TextFrame: Cosmopolitanism and Non-Exclusively Anglophone Poetries

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TextFrame:
Cosmopolitanism and Non-Exclusively Anglophone Poetries

by Michael Scharf

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

TextFrame: Cosmopolitanism and Non-Exclusively Anglophone Poetries

by Michael Scharf

Advisor: Ammiel Alcalay

This project proposes a replacement for some institutional-archival mechanisms of non-exclusively anglophone poetry as it is produced under racial capitalism and archived via its universities and grant-bearing nonprofits. The project argues specifically for the self-archiving of non-exclusively anglophone poetry, and by extension of poetry, in a manner that builds away from US-dominated, nationally-organized institutions. It argues that cosmopolitanist norm translation, as advocated by various critics, can function as part of a critique of institutional value creation used in maintaining inequalities through poetry. The US-based Poetry Foundation is currently the major online archive of contemporary anglophone poetry; the project comprises a series of related essays that culminate in a rough outline for a collaboratively designed, coded, and maintained application to replace the Foundation’s website. Whatever benefit might result, replacing archival mechanisms of racial capitalism while remaining within its systemic modes of value creation is at best a form of substitution: it is not an actual change in relations and not a transition to anything. Doing so may, however, allow greater clarity in understanding how poetry is situated within US-based institutions, beyond the images and values that poets and critics in the US often help to maintain.

Chapter one, “‘Indianness’ and Omission: 60 Indian Poets,” reads the anthology 60 Indian Poets, published in 2008 in India and the UK (with US distribution), as argument about the contours of Indian Poetry in English and about the contours of India’s relations in the world. It relates Rashmi Sadana’s work on the meanings of English in India to decisions made within the anthology, and look further at Pollock’s conception of cosmopolitanism and vernacularity, particular as it applies to the Indian North-East and the poetry of Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih. The second chapter, “Archival Power: Individualization, the Racial State, and Institutional Poetry” engages Roderick Ferguson’s concept of
archival power to explain the 2015 “crisis” within contemporary US poetry driven by practitioners of conceptual poetry, and an attempted archival act with regard to the Black Lives Matter movement. The chapter ends with a fragment of Alexis Pauline Gumbs’s recent account of US university life as experienced by Black artists and scholars. That chapter is followed by “The Poetry Foundation as Site of Archival Power,” which extends Jodi Melamed’s critique of US university value-creation mechanisms to Poetry magazine and the Poetry Foundation’s website. It argues that the Poetry Foundation functions as a de facto arm of the US university system as outlined in the previous chapter, and aids in capitalist value-creation. “TextFrame: An Open Archive for Poetry,” the fourth chapter, is an attempt to begin thinking a replacement for current mechanisms of archiving non-exclusively anglophone poetry. The fifth chapter, “Narayanan’s Language Events as Free-Tier Application,” documents work imagined for TextFrame, as an application, that has actually already been built: the poet and scholar Vivek Narayanan adapted Robert Desnos’s Language Events for the classroom using a variety of discrete free services, and the present author collaborated with Narayanan in creating a stand-alone Web application.

Chapters six, seven, and eight function as case studies to be used in creating templates for providing context to specific poems within any built application. Both of the specific moments covered transmogrify the “anti-psychological.” The sixth chapter, “An Unendurable Age: Ashbery, O’Hara, and 1950s Precursors of ‘Self’ Psychology” thus argues that an anti-psychological ethos is developed in Ashbery and O’Hara’s poems of that moment. It shows that Frank O’Hara’s “Personism: A Manifesto” (1959) is almost certainly a parody of Gordon Allport’s theory of Personalism, of related strands of 1950s American psychology, and of the poetry that developed alongside them in the 1930s. It follows other critics in looking at midcentury conceptions of schizophrenia as a specifically homosexual disease, and argues for the importance of contemporarily published examples of schizophrenic discourse, particularly those of Harry Stack Sullivan. It argues that Ashbery’s poem “A Boy” can be read as directly engaging those ideas, and opposing them. The shorter discussions follow consider the affinities that Some Trees has with anti- or a-psychological theories of mind that were being developed at Harvard and MIT at the time that Ashbery and O’Hara were in Cambridge, including generative

The last two chapters take up two corollaries, or theoretical concerns that fell out trying to think a cosmopolitanist application. The first, “Why Not Reddit?” examines existing commercial cosmopolitanist solutions for some of the functionality proposed for the application, and reasons for rejecting them. In doing so, it discusses Thomas Farrell’s construct of “rhetorical culture” in detail, and traces a theory of communication and authorship within a community, particularly with regard to thinking history. The last chapter (and second corollary) is titled “Ethos in Pedagogy as a Limit on Norm Translation.” It establishes the Aristotelian concept of ethos as a pedagogical limit for norm translation. The study’s governing interest is not the conflicts or differences between practitioners or tendencies that are detailed here, but their relative incomprehensibility of those differences outside of their formative contexts.
Acknowledgements

This dissertation owes everything to the work of the writers discussed here; all errors are my own.

Rashmi Sadana’s pathbreaking study on the meanings of English in India forms the basis of chapter one, which extends her analysis to a specific moment in poetry. Chapter two relies particularly on work by Ken Chen, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, John Keene, Tricia Low, Reginald Shepherd, Juliana Spahr, Heriberto Yépez, and Stephanie Young. The scope of their work on the issues discussed far exceeds the fragments excerpted here. Vivek Narayanan’s work is presented in chapters one and five, but Narayanan’s ideas and comments have affected and enhanced the argument throughout. That is also true of poets and critics whose work appears here briefly or doesn’t appear here at all: Rodrigo Toscano’s *Partisans*, *Platform*, *To Leveling Swerve*, and *Collapsible Poetics Theatre* remain crucial in revealing poetry’s place within current forms of imperialism. Anne Boyer’s poetry and critical writing, particularly *My Common Heart* and *Garments Against Women*, think through the limits of *ethos* and imagine new cooperative forms in ways that I hoped to emulate directly; Boyer’s advice regarding this project also proved decisive. Wendy Trevino’s *Cruel Fiction* is foundational to the main argument, and allowed the analysis in chapter two to develop as it did. Trevino’s Twitter feed, @prolpo, continues to educate me in anti-racist and anti-capitalist work, history, and thinking, and in the unbridgeable gaps between writing and struggle. As I note in the introduction, if I were starting again on this project, it would be in part with the work of these poets. John J. Kim read and commented on chapter seven, and Ivan Kreilkamp read and commented on several draft chapters; I have silently incorporated their many improvements, and, I hope, over the years, in very different ways, their sensibilities. This is also true of Sandeep Prasada, who provided difficulty, and, also as always, clarity. Jennifer Wolfe’s copy of the Allen *Selected* is where I first read Frank O’Hara. Sami Badawi set up the read-eval-print loop that resulted in my being able to think and write an application. Gwenne and Ray Celmer, of Hovelton Manor, offered inspired conversation and hospitality at a particularly difficult moment of composition and revision; ongoing literary and military-historical dialogue with Ray Celmer informs the argument as a whole. That is also true of Douglas Rothschild, who kindly slows his rate of information processing and patiently unspools his thought at my baud. I want to thank Ammiel Alcalay, whose sharp generosity and whose own work around some of these issues made my second return possible; Matthew Gold, who
recognized previous and existing links, and provided many new and further ones; and Wayne Koestenbaum, whose patience with the analysand is only exceeded by lightning insight whose poetic reflections continue to illuminate. I’m truly grateful. Meena Alexander read a very early draft of chapter one and suggested Sheldon Pollock’s work, transformatively. There is work here that I did for Louis Menand, whose conception of literature’s functions informs the project as a whole. The 20th century that from Joan Richardson I learned to see is here, as are David Richter’s 18th, Bill Kelly’s 19th, and Angus Fletcher’s 16th, 17th, and 21st. I am still always repeating Ann Lauterbach’s explications, and it would not be an exaggeration to say that Stephanie Burt taught me to read poetry for intention, that Brian Kim Stefans tried to teach me to be cool, or that Joshua Clover walked me to the (actual existing) limits of poetry. Work included here has appeared in very different forms in Boston Review, Coldfront, Jacket, Shark, and Sustainable Aircraft. I want to extend grateful thanks to two people I have never met in person: Kamailang Nongmalieh commented on chapter one and prevented several errors of fact; Simon Waxman at Boston Review commented on, and made edits that improved the argument of, a portion of chapter one. This thesis is dedicated to Mildred Freiman Scharf. It would not have been written without Lauretta Lakyrkhumai Syiem.
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1 Conventional full written dissertation (PDF), including static illustrations

2 Endpoints for currently deployed “Language Events” application (described in chapter five):

   The question / answer language event:

   The if (or when) / then language event:
   - http://desnos.herokuapp.com/some-random-id/if-then/add
   - http://desnos.herokuapp.com/some-random-id/if-then/combine
   - http://desnos.herokuapp.com/some-random-id/if-then/show

Any string can be substituted for “some-random-id”; it is the means by which a discrete “event” is created. See chapter five for further instructions.

3 Screen captures of current deployment (and fragments under development)

   - language_event.mov
   - parse.mov
   - xlang.mov

A set of Quicktime movies documenting the work described in chapter five. The first movie documents the “If-then” language event, but both language events—question/answer and if/then—work exactly the same way: only the prompts are different. The fragmentary parse! app is basically a sentence-diagramming tool, and the xlanguage application is a kind of translation prompt; both are explained further in chapter five.

4 Code and other deliverables

The contents of three separate Github repositories at the time of deposit, for the Language Events (aka “desnos”), parse!, and xlanguage (or “cross-language”).

   - https://github.com/scharfmn/desnos
   - https://github.com/scharfmn/parse
   - https://github.com/scharfmn/xlanguage
List of variables

The following variables are in use in the Language Events app:

EVENTS The main configuration variable for language events. Key-value pair that allows adding of two-box events. The key is a string; the value is a dictionary containing the names and ordering \((a, b)\) of the two individual textboxes, and the overall title (or “prompt”) text for the event.

EVENT_TITLE_TEXT A constant for use in choosing the configuration. Forces the developer to use the variable for a key rather than risking mistyping. Used in the EVENTS key-value pair config to designate the prompt text.

FLASK_APP An environment variable that should be set before local testing. Allows Flask to run locally from a chosen location. See the Flask documentation for more information.

FOR_DESNOS_ONLY An environment variable that should be set before deployment. Used to set the Flask app’s SECRET_KEY.

