it is days, & still not a light visible, it comes through the glass roof—but the speaking & ability of the members is nearly always on a low scale, it is very curious & melancholy to see such a rate of talent there, such tremendous times as these—I should say about the same range of genius as our old friend Dr Swalm, just about—you may think I am joking, but I am not, Mother—I am speaking in perfect earnest—

(Correspondence 211)

Given the “tremendous times” and the “magnificent hall,” Whitman expects thoughtful arguments about the future of the Union. He finds instead procedural maneuvering and rhetoric about the instability of language. Representative Fernando Wood, former mayor of New York City, for example, took the floor to argue that “it is the first time in the history of the Government that any proceeding of a
like character has been taken when the language of the offense clearly and definitely expressed, to which exception is taken, was not quoted” and then read into the record dozens of quotations from speeches and articles by Lincoln supporters in an attempt to claim that Lincoln and his party intended to “exterminate, destroy, rid or existences, extinguish the men, women, and children of the South” (2). Wood repeats the words “language,” “speech,” “utterance” and “words” throughout his speech, deflecting attention from substantive debate over the issue at hand.

“It is very curious & melancholy” to Whitman that there is not greater alignment between the occasion and the words used to address it, or indeed between the words used and the “actualness,” to use Oppen’s term, of the issues under debate. Whereas “curious” carries a positive resonance when applied to the beauty of the Capitol dome, here it suggests frustration and even sadness. As Jennifer Weber explains, the debates over expelling Representative Long took place at a tenuous moment for the Union. The Copperhead movement, a faction of Democrats that opposed Lincoln’s intention of keeping the country united despite the war, had gained strength through opposition to the March 1863 Enrollment Act. Support for the moment was further buoyed by increasing Union casualties in early 1864, to the point that some political leaders were beginning to see Lincoln’s defeat in the upcoming Presidential election as inevitable (Weber 47). As Whitman watched late afternoon light glint off the Capitol dome from across the Potomac, he surely remembered the disturbing scene he witnessed earlier inside the chamber. Considering this resonance, the poet’s use of “curious” in the letter suggests a sense of astonishment that Washington is both a muddle of language and a compellingly beautiful symbol of American democracy at once. While the “curious” debate seems to have given Whitman pause, the “curious” urban scene may have restored his hopes.

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57 Oren Irzenberg explains the symbolic importance of the Capitol and the statue Whitman describes in Being Numerous (95-98).
Whitman uses “curious” again in his next letter home, this time to describe Union soldiers marching through Washington in preparation for a new offensive. Having marched with his brother George past the President’s reviewing stand, he provides a participant’s view of the proceedings:

Mother, it was a curious sight to see these ranks after ranks of our own dearest blood of men, mostly young, march by, worn & sunburnt & sweaty with well worn clothes & their bundles & knapsacks, tin cups & some with frying pans, strapt over their backs, all dirty & sweaty—nothing real neat about them except their muskets, but they were all as clean & bright as silver—they were four or five hours passing along, marching with wide ranks pretty quickly too—it is a great sight to see such a big Army, 25 or 30,000, on the march—they are all so gay too, poor fellows—nothing dampens their spirits— (Correspondence 212)

Involving “a pretty strong force of artillery—& a middling force of cavalry, many New York, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, R[hode] I[sland], &c reg’ts,” as well as “five very full regiments of new black troops under Gen Ferrero” and a “reg’t of sharpshooters, partly composed of Indians,” the scene is complex and spectacular. Beyond the spectacle, the parade must have been “curious” for Whitman in embodying both the democratic principles of his poetics and the perilous state of the Union as suggested by the debates over expelling Representative Long. The word “curious,” as used by Whitman in his April 19 and April 26, 1864 letters to his mother, thus involves three different scenes and three very different sets of connotations. When speaking of the congressional debate, the poet is disappointed and means the word to suggest the misalignment of the moment and the language used to express it. Democracy in practice falls short of its ideal. When looking across the Potomac at the Capitol dome, his spirits are lifted. The setting sun transforms Washington’s muddled language into a majestic urban scene. Finally, while watching the Union regiments march through the city, he is happy to see his brother and the high spirits of the soldiers. At the same time, he is overwhelmed by the gravity of the situation. At the least,
“curious” seems to refer, as Whitman uses it, to unsettling experiences and to differences between seeing events from the outside and participating in them.

Peter O’Leary suggests that Oppen’s use of the excerpt from the letter represents an interrogation of the Whitman’s poetics of democracy. He reads the word “curious” as a “Whitmanian adjunct to numerousness” and suggests that “where Whitman speaks of the transient peace and joy that surpass all the art and argument of the earth, Oppen describes the necessity to construct an argument in order to speak at all” (np). Oren Irzenberg offers a similar reading, suggesting that Oppen’s central concern in “Of Being Numerous” is the question of “social recognition,” of “what forms of attention toward others might be adequate” (85). Insisting on the possibility of communication between individuals, Irzenberg suggests that the poem is hopeful at its core. Like Hatlen, he argues that Oppen recognizes the humanity of the city and, like DuPlessis, he suggests that the poet takes a posture of “attentiveness that encourages and dramatizes the greatest possible opening of the self” (106). In O’Leary’s and Irzenberg’s readings, “Of Being Numerous” is a discourse on the possibility of developing mutual understanding through language.

Given the multiple resonances of “curious” in Whitman’s letters, Oppen’s isolation of the word seems like an instance of the poetic procedure he outlines in section 4 of “A Language,” namely, capturing words “one by one proceeding // Carefully” in order to restore them “to meaning / And to sense.” He seems to be testing its truth, measuring the degree to which it obscures the “mineral fact” of what it describes (NCP 114; 164):

Possible
To use
Words provided one treat them
As enemies.
Not enemies----Ghosts

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58 Oppen would have encountered the letters in the first volume of Whitman’s Correspondence where they appear consecutively. There is no indication in Oppen’s published writings that he read the letters surrounding the April 19 letter from which he took the excerpt.
Which have run mad
In the subways
And of course the institutions
And the banks. If one captures them
One by one proceeding

Carefully they will restore
I hope to meaning
And to sense.

(NCP 116)

Language, like the city’s maddening subways, institutions, and banks, is dangerous in “A Language” and “Of Being Numerous” because it conveys both more than we can understand and less than we need it to. Like Castells, Oppen sees cities as subject to interpretation, misappropriation, and fantasy. The warning he offers about these dangers is even harsher in section 17 of “Of Being Numerous,” a revision of the same ideas, where “rootless speech” replaces the ghost-words of the original section and language is said to promulgate “madness” rather than merely expressing conditions of isolation and discomfort. Though the “urban landscape” of the poem “registers a disturbing loss of historical and linguistic depth” (Nicholls 84), all is not lost, in Oppen’s view, because meaning and sense can be restored through careful and skeptical interrogation, by a poetic process of thinking about words both in themselves and as parts of larger systems.

Lines from Oppen’s daybooks suggest he views the writing of poetry as an effective means for restoring meaning in this sense:

It is the proper purpose or the first purpose of the poem to restore the meaning of words [. . .] I do not think that a poem can be filled with meaning by being filled, like a bag or a jug, with words. On the contrary is the poem, the structure of meaning which restores the words to clarity. The word is the burden, the words are the burden, of the line which it must bear lift up into meaning. (Selected Prose 68-69)

The daybooks are bundles of undated papers bound together with twine and pipe cleaners deposited in the Oppen archive at the University of California-San Diego. Selections have been published in journals since the 1980s. Six of Oppen’s daybooks are reprinted in full in Stephen Cope’s invaluable Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers.
William Carlos Williams makes a similar point about poems as systems of meaning in notes for a prospective Book VI of his long urban poem *Paterson*: “Words are the burden of poems, poems are made of [words]” (237). The “burden” for both poets is the burden of making meaning, not to readers, necessarily, but to themselves. Writing poetry, in other words, is a way of disciplining the mind.

Oppen explains the conclusion of “Of Being Numerous” in a letter to John Crawford, poet and editor of *West End*, a literary magazine based in New York. Davidson includes the relevant section of the letter in a note in the *New Collected Poems*. Oppen writes:

> There is an almost audible click in the brain to mark the transition between thought which is available because it has already been thought, and the thinking of the single man, the thinking of a man as if he were single . . . “Of Being Numerous” is constructed around that click, of course—and the poem ends with the word ‘curious.’ I had set myself once before to say forthrightly “We want to be here,” and the long poem ends almost jokingly with ‘curious.’ But it is not a joke entirely. If I were asked, Why do we want to be here—I would say: it is curious—the thing is curious—“ (*NCP* 387)

Rather than borrowing Whitman’s “curious” poetic vision directly, in other words, Oppen is more cautious. He rewrites Whitman’s letter for his own purposes, setting “curious” on a line by itself, to create space for a “click,” an “instant of meaning,” though which his sense of himself and his place (and his reader’s place) in the world might be restructured. For Michael Heller, Oppen’s process of writing and rewriting, visible in the Daybooks, represents persistence in the face of despair about the “actualness” of the world. Pasting words and phrases over one another to create new versions of poems, Oppen is willing himself into a posture of curiosity. The “primary drama” of the poetry, for Heller, therefore, is its “open stance toward phenomena” and the “dizzying rapidity” with which poems “explode into a multiplicity of subjects, or dialogues, which the reader must patiently reintegrate for the poem to be more than a verbal message of sentiment” (149). While Whitman’s “curious” is important,
the “click” of “Of Being Numerous,” the moment when “thought which is available” becomes the
redemptive “thinking of the single man,” sounds in section 28:

The light
Of the closed pages, tightly closed, packed against each other
Exposes the new day
The narrow, frightening light
Before a sunrise.

(NCP 180-181)

The city and the urban scene takes many forms across Oppen’s work. This image of “new” light radiating
out from the pages of a closed book is perhaps most memorable. Recalling the sparks that draw a
sympathetic crowd in Whitman’s “Sparkles from the Wheel,” the light is “frightening” because it brings a
new day, as if the words on its “tightly closed, packed” pages prepare the way for unthought future
worlds. The image suggests reverence for the languages of New York and seeks to propose a city in
language that consolidates their creative force rather than merely using language as equipment to
describe the city as it exists.

The late poem “Waking Who Knows” consolidates several strands of Oppen’s urban thinking,
including the materialist critique of Discrete Series and The Materials; the exploration of consciousness
and language in This In Which; and the reflections on human vulnerability and survival in Of Being
Numerous. As in other poems, Oppen provides an alternately ecstatic and admonitory analysis bounded
by the title’s optimistic shrug:

Waking Who Knows

the great open
doors of the tall
buildings and the grid
of the streets the seed
is a place the stone
is a place mind
will burn the world down alone
and transparent

will burn the world down tho the starlight is
part of ourselves

(NCP 273)

Looking out at the city from a window, the reader is in the same position as at the beginning of *Discrete Series*. While the “boredom” of the earlier scene, borrowed from Henry James, suggests isolation and an unchanging eternity, the urban prospect in “Waking” produces a different effect. The poem develops through a chain of associations involving the poet and reader in contexts of increasing scale: seed, stone, mind, buildings, city, world, universe. While the scattered enjambments of the first six lines suggest restlessness, the trajectory from the “great open // doors” to the “grid // of the streets” to “ourselves” suggests a logic of inclusion that defines the city as coextensive with larger and larger physical and conceptual spaces. At the end of the poem Oppen warns that we tend to interfere in this logic of expansion, choosing to isolate ourselves in attempts to know and manage cities through abstract models. Looking out from the window, we seem to have two choices: embrace the play of “grid,” “seed,” “stone,” and “mind” or “burn the world down alone / and transparent” in an attempt to regulate and control the city’s possibilities.
Chapter 4: The Poetics of Neighborhood: Reading “Bronzeville” and the “Loisaida”

People protest in sprawling lightless ways
Against their deceivers, they are never meek—

— Gwendolyn Brooks, *Annie Allen*

So far in this study I have focused on strategies poets use to explore, document, analyze, and critique cities in crisis. This approach has led me to insights about the overlapping concerns of urban planners, geographers, social researchers, and city poets and to a characterization of city poetry as a mode of critical engagement with contemporary urban problems. First, by comparing the techniques of *Paterson*, *The Maximus Poems*, and Allen Ginsberg’s unrealized “Shrouded Stranger” project, I showed that the inclusion of archival, colloquial, and personal details in city poems produces different trajectories of analysis. Olson’s and Ginsberg’s direct engagement with concrete details in their work, whether from history or lived experience, exerted pressure on Williams’s metaphorical approach and ultimately shaped the insights about the relations between a city and its surrounding region in *Paterson V*. Second, through discussion of Los Angeles’s evolving poetic communities, I suggested that poets who take cities as their subjects draw on particular geographies—streetscapes, multilane highways, and hourly motels, for example—to motivate and develop their work. When the urban environment is constraining, as it is for Wanda Coleman and her fellow Watts writers, they “factor-in feeling” in order to propose and pursue alternative methods for claiming their “right to the city.” Finally, in my reading of George Oppen’s city poetry, I argued that poetic language provides an incisive “tool of theoretical work” that can interrupt and confront corrosive forms of what Manuel Castells identifies as “urban ideology.” Oppen’s interrogation of the relationship between processes of labor and language served as an example of the opportunities poetry provides for restoring a sense of possibility that our cities can be made to be different than they are through our collective efforts.
In this and the following chapter, I turn from a focus on writing and the ways city poetry functions as analysis and critique, to a focus on reading and the ways city poets anticipate and promote certain kinds of reading experiences. While I continue to interpret individual poems in light of planning approaches and other urban research and also to characterize the ways poets conceptualize the cities they write about, I expand my inquiry to include readers. In a sense, the act of reading has been at the center of each of the preceding chapters, but it has been the act of reading the city and how poets and planners transform their readings of particular cities at particular times into actions, for example, the development of experimental city poems, the formation of poetic and other communities, or the pursuit of urban projects, rather than the act of reading poetry that has been important. As a result, the relationships I have explored so far have been binary, Williams-Paterson, Olson-Gloucester, Oppen-New York, and Coleman-Los Angeles, and the city poems I have introduced have served as evidence of particular and limited poetic-critical encounters. Where I have referred to readers and reading, for example, in my descriptions of Williams’s, Olson’s, and Ginsberg’s responses to each other’s work, I have done so in order to demonstrate the embeddedness of poetic inquiry in the everyday life of poets. In outlining a “poetics of neighborhood” in this chapter and detailing the relationship between poetry and progressive planning in the next, I argue instead (or in addition) that city poetry functions as a terrain through which readers encounter cities in new ways. In its strongest form, my claim is that city poems immerse readers in cities similar to those they know from direct experience or media portrayals but different enough to trigger novel insights about both urban conditions and possibilities for change. To put it another way, this chapter and the next provide a reader-focused elaboration of Dewey’s claim that “poetry is a criticism of life [. . .] not directly, but by disclosure, through imaginative vision addressed to imaginative experience (not to set judgment) of possibilities that contrast with actual conditions” (360). Where previously I used Dewey’s aesthetic theory to explain the shared “imaginative vision” that linked disparate groupings of Los Angeles poets in the 1950s and provided a framework for
their later interactions and development, here I apply it to characterize the “imaginative experience” of visiting poetic neighborhoods such as “Bronzeville” and “Loisaida” and the contested banks of the Los Angeles River and Brooklyn Bridge Park.

Reading Neighborhoods

Gwendolyn Brooks, whose Bronzeville poetry is the focus of the first section of this chapter, identifies a difference between what a poet does when she uses a city as a writing environment and what readers do when they incorporate city poetry into their everyday lives: “The poet, first and foremost an individual with a personal vision, is also a member of society. What affects society affects a poet. So I, starting out, usually in the grip of a high and private suffusion, may find by the time I have arrived at a last line that there is quite some public clamor in my product” (Report 138, italics in original). Brooks’s use of the term “public clamor” is important; less than a year after the interview the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy sparked riots in Chicago, Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and other American cities. Indeed, as a response to these events and others, she titled her next collection Riot (1969). But the clamor she means here is not a protest or uprising. Instead, it is a contrast to the “private suffusion[s]” that spur her to write, a signifier of the reading experience she imagines might correspond to her experience writing. The statement is Brooks’s response to an insistent line of questioning from an interviewer about the relations between her poetry and the civil rights movement. While she is reluctant to describe her poetry as being motivated by the movement’s vision of racial equality, she nonetheless locates her work, in terms of both its production and reception, in “society.” Brooks anticipates that readers will find some stimulus in her “product” that will spark the kind of awareness and reflection through which she created the poem in the first place.

The emphasis I place on reading and the “public clamor” of city poetry in this chapter and the next is grounded in two theoretical positions. The first is the idea that cities are open-ended texts
constituted through the reading and writing actions of their various users. Discussed in detail by Roland
Barthes and Michel de Certeau, this idea relates closely to Lefebvre’s claim, introduced in chapter 2, that
urban spaces are produced through the complex and conflictual interactions of people who use them,
people who design them, and external actors, rather than being fixed or naturally occurring. Barthes
describes Lefebvre’s interactions as a discourse: “The city is a discourse and this discourse is truly a
language: the city speaks to its inhabitants, we speak our city, the city where we are, simply by living it,
by wandering through it, by looking at it” (168). Further specifying that “the city is a writing” he explains,
“he who moves about the city, e.g., the user of the city (what we all are), is a kind of reader who,
following his obligations and his movements, appropriates fragments of the utterance in order to
actualize them in secret” (170). Barthes’s words, written in the same year as Brooks’s interview, echo
the poet’s explanation of how she transforms a “private suffusion,” or to use Barthes’s ter-

De Certeau applies a similar semiotic frame in describing the experience of “walking in the city”
in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Posing Lefebvre’s and Barthes’s notions of the ongoing and open-ended
“production of space” in cities against Foucault’s later analysis of the structures of power he asserts
that: “The long poem of walking manipulates spatial organizations, no matter how panoptic they may
be: it is neither foreign to them (it can take place only within them) nor in conformity with them (it does
not receive its identity from them)” (101). The “panoptic” spatial organizations he means are formal
aspects of urban space such as street grids, sidewalks, zoning regulations, building codes, and the
protocols of signs that structure, or discipline, to use Foucault’s term, urban environments. Focusing on
manipulation and “appropriation,” de Certeau argues that while individuals operate within the
“possibilities . . . and interdictions” of Foucault’s formal structure, they have the capacity to “privilege,
transform or abandon” particular elements of the city through use (98). Setting aside the difficult
question of the degree to which individuals can successfully confront structures of power, what is most
urgent for my purposes in Barthes’s and de Certeau’s accounts of urban experience is their shared sense that reading or making use of the city is a creative process.

My turn to reading is also grounded in reader-response accounts of literary experience. In particular, I draw from Louise Rosenblatt’s “transactional” theory of reading, Wolfgang Iser’s characterization of the act of reading as a process of reconciling horizons of meaning via a “wandering viewpoint,” and a third construct, Angus Fletcher’s “environment-poem.” Like Barthes and de Certeau in their accounts of urban experience, Rosenblatt, Iser, and Fletcher propose that reading proceeds in time and involves a creative response to particular encounters with the many possible meanings of a text. While they differ in their theorizations of the processes and influences that impinge on the reader’s experience, all three agree on two points: 1) readers actualize some versions or meanings of a text and not others and 2) the actualization or reading of a text is an experience in the life of the reader that informs other, non-reading experiences. Rosenblatt proposes that reading involves a dynamic “transaction” between a reader and a text with the reader’s part of the transaction, his response, being conditioned by prior knowledge and experience both in the world and with the kind of text he is reading. Literary works are the results of these transactions, in Rosenblatt’s view, rather than preconditions for them.

The poem, then, must be thought of as an event in time. It is not an object or an ideal entity. It happens during a coming-together, a compenetration, of a reader and a text. The reader brings to the text his past experience and present personality. Under the magnetism of the ordered symbols of the text, he marshals his resources and crystallizes out from the stuff of memory, thought, and feeling a new order, a new experience, which he sees as the poem. This becomes part of the ongoing stream of his life experience, to be reflected on from any angle important to him as a human being. (12)
Readers respond to texts in various ways, including by choosing how to read, for example, taking the text literally or anticipating multiple layers of meaning; combining details from the text and associations they call forth into a logical order and then reconceiving that order as new details and associations emerge; and reacting affectively to the work emerging through the event of reading (69). Taking all these kinds of responses and reactions into the consideration, Rosenblatt suggests that what a reader reads is not the text the author has created but rather the work he “senses the words [of the text] as pointing to” (21). The work or poem is therefore a “new experience” for the reader composed of three components: the text, the understandings and associations he derives from it, and the “new order” of his particular actualization of the work through a particular reading event. Because both the text, which the poet creates by condensing aspects of lived experience, and the understandings and associations particular readers derive from it are grounded, in Rosenblatt’s model, in the non-literary world, the “new order” that emerges through reading is both related to the non-literary world, for example, a kitchenette apartment in the Bronzeville neighborhood of Chicago in 1946, and distinct from it.

Iser shares Rosenblatt’s conception of reading as a “transaction” between a reader and a text and her sense that the world of the work actualized by the reader is both real and imaginary. For Iser, reading is a process through which readers organize the details, references, and associations of a text in relation to particular “themes” selected from the broader “horizon” of themes the text makes available. “The structure of theme and horizon constitutes the vital link between text and reader,” he explains, “because it actively involves the reader in the process of synthesizing an assembly of

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60 In Iser’s scheme, authors make the details, references, and associations of particular texts available to readers in two ways. First, they embed their texts in “repertoires” of “social norms and literary allusions” (86). For example, as I discuss below, Pedro Pietri invokes the social type of the wise minister and the literary trope of the coming-of-age story in “before and after graduation day” in order to set the stage for the poem’s dark humor. Second, they use “strategies” or “techniques employed in the text—whether they be narrative or poetic” in order to organize the reader’s perceptions (87). Pietri’s choice of structuring the private conversation that constitutes “before and after graduation day” as a series of short commands—“you jump first,” “do not wait”—followed by long, increasingly sardonic elaborations sustains the poem’s satire.
constantly shifting viewpoints, which not only modify one another but also influence past and future syntheses” (97). Perhaps because he focuses on narrative, the time-bound nature of reading is more important for Iser than for Rosenblatt. Both agree that the reading of a text is an “event occurring at a particular time in a particular environment at a particular moment in the life history of the reader” and that reading involves developing expectations about a text, encountering details and associations that challenge those expectations, and subsequently formulating new expectations, but Iser focuses more directly on how the latter process plays out on a sentence-by-sentence basis during the reading event. He explains the phenomenology of reading using a spatial metaphor, inverting Barthes’s and de Certeau’s equation of physical movement through the city with the creative processes of reading and writing: “Thus every moment of reading is a dialectic of protension and retention, conveying a future horizon yet to be occupied, along with a past (and continually fading) horizon already filled; the wandering viewpoint carves its passage through both at the same time and leaves them to merge together in its wake” (112). The “wandering viewpoint” is Iser’s figure for the reader reading: as he wanders through the text, encountering new details and references and experiencing the emergences of new associations with those details and references, he relates those details, references, and associations to whatever viewpoint on or synthesis of the work he had previously in mind and to the larger horizon of possible themes or syntheses.

The dynamics of Iser’s and Rosenblatt’s theories of reading are similar: readers bring knowledge and experience to their encounters with texts; authors encode references and allusions to the real and literary worlds in their texts; and readers actualize particular works by combining what they know with what they encounter in texts in new worlds that are both related to the real worlds of poverty and apartment buildings and distinct from them. Iser, following Dewey, explains these parallel worlds reading as being potentially transformative for readers when they are perceived simultaneously:
Aesthetic experience makes us conscious of the acquisition of experience and is accompanied by insight into the conditions that give rise to it. While the structure of everyday experience leads to pragmatic action, that of aesthetic experience serves to reveal the workings of this process. Its totality lies not so much in the new experience brought about by interaction, as in the insight gained into the formation of such a totality. (133)

What Iser takes from Dewey is that reading is both an aesthetic experience involving dynamic interactions between readers and texts and a process of meaning-making. Because they occur in particular moments and through the actualization of particular possibilities, the perceptions and transactions of reading are microcosms of the perceptions and transactions of everyday experience. At the same time, because reading experiences are integrated into the flow of the everyday, reading exposes the contingencies of meaning-making, or as Iser puts it, “the reader experiences the historicity of his own standpoints through the act of reading itself. This experience corresponds to the openness of the world, and so the serial variations [of the reading process] constantly turn definitive, current, and given world-views into mere possibilities of how the world can be experienced” (211).

Fletcher extends Iser’s “wandering viewpoint” metaphor into a fully spatialized theory of poetics and poetic reading. Noting similarities and inheritances in the poetry of John Clare, Walt Whitman, and John Ashbery, he proposes a new mode of writing, the “environment-poem,” as an emerging focus in American poetry. The mode is characterized by an emphasis on observation and deferral rather than on metaphor or narrative closure and a preference for everyday places and situations over the sublime. Through these strategies, Fletcher argues, environment-poems present “neighborhood[s] of images and ideas” that express the “adjacency of people, places, and things” rather than schemes of hierarchical or allegorical relations (156, italics in original). As Charles Simic explains in a review of Fletcher’s book in The New York Review of Books, the environment-poem aims to “break down the distinction between the poet’s interior life and the world outside,” and, because it lacks narrative or dramatic progression,
produces “an immersion in the quotidian” that points directly to the possibilities of political and social change (np). Fletcher gives as an example of a prototypical environment-poem Whitman’s “Sparkles from the Wheel.” He suggests that its repetitions, curious and calm perspective, and density of its falling sparks produce a “sense of entering and remaining inside a continuing moment-filled flow” (248). The key phrase in the poem is the first line of second stanza, “The scene and all its belongings, how they seize and affect me,” but, from the reader’s perspective, the way the scene itself overflows the poem’s speaker is equally important:

The scene and all its belongings, how they seize and affect me,
The sad, sharp-chinn’d old man with worn clothes and broad shoulder-band of leather,
Myself effusing and fluid, a phantom curiously floating, now here absorb’d and arrested,
The group, (an unminded point set in a vast surrounding,)
The attentive, quiet children, the loud, proud, restive bass of the streets,
The low hoarse purr of the whirling stone, the light-press’d blade,
Diffusing, dropping, sideways-darting, in tiny showers of gold,
Sparkles from the wheel.

(Leaves of Grass 389-390)

It is the “sideways-darting” movement of Whitman’s description more than anything else that motivates Fletcher’s claim that environment-poems are not “about the environment,” but rather “share the same character, the same intrusion, the same coextension in our lives as has the environment” (227, italics in original).

Like Iser’s “wandering viewpoint” and the “new order” Rosenblatt claims readers experience when they read and also like Barthes’s and de Certeau’s accounts of the creativity of urban experience, Fletcher’s environment-poem transports individuals from one frame of understanding to another, but in the case of the environment-poem, the frame induced by the experience of the “vast surrounding” of the poem takes precedence.
The environment-poem seeks symbolic control over the drifting experience of being environed, and it introduces the experience of an outside that is developed for the reader inside the experience of the work. While this outside/inside game closely resembles a stream of consciousness technique intended to reveal states of mind, the environment-poem converts natural surroundings and their common surrogates, like the furnishings of a house, for example, into a surrounding that has more presence than any state of mind. (227)

Fletcher’s argument here is that rather than being merely imaginative or existing solely on an aesthetic plane, the reader’s wandering in an environment-poem is, for lack of a term that would connote the consciousness we have of our existence within the world that surround us, real.

The relevance of Fletcher’s theory for this study is that conceiving poems as environments entails reimagining the reader’s work. As I note above, by privileging perception and observation over reasoning and interpretation, environment-poems encourage readers to consider multiple trajectories of meaning and to direct their attention to their own, particular, idiosyncratic reading experiences rather than to the text itself, exactly the kinds of transactional and interactional reading Rosenblatt and Iser describe. As Fletcher explains, “the environment-poem requires us, in both writing and reading, to practice a casual, unauthorized, but always intensely focused noticing” (238). At its best, this practice of noticing enables us to discover “who and what we are, and where and how we inhabit our space” and stimulates an “awareness of varying conditions of life and living through” (13; 136). There is an ethical dimension to the reader’s discovery of an environment-poem’s “neighborhood of images and ideas that is important for discussion of the poetry of “Bronzeville” and “Loisaida.” Fletcher frames it as a concern for the “democratic gathering of energies” in American society and an acknowledgement of the “frailties of our control over nature” and argues that environment-poems promote, through the reading experiences they enable, the development of an ecological perspective on everyday experience that sees humans as participants in the world rather than as lords over it (245; 255). While I share Fletcher’s
fears about the corporatization of the democratic process and his alarm at the accelerating degradation of the global environment, my focus interests here are more local. The poetry I discuss below enacts the principles of Fletcher’s environment-poem in order to involve and immerse readers in particular neighborhood contexts. It is concrete and specific rather than abstract and, as Fletcher insists, it is not merely about those neighborhoods but rather shares in their character, energy, and complexity.

In what follows, I consider two examples of neighborhood poetry, Gwendolyn Brooks’s engagement with Chicago’s Bronzeville neighborhood from the end of World War II through the 1968 riots and Nuyorican poetry centering on New York City’s Lower East Side in the early 1970s, in relation to the theories of reading discussed above and to neighborhood-based approaches to urban planning and design. Researchers and planners account for the structures and effects of neighborhoods in various ways, for example: as spatial arrangements of residents, workers, and others; as administrative units of the city; as social matrices that intersect across urban environments; or as political communities. Rather than treating the poetry as testimony for or against particular frames of understanding, I approach it as a form of “alternative urban knowledge” that produces what urban sociologist Douglas Madden terms “spatial projects” (492). Madden theorizes, as I discuss in more detail below, that neighborhoods are dynamic rather than fixed because they are products of continual processes of development, decline, and renewal driven by various actors, including the individual readings and writings Barthes and de Certeau describe. Linking this conception of neighborhoods with Fletcher’s “environment-poem” construct, I assess strategies Brooks and several Nuyorican poets use in order to stimulate engagement from readers with particular neighborhood circumstances and, through my readings, propose a “poetics of neighborhood” consisting of four textual strategies: 1) identification of locally important people and places; 2) first-hand observation of physical and social characteristics; 3) organization of people and places into comprehensible neighborhood contexts; and 4) deployment of verbal strategies that immerse and enlist readers in ongoing spatial projects. Neighborhood poetry condenses physical,
cultural, and social characteristics of neighborhoods in order to call them into existence for readers and recruit participation. Specifically, I claim that Brooks calls readers to witness the physical and social dynamics of Bronzeville and reconceive its relation to larger Chicago and that Nuyorican poetry, through its roots in performance, enacts political community in order to stake a claim for the territory of Loisaida.

**Neighborhoods in Urban Planning**

Neighborhoods have long served as focal points for interventions in urban infrastructure and community life. Because they are embedded in a city’s broader structures, they provide a local context for urban lives and small-scale opportunities for residents and policy makers to analyze and remediate larger-scale problems. In a basic sense, as William Rohe explains, they are “subareas of towns and cities whose physical or social characteristics distinguish them from one another” that function as component parts of the larger political entities, such as electoral districts and economic development zones, through which policy and planning decisions are enacted (210). According to Rohe, planners have increasingly recognized the importance of planning at the neighborhood level since the urban crises of the 1960s because they have found that residents tend to be “more motivated to participate in planning efforts designed to preserve or improve their neighborhoods, particularly if those planning efforts provide them with a real opportunity to shape the future of their neighborhoods” (227). Planning projects stand a greater chance of success with greater participation from local communities.

Even as neighborhoods serve as local spheres of action and proving grounds for planning initiatives, researchers contest the degree to which their spatial and cultural characteristics affect residents’ lives. Some contend, following in the tradition of social reform that inaugurated American city planning in the early twentieth century, that the physical and social conditions of neighborhoods have lasting effects. For example, Robert Sampson has theorized a “neighborhood effect” that links poor
health and economic outcomes to disadvantageous physical and social environments through a chain of individual and collective perceptions and actions. “We react to neighborhood difference,” Sampson explains, and these reactions “constitute social mechanisms and practices that in turn shape perceptions, relationships, and behaviors that reverberate both within and beyond traditional neighborhood borders” (21). As neighborhoods stagnate or change, residents respond to their characteristics and reputations, benefiting during periods of improvement and suffering during periods of decline. Others argue that the intensity and quality of individual attachments to neighborhoods are more important predictors of health and other outcomes than physical or social characteristics. Lynne Manzo and Douglas Perkins, for instance, draw on research in community planning and environmental psychology to argue that “place attachments, place identity, sense of community, and social capital are all critical parts of person-environment transactions that foster the development of community in all of its physical, social, political, and economic aspects” (347). While they agree with Sampson that “residents sort themselves and identify themselves [into neighborhoods] with broad groupings, especially along racial, ethnic, and class lines” and use their neighborhoods as “markers [of their] station in life” (54), they draw attention to the ways in which differential attachments to the same neighborhood can cause conflict in planning processes. For this reason, they encourage planners to prioritize “consensus building” activities in the early stages of particular initiatives in order to encourage

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62 Ruth Peterson and Lauren Krivo follow a similar line of argument in their analysis of neighborhood crime data in Divergent Social Worlds. Linking the prevalence and types of crime in a neighborhood to its socio-economic conditions, they observe that minorities are overrepresented in high-poverty, high-crime neighborhoods and also have higher crime rates than majority residents who live in neighborhoods with similar characteristics. Peterson and Krivo argue that while the data seem to show racial “crime gaps,” the differences between neighborhoods are in fact attributable to pervasive urban residential segregation rather than the racial differences of residents. The fact that black and Latino neighborhoods have higher crime rates, in other words, is an outgrowth of the “racialized order in which groups of all colors reside” rather than an effect of social disorganization or other characteristics of residents (11).
residents to accept the validity of diverse viewpoints (341). Manzo and Perkins’s analysis suggests that processes of community formation produce effects as consequential as other neighborhood dynamics.

Since residents draw on their neighborhoods as markers of identity, they defend them rhetorically and physically against external incursion and influence. St. Clair Drake and Horace Clayton describe the roles white Chicagoans played in limiting black migration out of the neighborhoods of Bronzeville during Gwendolyn Brooks’s young adulthood: “The persistence of a Black Belt, whose inhabitants can neither scatter as individuals nor expand as a group, is no accident. It is primarily the result of white people’s attitudes toward having Negroes as neighbors. Because some white Chicagoans do not wish colored neighbors, formal and informal social controls are used to isolate the latter within congested all-Negro neighborhoods” (174). Clement Vose expands their account, documenting the nationwide use of restrictive covenants and other policy and planning tools throughout the first half of the twentieth century to reinforce neighborhood segregation through the exclusion of minority residents. Real estate developers seek to take advantage of the dynamics of place attachment by promoting neighborhoods through invented names and acronyms, for example, Boerum Hill, SoHo, and MiMa (a new moniker for Midtown Manhattan invented to promote luxury apartment buildings along an extension of the number 7 subway line) in New York City.62 Christopher Mele explains how “images, symbols, and rhetorical forms” broadcast by developers and their allies, taken up by the media, and further circulated in formal and informal social networks “set broad parameters for the public’s awareness and understanding” of particular neighborhoods (17). Focusing on New York’s Lower East Side, Mele attributes shifts in urban policy from a focus on social justice for the neighborhood’s working class and immigrant residents to the prioritization of economic development changes to changes in

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62 Sharon Zukin identifies the effects spatial interventions have on residents’ senses of belonging in their neighborhoods in The Culture of Cities and Naked City. For a fictionalized account of the invention of Boerum Hill by property owners seeking a return on investments in renovation and neighborhood improvement activities, see chapters 1 and 4 of Jonathan Lethem’s coming-of-age novel, The Fortress of Solitude.
“symbolic representations” of the neighborhood’s reputation. By the 1970s and the rise of the Nuyorican movement, he argues, narratives of the Lower East Side’s physical and social decline were being used to justify “urban disinvestment and municipal neglect” (181). The emphasis placed more recently by proponents of the New Urbanism on walkability and visual order in neighborhood development represents a further extension of this reputational logic. Since, as the website of the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU) asserts, walkability generates a “premium in the marketplace” by playing on middle and upper-class perceptions of neighborhood status while also promoting “greener lifestyle[s],” it has been championed as a key driver of economic and environmental sustainability. The CNU’s emphasis on physical determinism and the preeminence of market forces are markers of the emerging neoliberal city that provides the backdrop for the discussion of poetry and progressive planning in the next chapter.

Rohe identifies the period of urban renewal initiated under the authority of the Federal Housing Act of 1949 as a turning point in the planning field’s conception of how neighborhoods work (214). Conceived in response to shifts in populations across regions from city centers to suburban peripheries and resulting economic crises, urban renewal imposed neighborhood-level changes in service of city-wide goals. As Rohe explains, the racialized outcomes of urban renewal projects created controversy among planners and the broader population throughout the 1950s and 1960s. While some projects benefited neighborhoods and whole cities, for example, by “diversifying their citizenry and bolstering their tax revenues,” a substantial number did more harm than good (214). In Rohe’s account, the key lessons of urban renewal are threefold: 1) “physical solutions to urban problems are limited and incomplete;” 2) “local social relations and networks matter greatly to people and should be given great

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63 In particular, conflicts over the processes and effects of urban renewal sparked the emergence of progressive approaches to urban planning beginning in the late 1950s. Varieties of progressive planning and their relation to neighborhood poetics are the focus of Chapter 5 and thus will not be addressed in detail here.
weight in revitalization planning;” and 3) “planners do not have all the answers, but should listen to and work with local residents in neighborhood rehabilitation projects” (216).

Perhaps the most trenchant critiques of urban renewal projects were articulated by activist scholars Jane Jacobs and Herbert Gans in their landmark books, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) and *The Urban Villagers* (1962). Focusing on neighborhood life in New York City’s Greenwich Village, Jacobs argues that urban renewal produces negative outcomes in neighborhoods when it interrupts the “intricate and close-grained diversity of uses that give each other constant mutual support, both economically and socially” by imposing physical obstacles such as super-block housing projects and high-speed highways (19). Her critique emphasizes the importance of relationships and contacts among residents for sustaining and strengthening neighborhood life. Gans chronicles the destructive effects of renewal in an Italian neighborhood in Boston’s West End. He argues that using physical characteristics to identify neighborhoods in need of renewal obscures social characteristics such as community ties and psychological attachment to place that contribute to their success (*Urban Villagers* 317-321). Chief among the failures of the redevelopment project was that plans to relocate residents displaced by the physical reconstruction of the neighborhood were ineffective because they were “negligent of residents’ needs” for social cohesion (*Urban Villagers* 324). Gans’s research in Boston suggests, as he writes elsewhere, that rather than determining behavior, a neighborhood’s physical environment is “relevant to behavior [only] insofar as this environment affects the social system and culture of the people involved or as it is taken up into their social system.” In other words, the relationship between individuals and their environments is mediated by a “social system and a set of cultural norms which define and evaluate portions of the physical environment relevant to the lives of people involved and structure the way people will use (and react to) this environment in their daily lives” (*People and Plans* 5). As these critiques suggest, residents experience multiple aspects of neighborhoods simultaneously. Just as the types and conditions of apartment buildings, not to mention
the prevalence of racist mortgage lending practices, constrain or enable residential choices, the presence or absence of people with shared racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds affect possibilities for friendship and affiliation. Similarly, just as memories of what a neighborhood has been and fears about what it is becoming inflect individual perceptions of safety and belonging, a neighborhood’s relative position in the collective urban imaginary identifies it as a place to visit, avoid, invest in, or renew.

Applying insights from the field of critical geography, David Madden argues that rather than defining neighborhoods as fixed containers of social life, planners and researchers should approach them as “spatial projects” produced through competition for use of city spaces and their meanings among various social, economic, and political actors; lie within “contingent and often overlapping boundaries;” and have “varying impacts on different groups” (481). Madden’s definition, which draws in part from the work of critical theorists Henri Lefebvre and Manuel Castells, directs attention to questions about “who produces [neighborhoods], using what techniques, in what contexts, and toward what ends.” He suggests that the “neighborhood effects” Sampson analyzes might be more accurately explained as consequences of city-wide processes, for example, of attempts to promote residential or commercial development in one neighborhood while restricting it in others, rather than being attributable to a particular neighborhood’s physical and social environment (481). Defining neighborhoods as dynamic and conflictual rather than fixed and naturally-occurring makes visible different kinds of neighborhood effects, in Madden’s view: “Some neighborhood formations, one could imagine, might have the effect of strengthening urban citizenship or bolstering particular kinds of political movements, while others might have the effect of dispossession” (491). The effects produced in and through particular neighborhood “spatial projects” depend on the actors involved and the types of knowledge they deploy. Recognizing the tendency for politically and economically powerful actors to impose policy recommendations that serve their particular interests under guises of “neutral[ity]” and
“disinterest,” Madden urges planners to “imagine alternative urban knowledges that might contribute to projects for more democratic, egalitarian neighborhoods instead” (492).