REDIS_URL An environment variable that should be set before deployment of the Web application. Provides the deployed Flask app with the address of the Redis key-value store, which is used to store the texts for the individual language event instances as they are created.

SECRET_KEY A variable required for the Flask app’s security. It is set via the environment variable FOR_DESNOS_ONLY. A default is also provided for testing.

TEXTBOXES A constant for use in choosing the configuration. Forces the developer to use the variable for a key rather than risking mistyping. Used in the EVENTS key-value pair config to designate the title text for each textbox.
Glossary of functions

The following functions are in use in the Language Events app:

**Python/Flask**

add_to_cache_on_post  Takes input from the user via textbox POST request and stores it in the Redis key-value store according to the following variable values: the request, which contains the user’s input, instance_id which is a unique string used to designate a particular instance of a language event, and an event_id, which is one of the prompt-sets from the EVENTS config.

combine  One of the three application endpoints, GET only. It takes retrieves the input as stored and sends it back to the template for combination and presentation.

retrieve_instance_data  Database access function that calls Redis for the correct instance and language event, and packages the data into valid json. If there is missing input data, sends canned ‘test’ data instead.

show  One of the three application endpoints, GET only. It takes retrieves the input as stored and sends it back to the template for presentation grouped as is.

text_input  One of the three application endpoints. It presents the textbox inputs on GET, and stores the user input in Redis on POST.

**Javascript**

anonymous [desnos.html]  Function for dynamically presenting text in couplets at timed intervals.

anonymous [event-base.html]  Cut/paste function from the Bootstrap documentation to validate user input to the textboxes. Checks for valid input on submit.

copyToClipboard  Stores whatever is currently onscreen into the clipboard so that the user might paste it into a document.

shuffle  Randomizing function adapted from stack overflow that combines the input texts in a pseudo-random manner.
A note on technical specifications

All three applications included here are Python 3-based Flask applications on the backend. On the frontend, all require the Bootstrap framework (https://getbootstrap.com), the jQuery framework (https://jquery.com), and the Font Awesome set of fonts (https://fontawesome.com), which are installed via various content distribution networks that are hardcoded onto the respective hypertext markup language files. Except where noted, the library requirements are installable by typing $pip install -r requirements.txt after changing to the repository directory.

The Language Events application is contained within the desnos repository included here. The application requires a Redis server to be installed and running (https://redis.io), and for the Redis url to be provided to the application via the environment variable REDIS_URL. The application has a very small memory footprint; it should not require a machine with a large amount of RAM. The repository includes a “Procfile” for deployment on the Heroku platform (https://www.heroku.com), as well as a Dockerfile and Docker-compose.yml for deploying both the application and Redis via Docker container (https://www.docker.com). The Procfile has been tested and used in the existing deployment on the Heroku free tier. Redis can be added to Heroku applications via the Heroku admin dashboard; see the Heroku documentation.

The parse! application requires the spacy.io natural language processing library (https://spacy.io), which can be difficult to install in some environments as it has a Cython (Python-syntax C) component, and many Python library dependencies. I have not attempted to include instructions for installing spacy.io or to include a Docker container or Dockerfile for a properly configured environment; it’s currently a very large set of files that seems to preclude a strictly free-tier deployment in line with the project’s goals as outlined in chapter five, including easy and free deployment. The parse! application itself is fragmentary and still in development. I have included a demonstration of the existing functionality; the code is included here for reference only.
The xlanguage (or “cross-language”) application similarly has a large set of dependencies, but its dependencies are lists of lexemes from various languages: basically a list of vocabulary items. I have taken them from the ubuntu 12.04 LTS distribution (https://ubuntu.com), where they are used, I believe, for spell-checking; ubuntu is an open source platform, and I have used the files for research purposes only. I have reformatted the source text, and the resulting files are installed into memory automatically by the application on startup as long as the file structure in the repository is maintained. Note that one set is latin-1 encoding and one is utf-8; Python handles them slightly differently. xlanguage as an application is in a working but still incomplete state and is still under development; the code is included here for reference only.
Introduction: Cosmopolitanism, Archival Power, and Poetry

This project proposes a replacement for some institutional-archival mechanisms of non-exclusively anglophone poetry as it is produced under racial capitalism and archived via its universities and grant-bearing nonprofits. The project argues specifically for the self-archiving of non-exclusively anglophone poetry, and by extension of poetry, in a manner that builds away from US-dominated, nationally-organized institutions. It argues that cosmopolitanist norm translation, as advocated by various critics, can function as part of a critique of institutional value creation used in maintaining inequalities through poetry. The US-based Poetry Foundation is currently the major online archive of contemporary anglophone poetry; the project comprises a series of related essays that culminate in a rough outline for a collaboratively designed, coded, and maintained application to replace the Foundation’s website. Whatever benefit might result, replacing archival mechanisms of racial capitalism while remaining within its systemic modes of value creation is at best a form of shitty substitution: it is not an actual change in relations and not a transition to anything. Doing so may, however, allow greater clarity in understanding how poetry is situated within US-based institutions, beyond the images and values that poets and critics in the US often help to maintain.

Just as it constrains people’s movements, the nation-state organizes people’s work and arts, actively working against attempts, via shared language or other transnational commonalities, to abstract away from it. In this sense, “global” always means “nationally-organized” and “transnational” means poetries that are distributed and read transnationally (or not), with the nation always remaining an inviolable containing construct in terms of production and reception. The nation, rather than “anglophone” or any other language-based abstraction one may imagine, is the top-level affiliation available to anyone writing non-exclusively anglophone poetry. Poetry is subject to more constraints than capital. People are too.
A nation is a kind of super-corporation. Nations organize property rights and relations, including resources and labor. They do so by defining and enforcing exclusions, using borders, which, along with systems of citizenship, define who does and does not have “rights” within a nation’s jurisdiction. That is what the poet Wendy Trevino calls a *Cruel Fiction*. Nations have militaries for enforcing sets of relations and interests that operate above, and are superordinate to, false and distorted historical and genetic narratives related to place and to origin. In their very real fictions of separation, nations make use of and manipulate what Benedict Anderson calls *Imagined Communities*, people’s ideas about who they are and who they are not in relation to others. What underlies them is not “imagined” in a conventional sense; it is internalized and wired in. Internally, nations have police to protect property and sets of normative practices drawing on these narratives using racist violence; externally, they enforce borders using racist violence. Internally, prisons isolate those to whom a nation tacitly does not grant rights under its system of relations. Through courts, prisons extract free or undercompensated labor from those they isolate. In the US, those imprisoned are disproportionately Black. Mass incarceration is a direct form of the “afterlife of slavery” (Hartman). The US, founded on slavery, continues to depend on Black labor extracted using racist violence.

At the same time, literature continues. Its production and its reception can be separable, with writing happening sometimes from within relatively different sets of relations to those that come to define a work’s meanings. Within the US, reception is generally a regulated spectacle. It is regulated within universities, which work to maintain an imagined political horizon, which is tacitly, and often explicitly, capitalist. The process of reception by which authors like Arundhati Roy or Toni Morrison appear within a “world republic of letters” (Casanova) is a process whereby a work, as a commodity, is made to seem “authorized less from its relation to the market,” and authorized more by its expressive function, treated as if it “does not have a relation to the market” (Spahr, Du Bois’s Telegram 15). That form of reception reflects “art’s anomalous, incomplete, and paradoxical commodification” whereby it is “brought into capitalism as something that is independent from capitalism”¹ in what Spahr calls a “complicated half-in, half-out relationship” that “gives literature the autonomy to provoke, to speak truths to power” (ibid 16).
The production of the “world republic of letters” is a cosmopolitanist process. Nations generally create relatively insular literatures with inevitable-feeling logics by conditioning production via expected reception. Finished works are subject to reception for much longer than they are to production, and reception can be subject to different constraints than is production. Seeming-not-to-have-a-relation to the market is a form of reception. In reception much more than production, perspectives get universalized, or detached, from poetries and literatures (or not) by a process that often gets called cosmopolitanism, imbricated within racial capitalism.

Racial capitalism is capitalism; capitalism assigns value via race. “The process of racial capitalism relies upon and reinforces commodification of racial identity, thereby degrading that identity by reducing it to another thing to be bought and sold” (Leong). It’s a pervasive systemic (aka “structural”) process that “displaces measures that would lead to meaningful social reform” because of the impossibility of operating outside its fine-grained set of values and its mechanisms for calculating and assigning them (ibid).

When used as descriptive adjectives for authors, nations implicitly (or explicitly) signify or beg rhetorical resolution of (in terms of demanding that ambiguous signification be resolved) race: “American” resolves to “US” resolves to default “white.” Hyphenations specifying origin-points of emigration (forced or otherwise) or background make race at once operative and finally “illegible” (Ferguson). National histories, as they are produced by people working within institutions and archives and then internalized by people, are at once formative, usually wrong, and essential to poetry as we know it within racial capitalism. They are literature’s origin stories, assigning values, via race, illegibly.

Many non-exclusively anglophone poets across the world know one another or one another’s work; many teach in universities; possibly all communicate electronically, often across multiple borders. At the same time, nations are the top-level signifier and institution of modern literatures, the thing to
which every “American” poet refers, and the thing that makes “American” a bad synecdoche for “US.”
When Jack Spicer (who was very invested in his US racism) referred to a “practice of outside” (Blaser)
he did not mean that one could actually use poetry to destroy a system of value-creation that is
enforced with state violence. He meant proceeding, as a practice, as if one could operate outside of
systemic value creation, even though poetry is always inside of that system. It turns out the practice
doesn’t work.

To take one recent example: conceptual poetry was actually correct in sensing the redundancy of poets
in writing poetry that maintains and reinforces state-based forms of inequality, but wrong in its
adhesion to the US institutional market as arbiter, which ended up killing it in the US. Conceptualism
said that it was simply repeating back to the culture-at-large what it had produced, which also wasn’t
true. Conceptualism “exceeded its self-understanding” (as Hal Foster said of Surrealism) by
reproducing structures of domination in ways that were finally fatal to its reception in the US. Chapter
two looks at the mechanism by which that happened.