**Citizens in the Wild Weed: The Social-Spatial Dynamics of Brooks’s “Bronzeville”**  
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Formed during the Great Migration, the Bronzeville neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago was home to more than 300,000 blacks by 1950 and nearly one million two decades later (Drake and Clayton 826). As a result of restrictive covenants and other racist housing practices, it remained one of the most densely populated and highly segregated neighborhoods in the United States throughout Gwendolyn Brooks’s life and career. As migration from the South intensified in the period after World War II, the neighborhood “became the beach upon which broke the human flotsam which was tossed into the city streets by successive waves of migration from the South [where] it mixed with the jetsam thrown off by lower-class families as they expanded within their restricted living quarters or disintegrated under the impact of economic crises or the explosions of family discord” (Drake and Clayton 577). Beginning with 1945’s *A Street in Bronzeville* and continuing through mid-career works *In the Mecca* (1968) and *Riot* (1969), Brooks used the neighborhood as the primary social environment of her poetry. As she explains in an interview republished in the collage-form autobiography, *Report from Part One*, the neighborhood “contributed to [her] writing progress” because “if you wanted a poem, you had only to look out of a window. There was material always, walking or running, fighting or screaming or singing” (133; 65).

Brooks’s characterizations of Bronzeville change considerably from the 1940s to the 1960s. What appears to be a disorganized neighborhood of isolated individuals in *A Street in Bronzeville* and *Annie Allen* develops into a poised, politically dynamic community united in struggle by the later collections *In the Mecca* and *Riot*. In part, the evolution of her neighborhood poetics is a function of a corresponding shift in her politics toward Black Nationalism. As many critics have noted, Brooks’s

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64 I presented an earlier version of this section at the Northeast Modern Language Association conference in May 2015.
encounter with Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka and the nascent Black Arts Movement (BAM) in the mid-1960s led her to reconsider the relationship between her poetry and other social commitments. At the same time that changing depictions of Bronzeville bear the influence of political engagement, however, they also represent a development in her poetics toward an ecological critique of neighborhood life. As Evie Shockley explains, because of Brooks’s immersion in the particular circumstances of the neighborhood, her exploration of BAM’s nationalist vision remains “socially grounded” in the ways individual experiences combine and intersect across the city and the larger Black community (53). Brooks immerses readers in the complexity of Bronzeville by describing characters from a range of backgrounds pursuing varying interests and commitments in and through the same social and physical environment. Like the “Black Metropolis” Drake and Clayton analyze in their landmark study, the Bronzeville she animates for readers is a multi-layered community fully integrated into the political landscape of the city of Chicago.

Like Wanda Coleman, whose lyric poetry and short stories chronicle individual and collective responses to the injustices of Los Angeles’s Watts, Brooks prioritizes women’s experiences in her writing, placing them at the center of the work of community and neighborhood development. In Annie Allen, her second book of poetry and one for which she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1950, Brooks acknowledges the challenges Bronzeville’s physical and social characteristics present to women and families and portrays their creative responses in compelling clarity. As I noted above, Sampson argues that concentrated disadvantage in the form of concrete characteristics such as “poverty, racial isolation, single-parent families, and . . . housing instability,” as well as “persistent and psychologically prominent

65 Aldon Lynn Nielsen describes an encounter between the two poets at a 1964 conference on “The Negro Writer in the United States” in the introduction to the edited collection Reading Race in American Poetry: An Area of Act. According to Nielsen, after reading together at the conference, Brooks and Jones/Baraka challenged audience members’ attempts to pit their aesthetics against each other (5-7). Brooks points to a later encounter with Baraka at Fisk University in 1967 in Report from Part One as a turning point in her conceptualization of herself as a Black poet (83-86).
correlations” in the public imagination of poor, minority neighborhoods with crime and disorder, generates lasting effects in health and economic outcomes (46; 365). Sampson’s research identifies two parallel processes, one in which a neighborhood’s characteristics and reputation affect resident’s lives at the scale of individual lifetimes and across generations, and a second process by which a neighborhood’s reputation, whether or not it is aligned with present conditions, contributes to the social reproduction of disadvantage.

Brooks provides a first-person account of these neighborhood dynamics in a sonnet sequence at the beginning of *Annie Allen*’s third and final section. Titled “the children of the poor,” the sequence outlines the unique vulnerabilities of Bronzelle’s children and describes their parents’ concomitant responsibilities. A mother advises her children over the course of five sonnets to construct their lives independently, guided by an internal sense of dignity, rather than relying on the temporary escapes promised by the church and other organizations. While the sequence presents an ultimately pessimistic view of the family’s probable life outcomes, it introduces a theory of neighborhood improvement driven by individual actions that recurs in Brooks’s later work. The first poem in the sequence confronts readers with the linked injustices of childhood and motherhood in Bronzelle. It separates the population into two categories, “People who have no children,” who, she explains, “Need not pause in the fire, and in no sense / Hesitate in the hurricane to guard,” and “we others” who do, and therefore experience the neighborhood’s storms as a “throttling dark” (115). Brooks challenges readers to locate themselves in one or the other group. Alliterations reinforce the incommensurability of the two positions, with the poem’s speaker, a mother, offering her children’s “little lifting helplessness,” “queer / Whimper-whine[s],” and “unridiculous / Lost softness” as indicators of their experiences in Bronzelle. In the second and third poems of the sequence, Brooks poses questions about how individual mothers and the

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66 Unless otherwise noted, quotations of Brooks’s poetry come from Third World Press’s 1987 collected edition *Blacks.*
community as a whole might act to ameliorate the compounding effects of concentrated disadvantage. Despite understanding that the neighborhood’s children are “quasi, contraband, / Because unfinished, graven by a hand / Less than angelic, admirable or sure,” in other words, despite the fact that they have been consigned to secondary status by extra-local forces, she insists on calm, patient readiness, “singularly calm / At forehead and at fingers rather wise” (116-117). The speaker’s description of the situation, layering together social critique and affective response in dense language, opens a position for the reader as witness and advocate.

The “crooked little questionings” of the second and third poems culminate in a virtuoso call to action in the fourth (119):

First fight. Then fiddle. Ply the slipping string
With feathery sorcery; muzzle the note
With hurting love; the music that they wrote
Bewitch, bewilder. Qualify to sing
Threadwise. Devise no salt, no hempen thing
For the instrument to bear. Devote
The bow to silks and honey. Be remote
A while from malice and from murdering.
But first to arms, to armor. Carry hate
In front of you and harmony behind.
Be deaf to music and to beauty blind.
Win war. Rise bloody, maybe not too late
For having first to civilize a space
Wherein to play your violin with grace.

Seemingly an instruction to a daughter or son to persist and take pleasure in the activity of practicing the violin, the poem sets a family’s apartment in relation to the public space of the neighborhood. Brooks pairs “fiddle” and “fight,” “harmony” and “hate,” as if to diagram the dimensions of an growing conflict in Bronzeville between the “graven” forces acknowledged in the preceding poems and the children who are the fourth poem’s main subject and addressees, and modulates between moments of innocence in the opening octave, “feathery sorcery” and dreams of “silks and honey,” and moments of “deaf,” “blind,” and “bloody” horror in the concluding sestet. The poem’s imperative mood, amplified by
no fewer than sixteen separate commands, extends to the reader, inviting her to take sides as an ally in the children’s attempts to “civilize a space.” Including demands for action, “fight,” “ply,” muzzle,” and calls for participation and presence, “devote,” “be,” “rise,” the commands signal the public nature of Brooks’s call to action despite the seeming privacy of the circumstances she describes.

George Kent explains this effect of Brooks’s use of language in his introduction to Report From Part One: “The technique is uncanny, perhaps helped forward by Miss Brooks’s inevitable leaning upon her lyrical strain, which, when it approaches the public act, invests it with the tensions of the private woman as an extension of her community. . . Thus the radical uncertainties at the base of black lives require no recourse to a term such as existentialism—but to existence-ism, to isness and to a dogged energy” (33-34, italics in original). Rather than merely exposing or critiquing injustice, Kent explains, Brooks invests her writing with the force of a “public act.” The frequent doubling of sounds in “the children of the poor” sequence, for example, and the use of abrupt, enjambed, imperative sentences in the fourth sonnet in particular, represent “subversive” attempts to convey, as John Grey claims, the “deep ambiguities facing those who live in black ghettos” in a “non-reductive” way (54). By presenting the neighborhood as it exists for mothers, Brooks engages readers’ sympathies and, more importantly, their sense of justice, in making meaning from the everyday life of Bronzeville. Challenging readers to situate themselves as mothers or not at the outset of the sequence, she simultaneously enlists their participation in emerging, community-based efforts to make improvements.

Annie Allen concludes with an explicit plea for solidarity. Separating herself at the beginning of the book’s final poem from “Men of careful turns, haters of forks in the road, / The strain at the eye, that puzzlement, that awe,” the character Annie insists that she possesses an uniquely productive form of urban knowledge (139). She listens patiently to an “elite” speaker argue that since racial prejudice is “native” and “ineradicable” she should simply accept its effects in her life rather than taking action. Then, having “learned how to gather the tender and imaginative energy . . . in ways that ease her
confrontation with the constraints upon her life without blinding her to them” (Shockley 52), she implores her community to join in confronting private and public injustice: “Rise. / Let us combine. There are no magics or elves / Or timely godmothers to guide us. We are lost, must / Wizard a track through our own screaming weed” (140). As Shockley explains, this final exhortation is both the culmination of Annie’s maturation from girlhood to womanhood and the beginning of a larger “quest” in Brooks’s poetry of simultaneously constructing an “empowering [black, female, working-class] subjectivity” and a “social environment in which that subjectivity can be realized” (44). To the degree that Annie Allen involves both the establishment of an identity and environment, it is a clear example of what I am calling the poetics of neighborhood. As I outline above in my reading of “the children of the poor,” Brooks identifies locally important people and places, provides first-hand descriptions of the Bronzeville’s physical and social characteristics, organizes mothers and children into a comprehensible neighborhood context, and uses alliteration, repetition, and other verbal strategies to immerse and enlist readers as participants in an emergent spatial project. Though the quest Brooks introduces at the end of “the children of the poor” and Annie Allen, as a whole, is private and personal in some respects, it expands over time to include a large portion of the community “wizard[ing]” its way through the “screaming weed” of Bronzeville.

Published in 1960 after the novel Maud Martha, Brooks’s next book of poetry, The Bean Eaters, introduces a range of Bronzeville characters whose lives and livelihoods take them across Chicago and as far south as Mississippi. Demonstrating that experiences in Bronzeville are, as Drake and Clayton explain, “but a part of a larger, national Negro culture, its people being tied to thirteen million other Negros by innumerable bonds of kinship, associational and church membership, and a common minority status,” the collection both documents continuing racial violence in Chicago and also engages national events, such as the murder of Emmett Till and school desegregation in Little Rock (396). Amid portraits of residents like Rudolph Reed, whose family is attacked when they move to a white neighborhood, and
the unnamed housekeeper who, in “Bronzeville Woman in a Red Hat,” takes and loses a job with a racist white family, Brooks describes individuals on the verge of taking up the call to action she offers in Annie Allen. In “The Explorer,” for example, we see a lonely older man wandering the halls of his apartment building looking for a “still spot in the noise.” Hearing only “spiraling, high human voices” and the “scream of nervous affairs” as he walks, he discovers there are “no bourns / . . . no quiet rooms.” Brooks subverts the reader’s pity for the man by suggesting, as the title of the poem implies, that there is more on his mind than solitude. Just at the moment when we learn he will not find his “still spot,” Brooks explains that rather than a lack of peace, what he fears “most of all” are the “choice, that cried to be taken” (327). Linked with the screaming voices that disturb the building’s quiet, the choices the man contemplates, like the instructions the mother of “the children of the poor” gives to her children, are simultaneously matters of private and public concern. Brooks dilates one such choice in “The Contemplation of Suicide: The Temptation of Timothy”:

One poises, poses, at track, or range, or river,
Saying, What is the fact of my life, to what do I tend?—
And is it assured and sweet that I have come, after mazes
and robins, after the foodless swallowings and snatchings
at fog, to this foppish end?
(Knowing that downtown the sluggish shrug their shoulders,
slink, talk.)

Then, though one can think of no fact, no path, no ground,
Some little thing, remarkless, and daily, relates
Its common cliché. One lunges or lags on, prates.—
Too selfish to be nothing while beams break, surf’s epileptic,
chicken reeks or squalls.

(371)

The alliterations, repetitions, and syntactical delays, resemble the verbal strategies deployed in Annie Allen to transform readers into participants in neighborhood scenes: “poises, poses, at track, or range, or river;” “the sluggish shrug their shoulders, sling, talk;” and “One lunges or lags on.” Here, rather than recruiting public engagement, Brooks’s use of dense sounds signals private complexity. Like the
“explorer” who seeks a quiet place to contemplate the desperate choices faced by his neighbors, Timothy struggles to understand his position in relation to other residents in Bronzeville and the city as a whole. While he experiences himself as isolated, he also recognizes that “some little thing, remarkless, and daily” connects him with the larger community. That he is “too selfish,” in the end to follow through with suicide is both a mild joke at his expense and an affirmation of social bonds. The “reek” of chicken that draws him back recalls the “onion fumes” that permeate Brooks’s description of life in a “kitchenette building” in the poem of the same name from A Street in Bronzeville (20).

The portraits and scenes of Brooks’s first three collections constitute an archive of alternative urban knowledge about Bronzeville. Supplementary to the empirical data analyzed by Sampson, the knowledge made available through Brooks’s neighborhood poetry reaches across scales of experience. It is “locality knowledge,” as Jacobs defines it, “concerned with relatively small and specific acts done here and there” that, in aggregate, bears significance at the individual, family, building, neighborhood, city, and national levels. Following Madden’s model, the imaginative vision developed in A Street in Bronzeville, Annie Allen, and The Bean Eaters establishes a foundation for the pursuit of a broader “spatial project” signaled by Drake and Clayton in 1945 and pursued in greater detail in Brooks’s late 1960s collections In The Mecca and Riot. As Drake and Clayton observe, “The pattern of residential segregation inevitably gives rise to an intense community consciousness among Negroes. They begin to think in terms of gaining control of their own areas, and the struggle for this control is the dominant motif of economic and political action within Black Metropolis” (198).

Antecedent to the types of political and economic action Drake and Clayton describe, Brooks’s neighborhood poetics calls preconceptions about Bronzeville, including those held by residents and nonresidents alike, into question by introducing readily identifiable characters, including single mothers, frustrated young men, and everyday men and women crossing the neighborhood and city in the course
of their everyday lives. Even Annie, the heroine of Brooks’s mock-epic “The Anniad” is, as Shockley explains, an “unremarkable young woman,” if one transposed onto a remarkable literary stage (31).

Perhaps the most significant contribution of Sampson’s decades-long study of “neighborhood effects” in Chicago is his argument that “collective (or intersubjectively shared) perceptions [of a neighborhood] form a context that constrains individual perceptions and social behavior” beyond what its current social and physical conditions might warrant (130-131). Sampson’s analysis shows that residual poverty and rates of outmigration, generally accepted measures for neighborhood health and stability, were more strongly correlated with prior perceptions of disorder than with structural variables such as crime rates, poverty rates, and actually observed disorder (143-146). His findings corroborate Gans’s insight, developed through observational research in Boston’s West End in the 1950s, that residents interpret the social and physical conditions of their neighborhoods through shared norms and understandings:

The physical environment is relevant to behavior insofar as this environment affects the social system and culture of the people involved or as it is taken up into their social system. Between the physical environment and empirically observable human behavior, there exist a social system and a set of cultural norms which define and evaluate portions of the physical environment relevant to the lives of people involved and structure the way people will use (and react to) this environment in their daily lives. (People and Plans 5)

Gans’s and Sampson’s conclusions suggest that interventions in perceptions and processes of meaning-making, both at the neighborhood and city levels, have the potential to shape individual and collective

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68 Sampson also explains that perceptions of disorder themselves are as strongly influenced by a neighborhood’s racial composition and changes in its racial composition over time as by actually observed disorder (131-132). The significance of this finding is that predominantly black neighborhoods, such as Bronzeville, and neighborhoods in which the black population is increasing as a percentage of the whole are more likely to be perceived as dangerous or violent than other neighborhoods with similar economic and physical characteristics.
behaviors. The “public clamor” of Brooks’s Bronzeville poetry serves this end, initiating an alternative discourse about the neighborhood by organizing everyday knowledge about its conditions and communities using verbal strategies that address and engage readers as more than mere observers.

Brooks condenses the various aspects of spatial project she initiates in her first three collections in the long poem “In the Mecca,” published in the 1968 collection of the same name. The poem narrates a Mrs. Sallie’s search for her child, Pepita, lost in the halls of the Mecca Apartments, a Bronzeville landmark built by famed architect Daniel Burnham in 1891 and demolished as part of a neighborhood renewal project in 1952. Describing various residents of the building and the relationships they have with one another, it presents a “large variety of personalities against a mosaic of daily affairs, recognizing that the grimmest of these is likely to have a streak or two streaks of sun,” in Brooks’s words, and in so doing, “capsulize[s] the gist of black humanity in general” (Report from Part One 189-190). While full discussion of the poem is beyond the scope of this study, it is important to note the ways in which the verbal strategies Brooks’s deploys at key moments relate to the claims I am developing about her neighborhood poetics.

Kirsten Bartholomew Ortega analyzes “In the Mecca” as an instance of black feminist flânerie that applies and adapts a traditional mode in order to produce insight about a misunderstood urban milieu. Observing that the poem is characterized by “burgeoning rhyme schemes [that] are restrained or cut off” and a “syllabic rhythm [Brooks] periodically undermines with disruption,” Ortega argues that it reflects and represents the “multivalent nature of urban life” in a way that confronts both “hegemonic (147; 153). Brooks’s verbal strategies, in other words, immerse readers in everyday life in the Mecca Apartments by disrupting preconceptions about the building’s social and physical conditions. As an example of this process, Ortega points to Alfred, a neighbor who is an aspiring architect and devoted reader of Leopold Senghor and who Mrs. Sallie describes as possessing a “decent enough no-goodness
When Pepita is found murdered under another neighbor’s bed, Mrs. Sallie overhears Alfred reflecting on the tragedy’s meaning:

I hate it.
Yet, murmurs Alfred—
who is lean at the balcony, leaning—
something, something in Mecca
continues to call! Substanceless; yet like mountains,
like rivers and oceans too; and like trees
with wind whistling through them. And steadily
an essential sanity, black and electric,
builds to a reportage and redemption.
A hot estrangement.
A material collapse
that is Construction.

As Ortega explains, Alfred’s words underscore the degree to which the poem as a whole overlays the 1952 demolition of the Mecca building with a present-day (1968) conception of the Bronzeville community: “But within the context of Brooks’s mythopoiesis, the raising of a metaphoric Mecca could motivate the construction of a new city, one where the people of the Mecca have an urban history” (152). Alfred’s invocations of the natural world and the accelerating cadence of his speech suggest he has a public audience in mind, almost as if he were preaching to an assembly of residents in the building’s courtyard. Brooks’s cuts off the sermon at its climax, Alfred’s identification of a “black and electric” future to come, with three short lines that set his redemptive vision in apposition to “estrangement,” “collapse,” and “Construction.” Shelia Hassell Hughes observes that the “oddities of Brooks’s diction” at moments like this, the building up of a rhythm that is then disrupted, “reflect the frictions of urban living” and represent a “prophetic call for reader-response and responsibility” (268; 258). Despite the tragedy at the center of “In the Mecca,” in its “vexed metaphor[s]” and tactical adaptation of the flânerie mode, as Hughes and Ortega argue, the poem “begins to issue a call for liberation, represented as a communal construction” (Ortega 152; Hughes 273). The verbal strategies of
Brooks’s neighborhood poetics ensure that the community invoked involves both Alfred, Mrs. Sallie, and their neighbors, as well as readers within and beyond Bronzeville.

Published alongside “In the Mecca,” the first “Sermon on the Warpland” is a brief, obscure oration that proclaims the coming of a new social order. Following an epigraph from Black Power activist Ron Karenga, Brooks establishes the scene for the sermon in a three-line introduction: “And several strengths from drowsiness campaigned / but spoke in Single Sermon on the warpland. // And went about the warpland saying No” (Blacks 451). The “alternate geography” of the “warpland” invites several readings. As Lesley Wheeler observes, the word may refer to “the ‘warped land’ or even the ‘Waste Land’ of a racist and riot-torn America;” or to the “‘war planned’ by black nationalists against white America,” or even to a “‘warplane,’ a carrier for this militant message” (231). Following up R. Baxter Miller’s suggestion of a parallel with the “Sermon on the Mount” from the Book of Matthew, Wheeler argues that Brooks uses a conventional form of address in the sermon, the lyric apostrophe, to transform it into “a public forum” that might “sustain the marks of and even participate in political struggle” (227). Indeed, the speaker of the sermon, whose words are marked off by quotation marks, gathers her audience three times in twenty-one lines: “My people, black and black,” “Prepare to meet / (sisters, brothers),” and “Build now your church, my brothers, sisters” (451). These calls to assembly and Brooks’s use of second and third person plural pronouns elsewhere in the poem embed the reader in the scene. We listen with the congregation to the speaker’s condemnation of the status quo and her insistence on a better world to come. If the first sermon is a proclamation of a “luminously indiscreet; / complete, continuous” black future that will follow the current “brash and terrible weather” of racist violence and civil unrest, the “Second Sermon” is an exhortation to the community to persevere. It is also an “environment-poem,” in Fletcher’s sense, that immerses readers in an alternate world in order to provoke critical involvement.
Brooks’s “Second Sermon on the Warpland” functions in a similar way. Published in sequence with the first sermon in *In The Mecca*, the poem places us in Bronzeville through evocative, though brief, descriptions of the neighborhood and community. Brooks interrupts our desire to impose meaning on the scenes she describes by withholding narrative. Like Whitman’s “Sparkles from the Wheel,” the sermon surrounds us with possibilities of perception. The fourth and final section of the poem repeats key phrases from the preceding three and refers to neighborhood types familiar from other poems in the collection. Unlike in the first sermon, the message is not presented in quotation marks nor is it prefaced by an invocation of the scene. Presumably, we have already gathered to listen.

The time
   cracks into furious flower. Lifts its face
   all unashamed. And sways in wicked grace.
   Whose half-black hands assemble oranges
   is tom-tom hearted
   (goes in bearing oranges and boom).
   And there are bells for orphans—
   and red and shriek and sheen.
   A garbageman is dignified
   as any diplomat.
   Big Bessie’s feet hurt like nobody’s business,
   but she stands—bigly—under the unruly scrutiny, stands in the wild weed.

In the wild weed
she is a citizen,
and is a moment of highest quality; admirable.

It is lonesome, yes. For we are the last of the loud.
Nevertheless, live.

Conduct your blooming in the noise and whip of the whirlwind.
   (456)

Brooks’s speaker presents Bessie, the garbageman, and the assembly-line worker, citizens of Bronzeville, in the midst of their everyday lives and converts their practices of endurance into a call to action. Rather than protest or other direct action, however, she counsels observation and self-awareness, precursors to the kind of organizing that might bring the community onto common ground. She invites us to
experience, with Bessie, what it feels like to stand, with aching feet, “under the unruly scrutiny,” and encourages us to lift our faces “unashamed,” in dignity, in admiration of the future “crack[ing] into furious flower.”

Contrasting Brooks’s late 1960s poetry to overtly political Black Nationalist poetry of the same period, Raymond Malewitz concludes that a defining characteristic of Brooks’s approach is that she “positions herself . . . as an interpretive medium through which the internal divisions within the black community can be reconciled or at least negotiated” (542). In other words, like Whitman in his elegy for President Lincoln, Brooks invites readers to participate in the experience of her poems as a community and then, together, to devise strategies and practices that will bring the future she prophecies into bloom. “This is the ultimate transference that Brooks asks her readers to imagine,” as Malewitz explains, “to look upon her poetry as a signifier of the yet-to-be, and as a path from which to reach the halcyon future of a ‘medicated’ whirlwind or the ‘wild weed’—and not as a statement unto itself” (537). Brooks’s sermons are rallying cries that situate readers in the here and now of social injustice, showing us “who and what we are, and where and how we inhabit our space.” Environment-poems in this sense, they are acts that promote solidarity and incubate action at the neighborhood scale. 69

Brooks’s third “Sermon,” composed in the aftermath of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Chicago riots, continues in this vein, assembling “obscure local references” and “disparate images” while at the same time withholding narrative synthesis. As Annette Debo observes, the poem “mirrors the chaotic form of a riot” and produces, for readers, an experience of confusion “akin to the country’s confusion in 1968 as it watched its urban centers explode” (150). Incorporating the voices of a “black philosopher” and a “white philosopher,” as well as several members of a community writing

69 As Fletcher explains, “justice is not a forbidden subject for this poetry [the environment-poem]; however, the poetry must first discover the living moment in which questions of social justice are embedded for action human beings” (80, italics in original).
workshop, the poem is more than a commentary on the riot or an occasional description. I will read a short excerpt from the middle.

A clean riot is not one in which little rioters long-stomped, long-straddled, BEANLESS but knowing no Why go steal in hell a radio, sit to hear James Brown and Mingus, Young-Holt, Coleman, John, on V.O.N. and sun themselves in Sin.

However, what is going on is going on.

(474)

Other readers point to Brooks’s description of rioters stealing radios to listen to jazz and James Brown as an empathic confrontation with the militancy of Black Nationalism. Though crucial to the ongoing reevaluation of black feminist participation in the civil rights movement, their arguments are beyond the scope of this study. What interests me are the last three lines of the passage, and in particular, the way the line breaks deform and reconstitute the reading experience.

Poet and critic James Scully defines line breaks as “areas of engagement, of interaction between work and reader” that involve readers as “joint producer[s]” of poems. Rather than being merely stylistic or aesthetic features, Scully contends, line breaks “ramify” across both the “structural economy of a poem” and the “layers of context” in which it is embedded by putting the reader’s experience of the poem and of everyday life in relation (129-130). Scully sees poetry in the same way as Fletcher, as a means for writers and readers to engage with the world as they experience it rather than as a separate sphere of comment and analysis. Relating Scully’s account of the social function of line breaks to Fletcher’s broader theory of the environment-poem, it can be argued that line breaks introduce the “experience of an outside that is developed for the reader inside the experience of the work.” They convert “natural surroundings,” the “layers” of historical and social context out of which Scully argues a
poem condenses, “into a surround that actually has more presence than any state of mind.” (Fletcher 227)

Making more frequent use of line breaks as the poem moves toward its conclusion, Brooks gathers readers in “The Third Sermon on the Warland” from across political affiliations and understandings of the riot in a single word: “However.” As was the case with the lyric apostrophes of the first and second sermons, the “However” draws together the context of the riot from across recent and distant history and creates a pause we readers share. Having brought us into the “outside” of the sermon that she has constructed for us “inside” her poem, Brooks poses a question, “what / is going on,” that further resolves into a statement of fact, “what / is going on / is going on.” The “what” she refers to is a complex matrix of racism, poverty, murder, playfulness, and political experiment. Whether we side with the young men listening to Mingus, fear for the “motherwoman” who is murdered in a subsequent section, or harbor doubts, like a speaker on the poem’s last page who asks, “But WHY do These People offend themselves,” about the efficacy of political action, we are present with Brooks on the street, immersed in the poem’s environment. Her diction implores us to articulate, for ourselves and for the community, exactly “what / is going on” in order to disrupt the “lies” and “legends” she assures us at the poem’s conclusion will be made from what is going on once the dust settles (476-478).

_Nuyorican Poetry and the Verbal Possibilities of “Loisaida”_70

The final section of this chapter shifts scenes from the Bronzeville neighborhood of Chicago in the 1960s to the Lower East Side of New York City in the 1970s. Specifically, I turn to the 1975 anthology _Nuyorican Poetry_ as an example of a collaborative work that utilizes a multimodal poetics of neighborhood in order to enact a specific spatial project: claiming the territory of a neighborhood by establishing the presence

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70 I presented earlier versions of this section at the New York Metro American Studies annual conference in November 2014 and at the Literature and Social Justice conference organized by English department at Lehigh University in March 2015.
of a diverse local community. Combining poetry, prose, and photographs, the anthology proposes an imaginative vision of “Loisaida,” a Puerto Rican neighborhood-in-progress constructed by members of the community to confront the social and spatial realities of urban disinvestment and the rhetoric of urban crisis during the 1970s. The texts and paratexts of Nuyorican Poetry disclose a multiplicity of viewpoints, some in conflict with others, rather than a unitary perspective, that co-editors Miguel Algarín and Miguel Piñero task readers with unfolding. Suffused, like Brooks’s Bronzeville poetry, with locally important people and places and detailed descriptions of everyday life, the anthology organizes a neighborhood context and environment that is neither opaque to those unfamiliar with its features nor reducible to a single narrative. In addition to verbal strategies deployed by individual poets to elicit reactions and responses, the anthology as a whole immerses and enlists readers as “joint producers” of meaning, in Scully’s sense, through the similarities and contrasts of its component materials. Performing the poetics of neighborhood at community scale, Nuyorican Poetry demonstrates the extent to which poetic language, especially in combination with other discourses, functions as a robust form of social action. Before turning to a reading of the anthology, I provide a brief outline of the neighborhood’s history drawn from Christopher Mele’s exhaustive critical study, Selling the Lower East Side, and Liz Ševčenko’s cultural précis, “Making Loisaida.”

Unlike Bronzeville, which, as I explain above, has been maintained as a segregated Black neighborhood since the 1920s, the Lower East Side has been a contested space throughout the twentieth century. Home to large populations of working-class immigrants from the middle of the nineteenth-century to the 1920s, the neighborhood was identified in the Regional Plan Association’s 1929 Regional Plan of New York and Its Environments as a prime location for residential development to support lower Manhattan’s increasing population of white-collar workers (Mele 90-92). Though many of the Lower East Side development projects envisioned under the auspices of the Regional Plan were left unrealized, the city’s planners continued to see the neighborhood as a potential site for large-scale
spatial intervention in the ensuing decades. The 1937 and 1949 Federal Housing Acts, along with shifts in city policy during the LaGuardia administration, eliminated barriers to urban renewal and led to the construction of low-income housing projects. By 1950, as Mele explains, the Lower East Side was the “favored site for new public housing construction” in Manhattan south of 96th Street and contained the same area’s “largest concentration of government-sponsored low-income housing” (108-113). Changes in the physical dimensions of the neighborhood created changes in its social composition. Much as Gans observed in Boston’s West End, the colocation of long-term residents and new arrivals from other neighborhoods in large-scale public housing and the simultaneous outmigration of residents with the greatest economic wherewithal fragmented what had been close-knit communities (Mele 118).

The decade after World War II saw the arrival in the Lower East Side of large numbers of working class people from the Southern United States, including a significant number from Puerto Rico. As the non-white population of the neighborhood increased during the 1950s, urban renewal, housing policies, and broad-based economic changes resulted in the segregation of residents by class, ethnicity, and racial background (Mele 132). Relations between groups were “conflictive,” as Mele explains, with spatial segregation reinforcing “hostility and anxiety toward those who were different” (137). By the 1960s, collective perceptions of the neighborhood resolved on persistent decline to the point that it had been “erased” from the map of “palatable New York” (Ševčenko 296). Indeed, the rhetoric of urban crisis fueled the decisions of property owners to “walk away from their buildings, leaving uninhabitable and often burned-out shells that soon transformed the landscape into a haunting and scarred urban war zone” (Mele 181). As Jacobs’s advocacy for “locality knowledge” and even Sampson’s empirical analysis of neighborhood effects suggest, however, despite its physical condition, individual experiences in the neighborhood were not identical with its public reputation. Daniel Kane documents the emergence of vibrant, interconnected poetic communities on the Lower East Side during this period of decline. They centered their efforts on the development of non-academic poetic modes and gathered at frequent
public readings at neighborhood bars and restaurants and, eventually, at more formal venues like the Poetry Project and the Nuyorican Poet’s Café. In an inversion of public officials’ use of the rhetoric of crisis, Kane suggests that some poets “used their position in a marginal neighborhood” to justify their experimentation with alternative modes (2).  

The Puerto Rican community developed particularly strong ties to the Lower East Side in the 1960s and early 1970s. In part, attachments formed as a result of the density of the Puerto Rican population in a specific section of the neighborhood, the blocks between Houston Street to the south, 14th Street to the north, Avenue A to the west, and the East River to the east. Juan Flores identifies Puerto Ricans’ status as internal rather than international migrants and the colonial structure of the relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico as contributing factors. Because the Puerto Rican government discouraged migrants from maintaining cultural ties to the island, the diaspora community created neighborhood-based organizations to fill the “representational void” (178). Writers and artists in the 1960s were particularly affected by this cultural dislocation, in Flores’s view, and chose to ground their identities in the Puerto-Rican-community-in-New-York, the Nuyorican community, rather than in the Puerto Rican community more broadly. They viewed neighborhood-level attachments as particularly vital. Indeed, as the effects of private and public disinvestment in the neighborhood mounted in 1970s, writers and artists were at the forefront of the community’s response, “coupling music, poetic, painting, and even gardening with traditional tactics, such as rent strikes and demonstrations” in order to register dissent and confront the social effects of political neglect, including 

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71 Mele discusses the presence of the “hippie counterculture” in the neighborhood during the 1960s in chapter 5 of Selling the Lower East Side. Like Kane, he explains structural incentives, such as inexpensive rents and the absence of formal institutions, that drew artists and writers to the neighborhood and the degree to which its declining status motivated their work and lifestyle experimentation. Unlike Kane, who documents the persistence and influence of the poetic communities that emerged on the Lower East Side in the 1960s, Mele describes the broader counterculture’s abandonment of the neighborhood in the latter half of the decade and suggests that real estate developers used their presence as a justification for rebranding the northern section as the “East Village,” an important precursor to its later gentrification (173-179).
the displacement of residents when buildings were abandoned and condemned (Mele 200). Tenants organized to renovate and gain title to deteriorating buildings through community-based groups such as Adopt-a-Building and Rehabilitation in Action to Improve Neighborhoods (RAIN) and national organizations such as the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) (Mele 204-208). As the success of these initiatives suggests, and as Ševčenko observes, activists saw their task as creative, as “not only [claiming] a geographical territory but [endowing] this urban space with an identity and an ideology that would support its residents’ needs” (296). Poets Bimbo Rivas and Chino Garcia renamed the neighborhood “Loisaida” in 1974 in service of this goal and, in combination with the broader community of artists and writers, “articulated both a physical and a discursive space for Puerto Ricans in the postindustrial city” through written, painted, and performed works (Ševčenko 298; 300). Encouraging residents to “roll up their sleeves and physically take over their environment” rather than merely promoting the “symbolic appropriation,” the Loisaida movement linked the social and physical dimensions of neighborhood experience in a holistic spatial project (Ševčenko 307).

Edited by Miguel Algarín and Miguel Piñero, the 1975 anthology *Nuyorican Poetry* represents one example of the strategies developed by the larger movement. It combines 63 poems, 5 prose essays, 10 black and white photographs, Spanish, English, formal language, vernaculars, and invented words and involves no fewer than 25 poets and artists, including trombonist Willie Colón and theater director Joseph Papp who contributed promotional copy for the back cover. Divided into three sections, “Outlaw Poetry,” “Evolutionary Poetry,” and “Dusmic Poetry,” the anthology proposes multiple versions of neighborhood poetics that correspond to the varieties of protest, self-determination, and neighborhood transformation that animated the Loisaida movement. As an historical document, *Nuyorican Poetry* is an important record of artistic and activist energies that coalesced on the Lower East Side in the early 1970s, a crucial moment in the history of New York City’s Puerto Rican communities. Many of its poets—most prominently, Pedro Pietri and the aforementioned Chino García—were
prominent members of the Young Lords and other community-based organizations. Others, such as Sandra María Esteves and Bimbo Rivas, forged partnerships with artists and writers from ally communities, for example: Taller Boricua, El Teatro Ambulante, and the Nuyorican Poets Café, itself.

At the same time that the anthology preserves this history of grassroots organizing and artistic self-determination, it is also a “social text” that, as Urayoán Noel suggests, gathers poets and readers into an “evolving” community that exceeds its specific context (17). As the subtitle, “An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings,” indicates, *Nuyorican Poetry* sets differing perspectives on Loisaida and Nuyorican identity and experience in relation, producing a multivalent portrait of the neighborhood. Perhaps echoing the insights Barthes and de Certeau offer about the priority of lived over represented experiences, Algarín worries in the general introduction that print publication will inhibit the “social” extension of the anthology’s terms and critique: “Raw life needs raw verbs and raw nouns to express the action and to name the quality of experience . . . Imposing a system of usage on Nuyorican would at the present time stunt its childhood and damage its creative intuition” (19). Forty years later, it seems reasonable to argue that the “social text” of Nuyorican poetics transcends these limitations, especially in the claims it makes for local determination. Noel argues that it is the performative dimensions of Nuyorican poetry that produce its social text. In particular, he suggests that linking the practices of the “poetic vanguard and an urban community” in this way allows Nuyorican poets to perform the “the complexities of their location” (126). The anthology’s profusion of visual and verbal languages produces a similar effect. Much like the styles and gestures of live performance, the dynamics of its overlapping languages make multiple trajectories of meaning available. Interposed among the poems, Algarín’s prose essays and Gil Mendez’s photographs function as “paratexts,” in Gerard Genette’s sense, that encourage divergent readings. In combination, the poetic, prosaic, and visual possibilities of *Nuyorican Poetry* engage readers in mapping the linguistic, cultural, and spatial dimensions of everyday life on the
Lower East Side by demonstrating the relationships among the neighborhood’s aesthetic, political, and social concerns.

In his initial essay, “Nuyorican Language,” Algarín places the anthology in context with the history of urban decline and grassroots community activism Mele, Ševčenko, and others outline. He calls out the work of neighborhood groups, including the Young Lords, the Renigades [sic] of Harlem, and the Dynamite Brothers of the Lower East Side, and describes their interactions with government entities such as the Municipal Housing Authority, the fire department, and the police. In Algarín’s account, communications between these groups and the entities of city government are “strained” by mutual distrust and the lack of a common “language.” Even as the groups shift their energies from “organized street hustling”—things like theft and dealing drugs—to “coordinated alternative street government”—community-directed projects like rehabilitating abandoned buildings and negotiating control over empty lots, they struggle to gain official recognition (Algarín 16; 10). No matter how they closely align their activities with the long-term health of their communities, these groups seem destined to be interpreted from the outside as criminal and therefore subject to harassment and control. This lack of recognition suggests to Algarín the need for a “new language” responsive to the “raw life” from which Loisaida activism emerges. Such a language would serve multiple functions: “blaz[ing] a path of fire for the self” (10); “pierc[ing] the crowd with cataracts of clear, clean, precise, concrete words about the liquid, shifting latino [sic] reality around him” (11); “verbaliz[ing] the stresses of street experience” (19); and “document[ing] the conditions of survival” (15). Documentation, disruption, and self-determination are central components of the spatial project in which the anthology and related community-based actions participate.

The cover and the first two photographs of Nuyorican Poetry reinforce the needs Algarín identifies in the community and the actions they seem to require. On the cover, four adults and a young girl stand at a littered curb. Five others walk by. None of the nine makes eye contact or relates in any
way to the others. They look guarded—arms crossed and faces firm—and in frustrated dialogue with the abandoned building looming behind. In the next photograph, on page 45, police restrain a young protester, perhaps a Young Lord, Renegade, or Dynamite Brother, while he points and shouts out of the frame. On page 61, a different young man marches with a placard featuring Pedro Albizu Campos and a rallying cry for Puerto Rican independence in English and Spanish, “IN ORDER TO DESTROY OUR NATION THEY WILL HAVE TO TAKE OUR LIVES” / “PARA QUITARNOS LA PATRIA TIENEN QUE QUITARNOS LA VIDA.” The photographs capture the young men in the midst of acts of confrontation which contrast with the defensive postures of their neighbors on the cover. Unapologetic and confident, these young men are analogs of the “outlaw poet”: a poet who “fights with words” and sees himself as “morally free to act, to aggress against authority” on behalf of “himself or for his friends or for his people” (24; 26).

The poems juxtaposed with these photographs in the “Outlaw Poetry” section define the geographic and imaginative borders of the Loisaida sphere of action. Ranging from San Juan to Times Square, from 6th Street (“The Sounds of Sixth Street”) to 106th Street (“A day when clinkers . . .”), and through subway platforms (“Underground Poetry”), classrooms (“The Teacher of Life” and “Situation Heavy”), and infested apartments (“About Los Ratones”), they “tell the tale of the streets to the streets.” The poems address residents of the neighborhood by challenging their complicity in oppressive myths, the collective perception that the neighborhood is in irreversible decline, and enlisting them in advocating for radical political change. Algarín singles out Martita Morales, Lucky CienFuegos, Chino Garcia, Jorge Lopez, and co-editor Miguel Piñero as exemplar of this version of neighborhood poetics in the section’s introduction. They are “street fighters” who perform for the crowd and insist on “our right to make our words communicate our experience” (23-24). Like the marcher in the photograph on page 61, CienFuegos’s poem invokes a movement leader, Lolita Lebrón (59-60), and like the protester on page 45, Garcia’s calls for “BORICUA REVOLUTION!!” (76-77). In “The Book of Genesis According to Saint
Miguelito,” Piñero confronts God and capitalism about the condition of the city, mimicking the idiom of the King James Bible and inserting details from the street in the creation story:

In the beginning
God created the ghettos & slums
and God saw this was good.
So God said,
“Let there be more ghettos & slums”
and there were more ghettos & slums.
But God saw this was plain
so
to decorate it
God created leadbase paint
and then
God commanded the rivers of garbage & filth
to flow gracefully through the ghettos.