Working life within poetry’s institutions themselves, whereby US universities and nonprofits reproduce
real inequalities, is well-documented and theorized by scholars including Sara Ahmed, Roderick
Ferguson, and Jodi Melamed. My intent is to extend their analyses to the archiving of poetry, adding to
recent work by poets writing as critics including Ken Chen, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Juliana Spahr
(particularly the extensive work on nationalism in Du Bois’s Telegram), and Heriberto Yépez. The
current archival mechanisms for poetry reproduce real inequalities in ways detailed throughout the
first three chapters. Chapter one, centering on contemporary Indian poetry in English, uses
cosmopolitanism and the norm translation to reveal conventionally illegible forms of value creation.
Chapter two, on the mechanisms of the conceptualism “crisis,” looks at conceptualism’s attempted
preliminary archiving of the Black Lives Matter movement via “archival power” as described and
theorized by Roderick Ferguson. The third chapter builds on Juliana Spahr’s work detailing the origins
and purpose of the Poetry Foundation, and proposes an application to replace it. The chapter outlines
a non-exclusively anglophone poetry archive, called here, generically, TextFrame, that can be built
and run as a collaborative or distributed project. If building a collaborative archive turns out to be a bad idea, however, i.e. if it seems like it will make things worse, or that it will get immediately co-opted into capitalist value creation like everything else, then it should not be built. Either way TextFrame, as proposed, will have served its purpose.

Nation-state-created value in poetry is in tension with some global non-exclusively anglophone poetries that, in some subsets, discursively oppose both the nation and capitalist value creation. The internet, still nascent, has pieces in similar bordered tension. It is this tension that, following a number of critics, I will be calling cosmopolitanism. It runs through language as it runs through locale. I am using the term “cosmopolitan” as a subordinate term to “postcolonial.” Cosmopolitanism has specific resonances I want to engage, but its use may be an incorrect decision. I am not trying to elide continuing colonial violence or colonial economic relations in any way by using the term cosmopolitanism. Movement or discursive appearance within a bordered, policed world under the sign of a dominant language—always in tension with “vernacular” languages—is cosmopolitanism.

The borderless internet was always chimerical (Goldsmith and Wu); it is curtailed and policed in myriad ways, including (and not benignly) paywalls. To use the terminology of Sanskrit scholar Sheldon Pollock, English, as the dominant language of the internet and of nominally (if not wholly) US-centered capitalism, is a major, and specifically cosmopolitanist, dominant language. Arabic as cosmopolitanist dominant remains operative over much of the sphere to which it was taken beginning in the 7th century CE, with local languages, such as Adyghe and Bajelani, functioning as vernaculars. At the time of its dominance and within its sphere of influence, Latin was a cosmopolitanist dominant, and English, German, Italian, and Spanish were vernaculars. At the time of its dominance, Sanskrit was a cosmopolitanist dominant, and Javanese, Kannada, Malayalam, Marathi, and Tamil were vernaculars. Spanish is a cosmopolitanist dominant in Mexico, Central America, much of South America, and elsewhere.
In trying to limit its signification to language, however, the term cosmopolitanism becomes euphemistic. Spanish and French are spoken widely as a legacy of Spanish and French colonialism; those languages, whose use is enforced by violent systems of oppression and extraction, are still cosmopolitanist dominants. English was brought to the US as a result of colonialism on the same genocidal mission. Cosmopolitanism as we know it is a violence-enforced, post-colonial, client-state cosmopolitanism. Despite this, and despite their histories, the valences of dominant cosmopolitanist languages are not, now, always negative for their speakers working within colonialism and its continuing settlements, and can, ironically, be a bulwark against nationalist vernacularity. (This point is the focus of the first chapter.)

For poets, the major form of cosmopolitanism works through the “rhetorical culture” of global non-exclusively anglophone poetries. In the coinage of philosopher Thomas Farrell, a rhetorical culture is “an institutional formation in which motives of competing practices are intelligible, audiences available, expressions reciprocal, norms translatable, and silences noticeable” (1). Global non-exclusively anglophone poetry communities together form a rhetorical culture. Its contours and practices are still coming into focus. Poets, while often subject to censorship or surveillance, can communicate, make appearances, and even give readings across borders without having to travel (though the major form of this last kind of appearance is through circulated videos of events, rather than two-way live streaming). A premise of this project is that the process of solidifying this para-institutional culture, fraught as it is, out loud, in the open, should be supported, another belief that should be subject to critique. Either way, global non-exclusively anglophone poetry, as cosmopolitanist, has glaring gaps with regard to Farrell’s definition of a rhetorical culture: there are missing translations of norms that are, in fact, translatable; unnoticed silences that are, in fact, noticeable; and currently mutually unintelligible competing practices that are, in fact, mutually intelligible. The gaps remain formidable. I will give one introductory example, that of a particular poet’s reception.
Despite his preeminence within Indian poetry in English, relatively few poets in the US know the work of Adil Jussawalla, or have a sense of the terms under which his great long poem *Missing Person* operates.\(^5\) *Missing Person*, published in 1974, describes the vectors in play as the speaker returns from years living and working in England to (what was then still officially) Bombay. Like *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* thirty-five years earlier, it is the great ex-ex-pat poem of its era. In trying to telescope emergent post-colonial Indian society through the title persona, the poem’s speaker finds that his sensibility—and his English—offend: “You’re your country’s lost property/ with no office to claim you back./ You’re polluting our sounds. You’re so rude.” He continues channeling voices and registering atrocities (“childbrides bundled to a knot/ childbirth a bleeding bag”), as echoes of “The Waste Land,” “Howl” and other precedents add ironies: “You see,/ we’re *Das Capital*, a dried-up well/ and a big *Mein Kampf*. Also.”

Jussawalla’s lack of recognition in the institutional US feels of a different order of magnitude from, to take a generationally comparable example with relative parity across other terms, the lack of mainstream recognition of J.H. Prynne, whose work also relies on knowing particular histories and circumstances to be fully decodable. While Prynne’s work may not be actually read in the US, he shows up frequently enough on US syllabi, and he was the subject of a *New Yorker* profile: national profiles signal the poet’s acknowledged value within the US without anyone having to read the work.

Jussawalla, who is arguably a much more important poet, and who has had a much more compelling life and career, is also not read widely in the US, but has not been similarly profiled and taught. Prynne appears; Jussawalla does not. This may look like a matter of failed representationalism, and of racism. While racism is in play, institutional borders are too, in terms of who can play what role within archival institutions. And those roles are tied to narratives that are in turn tied to norm translation. For Prynne’s work in the wake of modernism, lots of paradigms exist in the US, and his context has been detailed within its criticism. The same is not true for Indian poetry in English and for Jussawalla. Significant and available norm translation would make competing practices (or perhaps complementary practices, since produced by differing conditions) intelligible, which would remove one obstacle to appearing (which is, despite its contradictions, probably a positive). Narratives and relations are
The problem of Indian poetry in English’s reception as a problem of norm translation involves an ignorance of Indian political and linguistic horizons, to name two formative limits; these remain largely obscure in the default US beyond the Attenboroughian horizon of Gandhi. There are many reasons for this, including racism, north-centric-ness, and west-centric-ness in the US—which is not to say that these things are not also present, in different forms, in India. To put it another way, poets in the institutional US, through curricula and generally read sets of critics, hold sets of background assumptions about US literary history, assumptions that, as an aggregate, while “improving” (“doing better”), are flawed and skewed white by default. Those curricula sometimes include some sort of model of later 20th century poetry in English from the English UK after Philip Larkin: the conditions that produced it, a few of the major figures who wrote it, what the reception generally was. The default for poets in the US is not to hold or be taught something similar for Indian Poetry in English, which is quite various in itself, at all. Directly related to this is the problem of norm translation. Failure of norm translation is the failure of criticism and/or criticism’s dissemination to explain the sources of competing and complementary practices. Released in 2016, Rosinka Chaudhuri’s massive edited collection *A History of Indian Poetry in English* is a resource that can help to change that. In the meantime, and as work continues, it’s a failure that creates unnoticed silences.⁶

The problem of norm translation is clearly framed by Dorothy J. Wang in *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* (2013). There, Wang argues that race is largely “unspeakable” in contemporary “American” poetry, and that it leads to criticism that fails to produce “sustained critical analyses that pay serious attention to both the literary and social properties of Asian American writing” (XXII). Wang here articulates major critical failures within the US in norm translation: the norms structuring poetry by Asian Americans, Wang argues, are often either being misarticulated not articulated at all. Wang likens criticism that does norm translation to doing sociology in order to get at historical and cultural differences.
The focus of *Thinking Its Presence* is on American poets of Chinese descent. As Wang clearly states, such silences are not limited to Asian American poetry as a category. The subject of Bishnupriya Ghosh’s *When Bourne Across: Literary Cosmopolitics in the Contemporary Indian Novel* (2004) is transnational silences in discussions of novelists of South Asian descent. In elaborating on the title of her critical study, Ghosh cites the “culture-specific notation of the migrant, one who is ‘translated’ when borne across *kala pani* (black water)” (Ghosh 14). Ghosh’s book argues for specific “capacities of the literary to translate local struggles” and calls carrying across “a cosmopolitan literary activism within... political limits” (ibid). Those limits are very real: in articulating the contexts of local struggles, one may participate in widening the discursive horizon, but one cannot change the structure of global racial capitalism with books or criticism. Ghosh is very careful not to conflate being borne across with structural change, or to argue that altering discursive limits does anything to alter economic or other material realities such as freedom of movement.