... but he saw the people lonely & hungry
and from his eminent rectum
he created a companion for these people
and he called this companion capitalism
who begat racism
who begat exploitation
who begat male chauvinism
who begat machismo
who begat imperialism
who begat colonialism
who begat wall street
who begat foreign wars

(62-63)

The sequence of begats demonstrates the scope and intensity of Piñero’s analysis: the Loisaida’s fragile social and physical conditions are effects of both individual and neighborhood-scale interactions as well as the confounding structures of national and international relations.

“before and after graduation day,” the third of four poems by Pedro Pietri in the section, shows the complexities of Nuyorican experience in a different way. Set on a rooftop where two men are negotiating the terms of a suicide pact, the poem showcases Pietri’s characteristically dark humor and
seemingly contradicts both Algarín’s prose assertions of the power of activism and Mendez’s heroic photographs.

you jump first
one wino says to the other
do not disappoint your friends
they have been waiting down there
in below zero temperature
for the past 365 days to see you
practice what you preached
do not wait until it gets dark
the lights do not work around
this neighborhood of oldtime religion
strangled by police sirens
hurry up before the reverend
who showed you where the roof was at
changes your mind with
another bottle of gypsy rose
& deports you back to night school
so you can learn how to count
& jump off higher buildings

(33)

The reasons the speaker encourages his companion to jump invert the poetic responsibilities Algarín identifies in the section’s introduction. First, he must jump in order to fulfill his friend’s expectations for his self-destructive identity; second, he must jump or the chaotic night will obscure and invalidate his attempt at documenting his struggle; and third, he must jump or his intention to disrupt the status quo might dissolve in cheap liquor or another dead-end educational program. While the title of the poem signals the possibilities of emerging adulthood, possibilities which are also implicit in Mendez’s photographs of the protester and marcher, its narrative suggests idleness and incapacity, a mood that fits more closely with the visual language of another photograph in the section, on page 78, in which a balding older man looks down at his wrinkled hands in a mostly bare room. Outcasts rather than outlaws, these three men seem dejected, beyond the reach of the Nuyorican spirit Algarín proposes in his essays.
The multiple resonances of the anthology’s representations of the “outlaw” figure suggest that Algarín’s essays and Mendez’s function less to show the “unity—formal or, more often, thematic—of what is likely to seem a priori a factitious and contingent jumble” of poems, Genette’s explanation for the role paratexts play in collections of works by multiple authors, and more as contributions in themselves to its composite neighborhood poetics (201). Indeed, Algarín’s prose constitutes nearly 15% of Nuyorican Poetry overall. Appearing at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the volume, his essays wholly surround the reading experience. The neighborhood and poetic context they describe constitute what Iser identifies as the “horizon” of possible interpretations against which readers measure the themes of individual poems and set the terms of Rosenblatt’s reading transaction. They specify, as Algarín explains in “Nuyorican Literature,” a reflective essay published in MELUS in 1981, that the Nuyorican poet’s roots are in “the debris of the ghettos, the tar and concrete that covers the land, the dependence on manual labor that is merely brute force, the force feeding of the young in schools that kill their initiative rather than nourish it, and the loss of trust” (90).

Mendez’s photographs reinforce the everydayness of this context by contrasting outcasts and outlaws, poets who assert that “the future will be procured by what we do that is cultural in the present,” as Algarín explains in “Nuyorican Literature,” and winos who debate the merits of suicide as a solution to the neighborhood’s difficulties (90). The photographs included in the “Evolutionary” and “Dusmic” poetry sections feature women and children, some, like the unkempt little boy shown on page 122, suggesting shared struggles, and others, like well-put-together young woman and little girl striking similar poses on pages 112 and 132, respective, striking a note of defiance. The rich variety of Mendez’s portraits lives fulfills in visual terms the mission Algarín sets out for Nuyorican poets to “write poems that describe our actual conditions without fearing that they might be too personal or too lost in the detail of the day and not metaphysical enough” (“Nuyorican Literature” 90). Juan Flores compares the Nuyorican aesthetic later writers inherited from Algarín’s early theorizations to the realist fiction of
Balzac. “What most impresses the young Puerto Rican writer,” he explains, referring to novelist Abraham Rodriguez’s appreciation for Balzac, is the model he provides of writing that “confronts social reality directly, as everyday lived experience and institutions, rather than as a mediation of what is conveyed in books and other means of representation” (185). Like Balzac, Algarín asserts, through his positioning of poems like “before and after graduation day” alongside portraits of innocence and protest, that the “actual conditions” of life in Loisaida involve the mundane and heroic in equal measure.

Martita Morales’s “outlaw” poem, “The Sounds of Sixth Street,” adds to this complexity through the voice of a 15-year old girl who “never gives up” despite the limitations placed on her by her mother, teachers, and fellow poets (51). Anticipating the photographs and poems of the “Evolutionary” and “Dusmic” sections, Morales’s poem enriches the anthology’s poetics of neighborhood by introducing a perspective and scene that complements Algarín’s, Pietri’s, and Piñero’s “invariably male” street poets (Noel 41). Like Brooks does in “the children of the poor,” Morales engages the reader’s empathy and sense of justice with descriptions of racialized conflict:

she fights and
she rebels
and for this
she gets expelled
but she never gives up
no she never gives up
because in what they are doing
they are wrong and
she knows she is right
she fights
and she is in assembly in school
and because she does not stand up
like the rest of her fellow students
to do the pledge of allegiance to the amerikan flag
she is harassed by her teacher and two deans
she is almost expelled
at which she more fully rebels

(51)
Morales’s simple diction exposes the reader to the accumulation of wrongs that characterizes the girl’s life, keeping her experience, through the persistent repetition of the pronoun “she,” always at the center. Maturing over the course of the poem from innocence, playing at the beach “in a world of [her] own,” to emergent sexuality, “her parents will not let her have a boyfriend / with an afro,” to activism at the school assembly, the girl embraces an increasingly complex identity (50). “Fight,” “rights,” “rebels,” and “expelled” organize the social context of the poem: a mixed-race neighborhood in which authority figures, regardless of race, punish deviation from norms. In contrast with the restrictions “fights,” “rebels,” and “expelled” suggest, Morales’s heroine seeks a community organized according to a shared sense of what, according to the poem’s final word, is “Right!”

Sandra María Esteves’s “Blanket Weaver” is also noteworthy for envisioning a broader basis of collective action. Responding, in a sense, to a question posed about women’s roles in community activism in a preceding poem by Jesús Papoleto Meléndez, “have you ever seen the revolutionary sister / rappin’ to the masses of the poor” (113), the poem portrays a self-assured female shaman intoning a call for unity and respect: “weave us a song of many threads / that will dance with the colors of our people / and cover us with the warmth of peace” (135). As Noel explains, in “Blanket Weaver” and other poems Esteves “posits an organic poetics invested . . . in the recovering of discredited or marginalized African and Taíno forms, as well as in an exploration of the intersections between verbal and visual arts” (77). The “blanket” she calls forth in “Blanket Weaver,” for example, is a tactile representation of a practice of solidarity that in its domestic softness and repetitive duration would be anathema to Algarín’s “outlaws” and Pietri’s winos alike. As if to emphasize these qualities, Esteves starts each of the poem’s ten stanzas with the word “weave.” Her assertion of weaving as politically relevant work challenges the sexist afterthought of Meléndez’s poem, “i understand you want to lay her,” and suggests an alternative trajectory for activism (113). In addition to the new perspective on activism and the critique of “machismo” it provides, “Blanket Weaver” enhances Nuyorican Poetry’s account of
Loisaida by transposing an imaginary Puerto Rico of “sweet plum,” “topaz canyons” and “floral honey” onto the neighborhood’s crumbling infrastructure (134). The poem does not lack for “fire” or depth. Perhaps the most powerful stanza is the third-to-last:

weave us a rich round black that lives
in the eyes of our warrior child
and feeds our mouths with moon breezes
with rhythms interflowing
through all spaces of existence
a black that holds the movement of eternity
(135)

The “black” Esteves invokes in these lines pairs the nurturing investments of motherhood with critical reflection on the spatial dynamics of everyday experience. Its “rhythms interflowing / through all spaces of experience” provides an apt characterization of the collaborative processes of community development. Paired with photographs of women, children, and the elderly, poems like Morales’s and Esteves’s make visible people, experiences, and perspectives on the margins of Algarín’s heroic countercultural avant garde.

What matters most for Noel about the performative dimension of Nuyorican poetics is the degree to performance creates communities. In his view, Algarín’s poets and audiences embody communities through the joint operations of their words, gestures, styles, and spaces such that Nuyorican becomes an “intersubjective identity that refers both to the performer of the poem and to the group brought into being by the performance” (46-47). He explains the process through which poets and their audiences develop shared identities in terms of reader-response: “While the emotional charge of the poems varies, certain heightened tones recur (humorous, irreverent, reflective, lyrical). The prevalence of these tones can be understood alongside their desired effects (laughter, shock, identification, contemplation), heightened states wherein a new relationship, an energy transfer between performer and audience akin to the kinetics of Olson’s ‘Projective Verse,’ becomes possible” (162). I have argued that the essays and photographs of Nuyorican Poetry function in a similar way,
preserving the emerging community of the 1970s for future readers through an open-ended poetics of neighborhood. As paratexts, they serve as “thresholds of interpretation” in Genette’s sense and as mediators of what Sampson identifies as “social perceptions,” setting the everyday realities of Loisaida in relation to the poems themselves. Fitting some poems more closely than others, the essays and photographs create conceptual space in and through which readers engage in dialogue with contributors to the anthology over the stakes of its main poetic texts. Perhaps most importantly, these paratexts protect the vitality of the poems’ “raw verbs and raw nouns” from the limitations of print publication by ensuring, through the matrix or field of meaning they enlist readers in producing, the iterative expansion of their verbal possibilities.
Chapter 5: Poetry and Progressive Planning

A city is its people; their practices; and their political, social, cultural, and economic institutions as well as other things. The city planner must comprehend and deal with all these factors.

— Paul Davidoff, “Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning”

I’m just trying to keep pace with all of it, writing little pieces of it down, trying to keep everything about me in the present tense, as I’ve been tasked.

— Lewis MacAdams, The River

The “Loisaida” movement described in chapter 4 was one of a number of community-based movements active on the Lower East Side during the 1960s and 1970s. It drew strength from longer-term efforts by workers and immigrant groups to resist the social and physical transformation of the neighborhood. Building on the successes of these groups, the Nuyoricans proposed a neighborhood-based cultural identity involving persistent advocacy for improved housing conditions and increased access to health, education, and employment. Being “Nuyorican” entailed fighting for the right of the community to remain in place and to be treated by City agencies and private landowners as a full partner in determining the neighborhood’s future. Four blocks west of the movement’s core area of influence on Avenue C—and more than a decade before its emergence—a coalition of tenants and housing activists won the right of self-determination in their section of the Lower East Side through persistent community organizing. Working with progressive planner Walter Thabit, the coalition developed and later won approval for New York City’s first community-based plan. Issued by the community in 1961 and formally adopted by the City in 1970, The Cooper Square Alternate Plan “set forth a bold strategy for building and preserving low-income housing” in an eleven-block area along the Bowery between Delancey Street and St. Mark’s Place that the City had targeted for renewal and redevelopment (Angotti 113).
As in many urban renewal projects of the period, the City’s plans made no adequate provision for the area’s predominantly low-income residents, raising the likelihood that residents would soon be displaced. According to progressive planning advocate Tom Angotti, the community’s Alternate Plan ultimately preserved 60% of the area’s housing stock as low-income, a significant achievement given the economic pressures affecting New York City at the time (115-116). The coalition that developed the Alternate Plan and its successor body, the Copper Square Development Committee, succeeded in preserving low-income housing in the area because it linked planning efforts to community organizing. As Angotti explains, “the most important element in perpetual affordability is perpetual organizing and protest, particularly when the organizing and protest are tied to broader social and political movements” (122). While the Cooper Square coalition’s goals remained consistent over time, the activists and planners involved in the development and implementation of the Alternate Plan confronted different processes of change from the 1960s to the 2000s.

In the 1960s, for example, urban renewal was the dominant strategy used by city governments to reengineer poor neighborhoods. Political elites, often with support from city planners, designated certain areas as “slums,” razed existing residential and commercial buildings, and then redeveloped them, displacing low-income and minority residents in the process. By the 1970s, in particular in New York City, the uneven effects of renewal projects led landlords to abandon properties in neighborhoods like the Lower East Side in hopes they would later be renewed (Mele 191-194; Smith 4-29). Communities resisted neighborhood abandonment both in their everyday lives and through organized movements. Some, like the Cooper Square Development Committee, protected themselves through community-based plans and other political action. The processes of gentrification accelerated in New York City and across the country during the 1980s as real estate developers and city leaders targeted abandoned,

72 Herbert Gans’s 1965 *Commentary* article, “The Failure of Urban Renewal,” provides a succinct outline of the goals, processes, and contradictions of urban renewal. Similar analyses appear elsewhere, for example, in Angotti (87-97) and Hartmann (173-209).
predominantly low-income and minority neighborhoods near city centers for investment and redevelopment. Their aims were to lure middle-class residents back from the suburbs in order to boost local tax revenues and make their cities more attractive to business interests. As Neil Smith explains, gentrification was and is an “integral residential thread in a much larger urban restructuring” oriented toward developing urban land for its most profitable uses by exploiting the “rent gap,” the difference between the existing and potential market value of particular parcels (38; 67-70). New residents in gentrifying center-city neighborhoods gradually displaced local communities and replaced diverse neighborhood cultures with racial and economic homogeneity.

The acceleration and corporatization of gentrification, as Jason Hackwork explains, emerged as part of a broader “neoliberal” turn in urban planning and policy during the 1990s. “Gentrification can be seen as the material and symbolic knife-edge of neoliberal urbanism,” he argues, because it involves the “replacement of physical expressions of Keynesian egalitarianism like public housing with a privately led segmentation of inner city space” (98). The shift to neoliberal entrepreneurialism occurred for several reasons, in Hackworth’s view, including decreases in local tax revenues resulting from suburbanization; the shift from a manufacturing to a service economy and concomitant changes in urban demographics; reductions in federal financial support accompanied by increased mandates to deliver public services; and reliance on the issuance of bonds to fund local infrastructure projects and close budget gaps (17-39). The net effect of these changes, he explains, has been that “local governments are now not only expected to ally with business to improve its plight, they are also expected to behave as businesses as well” (26, italics in original). This emphasis on profitability pushes the claims of community groups, such as the Cooper Square Development Committee’s insistence on maintaining low-income housing on the Bowery, to the margins of discussion of citywide plans and policies.

As a culmination of my inquiry into the dynamics of city poems and urban crisis, this chapter compares strategies used by community-based progressive planners to challenge neoliberal urban
planning and the forms and knowledge claims of recent city poetry. My main purposes are to define what is at stake in the conflict between progressive and neoliberal approaches to the city and to articulate how city poetry might serve both as a tool of analysis and critique and as a mode of insurgent practice in and of itself. The chapter focus on three poets: Brenda Coultas, whose “Bowery Project” explores the neighborhood protected by The Cooper Square Alternate Plan forty years after its adoption; Anne Winters, whose narrative lyrics question the contradictions of neoliberal New York City; and Lewis MacAdams, an activist and poet whose book-length project, *The River*, documents a spatial and conceptual intervention in the geography of Los Angeles. These poets address readers in much the same way as Brooks and the Nuyoricans, but rather than immersing them in neighborhood poetics, Coultas, Winters, and MacAdams assert an insurgent urban politics: documenting and exposing racial and economic inequalities; consolidating the “dynamics of conflict, struggle, indeterminacy, and heterogeneity” of cities into focused critiques of the status quo (Boykoff and Sand 17); and mobilizing action by proposing alternative visions of an urban commons. Progressive planners share these practices—documentation and exposure, the consolidation of community knowledge into theories of action, and the proposal of alternative visions—as well as their implicit politics. As progressive planner Leonie Sandercock suggests, “if we want to achieve greater social justice, less polluted environments, and broader cross-cultural tolerance, and if planning is to contribute to those social goals, then we need a broader and more politicized definition of planning’s domain and practices” (204). The chapter concludes with a comparison of urban development projects that shows the possibilities of poetry within a politicized planning practice. I contrast the community-based movement MacAdams nurtured to restore the Los Angeles River with one of New York City’s largest neoliberal planning projects to date, the construction of Brooklyn Bridge Park.
Neoliberalism and Progressive Planning

Economist Edward Glaeser argues that cities are incubators of innovation that “magnify humanity’s strengths” by providing poor people access to opportunities, preventing the degradation of the environment through sustainable lifestyles, and stimulating the integration and expansion of the global economy (249). Advocating for dense urban development in the US and across the world, Glaeser suggests that the potential benefits of cities in the areas of public health, environment sustainability, and economic growth outweigh their disadvantages for particular communities at particular times, for example, the displacement of working-class, poor residents from Boston’s West End in the 1960s and New York’s Lower East Side in the 1970s and 1980s. In fact, he claims, the negative effects of uneven urban development result from “bad policy” that puts “place-making above helping people” by enforcing artificial constraints on markets rather than from structural or systemic inequalities. “The great problem of urban slums,” he argues, “is not that there are too many people living in a city, but that those residents are often too disconnected from the economic heart of the metropolis” (70). Glaeser’s prescription for promoting justice is for city governments to ally with business interests to create urban environments that “attract smart people” through cultural amenities and robust transportation and education infrastructures and “enable them to work collaboratively” by easing regulations on development and competition (223). The greater a city’s concentration of highly skilled workers and the fewer restrictions it places on economic activity, he explains, the greater the likelihood that “those who start with less” there will “end with more” (224).

While Glaeser is undoubtedly correct to identify unequal access to the benefits of economic growth as an urgent urban problem, his analysis assumes that successful entrepreneurialism will reduce rather than maintain or intensify differences in access and outcomes over the long term. Beyond recommending that “social services [should be] funded at the national rather than the local level” and contrasting rural and urban poverty, Glaeser does not explain how corporate-sector growth will benefit
the urban poor (90; 258). His arguments follow and reinforce the logic of neoliberalism that emerged in American cities in response to the economic crisis of the 1970s. According to this logic, city residents are autonomous agents who choose where to live and work based on lifestyle and employment preferences, and businesses, in turn, choose to invest in cities with the largest numbers of highly skilled workers, especially when those cities also provide tax and other financial incentives. Cities that do not invest in the kinds of infrastructure and cultural projects that will attract the right kinds of workers or otherwise encourage investment from large businesses lose the benefits of this virtuous cycle and run the risk of marginalization and decline. 73

According to Hackworth, Glaeser’s neoliberal approach has become an “axiom rather than a debated policy shift among city managers” as a result of changes in the underlying economic and political dynamics of cities since the 1980s (39). Following critical geographers Erik Swyngedouw and David Harvey, he identifies two main causes for the neoliberal turn: first, the global integration of urban and national markets and second, the simultaneous devolution of responsibility for the provision of public services from the national to the local level. Both sets of changes have made cities more vulnerable to shifts in the global economy and more dependent on “hegemonic real estate interests and the pro-growth civic coalitions they are able to assemble” in order to remain financially solvent (Angotti 12). As a result of this vulnerability and dependence, Hackworth explains, cities promote economic development at all costs, for example, by encouraging gentrification and offering tax and regulatory incentives for downtown mega-projects, while at the same time reducing public investment “that is not

73 Glaeser adapts two strands of neoliberal urban planning theory to make his case for dense, pro-growth urban policy: Richard Florida’s claim that cities must attract “creative class” workers in order to be viewed as attractive sites for corporate investment and the New Urbanist’s assertions that dense, walkable neighborhoods are both more attractive to consumers and more environmentally sustainable. While Glaeser disagrees with Florida’s emphasis on the importance of cultural amenities, he makes similar claims for the importance for cities of attracting highly skilled workers (260). Similarly, while he questions the “social” objectives of the New Urbanists (214-215), he follows their lead in arguing that “dense cities” are the most sustainable form of residential development because they “offer a means of living that involves less driving and smaller homes to heat and cool” (222).
likely to lead to an immediate profit” (78). Public-private partnerships and private investors take control of public resources such as parks, housing, and utility services as city governments disinvest with the result that inequalities between neighborhoods and across the city increase, often, as Robert Sampson’s research suggests, along racial lines. The consequences for residents who are not in positions to benefit from the effects of pro-growth policies are “displacement, alienation, and exploitation” (Porter 530). For some, the rise of the neoliberal city suggests an intensifying crisis of “rapidly degrading qualities of urban life” and exposure to “predatory practices in urban housing markets, reductions in services, and above all the lack of viable employment opportunities, with some cities . . . utterly bereft of employment prospects” (Harvey 53).