The kind of being borne across that Ghosh calls for and exemplifies in Ghosh’s own readings of fiction are analogous to what Wang accomplishes in the five paradigmatic chapters in *Thinking Its Presence* that do close readings. Those readings, of work by Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge, Marilyn Chin, Li-Young Lee, Pamela Lu, and John Yau, serve as object lessons in how to “pay serious attention to both the literary and social properties” of texts. In the theoretical chapter on “Aesthetics contra ‘Identity,’” Wang specifically points up “the minefield that awaits anyone, especially a minority scholar, who dares to invoke the term ‘identity’ (much less ‘race’ or ‘identity politics’) in a US context” (8). *Thinking Its Presence* has done a great deal to change that for poetry in the US within institutional contexts. (I discuss “identity politics” as a “highly contested” term (Haider) in the next chapter.) At the end of “Aesthetics contra ‘Identity,’” Wang suggests directions for further work, and looks forward to “the reframing and reconceptualizing—the genuine *rethinking*—of American poetry, down to its very historical and conceptual foundations.” That rethinking should allow, Wang argues, for “new forms of experimental minority poetry; scholars who have been trained to see no contradiction between ethnic studies and poetics, prosody and postcolonialism; and new digital technologies and possibilities” (47).
Other poets and critics have made complementary calls. Ghosh’s book offers a look at how cosmopolitanism works in fiction in a manner that can be extended to poetry. M. Jacqui Alexander’s Pedagogies of Crossing, which I discuss below, offers a framework for seeing processes of value creation that are intentionally rendered illegible. In a series of essays arguing that poetry as we know it must always be understood within capitalist production and value creation, Jasper Bernes, Joshua Clover, and Juliana Spahr look at the ways that poetry co-evolved with the nation-state as “a tool for the administration of [its] affairs.” They find that there is a very literal sense in which “poets really are the unacknowledged legislators of the world,” from Thomas Wyatt at Henry VIII’s court to Robert Frost reciting “The Gift Outright” at the Kennedy inauguration. Poets themselves know this, they argue: they point to “the legendary refusals and decompositions” of poets such as Dickinson and Oppen, who either did not publish at all or did not publish for prolonged periods. Those refusals “emerge largely as the consequence of the dawning awareness of [the] legacy” of discursively, if often unwittingly, legislating state affairs:

> Once poetry is defined as an explicit antagonism to this legacy — and to the official, sanctifying role that the poem might play in bourgeois society — the categories of poet and poem and poetry are animated by curious contradictions, like so many of the categories in capitalism. The vocation of the poet becomes self-destruction; the vocation of the poem, self-abolition. (Bernes, Clover and Spahr, Self-abolition)

As they note in a follow-up piece, “self-abolition” may be less useful as a term than realization: the realization of a new poetry that will come as by-product of structural change, of something beyond rethinking and beyond protest (Bernes, Clover and Spahr, Realization). If capitalism is to be abolished, either in confronting climate collapse or as an attempt at finding just forms of living or both, then its products, the nation-state (as a corporation whose campus is demarcated with borders) and the poetry produced within and often for it, must also be abolished.

Facilitating norm translation is about (or should be about) thinking the transition to post-racialist, post-nationally-organized, post-capitalist society. This document is a dissertation. I’m writing it as something responsive, or at least not harmful, to changes that people are actively trying to make. The proposed application, for example, should be designed to let the local struggles of non-exclusively
anglophone poetries be borne across clearly and without compromise. At the same time, the application, if it is ever actually built, must avoid reproducing current modes of settler-colonial domination, or inadvertently inventing new ones. That requires collaboration, from the very beginning, in planning and in implementation. If the application were to be centered around individual texts, for example, care must be taken to ensure that the ways in which local struggles are made legible do not harm those struggles. Cosmopolitanist norm translation takes place within actually existing reality, not just in discursive space, even in Ghosh’s sense of local struggle being borne across, and even when that struggle takes place within a cosmopolitanist dominant. To illustrate what I mean in saying “within a cosmopolitanist dominant,” I will turn to the work of a US-based poet.

When the poet Tongo Eisen-Martin is characterized as “a revolutionary poet who uses his craft to create liberated territory wherever he performs and teaches” (SFSU), it means at least in part that Eisen-Martin’s work creates a reproducible ethos of liberation: a set of determinate dispositions and actions given the circumstances under which it was produced, and within the contexts in which it is received (in the US or otherwise). Eisen-Martin’s work gives voice to particular struggles while having a vision of justice that can be extended to other circumstances. In order for the work to do this, the context, the local struggle, must either be lived, or it must be otherwise understood:

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another mayor puts his head on a pike
(one down is just one down)
but tell all this to the masses and your teacher
will pipeline you

they told me I was jewelry. They told me this was the jungle (well maybe not the jungle. More like fifty machine guns planted in the ground)