Trained in the systems and processes of urban governance, planners have a role to play in advancing, modifying, or confronting the influence of neoliberalism at the local and regional scales. In planning theorist Susan Fainstein’s view, “the development of practical alternatives to the status quo and neoliberal hegemony” is the “primary task” of planners and city leaders “with a moral commitment to human betterment” (The Just City 19). According to Libby Porter, editor of a special supplement to the journal Planning Theory & Practice dedicated to alternative planning approaches, because the neoliberal approach has become so dominant, planners situated within government agencies face a choice between having their work coopted by urban growth regimes or “articulat[ing] clear and genuine alternatives to this kind of practice—alternatives that imagine and practice forms of social and economic life that are not exploitative, commodifying, or alienating” (530). A first step toward pursuing alternatives to neoliberalism is for planners to recognize that their “complex and contradictory” work plays out “in a political environment that is rich in conflict” and that, as such, “plans and planning are not static things but nodes of social and political relations that occur in public places” (Angotti 24, italics

See chapter 4 for a discussion of Sampson’s empirical study of racial inequalities in Chicago neighborhoods.
in original). Like Porter and Angotti, Leonie Sandercock advocates a progressive approach to urban planning that challenges neoliberalism’s market orientation. Acknowledging that the “single undeniable cultural hegemony is that economic rationality is paramount, and every city, region, and nation has to realize its social ideals as best it can within the constraints of a profit-maximizing world market,” she argues that planning practice should be grounded in a critique of “existing unequal relations and distributions of power, opportunity, and resources” and oriented toward the “structural transformation of systematic inequalities” and the “empower[ment] of “those who have been systematically disempowered” (199; 97).

Porter, Angotti, and Sandercock work in a progressive planning tradition that emerged in the wake of the racialized failures of urban renewal in the 1950s and 1960s. At the time, as Angotti explains, planning was dominated by a rational-comprehensive approach that promised “physical solutions to social problems” and a “neat, logically constructed process of plan development engineered by technically trained planners” (11). Planners served the general public interest, coordinating the provision of services and amenities across the urban region as agents of city government. Robert Moses’s attempts to remake New York City through the construction of transportation infrastructure and public housing projects are a prime example of the rational-comprehensive approach. Writing in the field’s main professional journal, the Journal of the American Institute of Planners, in 1965, Paul Davidoff proposed an alternative approach termed “advocacy planning” (Angotti 13-15; Sandercock 89-91; Fainstein, “Planning Theory,” 162-164). In addition to critiquing the existing focus on physical solutions, Davidoff proposed an adversarial process in which planners represent different groups, including both government agencies and community organizations, “plead for his own and his client’s view of the good society” (195). The advocacy planning model provides greater opportunities for community involvement in planning decisions by expanding the number of interests represented from one, rational-comprehensive planning’s general public interest, to many, the range of interests articulated by
advocate planners. It shifts the focus of the planning process from identifying technical solutions to evaluating multiple courses of action.

Following Davidoff, planners who reject the rational-comprehensive model have developed and practiced a number of alternative approaches. Sandercock describes four such approaches, each offering a distinct perspective on planning’s object of analysis and the planner’s relationship to the community. Since “all six paradigms of planning,” including the rational-comprehensive and advocacy models, “are alive (and reasonably well),” she argues, “adhering to one rather than another involves a political choice rather than scientific verification” (103). Equity planners, such as Norman Krumholz, locate planning’s stage within the “institutional settings—political, social, cultural—in which any attempt at planning takes place,” forging alliances between community groups and progressive politicians and arguing for inclusion and accountability in planning processes (94). A second group, collaborative planners, centers their work in communities. They apply Habermas’s communicative action theory to characterize the planning process as generative discourse, facilitating community meetings and creating other opportunities for those affected by planning decisions to participate as equals in priority-setting and decision-making. In the best case, the collaborative planning model ensures that “the force of argument” is the deciding factor in determining goals and strategies rather than an individual’s “power or status” (96). John Forester suggests that in addition to bringing communities together, collaborative planners also serve as advocates, “anticipat[ing] and counteract[ing] pressures that stifle public voice, that manipulate democratic processes of consensus-building, and that ignore the many in need so that a few may prosper” (137). A third alternative, critical urban theory, advances a theoretical critique of urban political economy from a Marxian perspective. Initiated by Harvey, Manuel Castells, and Henri Lefebvre in the late 1960s, the approach exposes injustices and suggests that planners are complicit in processes of capitalist accumulation because they serve to rationalize “the chaos of individual decisions” pertaining to urban development and to coordinate the provision of public goods (Sandercock 91-92). In
a final model, radical or utopian planners immerse themselves in systematically disempowered communities. Through engagement with racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression, they work with members of affected communities to catalyze nascent social movements (Sandercock 102). Angotti identifies four additional models, feminist planning, transformative community planning, indigenous planning, and sustainability planning, in describing the history of community planning. Emerging from related social movements, these models focus on redefining planning’s objectives to include specific consideration of gender, race, the rights of native peoples, and environmental justice (16-17).

Planner and theorist Peter Marcuse groups the various planning approaches under four main “currents” according to their relationship to power and degree of commitment to social justice. The rational-comprehensive model represents a “technocratic current, deferential to existing structures of power.” Equity and collaborative planning constitute a “liberal reformist current, moving generally within existing relationships of power, using planners’ influence to move plans toward their more liberal and justice-respecting ends.” A “transformative critical current” encompasses the feminist, indigenous, sustainability, and community planning approaches, envisioning the planning process “as an activity dedicated to the application of reason to physical and social relations” and adopting a “critical stance” that emphasizes “social justice.” Sandercock’s radical planners and some planners working within other models follow a “utopian approach,” proposing “alternative vision[s]” of the city with “radical implications” for future planning practice. (“A Just Code” 16) Noting the overlapping strengths of the four currents, Marcuse proposes a hybrid, critical planning model that applies the insights of critical urban theory in order to enact and support “radical urban practice” (“Whose Right” 37). The model involves three processes or steps: expose, propose, and politicize:

Expose in the sense of analyzing the roots of the problem and making clear and communicating that analysis to those that need it and can use it. Propose, in the sense of working with those affected to come up with actual proposals, programs, targets, strategies to achieve desired
results . . . Politicize, in the sense of clarifying the political action implications of what was exposed and proposed and the reasoning behind them, and supporting organizing around the proposals by informing action. ("Whose Right" 37, italics in original)

Marcuse defines progressive planning as community building: planners work in and with communities to identify problems, diagnose their causes, and develop and implement proposals for action. Bringing to bear the insights of critical urban theory, they encourage relationships among different groups by exposing the “common roots” of “deprivation and discontent” and the “common nature of the demands and the aspirations of the majority of the people” ("Whose Right" 39). By politicizing the city’s existing social and physical conditions, planners draw attention to the “common” causes of injustice across gender, racial, and cultural differences.

As I note in the introduction to this chapter, Angotti takes a similar view of the importance of community organizing and politics to progressive planning. He argues that community plans are “conscious political struggles that seek, within the context of broader struggles for social justice, to change the relations of political power both within neighborhoods and between neighborhoods and outside forces” (5). Politicized in Marcuse’s sense, Angotti’s model of progressive community planning turns on a “strategic conception of community land” that views land as a set of conflictual social relations rather than as an independent commodity or object of analysis (31; 229). In order to effectively confront neoliberalism, Angotti argues, communities and planners need to do more than theorize the causes of injustice and articulate visions of a better urban future. In addition, they must use planning tools such as air and water quality regulations, strengthened community boards, zoning, and community land trusts, among others, to consolidate parcels of city land that are “already under some form of public ownership or control and outside the circuit of commodity exchange,” including streets and sidewalks, as well as parks and public housing, into a regulated “urban commons” that is protected in perpetuity for public use (231-234). Using planning strategies to remove land from capitalist exchange is
the main objective of Angotti’s ten-point agenda for progressive community planners (228). By transforming residents’ relationships to city land in concrete ways, Angotti suggests, planners can reinvigorate awareness of the “psychological, symbolic, cultural, and spiritual functions of land” that neoliberal urban policy obscures and thus contribute to emerging social movements (231). The strategies he enumerates depend equally on community organizing, mobilization, and an underlying “political recognition that the [urban] commons can be produced, protected, and used for social benefit” (Harvey 86).

For Harvey, the “urban commons” Angotti describes is both spatial and conceptual. He emphasizes the difference between “public spaces and public goods, on the one hand, and the commons on the other” and claims that the preservation of public land is not sufficient in and of itself to produce the commons. Persistent political action is also necessary, in his view, to ensure that land reserved for public use remains under public control. Harvey’s definition of the urban commons and his prescription for its protection echoes Angotti’s argument that urban land is a “set of relations and not a thing” (229):

The common[s] is not to be constructed, therefore, as a particular kind of thing, asset or even social process, but as an unstable and malleable social relation between a particular self-defined social group and those aspects of its actually existing or yet-to-be-created social and/or physical environment deemed crucial to its life and livelihood. There is, in effect, a social practice of commoning. This practice produces or establishes a social relation with a common whose uses are either exclusive to a social group or partially or fully open to all and sundry. At the heart of the practice of commoning lies the principle that the relation between the social group and that aspect of the environment being treated as a commons shall be both collective and non-commodified—off-limits to the logic of market exchange and market valuations. (Harvey 73)
“Commoning,” to use Harvey’s term, involves the negotiation of relationships between communities and their social and physical environments in the broader context of urban capitalism. As such, it closely resembles the practices of Sandercock, Marcuse, and Angotti’s models of progressive planning.

“Individuals and social groups create the social world of the city,” in Harvey’s view, and “thereby create something common as a framework within which all can dwell” (74). The work of planning, in this model, consists in bringing communities together to recognize common interests and politicizing the potential for collective action.

The link between Harvey’s theoretical analysis and progressive planning’s concrete advocacy is a shared commitment to defining the “right to the city” as a “focused collective right” to demand social justice by transforming the “idea of citizenship” into a “powerful form of social solidarity” in opposition to the exploitative processes and structures of neoliberalism (Harvey 137; 149-150). Since, as Hackworth observes, “neoliberal social policy has had a fragmenting effect on progressive activism,” the formation of broad-based urban coalitions to advocate for political change is increasingly urgent (175). Whether defining utopian futures, protecting and expanding community land, or politicizing claims for social justice, progressive planners seek, consolidate, and mobilize diverse knowledges about the city’s existing social and physical conditions. They claim, with and through communities, “shaping power over the processes of urbanization, over the ways in which our cities are made and remade . . . in a fundamental and radical way” (Harvey 5). In the next section, I describe the knowledges Brenda Coultas and Anne Winters apply in their poetic explorations and critiques of neoliberal New York City. I note commonalities between their poetic techniques and forms and the progressive planning strategies described above and suggest ways their poetics might contribute to a more inclusive and critical planning practice.
Knowledges and Plans: Exploring the Urban Archive

Like many progressive planners, Sandercock argues that accessing “experiential, intuitive, and local knowledges . . . based on practices of talking, listening, seeing, contemplating, sharing . . . and expressed in visual and other symbolic, ritual, and artistic ways” would enable planners to engage more effectively with communities in confronting the logic of neoliberalism (76). In her view, these community knowledges can supplement the rational, comprehensive, scientific, and technical knowledges that government and business interests bring to bear on city problems. By expanding what counts as knowledge in planning processes, she suggests, planners would also expand the number and variety of community participants who feel personally invested in outcomes. In addition, by changing what “counts” as valid knowledge, they would, in effect, reshape the terms of planning debates and make visible approaches and solutions relying only on empirical data can obscure. She elaborates a list of questions that would allow planners to access the “experiential, grounded, contextual, intuitive knowledges” available in communities (30):

The questions at the heart of planning epistemology are: What do I know? How do I know that I know? What are my sources of knowledge? How is knowledge produced in planning? How and when do I know what I know? How secure am I in my knowledge? What level of uncertainty or ambiguity can I tolerate? What forms of knowledge offer me most security? How adequate is my knowledge for the purpose at hand? How can I improve the knowledge base of my (and others’) actions? What rights does my knowledge confer on me as a planner? What responsibilities do I assume for the application of what I claim to know? What is valid knowledge in planning? Who decides that? And who possesses knowledge that is relevant to planning? (58)

Perhaps more important than the answers such questions might yield, the planner following Sandercock’s advice would be adopting a questioning mindset, a way of knowing oriented toward
understanding a range of experiences and perspectives rather than toward mastery and action. In so doing, she would be inviting community members to share as equals in the process of defining the current state of the community and constructing alternative future visions.

Brenda Coultas practices in her city poems exactly the kinds of questioning Sandercock advocates. In 2001, when she was living in an apartment near the Bowery in New York City, she grew concerned about an urban renewal project slated to begin in the neighborhood. Authorized by the community-based Cooper Square Development Committee and the City’s Department of Housing Preservation and Development, the project called for the demolition of historic buildings and the construction of retail space, a community center, and mixed-income condominiums. In keeping with the principles of the original 1961 Alternate Plan, the project also provided for the construction of new low-income housing, though as a smaller percentage of overall construction than in previous projects (Angotti 123-124). Concerned that the present history of the neighborhood would be lost, Coultas resolved to document it for several months as a “public character” and, through her observations, created a series of prose poems titled “The Bowery Project.” As she explains, “I lived a block from this section and traveled through it daily. My intent was not to romanticize the suffering or demonize the Bowery its residents, but rather to observe the changes the Bowery was currently undergoing and to write about my own dilemma and identification as a citizen one paycheck away from the street” (11).

Identifying with and through the neighborhood, Coultas positions herself in this introduction both as a concerned resident and as an interpreter and advocate. The poems of “The Bowery Project” focus on people, things, and experiences that the renewal project ignores, for example, homeless people, discarded furniture, and passersby. Coultas takes seriously the knowledge they share or represent, enacting an archival poetics of urban space that is equal parts documentary and radical social practice.

Coultas cites Jane Jacobs’s description of “public characters” in The Death and Life of Great American Cities as an inspiration for the project’s methodology. For Jacobs, as Coultas explains, these
“characters” are people on the street such as shopkeepers “who [know] everyone and whom everyone knows” and who therefore “lend cohesion to the community” and serve to “prevent crime” (11). In order to become such a figure herself, Coultas first “claim[s] a public space”:

I will sit in a chair in the Bowery at the same place and time for a season and participate and expedite street life. I’m going to dump it all in, everything that occurs to me or everything I see. That will be my data, my eyes upon the street; the firsthand observation of this last bum-claimed space, a small record before the wrecking ball arrives. I’m taking only pen and notepad. Everything I truly need will appear—I’m not an archaeologist, but am a studier of persons and documenter of travails. (BOWERY & 1ST ST.) (15)

As in many of the poems in “The Bowery Project,” Coultas assigns this paragraph to a specific location, perhaps to affirm the validity of any knowledge it contains. She “expedite[s] street life” later in the project, serving as a common point of contact for people who might not otherwise interact, by inviting passersby to take a pre-recorded tour of her apartment (33); anonymously collecting “Bowery Wishes” in a box “mounted on street furniture or maybe wired to a chain link fence” (34-35); and, finally, by setting up a table and chair on the sidewalk with a sign that reads, “Tell me a Bowery story,” and then listening (47-51). To the degree that she “dump[s] it all in” and composes a “small record” of what she experiences, Coultas is less of a public character and more of a Jacobs, more of a planner attuned to the community’s specific knowledges.

One example of Coultas’s planning work is a description she provides of the social ecology of a dumpster in a poem titled “Gumball.” Renovations are underway in this scene, evidence of socioeconomic changes taking hold in the neighborhood. Through her description, Coultas poses gentrification’s destructive logic, represented by a contractor’s careless destruction of furniture, against the “studied” local knowledge of a man she observes picking through the dumpster.

Aquamarine dumpster named Gumball, outside window, empty. Men from across the street filled it all day long. An eager man stood by taking what he could, he left an old model boat that

75 Coultas’s claim that she is “not an archaeologist” distinguishes her project from Charles Olson’s encyclopedic city poem. Olson famously defined himself as an “archaeologist of morning” (Collected Prose 206).
was missing the sail. He took a small desk instead because he could sell it. He said they were cheapos, that the contractor and workers were destroying the furniture before it hit the street. He said if it were his job he’d put the furniture out, let people take it and then the dumpster would hold more. He had a great plan for how the dumpster should be filled, for he had studied on it. By day’s end, Gumball was brimming, overflowing, and surrounded by the homeless. (APRIL 11, 2002, 75 E. 2ND ST.) (45)

The man’s critique is subtle: rather than protesting what the contractor are doing, he simply proposes a more community-friendly approach, one that would preserve rather than destroy existing resources while also yielding greater efficiencies. Alan Gilbert notes the “impressionistic, yet direct, depiction of people and discarded commodities” throughout “The Bowery Project” and commends Coultas’s “sympathetic, while never patronizing, tone” (222). He suggests that the net effect of a poem like “Gumball” is to “create confusions between the categories natural and unnatural, normal and abnormal” that invest the Bowery with “significance and value” beyond its status as property under law (218; 220). The man Coultas watches (and overhears) transforms the dumpster, surely on rental to the contractor, into a public resource shared in common by the contractor, workers, and neighborhood residents.

Coultas describes her methodology in composing “The Bowery Project” in a poem titled “Some Might Say That All I’ve Done Is Stack Up a Heap of Objects.” The description introduces the possibility of discovering order amid the Bowery knowledge she is accumulating.

Some will say it’s all been done before, and that others have done better but still I stack things up. I don’t think about it, I put blinders on but hope that through accumulation they’ll form a pattern out of chaos. I’ve stacked up twigs one by one, building a structure, weaving and shaping, forming a skeleton out of raw garbage transformed into beauty, maybe with something to say to any Bowery resident or reader of poetry. Please, I am intentionally writing this for you. (28)

Refusing, like Charles Olson in The Maximus Poems, to apply an external structure to her developing project, Coultas affirms her technique of considered observation. She doesn’t “think about” what she writes down because she expects a pattern to emerge from what she sees and experiences. In part, as Gilbert observes, the poem provides an “honest” accounting of the poet’s “struggles and frustrations
with her project;” specifically, the struggle of playing a dual role as participant and observer (219). In part, however, Coultas is making an argument about the kinds of knowledge available in the city and offering a suggestion for how observers (or planners) and residents might participate together in processes of knowledge construction. It is as if Coultas were pausing over several of Sandercock’s questions: “What do I know? How do I know that I know? What are my sources of knowledge? . . . How and when do I know what I know?” (58).

Jaime Robles identifies the progressive potential of Coultas’s method in the space it leaves for imagination. “Her collecting,” she writes, “allows for reshaping, which is an imaginative act that provides order in an inexplicable world . . . one that soothes pain and is generously shared” (np). What she sees watching the dumpster is a neighborhood ecology in miniature: the workers fill the dumpster to make space for new development; the man and other Bowery residents react to the stimulus, first critiquing what’s happening and then making use of what they find; and finally, their activity gives rise to Coultas’s own consideration of the possibility of an emergent order. She describes her own reuse of discards in several poems, for example, in “Dumpster,” a poem not included in “The Bowery Project” but published in the same collection: “My mission is to gather intelligence, so I went to the dumpster. There! Exactly what I was looking for. I washed it first before putting it on, it looks good on me. I’m not afraid of polyester. I’m not afraid of mixing prints. This is not a mere shirt. This is evidence.” (92) The City’s response to the remnants the poet and the people she observes consider and use is quite different. On December 31, 2001, for example, she notices “Parking lots cleared out by city, a 2-wheel plastic cart, big, on its side, garbage not trash in the bitter cold” at the corner of Houston St. and the Bowery (36). In “Bum Stash: Early 21st Century,” she document the clearance and reuse of the same lot over a span of months. At first it serves as a community garden, but when she sees it in early May 2001, “the lot had been emptied by the police/city who put up a new fence and padlock, took down the trees and crops, and replaced the soil with gravel.” Later, “in secret,” she notices “a man with magenta hair, adding
objects he found on the street” to a makeshift home he has constructed on the lot. The city clears the lot again on May 25, 2001. (24-25)

There is nothing magical or curative in a homeless man piling up discarded shopping carts and broken exercise equipment in an empty lot. The clearance of the lot, like the emptying of the dumpster in “Gumball,” protects the health and safety of the larger community. Nevertheless, the poem and “The Bowery Project” as a whole preserve useful data about everyday life on the Bowery and comprise an intriguing aesthetic and epistemological experiment. As it relates to the longer story of urban planning in the neighborhood, however, “The Bowery Project” is problematic. By challenging what is widely understood to be a paradigmatic success of community-based planning, Coultas calls attention to the contradictory nature of the neoliberal city. The Cooper Square Development Committee’s success in preserving low-income housing over five decades testifies to the continuing ability of community groups to affect city-wide planning decisions. Its assent to a public-private development project involving a large percentage of market-rate housing suggests the intense pressures of economic growth. Coultas’s careful approach to the knowledge embedded in mundane objects and marginal people embodies important principles of progressive planning.