it’s raining faces again in California
(what does this say about heaven?
what does this say about the people
you have killed?)
```

(Eisen-Martin 66)

I could try to explicate this poem fragment to someone coming to it knowing nothing about Eisen-Martin, or about what Black life in the US entails when growing up as a poet and activist or otherwise, or little about continuing US colonialist state violence, the same violence on which the US was
founded. I could try to talk about how US schools enforce the racist values of the society at large, where Black lives and learning are literally worth less. I could try to talk about the history of smears of activists and organizers in the US, and about the ongoing executions of Black activists, and about how attempts at political organization are still met with violence in schools and almost everywhere else in the US, and about how singular removals of overtly racist actors from within government does not change the system of racial enforcements in place, particularly with regard to armed police. I could try to talk about how representational diversity can be used as a form of attempted co-optation, and about how attempts to reduce one to a token are a further form of attempted control. I could try to talk about the particularities of the history of California organizing, and about the rain of faces on fliers that alert people that more extrajudicial murders have taken place, fliers that also that call for those killed to be collectively mourned, often through action. All of that might help the speaker’s voice to be borne across outside and inside the US.

At the same time, putting the poem here in this dissertation actually deprives it of context in ways that negate any context I might add. Putting it here is an “archival” act, a means of draining the liberatory function from work by framing it within a structure, the university, that, ultimately, works to reinforce conditions as they are by assigning racialized values and setting institutionally-enforced limits on continued membership, which act to keep demands discursive. This is part of Roderick Ferguson’s concept of archival power, which is detailed in chapter two; it is the mechanisms of archival power as they pertain to poetry that it might be possible for this project, paradoxically, to partially address. To do so requires being clear about the project’s discursive horizon, what its scope is. To do that requires looking further at its theoretical bases.

According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “[t]he nebulous core shared by all cosmopolitan views is the idea that all human beings, regardless of their political affiliation, do (or at least can) belong to a single community, and that this community should be cultivated.” The less-nebulous core shared by all anarchist and communist views is also unequivocal on this point, but it has liberal forms. Theorist Seyla Benhabib recounts that “since the UN Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, we have
entered a new phase in the evolution of global civil society, which is characterized by a transition from international to cosmopolitan norms of justice.” Those forms, Benhabib continues, “accrue to individuals as moral and legal persons in a worldwide civil society,” while at the same time “their peculiarity is that they endow individuals rather than states and their agents with certain rights and claims.” That form of cosmopolitanism, which seeks to transcend the state via natural rights, is a branch of “rights-based” ethics. While these claims can be made discursively, however, they cannot be made on the ground by actual people with any real effect. The US border is one visible example of the violence of that fact.

Theorist Pheng Cheah writes that “cosmopolitanism and human rights are the two primary ways of figuring the global as the human” and that as such, they partake of a faulty, individualized discourse of the human. Cheah argues that the discourses that surround, protect, and legitimate forms of globalization, particularly the discourses of cosmopolitanism and human rights, fail to take into account the facts on the ground, meaning the actual ways in which people are not actually the “bearer[s] of dignity, freedom, sociability, culture, or political life.” “Bearers” is the important term here: Cheah does not mean that dignity and culture don’t exist, but that they are not intrinsic to people. The failure to recognize that fact “indelibly compromises, circumscribes, and mars the face of global human solidarities and belongings staged by new cosmopolitanist and human rights discourses.”

Cheah continues:

[I]f social-scientific solutions to the problems of globalization have always already pre-comprehended an idea of humanity as the bearer of dignity, freedom, sociability, culture, or political life, and therefore as an ideal project that needs to be actualized, the task and challenge... in relation to globalization may be to question this pre-comprehension of the human and, somewhat perversely, even to give it up.

The poets that I care most about are working, inside and outside of their writing, to give up this pre-comprehended idea of the human, and relatedly, of humanist cosmopolitanism. In its place is a vision of a borderless, police-less, prison-less world where the monopoly on sanctioned violence is not in the hands of the state, and all larger- and smaller-scale decisions about value are not made according to the profit motive. This is the kind of cosmopolitanism—the communist kind—that is the horizon for a replacement of current forms of archival power.
In relatively recent versions of postcolonial studies, as I noted above briefly, cosmopolitanism always involves physical mobility: people with relative freedom of movement traveling across nations and locales. “Cosmopolitans” are often figured in such studies as in opposition to those who live within a single, and often marginalized, set of norms and stay in a single locale, either by constraints on movement or means, or by choice. As travel becomes relatively easier for those with some means, working solely within a marginalized culture begins to acquire a purist valence within cosmopolitanist postcolonial criticism, one that elides class. Ghosh, drawing attention to this error, critiques theorist Arjun Appadurai’s opposition of “ethnic collectivists who lack the global imagination of the cosmopolitan, who, by contrast, relishes non-national nomadism and celebrates migrancy, hybridity, and mobility” (19). In contrast to Appadurai, Ghosh cites the critiques of Revathi Krishnaswamy and Aihwa Ong, who find such formulations of cosmopolitanism reflect the experience of “transnational elites” who “fetishize their marginality as migrants, while synchronizing the global flows that underpin the new world order” (ibid). Ghosh finds that the “endless troping of mobility, hybridity, travel, nomadism, and flexibility in postcolonial critical theory, despite all claims of resistance to oppressive political and economic regimes, finally serves to flatten structural antagonisms and make light of abiding cultural differences” (20). For Ghosh, that form of cosmopolitanism is not a critique of racial capitalism, and is correspondingly not reflective of any nascent movement to abolish it. And at this point, 15 years after the publication of Ghosh’s book, it is clear that, even for many artist-elites, nomadism is no longer a readily available possibility.

Ghosh’s vision of cosmopolitanism works at once to “interrupt” elite self-reproduction while at the same to reject “fetishistic localism” (ibid). Ghosh uses the terms cosmopolitanism and “cosmopolitics” to limn “the capacities of the literary to translate local struggles” and to attempt, again, “a cosmopolitan literary activism within the political limits” (14) of local struggles themselves. “Literary activism,” Ghosh is clear, is activism in a discursive sense only, and not transformative of structure. In its dialectic of the global and the local, Ghosh’s cosmopolitanism fits, at some points, with that of Sanskritist Sheldon Pollock, who writes against “what often seems to be the single desperate choice we
are offered: between, on the one hand, a national vernacularity dressed in the frayed period costume of violent revanchism and bent on preserving difference at all costs and, on the other, a clear-cutting, strip-mining multinational cosmopolitanism that is bent, at all costs, on eliminating it” (593). Pollock wants to “conceive of the practice of cosmopolitanism as literary communication that travels far, indeed, without obstruction from any boundaries at all, and, more important, that thinks of itself as unbounded, unobstructed, unlocated—writing of the great Way, rather than the small Place” (599). This is a form of the practice of outside, bolstered by “world republic of letters” forms of reception. It doesn’t work, but it thinks of itself as if it does, and the state encourages that thought by regulating reception. That encouragement is a big reason to be very careful when doing norm translation: non-nationalist vernacularity can work as a form of open secret. (I look at already-revealed ways that that historically has been so in the first two chapters.)

Pollock does not want to call individuals “cosmopolitanist.” He wants to “think about cosmopolitanism and vernacularism as action rather than idea, as something people do rather than something they declare, as practice rather than proposition (least of all, philosophical proposition)” (593). Pollock wants cosmopolitanism to be a lens that “enables us to see that some people in the past have been able to be cosmopolitan or vernacular without directly professing either, perhaps while finding it impossible rationally to justify either” (ibid). I will go further into Pollock’s cosmopolitanism and vernacularity in chapter one, but the terms, as I use them here, are meant to reflect the discursive side of postcolonial relations, of English as a globally dominant language that is in tension with other globally and transnationally-dominant languages (such as Arabic, French, Hindi, Mandarin, and Spanish) and with vernaculars (such as Diné Bizaad, Khasi, Oriya, and Xhosa). One goal in thinking cosmopolitanism and in building away from its capitalist institutions should be to make those tensions explicit and manifest. (I try to do that in the discussion of Indian Poetry in English in chapter one, and in the discussion of anti-psychological poetries in the US in chapters six, seven, and eight.)

Ghosh’s phrase—being “borne across”—immediately invokes the Middle Passage, the crossing into the holocaust of slavery and its colonial afterlives in the US and the Americas. The Middle Passage is
present in any form of cosmopolitanism that one might want to propose, US-dominated or otherwise.

M. Jacqui Alexander’s essay collection *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred* was published in 2005. In her introduction, Alexander outlines the collection as “a map of the various ways that practices of dominance are simultaneously knitted into the interstices of multiple institutions as well as everyday life” (4), resulting in “psychic products that fossilize deep in the interior, forcing us to genuflect at the altar of alterity and separation” (5).

Alexander continues:

> Physical geographic segregation is a potent metaphor for the multiple sites of separation and opposition generated by the state, but which are also sustained in the very knowledge frameworks we deploy and in the contradictory practices of living the oppositions we enforce: the morally consuming citizen versus the morally bankrupt welfare recipient; the patriot versus the enemy; the loyal citizen versus the disloyal immigrant; “us” versus “them”; the global versus the local; theory versus practice; tradition versus modernity; the secular versus the sacred; the embodied versus the disembodied. (5)

What I am doing, or what I think I am doing, is to propose means by which social formations around poetry, formations that form a larger rhetorical culture, might restrict or redirect certain forms of discursive service to state reproduction of inequality. Doing so might help the process of “making the world intelligible to ourselves,” as Alexander describes it:

> If hegemony works as spectacle, but more importantly as a set of practices that come to assume meaning in people’s lives (that is, the ways in which ordinary people do the work of the state and the work of war), then all spaces carry the potential for corruptibility. (5)

Alexander’s invokes “the power of the disembodied and the stories that those who forcibly undertook the Middle Passage are still yearning to tell, five centuries later” (6). While the resonances with Ghosh’s formulation strike me forcibly, those stories are not mine to claim or tell. I also do not want to build the StoryCorps for presenting them on NPR. What I want is to document some of the “practices of dominance [that] are... knitted into the interstices” of current poetry institutions, and propose a possible substitution for some of them. At the same time (again), I am not saying that doing so changes economic relations among people, or within or between states. It is at best a substitution. The best thing to do would be to evaluate it and reject it as such. Anything else might be a pressure valve. That is why this study should be subject to critique.
This dissertation is written in ten often relatively short chapters. The first five outline the cosmopolitanist background of and vision for the proposed application. The next three do a form of norm translation, via conventional literary-historical criticism. The last two develop corollaries that seem to fall out of the main argument.

Chapter one, “‘Indianness’ and Omission: 60 Indian Poets,” reads the anthology *60 Indian Poets*, published in 2008 in India and the UK (with US distribution), as argument about the contours of Indian Poetry in English and about the contours of India. There, I relate Rashmi Sadana’s work on the meanings of English in India to decisions made within the anthology, and look further at Sheldon Pollock’s conception of cosmopolitanism and vernacularity, particular as it applies to the Indian North-East. I look at the poetry of Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, which was omitted from the anthology, in doing so. The anthology seems to have been put together with the explicit aim of making Indian poetry in English something that operates transnationally. Despite its many strengths, it ends up tracing some familiar national contours in its explicit critique of “Indianness.”

The second chapter, “Archival Power: Individualization, the Racial State, and Institutional Poetry” engages Roderick Ferguson’s concept of archival power to analyze the 2015 “crisis” within contemporary US poetry that centered on what I argue was an attempted archival act with regard to the Black Lives Matter movement by practitioners of conceptual poetry. The chapter ends with a fragment of Alexis Pauline Gumbs’s recent account of US university life as experienced by Black artists and scholars.

That chapter is followed by “The Poetry Foundation as Site of Archival Power,” a short chapter extending Jodi Melamed’s critique of US university value-creation mechanisms to Poetry magazine and the Poetry Founation’s website. The chapter goes into some detail about the Foundation’s origins and current practices (already well-documented by Juliana Spahr in *Du Bois’s Telegram*), and into the potential functionality (and funding) of a replacement application. It argues that the Poetry Foundation functions as a *de facto* arm of the US university system as outlined in the previous chapter.
“TextFrame: An Open Archive for Poetry,” the fourth chapter, works to think a poem-and-text-centered application for non-exclusively anglophone poetry’s rhetorical culture, with an emphasis on providing a medium for norm translation and context-reconstruction. TextFrame, as an idea, is an attempt to begin replacing current mechanisms of archiving non-exclusively anglophone poetry, most prominently the Poetry Foundation website. The application should allow poets and readers to archive knowledge online apart from any particular nation-state or academic institution. It should approach the Freirean horizon of participatory learning from and through life experience without any necessary institutional affiliation. This is, for better or worse, an explicitly cosmopolitanist approach to thinking poetry and archiving, in that it seeks to at once represent local struggles while making them legible across different contexts, including dominant ones. Cosmopolitanism leads inevitably, within capitalism, to contradictions, and the application is a shitty substitution for what the Poetry Foundation is doing in terms of value creation.

A shitty substitution exchanges terms within a capitalist value loop in order to make an incremental gain, or potentially transitional gain, in avoiding conventional value creation, while failing to change the structure that is sure to compensate, sooner or later. Rather than structural change, that gain may act as a pressure valve, or it may help people think the tactics for the abolition of capitalism, or it may replace one bad set of practices with another bad set of practices. Whatever the temporary gains, without actual change, they will eventually be co-opted. The global non-exclusively anglophone poetry community somehow coming together to build a transnational archive would be an amazing thing. It would also be a substitution, in this case a substitution for the value creation mechanisms of the US-based Poetry Foundation. The substitution that I discuss in the most detail in chapter three has to do with open access for poetry and for scholarly publications.

The fifth chapter, “Narayanan’s Language Events as Free-Tier Application,” documents work imagined for TextFrame that has actually already been built. The poet and scholar Vivek Narayanan previously adapted Robert Desnos’s Language Events for the classroom using a variety of discrete free services. As
an experiment with free-tier applications (applications that can be hosted and run at a small-scale for free), Narayanan and I built a simple Flask-based Web application to make his classroom processes more seamless. It is browser-based, but optimized for mobile and desktop. Narayanan has used it in the classroom twice as of this writing. An appendix at the end of the project documents pieces of two other free-tier applications we are working on that are in a fragmentary but runnable state, with suggestions for further development. I imagine pedagogical tools of this kind to be central to the larger application, whether it ends up a centralized monolith or a series of related sites and APIs.

Chapters six, seven, and eight undertake norm translation, specifically historicist norm translation of two different but related moments in white-dominated US poetry. I imagine them as case studies, to be used in creating templates for providing context to specific poems within any built application. Both of the specific moments I cover transmogrify the “anti-psychological.” I take anti-psychological to be a term that defines a movement within modernism, a modernism that continued past WWII (Levenson), and also a particular strain of US thought that arose against the specifics of newly-developed psychological constructs (Pfister and Schnog). The two moments and poetries I cover operated within the white-dominated avant-gardes of their times, and their discursive resistances came from a relatively dominant position (and dominant city) in the US. That fact is part of what positions them in a literary history that was directly engaged by conceptualism (conceptual art repurposed as a brand of poetry), which took its branded form most prominently in New York, where the contradictions of appropriation finally came home to roost. Conceptual art, like conceptualism, explicitly positioned itself as anti-psychological in ways I look at in chapter eight. Chapters six, seven, and eight as a whole look at historical anti-psychological antecedents with varying political valences that were silently marshaled into conceptualism’s ambiguous, “anhedonic” (as Bernes calls it) textual vision.

The sixth chapter, “An Unendurable Age: Ashbery, O’Hara, and 1950s Precursors of ‘Self’ Psychology” argues that an anti-psychological ethos is developed in Ashbery and O’Hara’s poems of that moment. It shows that Frank O’Hara’s “Personism: A Manifesto” (1959) is almost certainly a parody of Gordon Allport’s theory of Personalism, of related strands of 1950s American psychology, and of the poetry
that developed alongside them in the 1930s. It rehearses the origin myth of the selection of *Some Trees* by W.H. Auden for the Yale Younger Poets Series and looks closely at Auden’s conflicted introduction. From there, it transitions into looking at midcentury conceptions of schizophrenia as a specifically homosexual disease and at contemporarily published examples of schizophrenic discourse (those of Harry Stack Sullivan). It argues that Ashbery’s poem “A Boy” can be read as directly engaging those ideas, and opposing them. It works to clarify uses of the term “surrealist” as applied to O’Hara and Ashbery to show why, from the perspective of the psychologistic ethos of surrealism itself, the term is misapplied. The origins of “self” psychology in the US, along with the attendant ethos of “self-actualization,” have bearing on the US as a racial capitalist state (which shows up later in Ron Silliman’s writing, for example, as Timothy Kreiner shows).

In the shorter discussions that comprise the seventh chapter (with the long title “‘Baskets, Birds, Beetles, Spools’: Ashbery, O’Hara, and Three 1950s Views of Meaning and Reference”), I consider the affinities that *Some Trees* has with anti- or a-psychological theories of mind that were being developed at Harvard and MIT at the time that Ashbery and O’Hara were in Cambridge, including generative grammar and critiques of philosophical analyticity. The chapter also touches briefly on the affinities of *Some Trees* with Barthes’s related uses of structuralism, and the implicit racism that is marshaled within it. I don’t explicitly draw parallels between this work and conceptualism, but the fact that this work is part of a line that led directly to the conceptual art movement that conceptualism in turn appropriated is well-known. The poetry covered in the next chapter makes that point explicitly.

The eighth chapter, “Before Conceptualism: Disgust and Over-determination in White-dominated Experimental Poetry in New York, 1999-2003,” recovers a micro-tradition that was also silently marshaled into the larger, slightly-later movement of conceptual poetry. It highlights two poets’ uses of lyric’s peculiar staging of voice to foreground the multi-furcation of white identities and voice in response to state pressures. Some poems treat the space of the poem as ironically inhabitable; some treat it as an extension of the boring city and landscapes available to whites as produced by late capitalism. The parodic institutionalism of Dan Farrell’s work and the ironic peregrinations of Lytle
Shaw’s *Cable Factory 20* are two affects with political valence that were flattened out of conceptualism. Dan Farrell writes an aestheticized but still uncompromising Marxist poetry from a de-centered white perspective. It allowed its subjects (its objects) to be exactly what they are systemically, while at the same time heightening the perceptual frame around them, and rejecting false divisions. Lytle Shaw seems to be doing the opposite: intentionally make the frame at once as baroque and as boring as possible as a different kind of rejection of the same things, also from a self-aware white perspective, one that uses an ironic pleasure in disgust to get at its contradictions. The ironic pleasure in disgust that Shaw developed (in several directions) was, I think, new in US poetry; it was quickly taken up, in very different forms, by what would become New York’s Flarf collective (which did not include Shaw). The success or failure of this work in terms of making political statements is not something I want to argue about: it is clearly not making direct political statements of any kind. All I am trying to do is point out the political content that is there, and how it was flattened out as these works were marshaled into conceptualism’s pre-history. That some of the work allows that can be ascribed to inherent ambiguities and to assumptions made in the authorial framing of it, as when Shaw appropriates O’Hara’s poem “At the Old Place.”

I wrote chapters six, seven, and eight first, and this project took a very long time. If I were beginning today, I would want to write about the emerging poetry in the US that deals directly with racial capitalism, that names it and its many manifestations as such. I would want to write one historical section about Rodrigo Toscano and Hung Q. Tu, and about how the gradual, relative centering of younger writers of color within the turn-of-the-millennium avant-garde was interrupted by conceptual poetry’s marshaling of whiteness and state power. I would want to write another whole book with a section each on *M Archive* by Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *EXTRATRANSMISSION* by Andrea Abi-Karam, *Garments Against Women* by Anne Boyer, *Don’t Let Them See Me Like This* by Jasmine Gibson, *Austerity* by Marion Bell, *POEMS (2012-2017)* by Oki Sogumi, *LO TERCARIO / THE TERTIARY* by Raquel Salas Rivera, *a/s/l* by Uyen Hua, and *Cruel Fiction* by Wendy Trevino. The uniqueness and force of each of these books shatters any list-frame. At the same time, a study that looked even a few of them would be a beginning on recent forms of anti-capitalist poetry from writers based in the US. The problem is
that, the way things stand, it would also be a beginning on archiving the work away from the demands
that the books, and their writers, make.

To that end, I also want to note that I’m publishing this dissertation under a CC BY-SA license, which
means that anyone may take it, change it, and republish it as their own, digitally or otherwise. I do not
want the argument’s gaps to be taken as erasures. I have also certainly gotten other things wrong. I do
not discuss trans writers or writing. I do not deal in detail with gender-based oppression within
capitalism. I do not investigate the ways that ableism functions within the framework as I propose it.
These gaps not only limit my analysis, they likely make parts of it unintentionally harmful. I hope that
can be corrected by critique and by repurposing. Further, the Marxist analysis that I should provide at
many points is minimal at best, which deprives the argument of the kind of explanatory power it really
requires. My hope is that other people will correct and expand the argument to the extent that it is
useful.

The last two chapters take up two corollaries, or theoretical concerns that fell out trying to think a
cosmopolitanist application. The first, “Why Not Reddit?” examines existing commercial
cosmopolitanist solutions for some of the functionality proposed for the application, and reasons for
rejecting them. In doing so, it discusses Thomas Farrell’s rhetorical culture construct in detail, and
traces a theory of communication and authorship within a community, particularly with regard to
thinking history. It aims to get at the how of conceiving a rhetorical situation, and the how of
identification when reading a text, without forsaking the what. Described as a kind of transpiling problem, the above can be seen to be distinctly cosmopolitanist one as well, in the sense of privileging
English as a global dominant. It is also, seemingly, the same problem that led Stephen Greenblatt and
other New Historicists working in the wake of Foucault to reconstruct contexts, to get closer not just to
the intended meanings of poems of the past, but to their ideological convergences. In that vein, I find
it productive to link Stanley Fish’s interpretive communities to, on the one hand, Thomas Farrell’s
rhetorical cultures, and, on the other, to shitposting.
The last chapter (and second corollary) is titled “Ethos in Pedagogy as a Limit on Norm Translation.” It works to establish the specifically Aristotelian concept of ethos as a pedagogical limit for reconstructing contexts. In so doing, it engages the neglected “descriptive and explanatory” side of criticism as laid out by cognitive scientists Dan Sperber and Deidre Wilson in their theory of rhetorical “relevance.” Sperber and Wilson’s ideas about rhetorical mechanics draw on H.P. Grice’s inferential model of communication, whereby the meanings ascribed to a particular utterance may not be directly encoded within it, but instead are inferred from the larger context. A principle of relevance within rhetoric, combined with ethos, makes a usable limit in the pedagogy of norm translation and historicist criticism, of knowing when one might, momentarily, stop. Having to describe the ethos reflected by a book or poem is a way to specify, within pedagogy, what kinds of other information one needs to read it with sufficient care. Open the context too far, and one is back in the realm of irrelevant associations and stock responses; too little, and one is within plain incomprehension. Restricting the delineation of context to elements of ethos is one way of letting in reader perspectives while attempting to reconstruct those of the poem.

This study’s governing interest is not the conflicts or differences between practitioners or tendencies that are detailed here, but their relative incomprehensibility of those differences outside of their formative contexts. The first chapter looks at some of the issues engaged by one attempt at contextualizing Indian poetry in English, and the ways some of the poems may still be illegible outside their specific contexts. In the US, one also need not look extra-nationally to find instances of missed cues and unnoticed silences: these happen constantly with our poetic and other social formations, across multiple, ill-defined lines.
Chapter 1: ‘Indianness’ and Omission: 60 Indian Poets