Published twenty years apart, Anne Winters’s The Key to the City (1986) and The Displaced of Capital (2004) convey a different kind of firsthand knowledge, documenting the adjacency in New York City of conflicting realities: social mobility for educated white professionals, globalized luxury for financial elites, and crushing poverty for immigrants, racial minorities, and poor people. The narrowly observed lyric narratives in both collections expose conditions of injustice in the City and identify structural causes. Like Coultas, Winters criticizes the contradictory effects of neoliberal urbanism, at times implicating herself and readers in its processes. Her critique, however, is grounded in a Marxian conception of class conflict and draws on everyday experience for the terms of its analysis. By utilizing beautiful and complex language to explore the urban consequences of uneven development,
seggregation, and privatization, the poems open a “breach of idiomatic decorum” readers must reconcile in order to make sense of the persistence of injustice (Chiasson np). As a conclusion to this section, I focus on three poems: “Two Derelicts” and “The Ruins” from *The Key to the City* and “A Sonnet Map of Manhattan,” a fourteen poem sequence from *The Displaced of Capital*. In each, Winters arranges the elements of the urban archive, including memories, observations, and rubble, in a cohesive, if at times disorienting, critique of the neoliberal city.

In “Two Derelicts,” Winters reflects on the survival practices of homeless people in New York City by contrasting their “tacit / sense” of respect for one another and the city’s physical environment with the “vertigo” of her own experience of privilege (7). The poem combines two encounters, one when the poet is a student at NYU and the second after she has finished her doctorate (at Berkeley) and attained a professorship. In the earlier encounter, a passerby dressed in a “thin-striped, cheap green suit” confronts her as she steps over a man lying on a Bowery sidewalk:

> . . . The moment I mean
> my legs had just callipered a stale bundle
> with a face my eyes jerked away from, red porous mound
> in brown twiggery, two green ropes of snot.
> . . .
> But what set its seal on that step,
> that stockingless, sneakered step of mine,
> was the angry word a fat man spoke
> who suddenly appeared. Cheeks blotching, voice shaky—‘How can you, just step over a man like that on your way to school?’ (He must’ve seen my books.)
> (5-6)

Attire distinguishes the three individuals’ positions: Winters, in sneakers, is confidently mobile, or as she puts it earlier in the poem, “euphoric / with student poverty (the traveller’s / unconscious I’ll only be here once)” (5); the man who confronts her is stable but struggling, a wearer of cheap suits who draws his identity through rules of decorum; and the man on the sidewalk is an almost inhuman object. They are upper, middle, and lower class and though they make different use of the city, they are all
implicated in its injustices. Winters objects to the man’s rudeness, “He’d no right / to ask me that,” but she accepts his critique of her behavior. That both of them could carry their lives “unfractured past that smoking, falling life” without providing assistance is an indictment of the whole community, an indication that what they share in the city sits at “some right / angle to the real” where callousness is the norm (6).

Part of the attraction of the poem, and also a weakness, is the sense of guilt it induces. Most city people have walked past a homeless person without offering help. But the core of “Two Derelicts” is the analysis Winters lays over the narrative. Reflecting on the experience years later, she compares the emotional distance she kept from the poor people on the Bowery to the insidious logic of neoliberalism. Addressing herself to the “apartment towers and awnings of Fifth Avenue,” Winters observes that the city’s built environment conceals injustice:

As somebody said once, New York
is everything that is the case: the rich
up there, me here, these scavenging; you’re free
to do—whatever you do do, in this city.
Those buildings, for example: I used to wonder
what jobs people had, who lived there, did anyone ask them?
No. The point is, nobody stopped them . . .

(7)

Wealth insulates individuals from having to justify their behavior according to broader principles. But being free “to do—whatever you do do,” in other words, having individual autonomy, means different things for people with differential access to resources. Holding aside the “derelicts” in the poem, the green-suited man bears the weight of this contradiction. He takes pride in working hard but recognizes in the moment he sees the poet stepping over the man on the sidewalk that his opportunities are more limited than hers. His rudeness toward her, she concludes, shows a deep anger:

. . . The fat man
the more I think, he must’ve worked
down there. And wouldn’t he, carrying himself to work
or home fat and tired past the red-ringed
eyes, the weakly hugged pints of witch hazel, feel
how day and night all roads lie open, hate
them, hate the passersby too, at last
lash out at barelegged me?

(7)

While the man cannot see the lie “all roads lie open” for what it is, he feels, viscerally, the conflict between his self-perception and the visual cues of his neighborhood. His sense of justice arouses him to confront the poet but does not extend to the larger structures that constrain his life. Exploring diverging points of view, Winters invites readers to consider their own complicity in the circumstances she describes.

“The Ruins” questions landlords’ decisions to abandon rather than maintain apartment buildings in the Bronx, East Harlem, and Lower East Side during the 1970s. Quotations identified as originating in *The New York Times* set the scene: “Some streets might have ceased to be part / of the city. No police, fire protection; TB everywhere; heroin; in three blocks / studied by the Times the chance for a normal death / for anyone is one in twenty” (21). A young black man explores the rubble of a newly collapsed building on one of these streets. At the beginning of the poem, Winters characterizes his expression as “furious, inward, fixed,” an attitude that recalls the postures of the Young Lords and other participants in the “Loisaida” movement. “[I]nnerness and the street / begin to converge” in his confident defiance but also in the discarded furniture that litters the sidewalk in front of the site. While landlords are able to reap insurance benefits if buildings were made to “seem to fall from within,” their tenants are left exposed. Some tenants organized, as I discuss in chapter 4, but a larger number were displaced.

Winters draws attention to the interrelatedness of poverty and wealth in Manhattan by noting the proximity of the feral streets the young man travels and the luxuries of the Upper East Side on the City’s subway and street grids.

So Heaven and Earth have put their hands to the work
that holds this boy, and holds him on this block. Not one
light swerves of thousands outbound on the East Side Drive, or reflected
in the shady vitrines of Madison, of Park; ten minutes
on the A train from air-conditioning, residential
towers still half I-beams, the endlessly pinwheeling brush-
points of A Starry Night, and can not one of these
banks of incandescence cast a lightline to these ruins?

(21-22)

The young man’s “fixed” position provides a counterpoint to the rest of the City’s constant motion. Since
“capital itself (they say) has fled the city,” both at the level of individual decision-making and through
the federal disinvestment in urban programs characteristic of neoliberalism, no “lightline” of
intervention is forthcoming for him or fellow residents (22). Indeed, as Harvey explains in Rebel Cities,
disinvestment in cities and in particular neighborhoods of cities has long been a correlate of
development in other neighborhoods and in the suburbs (49-53). Since neighborhoods like the one
Winters depicts have little leverage in these cycles, he continues, “the economy of dispossession of
vulnerable populations is as active as it is perpetual” (57). Along with predatory and discriminatory
housing and real estate practices, poor communities also face higher costs for food and other basic
needs and financial and legal services (53-57).

The pressure point in “Two Derelicts” is the moment when Winters reconsiders her perception
of the green-suited man’s indignant question. Reflecting on his likely position and trajectory within the
City’s larger economy, she concludes that the question was motivated by the man’s anger about his own
immobility rather than by genuine moral outrage at her behavior. In “The Ruins,” a second description
of the young man exploring the building collapse serves a similar purpose. It serves as the poem’s final
stanza:

Expression: obscure now, lid-glistening, as if
you’d tried to seal yourself into something
separate, and when this is denied a flatness
comes into the human face. Yet it’s only the armor
of outside, still inlaid with its useless and lovely
uniqueness of inside. Almost you weep, taking arms, and one day
one source of your street cool will be this tear
spread without depth or relief over the whole eye.
Nothing has changed in the scene except Winters’s account of the young man’s expression. What she characterizes as “furious, inward, fixed” early in the poem becomes externalized, an “armor” of “street cool” that provides protection but also reinforces injustice. The young man is doubly affected by the neoliberal practice of neighborhood abandonment. Deprived of a safe and secure place to live, he insulates himself from emotional involvement in the everyday. He is a surface on which the poet and readers alike can project their distaste for the consequences of the urban crisis and their fears about the city’s future. It is an uncomfortable conclusion. Though the poem conveys a sophisticated critique of the spatial effects of neoliberalism and a prescient concern from the psychological condition of vulnerable populations, as in “Two Derelicts,” Winters invites readers to join her at a distance from the scene. We are near the ruined building, close enough to see tears forming in the young man’s eyes, but we are not members of his community nor are we participants in an allied social movement. Rather, we simply watch the scene play out and experience empathy or anger or sorrow through the poet’s pointed descriptions.  

The fourteen poems of “A Sonnet Map of Manhattan” situate the physical and social realities of the City in relation to abstractions, such as money, housing codes, zoning laws, and electronic surveillance, that constrain residents’ everyday lives. Ranging from Wall Street at Manhattan’s southern tip to the base of the George Washington Bridge near its northern extent, the sequence combines observations of injustice and Winters’s memories of growing up in a Village tenement to show how
conditions of life in poor neighborhoods are changing as a result of the rise of neoliberalism.

“MacDougal Street: Old-Law Tenements” provides a baseline:

We’re aware in every nerve end of our tenement’s hand-mortared Jersey brick, the plumbing’s dripping dew-points, the electric running Direct, and on each landing four hall-johns fitted to the specifics and minima of the 1879 Tenement Housing Act. We live in its clauses and parentheses, that drew up steep stairways and filled the brown airwells with eyebrowed windows. . . . .

(45)

If life in the building is uncomfortable, it is also predictable and domestic. Tenants know each other and what to expect when the radiator gives out in the winter or a roach falls from a crack in the ceiling. The “clauses / and parentheses” of the housing code protects them, modestly, from the varieties of dispossession with which the young man in “The Ruins” contends. Winters reports in another poem how, when she was fourteen and living in another neighborhood, the “city’s indifference drew me. / Curb-balancing on my sneaker arches, still and late / on Broadway, then strolling south for hours . . .” (51). Her comfort in the city reflects its condition in the late 1940s and early 1950s, not yet in crisis and still committed to working class neighborhoods.

While memories of this period linger in the streets, conditions change by the 1970s when the poet is an adult. In “First Avenue: Drive-In Teller,” Winters contrasts the concrete precariousness of making a utility payment at the last possible moment with the bizarre impersonality of the procedures of banking. “It’s one half hour till Bank Wednesday—last day / for my monthly payment paid, though not in a car, / in the line of this East Side drive-in” the poem begins, placing the poet on foot in the drive-through teller lane (48). The pneumatic tube she uses to submit her payment and the isolation she feels from the teller are disorienting. Added together with the “gray security / lens, angled towards license
plates” over the poet’s shoulder, they make what is on the surface a routine experience into a “strange transaction” (48). Winters extends her exploration of the dehumanizing effects of the kinds of financial practices that take root in poor neighborhoods in a description of a check cashing window in another poem, “One-sixty-fifth Street: The Currency Exchange.”

Here money takes on more palpable form, moist bills and coins counted out on linoleum sills. It’s July on Broadway, and the Exchange is a 12’ by 12’ storefront whose transom sports one outspread, sooted handprint. (52)

Passing money to the Exchange’s cashiers involves more human contact than sending it through a pneumatic tube, but the community’s presence in the space is ghostly, “one outspread, sooted handprint.” This is perhaps not surprising in view of the intrusive and patronizing form of surveillance Winters documents in the next three lines: “FOR YOUR CONVENIENCE AND SAFETY / YOUR TRANSACTION WILL BE PHOTOGRAPHED / by a bullet-headed, cyclopean rod” (52). Relinquishing a percentage of their incomes to the Exchange because they are otherwise “bankless,” customers, including Winters, are marked by the “warning-red / envelopes” they carry for “phone bills, electric; for these are those who pay, / always, on the final, disconnection day” (52).

The mood of “One-sixty-fifth Street” is much bleaker than that of “First Avenue” or “MacDougal Street” and so is the social and physical condition of the neighborhood. Fourteen miles from Wall Street, it is further from the engines of the City’s economy and from the minds of its elite. Underserved by diminishing public services, community members are pulled into Harvey’s “economy of dispossession,” relying on predatory private entities and the market to satisfy basic needs. The final poem of Winters’s “Sonnet Map,” “One-seventy-fifth Street: The Scout,” associates global finance and neighborhood drug-dealing. Implicit in the poem, as in the sequence as a whole, is a conviction that Wall Street’s “spires and balustrades” (41), Lincoln Center’s “cantilevered mezzanine, underlit, // stipple-eyed in its stoles and fur tippets” (49), and the “spike-fenced junior high” on 175th Street “in a neighborhood whose sewer is
crumbling” (54) are interlinked consequences of the same processes and practices. They exist in their current states as a function of citywide and larger-scale decisions about investment vs. disinvestment, provision of public services vs. privatization, and community development vs. economic growth. The second half of the poem provides a concrete example:

The beeper. Phone booths by the spike-fenced junior high

in a neighborhood whose sewer is crumbling, where last week tuberculosis was diagnosed; the money flows from the bridge to the streets below. Our stoopfronts sprout silhouettes with baseball caps—the signifying angles, colors, the passwords. And on the stoop front, the watching profile and elliptic, archaic, smile of the ten-year-old scout.

(54)

The presence of the “ten-year-old scout” on the stoop front is a direct consequence of absence of the neighborhood from the City’s regular economic circuits. Since it has been bypassed by some markets, it has been integrated into others, with drug-dealing emerging in place of lawful exchange.

Winters’s observations are pointed and her critique of what is happening across Manhattan has explanatory power. The intricate poems of “A Sonnet Map” interrupt readers’ expectations of aesthetic harshness to match the City’s social and physical conditions. The gap between Winters’s language and the subject matter of her poems, the “breech of idiomatic decorum” the poetry opens, to return to Chiasson’s words, underscores the seriousness of the injustices she exposes. Winters consolidates her accumulation of community knowledge about systematic inequalities into a focused critique of the neoliberal city. If the personal reminiscences in her poetry and backward-looking orientation suggest a private reading experience rather than the coalescence of an activist public, her rigorous attention to the City’s interconnectedness and her exposure of techniques of dispossession in poor and minority communities models a commitment to advocacy.
Poetry, Waterfronts, and the Urban Commons

I started thinking about the project that became City Poems on a visit to the Brooklyn Promenade in the spring of 2010. Looking across the New York harbor to the downtown skyline, I saw major construction underway on the Brooklyn waterfront. Large mounds of earth appeared where I had remembered warehouse structures and industrial piers. Five years later, Brooklyn Bridge Park is tremendous. It curls around the edge of Brooklyn from the Manhattan and Brooklyn Bridges at the north to the terminus of Atlantic Avenue at the south. Though still unfinished, the park already has more amenities than most many public spaces in New York City: playgrounds, grassy areas, running and walking paths, boat launches, beach volleyball courts, grass and stone amphitheaters, to name a few. While the park restores public access to the waterfront and is seemingly well-used, it is also expensive and exclusive. Developed through a public-private partnership, it is a prime example of the contradictory processes and outcomes of neoliberal planning: the privatization of decisions about public space, the promotion of physical solutions to urban problems, and the increasing primacy of the goal of economic growth. A recent email promotion for One Brooklyn Bridge Park, a luxury residential development within the park’s boundaries, touts “an 85-acre backyard,” as if the park itself were a private amenity. With studio apartments priced at $600,000 and a five-bedroom apartment under contract at $6 million, it is clear that the park is attracting wealthy buyers.

In the final section of the chapter I compare the development of Brooklyn Bridge Park with the contemporaneous redevelopment of the Los Angeles River. While the former has been built according to the principles of neoliberal governance, the latter is a prominent example of large-scale progressive planning. Initiated by the poet Lewis MacAdams in the 1980s, the redevelopment of the Los Angeles River has progressed in small stages over several decades through the efforts of a loosely-affiliated coalition of community groups. MacAdams’s three-volume poem The River chronicles the varieties of activism that have centered on the river. It has served since the project’s founding to “fortify us all
against impatience and frustration and cynicism,” as MacAdams explains, while simultaneously insisting on community-centered vision of the river’s future (“Restoring”). Continuing MacAdams’s commitment to ensuring the river plays a positive role in residents’ lives, the *Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan* (2007) includes enhancing neighborhood access to the river and engaging communities in future planning efforts among its core goals (2-5). The creation of Brooklyn Bridge Park during the same period followed a different process. Initially conceived as a public resource, the park is controlled by a public-private partnership and its operating costs are funded by payments in lieu of taxes from private real estate developments located within its boundaries. By contrasting the neoliberal logic of Brooklyn Bridge Park with the community-based coalition politics of *The River*, I argue that city poetry can serve as a conceptual urban commons that communities and planners can draw on in developing and enacting alternative visions of the urban future.

Brooklyn Bridge Park’s chief designer Michael Van Valkenburgh claims that the park represents “a new kind of park-making—an act of transformation rather than preservation” that combines “park programming, innovative marine engineering adaptations, and shifts of scale—plus a bold design—to bring the [site] into a new balance with the colossal scale of the surrounding man-made” (quoted in ASLA). A leading practitioner of ecological urbanism, an approach to urban design that combines methods of landscape architecture, smart growth, and sustainable urbanism, Van Valkenburgh describes his primary goal for Brooklyn Bridge Park as transforming the abandoned waterfront into an urban commons, a place “where people feel embraced, welcomed and comfortable” (quoted in ASLA). He compares the role of a visitor interacting with a park’s design with the role of a reader making meaning from poetry:

As with poetry, a landscape requires the reader to want to be a participant, to add the important part of experience to the realization of the piece. That is a different kind of writing—and reading—than a novel . . . In a landscape often you don’t know where the boundaries or the
edges are . . . and not knowing that is part of what you take advantage of if you are a good landscape architect. (Amidon 16-17)

Like Glaeser’s claims for the “triumph of the city,” however, Van Valkenburgh’s vision of a dynamic and engaging park elides important components of its design. In particular, it submerges the history of the site’s development and the decades-long conflict over whether it would be used as a public amenity or a tool for promoting economic growth. Further, Van Valkenburgh’s conception of the park’s design addresses a particular kind of visitor, one willing to experience its “colossal scale” while not knowing exactly “where the boundaries or edges are.” In what follows, I outline the trajectory of the park’s development and situate public response to its design and implementation in relation to the goals of neoliberal and progressive planning. I argue that despite Van Valkenburgh’s technical and aesthetic achievements, the park represents a transfer of a public resource into private control and an intensification of the surrounding neighborhood’s economic inequalities.

Brooklyn Bridge Park sits on land that New York’s Port Authority offered for sale in 1984 after the downtown Brooklyn waterfront had ceased to be an active port. With its unparalleled views of the Manhattan skyline and the Brooklyn and Manhattan bridges, the site was viewed at the time as a “remarkable piece of real estate” with vast potential to transform the economic future of the borough of Brooklyn and the city as a whole (Lyons R7). Developers proposed mixed-use projects for the site, emphasizing its attractiveness as a location for private residences, especially for financial services executives with offices in downtown Manhattan, and for a hotel and convention center that would draw visitors and businesses to the city from across the region and the country. In the context of the neoliberal turn in urban policy, the waterfront emerged in public discourse as a tool for generating economic growth—something the city as a whole could use—rather than as a place for specific kinds of activities or a public resource—something individuals could use.
In 1989, the Port Authority tentatively accepted a proposal from developer Larry Silverstein to build a hotel, offices, shops, restaurants and marina at the waterfront (Dunlap B4). Activists and officials from Brooklyn Heights, a wealthy neighborhood adjacent to the site, opposed the sale on the grounds that Silverstein’s buildings would interrupt the neighborhood’s landmarked views and change the character of the area for the worse. Through the intervention of close allies of then Governor Mario Cuomo, the Port Authority cancelled the sale in 1992 and, after further negotiations, transferred control over the site to the state’s Empire State Development Corporation (ESDC) (Tabor B3). As part of the transfer agreement, the ESDC invited groups opposed to private development at the waterfront to provide guidance as to what kind of development would be acceptable. The Brooklyn Bridge Park Coalition published thirteen principles for development in late 1992, including a requirement that future plans encourage “certain uses to produce revenues committed to the operation and maintenance of dedicated park and open space areas and contribute to project development costs” (FEIS 1-23). The requirement effectively merged the project of building a public park with redevelopment for economic growth. The ESDC established the Brooklyn Bridge Park Development Corporation (BBPDC), with members appointed by the mayor and governor from among the city’s business and government leaders, to steer development of the park according to the Coalition’s principles in 1998.