English was imposed on Indian states by armed force and its attendant murder, subjugation, and bureaucratic job-creation. English’s current position in India as the language of national class mobility and international commerce has eclipsed its older political meanings. As anthropologist Rashmi Sadana details in the groundbreaking *English Heart, Hindi Heartland* (2012), English in India currently signifies in ways that are “premised on more direct access to power... that bypasses more traditional or engrained social boundaries” in Indian society (22). English’s use is increasingly seen in India as politically “neutral” (ibid) as a result of that role. The perception of neutrality has implications for the reception of Indian poetry in English inside and outside of India.

India is linguistically very various: there are more than 1,600 languages spoken in India. Almost all are regional, their speakers centered in particular locales. As multiple scholars recount, after India gained independence from Britain in 1947, one of India’s regional languages, Hindi, whose everyday familial use is centered in the north, was declared, in 1950, by the union government, India’s first official language: the language in which all union (i.e. national) governmental affairs would be conducted. The plan was for English, then in use in that capacity, to continue alongside Hindi over a period of 15 years, with English’s use dissipating and ceasing. Then as now, what linguists still call native speakers of Hindi comprised only about 40 percent of India’s population. There was thus widespread resistance to the language’s designation as the sole official language of the union, particularly in the southern states (from Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh to Kerala and Tamil Nadu). When 1965 arrived, resistance to a Hindi-only union government remained very strong. English was designated a second official language.

In many regions of India, Hindi continues to be a “symbol and arbiter of North Indian cultural hegemony,” as Sadana describes it (19), and it has not played the role in daily life once imagined for it across the country. There are 31 languages currently in official use across 29 state and 7 union territory governments, with widespread media behind them. Speakers of Kannada, Malayalam, Marathi, Tamil, and Telugu, for example, together number hundreds of millions. At the same time, regional languages
themselves can be a source of conflict: in some states where there are multiple competing vernaculars, English is the sole official state-business language, another sign of its relative perceived neutrality.

Education has largely followed suit, particularly given that there is a “long-standing divide [in India] between students who come from English-medium backgrounds [in their educations] and those who come from ‘vernacular’ ones” (5)—with vernacular, in terms of education, including Hindi-medium schools. English-medium education is certainly class-marked, and allows forms of mobility unavailable to those who lack it. At the same time, the tens of millions of people across India who speak English with varying fluencies are much too diverse to be categorized as an aggregate elite. In many states, school-Hindi is as far as many people get; in many rural areas, Hindi will not be heard at all.

If English in India is a language of economic aspiration and domination, its white valence is marshaled illegibly into India’s own forms of dominance, themselves linked to caste, and, via myriad points of contact, to the US, the Commonwealth, and other market-based allies. Like other media in India, Hindi-language media reflect long-standing racial hierarchies, particularly in popular films and music videos, where “fairness” is a deciding factor with regard to who gets on television and in what role. Fairness is a major, complex subject of inquiry (Mishra). “Aryan hegemony” signifies and is used in value creation, and is even more complexly mapped onto and into caste and other social forms (Sharma). Whiteness signifies as a related but separate category; the roles that white woman play in Hindi-language media, for example, fall into very specific categories (Dark). Blackness is also a separate category in India (Jain-Grégoire); many Hindi-language films and music videos perpetuate specifically anti-Black stereotypes in a manner that calls out for a targeted campaign to make it stop. English-language media, including imports of much of what is popular in the US and UK in relatively real time, are presented with their hierarchies largely intact. All of these extraordinarily complex phenomena are beyond the scope of what I will try address here. The first half of this chapter will discuss North-East India in some detail with regard to English, racialization, and poetry in India, particularly as it pertains to a relatively recently-published anthology of Indian poetry in English, 60 Indian Poets. I will detail Sadana’s argument further before turning to the anthology.
While there is surface agreement on some of what it means to use English in daily discourse and media in most places in India, English’s role in Indian literature is more broadly controversial in terms of its reception within India. In the popular press, as Sadana shows, Indian critics overtly evaluate a writer’s regional linguistic loyalties, and correlate those regional loyalties to the writer’s degree of “Indianness.” In that equation, as Sadana extensively documents and unpacks, writers of English come in for harsh critique by bhasha, or vernacular, writers. Bhasha critiques include those of Hindi writers: Hindi functions as a vernacular with regard to its position vis-à-vis anglophone literature, and as a language to which one can feel regional affiliation. “From the perspective of most bhasha literary communities,” Sadana writes, “to write in English is to reject willingly (and perhaps willfully) part of one’s Indianness” (137-138). Nowhere is this more true than in Indian poetry in English.

If lyric poetry is the literary form that most explicitly and self-consciously explores the relationship between the construction of individualized voice and the construction of sentences, then the intimacy of its scale is part of what sets it apart from the novel, and makes it, arguably and paradoxically, the major expression of national sensibilities and dynamics. Poetry’s “official, sanctifying role” (Bernes, Clover, and Spahr) in national projects means that there is a way that it gives actual, individualized discursive form to its national subjects. As such, poetry is political in a way that is arguably more immediate than the novel: it is literally about how a nation’s subjects are articulated, and it articulates them as a kind of model that can be used by the state. As Sadana, Ghosh, and others have shown, English-language fiction is a major medium for the expression, and the export, of India and Indianness, even as it is critiqued by vernacular writers for whom “authenticity has to do with the social and economic privileges of the literary Indian English writer who is assumed to be pandering to a global rather than to a regional audience and who is considered to be ‘less Indian’ for doing so” (Sadana 138). Indian poetry in English has likewise largely been denounced, dismissed, or ignored pretty much across the board in India, partly because the particular cultural demands made on poetry in India are very different from those on prose.
To put it schematically and to greatly oversimplify: poetry has a long and also centrally religious tradition in India and Indian states. Sanskrit epics form a textual foundation of Hinduism. As preservationist receptions of more recent epic poetry disappeared, replaced first by descendants of Sanskrit court lyric, contemporary lyric has come to stand for “poetry” in the modern imagination (Thain). How this might work within Hindu nationalism is far beyond the scope of what I am trying to do here. Even as of this writing, however, when Indian reviewers in the popular press thus wonder aloud whether India can ever produce poetry in English that would be of any value, or what the point of doing so would be, they are making a tacitly political argument about what India is, and should be, one that contests English’s commercial and cosmopolitanist cachet to a variety of ends. A related critical move, as Sadana notes, is to challenge the poet’s linguistic competence in English and condemn alleged mimicry so as to impugn the poet with lingering colonialist sensibilities (in a manner that everyday use of English no longer produces). Such critiques, Sadana shows, rooted in a politics that does not see English as a proper medium for Indian literature, deny that Indian poetry in English is “Indian” at all.

Both Sadana and Ghosh document a variety of aspects of Indian literature in English, with Ghosh focusing on it as an Indian export. For poetry, anthologies play a particularly crucial role in the internal reception and in the export of national identity. The currently dominant anthology of Indian poetry in English, edited by the poet and novelist Jeet Thayil, was published in 2008. It was published in India by Penguin India as *60 Indian Poets*, and in the UK and US as *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poetry in English*. The Bloodaxe edition, published “in association with Fulcrum: an annual of poetry and aesthetics” based in the US, has 12 more poets, and US distribution. Fulcrum itself published a somewhat shorter version of the anthology as a section of a prior issue, in 2005. In its various forms, it soon eclipsed Arvind Krishna Mehrotra’s *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (1993) as the standard anthology.

Thayil’s anthology makes a self-conscious riposte for Indian poets writing in English against bhasha critiques, seeking to showcase a mature tradition, a canon of founding poets, and a take on the (then-
current) English-language Indian poetry scene. Other anthologies from inside and outside India have attempted the same thing (most successfully Mehrotra's), but Thayil's is the first to place a large selection of poets from across the diaspora, including poets born and living outside India, within the standard canon that begins with Nissim Ezekiel, and thereby to contest what Indian poetry in English might be. Thayil spends a significant amount of time in his introduction rehearsing and shooting down vernacular critiques of Indian poetry in English: that it is a “failure of national conscience”; that it is “perpetuating colonialism in a postcolonial era”; that what it does is “essentially a conjurer’s trick” lacking a native tradition in India, inauthentic. His rebuttals dig deep into the history of English language poetry in India, going back to the mid-nineteenth century.

Thayil, however, never explicitly identifies the ground shared among the poets included in the anthology, referring instead to “a community separated by the sea”: basically an elite, physical movement-based cosmopolitanism. In parsing the demographics, as we are trained to do, one finds the poets are split roughly between India and the diaspora (including poets born or living in Africa, Australia, the US, and the UK) and between poets who were then under and over 50. What is consistent is Indian descent, and the use of English. What is missing from Thayil's account and rationale, however, is the cosmopolitanist process by which regional, or vernacular, literatures arise, a process that clarifies the role of English in Indian poetry as the object of bhasha critique, the constraints on Thayil’s “community,” and the contours of Thayil's selections.

For Sanskritist and historian Sheldon Pollock, vernacular literatures represent a response to dominant literary languages that are, in their moments, perceived as cosmopolitan, and even universalizing. For Pollock, vernacular literatures are not preexisting literary modes that get eclipsed, as such, by hegemonic languages, but rather novel forms that arise only as and after those hegemonic languages achieve their hegemonic status, at least in terms of governmental and trade-based transactions and in terms of literary transmission. Cosmopolitan dominance and vernacularization, in literature, are part of the dialectic of trade and of nationalism.
Within this paradigm, English can be seen (historically, ironically) alongside bhasha literatures as paradigmatic examples of vernacular response to cosmopolitan dominance. English, as a literature and as a language of statecraft, was created out of Latin’s shadow as part of a wave of vernacularization that also created written Spanish, French, and German in the same roles. Sanskrit, less than a thousand years ago, was the language for official transactions across kingdoms extending from “Afghanistan to Java and from Sri Lanka to Nepal” (Pollock 23). When Sanskrit was taken up by poets, it enjoyed “the fact and the perception of universality” (24). Pollock finds the eleventh-century Kashmiri poet Bilhana boasting that “there is no village or country, no capital city or forest region, no pleasure garden or school where learned and ignorant, young and old, male and female alike do not read my poems and shake with pleasure” (23).

Vernacularization is a dialectical process. From this perspective, India’s early regional-language writers self-consciously positioned themselves against Sanskrit, a perceived universal, in order to define themselves and their literatures: the process of vernacularization. Urdu, Persian, and Hindustani also played roles in Indian vernacularizations, as did English, eventually. Bhasha writers now define themselves against English in a manner that is analogous to their historical formation vis-à-vis Sanskrit; the linguistic lineages are very different, but the process is the same: vernacular critiques, which assert acceptable structures of regional authenticity, do so, paradoxically, now, in service to the union, which draws on them in defining authentic Indianness, partially as a pressure-valve for tension around market relations with the US and with the rest of the Commonwealth (among other states). If bhasha writers, as Sadana argues, make use of Ngũgĩ’s decolonization argument, whereby “[w]riters must return to their mother tongues to reclaim their authentic cultural and political selves” (Sadana 107), that “authentic” act, often undertaken within regionalist movements, is quickly appropriated by the state, which absorbs their demands, then uses the authenticity claims to distinguish and assert authority over regions it does not deem similarly authentic. (One of those regions is the Indian North-East, to which I will turn momentarily.) A partial function of bhasha critiques is thus, paradoxically, national, if not always directly aligned with the union: as “authentic” products of authentically Indian regions within in the union, their perceived authenticity serves to authenticate the union and to help it
to maintain and make use of selective differences. This relationship is literally instantiated at the very end of India: standing 133 feet tall at Kanyakumari, looking out over two oceans, is a statue of the Tamil poet Valluvar.