In the same year the ESDC became involved in plans for the downtown Brooklyn waterfront, the New York City Planning Commission published its first Comprehensive Waterfront Plan. The Plan identifies a conflict between the priorities of “commerce and recreation” along the City’s waterfronts and proposes to “balance competing interests” by interspersing growth and public-space oriented development (2). The Comprehensive Plan identifies four categories of existing waterfronts: the “natural” waterfront, “comprising beaches, wetlands, wildlife habitats, sensitive ecosystems and the water itself;” the “public” waterfront, including “parks, esplanades, piers, street ends, vistas and waterways that offer public open spaces and waterfront views;” the “working” waterfront, “where
water-dependent, maritime and industrial uses cluster or where various transportation and municipal facilities are dispersed;” and the “redeveloping” waterfront, “where vacant and underutilized properties suggest potential for beneficial change” (3). The language used to describe the “redeveloping” waterfront stands out: it is a place where “beneficial change” might be encouraged while the other types are described as static entities. Included in the “redeveloping” category, the downtown Brooklyn waterfront is identified as a possible site for “housing, mixed uses, recreation, open space, and marina development” (129). Like the Brooklyn Bridge Park Coalition’s principle of encouraging private development to fund operations, the Plan links public benefits and private development by suggesting that “expanded public access to and along the waterfront will result from the conversion of manufacturing-zoned land to residential and mixed uses” (63).

Prepared as a follow-up to the citywide Comprehensive Plan, the 1994 Plan for the Brooklyn Waterfront proposes an alternate vision of the site, envisioning “public access in a parklike setting with enlivening activities” (70). Recommending a “phased, adaptive reuse strategy,” the Brooklyn Plan emphasizes that the site is a publicly owned resource and insists that it offers an unparalleled opportunity for the creation of a “public waterfront of regional significance” and predicts that “transforming the area primarily for public use and activity would create a gateway to the waterfront and provide a focal point for waterfront public access and recreation for much of Brooklyn – especially the northern part of the borough which has relatively little parkland” (82-83). The Comprehensive Plan’s recommendations for mixed-use development took precedence in the BBPDC’s planning process.

By the time the BBPDC released its Master Plan for the park in 2005, the debate over redevelopment at the waterfront had shifted from conflict over the inclusion of private development within park boundaries to discussion about the kind of private development that would be the most efficient means for generating revenue to sustain the park’s operations. An editorial in The New York Times explains the situation: “The goal here is for Brooklyn’s waterfront to become a real public
treasure, not a private development with a few token patches of public space” (“Selling Brooklyn Bridge Park” S13). Though opponents of the Master Plan argued at the time that residential and hotel uses overload the park with “elements that don’t belong in a public park” (Ravitch C11), the BBPDC concluded that “the inclusion of housing is the most efficient means of making the proposed park financially self-sustaining” (FEIS 1-23). As Angotti contends, “the basic problem with developer-driven planning is that the entire policy debate revolves around the developer’s proposals, not around a plan that is based on what is best for the neighborhood and city.” When a project like Brooklyn Bridge Park begins from developers’ proposals, he argues, “community organizations are diverted away from pursuing plans that will meet their needs and instead toward negotiating over a developer’s plan” (222). This is exactly the trajectory of the planning of Brooklyn Bridge Park. The Port Authority positioned the downtown Brooklyn waterfront as a blank slate for redevelopment when it offered the land for sale to private developers in the 1980s. Public debate over what would be built at the site since that initial offering has centered on a compromise between plans to spur economic growth, on the one hand, and plans to enhance public benefit, on the other.

According to the BBPDC’s Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS), the neighborhoods surrounding the park are experiencing increasing incomes, housing values, and rental rates and “a trend towards development of market-rate and luxury housing.”77 As such, the report concludes, “the housing that would be introduced by the proposed action would represent a continuation of an existing trend rather than the introduction of a new one” (3-13). While other sections of the FEIS indicate that the park is intended to “welcome all New Yorkers and serve a diverse population,” the language used to describe potential socioeconomic effects suggests that wealthy users from nearby neighborhoods are the park’s target audience (1-5). Living in or near the park and visiting it are, of course, two different things, but

77 The FEIS describes Van Valkenburgh’s complete vision for the park. I refer to it throughout this section. Additional documentation, including the most recent version of the General Project Plan, is available at <http://www.brooklynbridgepark.org/pages/project-approvals-and-presentations>.
the former influences the likelihood of the latter. Even though considerable space in the park will be dedicated to recreational uses such as playing fields, it is not unreasonable to follow the FEIS in concluding that the park will have less appeal for lower-income visitors from outside its immediate area. The park will be a good fit for the neighborhood, as the FEIS suggests, because it will encourage use by high-income and creative-class workers who will contribute to local and citywide economic growth.

Architecture critic Nicolai Ouroussoff describes the park’s completed sections as an intellectual and aesthetic achievement. “What gives the park a truly contemporary sensibility,” he reports, “is the way Mr. Van Valkenburgh connects his design to the surrounding city and its infrastructure” embracing “the grittier elements of the city” and celebrating “the underpinnings that support them” (C23). In Ouroussoff’s view, the park is meaningful and important because of the way it echoes and engages the bridges and skyline to its north. In this way, the park converts visitors into spectators. As a reviewer for the New York Daily News observes, “as a visitor’s perspective shifts, the view of the city changes with it” (Sheftell 1). While casual visitors and tourists might share this enthusiasm for contemplating the view, it seems unlikely, for example, that a large family would feel comfortable setting out a picnic in their midst. Setha Low, Dana Taplin, and Suzanne Scheld caution urban planners and designers to devise park designs that welcome a wide range of users. While “vernacular uses” are rarely noted in official park descriptions, they play a crucial role in sustaining “the social and cultural life of parks” and contribute “an unexpected vitality that energizes formally designed parks” (35; 199). Low and her colleagues argue that restrictive aesthetics and directive programming, such as the manicured paths and historically resonant building materials at Brooklyn Bridge Park, restrict “vernacular uses” such as “outings, get-togethers, picnics, [and] sports and games” as well as “excessive drinking, exuberant park play . . . and loud, rowdy behavior” (21; 35; 53). Such limitations and the use of “polite, upper-class [design] idiom” send a message to poor people and people of color that “the landscape [is] exclusive—something for others” but not for them (199).
Unlike the development of Brooklyn Bridge Park, the redevelopment of the Los Angeles River began in communities. Familiar in popular culture, if not by name, as the setting of the race Danny Zuko wins in the movie version of *Grease*, as well as the apocalyptic battle scenes in *Terminator 2*, the river was paved in the 1930s to reduce flood risks. Functioning as the “world’s largest storm drain,” it protected the city, but it also “disappeared from public consciousness” for decades until a poet, Lewis MacAdams, and three artist friends began to advocate for its restoration in 1986 (FoLAR). MacAdams and the organization he founded, the Friends of the Los Angeles River or FoLAR, raised the river’s profile through thirty years of clean-up projects, art installations, and public relations events. Recognizing the efforts of organizations such as FoLAR, TreePeople, the Arroyo Second Foundation, and the Trust for Public Land, among others, to “raise public and private awareness of the River’s potential, and to sponsor and implement revitalization projects, including pocket parks, landscape improvements, and water quality treatment areas,” the City of Los Angeles initiated a planning process for the river’s full revitalization in 2005 and issued a *Revitalization Master Plan* in 2007 (1-6). While the Plan is not void of neoliberalism’s influence, the fourth of its four organizing principles is “Create Value,” it is notable for defining the river as a public resource and emphasizing the roles of communities in its future restoration. As a catalyst and sustaining force for a progressive planning process, MacAdams’s poetic and activist engagements with the river demonstrate the power—and perhaps the obligation—of urban communities to invent and reinvent urban places.

Social ecologist Anne Taufen Wessells argues that MacAdams’s three-volume poem, *The River*, provides both a record of community planning in action and a test case of the possibility of a “place-based, visceral” alternative to neoliberal planning techniques (550). An “ongoing performance” and “forty-year art project,” the poem functions as a conceptual urban commons, the kind of shared

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78 MacAdams chronicles “The First Los Angeles River Art Walk” in poem I.18 and describes the “Gran Limpieza” clean-up efforts in poems II.5 and III.38.
resource Harvey and Angotti suggest is necessary to ground and sustain successful community action (MacAdams, “Restoring”). *The River* is useful as an example of progressive city poetry for two reasons. First, the poem documents the everyday realities of the Los Angeles River rather than rendering it as an abstraction or relying on impossible visions. In so doing, it invites readers, as Wessells explains, to “physically, personally experience” the river’s possibilities, in other words, to inhabit in the present a future version of Los Angeles that includes physical and conceptual access to the river (549). Second, the poem consolidates perceptions, experiences, and community-based interventions in an activist critique that is equal parts analysis and action. It records strategies and turning points of FoLAR’s struggle to convince city leaders to take seriously the needs and desires of communities on the river’s edges and charts MacAdams’s personal investments in the river’s future. Further, drawing on a variety of knowledges about the river, the poem offers a model for integrating critique, politics, and action, as in Marcuse’s critical planning model, in order to reorient public perceptions and create momentum for positive change.

MacAdams challenges popular representations of the river in “To Artesia,” a poem from Book II. Acknowledging that the river has historically exerted a powerful draw on the city’s imagination, the poem presents it as a contested site. MacAdams’s sexist characterization of the river as a “rigorous mistress” notwithstanding, the poem’s overlaying of contradictory views suggests the possibility of new characterizations of the river’s place in the larger geography of the city and region.

I think of the river
the way it reads in the
Sam Shepard story,
*Cruising Paradise* –
a “huge concrete serpent,”
a “dumping ground for murder victims.”
I think of the river beside a freeway off-ramp as
roller-bladers, bent into it,
spandexed buttocks rotating,
roll downstream. I think
of William Mulholland’s
“gentle, limpid stream”
coursing from a Pharaoh’s forehead
or from the brow of a Rhine-maiden,
green-eyed and coffee-colored,
a bracelet of drowned children
wrapped around her wrist, descending
from the mountains east of Irwindale
into the jardin des rocas. The river
is a rigorous mistress,
but when you tickle her
with your deeds, you can hear laughter
from beneath her concrete corset.

(II.29)

Three visions of the river are at odds here: Shepard’s noir nightmare, Mulholland’s early 1900’s boosterism, and MacAdams’s banal, sexualized rollerbladers. Equally vivid, each vision proceeds from a different set of interests and speaks to different audiences. Shepard, as Mike Davis explains, is a playwright and screenwriter whose main subject is the persistence of crime at the city’s margins. Focusing on neglected sites, he exposes the consequences of Los Angeles’s fascination with the Hollywood fantasy world through descriptions of physical and moral decay (92). Mulholland, by contrast, was chief engineer of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power from 1886 to 1928 and promoted Los Angeles in this role as a desirable destination in order to garner federal support for infrastructure projects such as the Hoover Dam (Dear 104-5). MacAdams cuts across Shepherd’s and Mulholland’s visions with his own view of the river from behind the steering wheel of his car. His offhand comparison of the river with a “freeway off-ramp,” and, by extension, with Los Angeles’s notorious traffic, suggests that their utopic and dystopic visions are equally exaggerated.

The key moment in the poem is the enjambment of the third- and second-to-last lines: “The river / is a rigorous mistress, / but when you tickle her / with your deeds, you can hear laughter / from beneath her concrete corset.” By placing the grammatically unnecessary phrase “with your deeds” at

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79 For a sympathetic history of Mulholland’s influence, see his granddaughter Catherine Mulholland’s William Mulholland and the Rise of Los Angeles.
the end of a line, MacAdams invests the idea that the river laughs at men’s attempts to impose their will on it, already implicit in the scene, with added intensity. A provocation to the reader, “with your deeds” refers back to and recasts Shepard’s and Mulholland’s hyperbolic visions as actions taken toward the river that have affected its present and future. Constituting a “concrete corset” the river wears or has been forced to wear, their visions limit residents’ experiences of it. MacAdams further counters Mulholland’s and Shepherd’s limiting visions of the river in a poem from Book III: “We all worship / the river in our own ways, some with stale tortillas / from the Salvation Army, others / with degrees in landscape architecture / from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo” (III.14). As Sandercock would insist, these lines equate experiential and technical knowledge. The intervention works in both directions, indicating that while impromptu picnics and “landscape architecture” both represent applications of insight about the river they also involve some measure of irrational “worship” of its possibilities.

Like MacAdams, the Revitalization Master Plan contrasts negative perceptions of the river with alternative visions. For example, in a section that outlines a “Community Planning Framework” the Plan notes that “many residents who live near the River have expressed concerns for security along the River, as there is both real and perceived crime in some areas” and proposes that redevelopment of industrial sites along its banks will “bring a new level of connectivity, amenity and value” to city neighborhoods (8-3). Though a subsequent paragraph warns that redevelopment “could potentially add” to pressures toward gentrification and displacement, the Plan’s language in this section veers uncomfortably close to the discourse of decline Beauregard indicts in his critique of urban renewal politics (8-3). MacAdams’s

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80 In the “Implementation” chapter, the Plan acknowledges that concerns about “increasing prices and land values [causing] the displacement of people who currently rent, own, or work at properties near the River” were raised frequently in public meetings during the planning process (10-4). It recommends the “participation of existing communities and employees” in redevelopment projects and region-wide consideration of the “gentrification consequences of major public investments” as strategies for reducing this risk of displacement (10-5).
descriptions of similarly disused areas in *The River* contrast the *Plan’s* association of the city’s physical and social conditions:

> Whether it’s ugly or beautiful,  
> poisoned and imprisoned,  
> or flooding fresh and free,  
> the Los Angeles River  
> will always flow;  
> and lovers will always walk  
> along its banks holding hands;  
> and people who have no homes  
> will make it their homes,  
> washing their ragged garments  
> in the concrete inverts,  
> dwarfed by the desert  
> of downtown concrete,  
> going about the business of their lives.

(looking upstream  
from the 4th St. Bridge)  
(I.25)

As the poem suggests, much can be seen looking north-northwest from the 4th Street Bridge today: ugliness, the destruction of nature through industrial processes, danger, romance, and the excesses of capitalism. The cramped language in the second and third lines, “poisoned and imprisoned, / or flooding fresh and free,” leads dramatically to a focal point, the determined affirmation of the fourth and fifth lines that the “Los Angeles River / will always flow.” MacAdams’s multivalent descriptions make visible the different uses it enables: a walking path, a no-man’s land, a dangerous drainage. Given these layers of meaning, the poem suggests, it is incumbent upon residents to consider the river’s past, present and future, and perceptions of it that predominate, in determining what actions will be taken toward it, whether, for example, it will become a freeway, as a city politician proposed in 1990, or a publicly accessible recreational site.81 Though it seems to exist on the margin, in MacAdams’s view, the river is a permanent feature of the city’s geography. In fact, its marginality serves the poet as a place of critique:

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81 MacAdams cites his angry public response to the possibility of the river being converted into a highway as FoLAR’s “First Breakthrough Into Public Consciousness” in Book One (I.19).
the neighborhoods along its banks near downtown are not just some elsewhere within Los Angeles; they are an inverse of the cityscape, evidence of the city’s failure to serve vulnerable populations.

MacAdams situates *The River* in relation to a wide range of midcentury American poetry, including the work of Lorine Niedecker, Gary Snyder, and Ed Sanders. Most prominently, he uses lines from Williams’s *Paterson* as epigraphs to Books One and Three. The lines that begin Book Three come from a section of the poem in which Williams compares the complex emotions of falling in love with the rush of the Passaic River over the Great Falls. The lines he borrows for Book One come from Williams’s “Preface”: “To make a start, / out of particulars / and make them general, rolling / up the sum, by defective means” (I.1). Proposing a poetics of observation, Williams’s notion of constructing a whole representation of the city of Paterson “out of particulars” shares a commitment to deliberation and argument with Davidoff’s advocacy planning. Though he generalizes in *Paterson* from the particulars of his experience, Williams recognizes that his means are “defective” because his interests are limited. No matter how much material he accumulates, he will only be able to produce one out of a number of possible poetic cities. Since, as Davidoff explains in his landmark article, “Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning,” “a city is its people; their practices; and their political, social, cultural, and economic institutions as well as other things,” planning processes can only truly serve communities if they involve multiple interests and the articulation of competing alternatives (202). Adopting this idea as a guiding principle for the final book of *The River*, MacAdams takes up a listening posture. As he explains in “THE VOICE OF THE RIVER,” the final poem of Book Three, advocating on behalf of the river has required him to listen to a considerable range of unfamiliar sounds:

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The high-pitched chi and the endless meetings,
    always one or two more,
    the laptops clicking, the TMDL’s,
    the BMP’s, the RFP’s, the SSO’s and
    the UAA’s; the murmuring bureaucrats, the sharp
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82 See chapter 1 for a discussion of the limitations of Williams’s vision of Paterson.
Through it all, he continues, his listening has been oriented toward one purpose, a purpose he shares with community planners following the progressive models described above: “to make my own hearing more acute” (III.40).

FoLAR has achieved considerable progress since its founding in 1986 toward its goals of restoring the river’s natural habitat and increasing public accessibility. In part, the work has progressed through the forging of alliances with other individuals and groups, such as the editors of High Performance magazine (I.18), the Urban Creeks Council (II.5), and the members of the American Rivers conference (II.18). As Wessells argues, the success of the movement FoLAR initiated is as much a credit to MacAdams’s and other activist’s pursuit of imaginative reconstruction as it is to their organizing skills. Their work, she explains, represents an intervention in urban watershed management that is “less an exercise in near-term structural governance reform than a long-term call to social-ecological creativity for the watershed’s artist-citizens” (550). In recognition of this dimension of the community’s engagement with the river, the Revitalization Master Plan articulates a goal of “enhance[ing] the use of art along the river” as way to encourage residents to “understand, celebrate, and participate in honoring the [river] and its significance” (5-36). MacAdams identifies a similar principle at work in himself when, looking back on twenty years of activism in “RIVERBOY: ‘THE MASK,’” he writes: “I built this river—/ not with my hands, / but with my imagination” (III.37).

As founder of FoLAR and the initial “Voice of the River,” MacAdams embodies the power of imagination and activism, vision and action, in concert, to change the shape of urban places. The River and the community activism it documents represent the fulfillment of a promise MacAdams and his fellow activists made in 1986 when they visited the river for the first time. Cutting “through the fence beside the / 1st Street Bridge” to reach the river’s bed,” they stood in its dry center, imagining deer,
herons and steelhead trout where they saw merely pavement. As MacAdams explains in “The Founding of Friends of the Los Angeles River”: “This must have been / one of the most beautiful places // around here, once—“ but “Now there are railroad tracks / on both banks of the river, three freeway / bridges—the 10, the 110, and the 5—cross it” (I.16). The presence of maintenance workers repaving the riverbed gives MacAdams’s poetic retelling of this first visit a particular urgency.

Since cement is just inverted riverbed,
they have to re-pave it. Today there’s thirty guys with jackhammers, leveling
the river
ahead of an airport runway paving machine.

It makes an unholy clatter,
so we address ourselves to the river.

We ask if we can speak on its behalf
in the human realm.

We can’t hear the river saying no
so we set to work.

(I.16)

MacAdams’s activism begins from the same place as his poetry, in dreams, drama, and imagination. Like Coultas and Winters, he watches and listens for the deeper resonances of his experiences in cities and develops a critical poetics from his encounters there. Proposing a river where others saw only the “world’s largest storm drain” is a political act: the creation of a conceptual urban commons. Like the progressive approaches to urban planning advocated by Angotti, Marcuse, Sandercock, and others, The River couples an audacious goal, improving a city’s quality of life by remaking its social and physical geography, with a radical technique, challenging and transforming a city’s conception of its possibilities. Joining poetry and progressive action, MacAdams and other advocates for the Los Angeles River have maintained community control through a combination of imaginative and practical activism.


MNS Real Estate. "Re: One Brooklyn Bridge Park - Only a Few Stunning Units Left!" Promotional message received by the author. 2 May 2003. E-mail.


William Carlos Williams Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. 01 December 2014.