When looked at from the perspective of the diaspora as conceptualized in the anthology, however, bhasha charges against English seem not to apply at all. Among the contributors to Thayil’s anthology, poets such as Prageeta Sharma and Srikanth Reddy, who were born in the US and live and work there, clearly violate bhasha “authenticity” strictures. Are they thus not “Indian” poets? The late Meena Alexander was born Syrian Christian in Allahabad, educated in Khartoum and Nottingham, and lived and taught in New York: is her work traitorous to India, to Kerala, and to Malayalam? Vivek Narayanan was born in the North Indian city of Ranchi to Tamilian parents, raised in Zambia, went to college and grad school in the US, taught in South Africa, did a years-long residency at the Sarai institute in New Delhi, and is currently living in Fairfax County, VA and writing in English: is he a traitor to Tamil, and not authentically “Indian”?

The complex relationships and tensions between Indians in India, non-resident Indians (NRIs), people who split their time between continents, and other permutations of diaspora are present as a kind of background to the selections in Thayil’s anthology, which has its basis in forms of elite-cosmopolitanism. Those forms have their own authenticity demands: Arundhati Subramaniam’s poem in 60 Indian Poets, “To the Welsh Critic Who Doesn’t Find Me Identifiably Indian” addresses them directly, as do others in the anthology. In the US and in the Commonwealth, regardless of how poets may self-identify, racialized ethno-national reception is enforced, and Indianness ends up as something that must be performed by the writer in order to maintain and justify value. That these tensions are not made explicit by Thayil in the anthology feels like a purposeful choice, one targeting reductionist vernacular and diasporic receptions at once. At one level, that, in reception, feels liberating: Thayil’s cosmopolitanist juxtapositions disallow the kind of closed-circuit readings of Indian poetry in English prevalent up to that point, whereby it was treated as something cut-off from other anglophone literatures. In India, vernacular-based critiques of the anglophone Indian poetic diaspora, are, at
worst, when based in authenticity, a form of “national vernacularity dressed in the frayed period costume of violent revanchism and bent on preserving difference at all costs” (Pollock 593). Indianness, as a form of reception in India, is withheld from the diaspora. All of this contributed to the initial reception of the anthology and its genuine attack on that equation. If poetry’s relation to the nation-state is brought to the fore, however, something Thayil also does not do explicitly, the anthology’s selections seem much more constrained, and predictable.

While the anthology deliberately attacks the linguistic and geographic authenticity mechanisms that contribute to maintaining Indianness, Thayil nevertheless tacitly follows the prescribed contours of the extended Indian state: including multiple poets of Indian descent living and working in the US, UK, Australia, and Canada is perfectly aligned with trade markets opened up under liberalization in India in 1991. The US and its English, once semi-officially spurned partially on decolonial grounds, have become market-based allies. Liberalization has resulted, among other things, in greater wage inequality (Kumar and Mishra), an antagonistic contradiction that the anthology’s version of cosmopolitanism cannot address.

At the same time as the anthology is expansive in a manner in line with economic liberalization, it does not include a single poet writing in English from Pakistan, Bangladesh, or Sri Lanka. India has fought multiple wars with Pakistan since partition in 1947, including the one that resulted in Bangladesh’s independence from Pakistan in 1971. Despite historical and remaining cross-national familial ties to India, it is not possible for Thayil to call Pakistani or Bangladeshi or Sri Lankan poets “Indian”: the strength of the nationalism in India and in the three neighboring countries makes that impossible. The nation as top-level referent overrides cosmopolitanism where nationalism overrides potential markets.

The omissions go further, however: of the 60 poets, only a single one from India’s minority North-East is represented: Mamang Dai from Arunachal Pradesh. The North-East is geographically set apart from the rest of India, and is perceptually in its own category. In addition to being largely cut-off from the Indian plain by Bangladesh, India’s North-East is categorized as ethnically distinct from mainland India.
North-East populations have many similarities, including linguistic, with Southeast Asian populations. The Khasi language for example, with speakers based in the Indian state of Meghalaya, is a Mon-Khmer language, related to Vietnamese, of which there are several dialects. People from the North-East are subject to racism, often involving violence, on the Indian plain, where they are not seen as conventionally Indian, but as hill-state “tribals” without a blood relation to the mainland. They are also not conventionally seen as directly part of the Adivasi movement, a Sanskritized coinage from the 1930s usually referring to indigenous, “non-Aryanized” people from the Indian plain.

The Indian constitution explicitly lists 645 indigenous groups across both the mainland India plain and the Himalayan North-East. Members of the groups are granted certain tax breaks and affirmative action reservations, as part of the “OBC” (or “Other Backward Classes,” which also include lower-caste Hindus). The North-Eastern state of Meghalaya, for example, was carved out of the state of Assam in 1970 at the instigation of the Khasi, the Pnar (who are also Khasi, but were divided from them by the British via linguistic and other differences, including the term “Jaiñtia”) and the Garo: local ethnic and linguistic majorities known officially through the Indian union as “Scheduled Tribes.” In common use, the term often collapses into “tribal” or “tribals” (which, again, avoids the Sanskritizing of the term Adivasi). Regional languages in the North-East are also not “bhasha”; they lack a relationship to Sanskrit that those who use the term to describe their language seemingly require. While “the languages” of bhasha critiques are regional, bhasha critiques do not and cannot emanate from the North-East because the North-East itself is not seen as authentically Indian.

In his introduction and in his choices of poets, Thayil tacitly bypasses work with minority identity claims within India, from the North-East and elsewhere, even as that work, in English, offers a powerful means of refuting bhasha definitions of authentic Indianness. Apart from the anthology’s clear elite-cosmopolitanist composition, I can (only) speculate as to why “identity work,” as it gets called in the US, was not included. Before I do, I need to define that term.
Theorist Asad Haider has recently historicized the “highly contested” terms identity and identity politics in his book *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump* (2018). The term, Haider finds, has been subject to various uses since it was introduced by the US Black lesbian militant group Combahee River Collective. Following Malcolm X and Huey Newton, Haider defines identity politics as “the neutralization of movements against racial oppression. It is the ideology that emerged to appropriate [the] emancipatory legacy [of Black social movements] in service of the advancement of political and economic elites” (12), partially through archival acts. That is how identity politics, as a mode of reception, has traditionally worked within the US university (to which Thayil has had significant exposure). I will return to this meaning of “identity politics” in the next chapter.

Rather than “appropriate its emancipatory legacy,” however, Thayil likely wants to avoid work in modes that, in reception, in India, is associated with majoritarian religious and ethnic communalism, including Hindu nationalism. He thus similarly avoids minoritarian claims that also seem, in some forms of reception, to have an essentialist identitarian logic. The result is that Thayil avoids work grounded in struggles outside the norms of elite-cosmopolitanism. He does include, for example, work that has been received as sex-positive and feminist and that, at the time, pushed limits in India. And he includes work such as Subramaniam’s that contests diasporic definitions of authenticity. I’m not saying that doing so is not interesting or important. What I’m saying is that it is in line with elite-based cosmopolitanism, and that it resulted in the above omission.

In other layers of its multifurcated meanings, identity politics, in poetry, as a thing produced by forms of reception, is read, wrongly, as rejecting seemingly productive poetic ambiguities in favor of essentialist claims of heritage and of rights. That is the more commonly-understood meaning of “identity politics,” a meaning that Dorothy J. Wang unpacks in the “Aesthetics contra ‘Identity’” chapter of *Thinking Its Presence*:

In the US academy and society at large, the words “identity,” “identitarian,” and “identity politics” are often automatically conflated. Used synonymously, all three function as a reductive shorthand to refer to an essentializing and unthinking “identity politics”—almost always regarded, explicitly or not, as the provenance of minorities with grievances. “Identity politics” is a straw-man term. ... [It] index[es] something understood by readers as troubling
but whose precise contours are amorphous and indistinct—and, I would argue, ultimately incoherent and indefensible. (12-13)

Wang finds the most prevalent meaning of “identity politics” within poetic reception in the US reduces down to “the antithesis of (opposite to and opposing) literary value and critical rigor” (12). One also senses that form of reception in Thayil’s selections and omissions throughout, given the prevalence of work in Indian poetry in English with engagements that are conventionally received within this last sense of identity politics. Yet that work’s exclusion is a tacit acceptance of this harmful form of reception, one that deprives the anthology of an important insight that undercuts the anti-English bhasha critics: English can be a mode of expression of local struggle, one that acts differently in different contexts, within India. I’ll discuss that point with regard to a Khasi poet from the state of Meghalaya, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih. His exclusion from the anthology is a surprise bordering on shocking, given his accomplishments even at the time of its publication. I need to situate Nongkynrih’s work within the context North-Eastern Indian state of Meghalaya and its capital, Shillong, in order to clarify this point.

The East Khasi Hills region of Meghalaya, where Shillong is located, is bordered to the north by the Indian state of Assam, to the east by Meghalaya’s Jaintia Hills coal belt (and beyond that, by the North-Eastern states of Nagaland and Manipur), to the west by the West Khasi Hills (and their contested uranium deposits) and to the south, via a border that stretches 443 kilometers, by Bangladesh. There are maybe a million people who speak Khasi, Pnar, War, and other related dialects in Meghalaya, with maybe 25 percent in Shillong. Shillong itself is a steeply hilly city, broken into blocky localities by cliffs and ravines, crisscrossed by twisty lanes and above-ground water pipes, cut by 14 or so always-jammed main roads, and ringed by mountains, including Shillong Peak. Most houses are built with concrete. The bourgeois quarters have plenty of McMansions; older districts have a distinctive hybrid colonial neo-Tibeto-Kashmiri-Brit-looking architecture. Paddy (rice) is still grown within the city limits, if just in a single remaining valley field.
The North-East of India is, in Meghalaya, and in Mizoram and Nagaland, largely a Christian-majority area. (Nongkynrih himself is not a Christian; he practices Ka Niam Khasi.) When Welsh missionaries arrived in the area in 1840, most people in the Khasi hills lived on a very limited diet of millet and sweet potatoes (and wild rice in the less altitudinous regions), as some still do. There was no Khasi written script; it was likely lost in an originary migration, as one Khasi myth laments. (I will not try to deal here with originary migration and indigeneity; first inhabitants always come from somewhere.) The mission was successful; schools were opened; agricultural practices altered; building practices enforced in Shillong and in Sohra (aka Cherrapunji, from the Bengali; “punji” means “capital,” which Sohra was). By the early 20th century, along with an arguably relatively more benign version of British rule (a point which is contested), Christianity was well-established, to the point where US evangelical programming is now piped in via the local cable operator because there is a demand for it. The intensity of the Christianity in Meghalaya, which drives some international tourism to the area, is well-documented, along with attendant ideologies. On any given Sunday, one might hear that old John Ashcroft favorite, “On Eagles’ Wings,” sung in a Shillong Presbyterian Church by 12 adolescents clad in goldenrod sateen.

Travel up and down the hilly roads is difficult, but regardless, until fairly recently, it is unlikely that an outsider would have been admitted by officials to the neighboring states of Nagaland or Manipur if arriving by road or by air: the groups that originally agitated for the states’ independence from Assam continue to exist in various separatist permutations; isolation is part of the containment strategy. Such groups are often called “secessionist” in the press, as opposed to the (also-“tribal”) “Maoists” or “Naxalities” of mainland India who have land issues with the Union. Communism’s long history in India is something I don’t yet know enough about to comment on meaningfully. Its use in and by these groups has a different valence from the non-minority-based state communist parties that have run Kerala, Tripura, and West Bengal states on and off over the decades. The fact that the North-East continues to be “sensitive” in this way, however, adds to its cut-offness from the rest of India. Geographically, the main impediment is the “chicken neck”: the thin northerly bit of land that, if traveling by road, one must cross through to get to from the Indian plain to the North-East by road while avoiding Bangladesh.
Meghalaya is a tribal majority state, with non-tribals virtually not found in interior rural areas. At the same time, many villages bordering Assam and Bangladesh have been completely overrun by non-tribal populations, and many people from the Indian plain have settled in Shillong: mostly from West Bengal and Bihar, as well as other groups from the non-North-Eastern Himalayas, including Nepal and Sikkim, and many from neighboring North-East states, particularly where there are ongoing conflicts. The army and air force have substantial presences in the city, with the entire air command for the North-East situated in Shillong; with them come men (and it is mostly men) from all over India. The issue of migrant Bangladeshi workers is enormously complex in Shillong, and not limited to Meghalaya itself; the weakness of Bangladesh’s currency is a big draw across the (militarized, but largely forested) border. In Shillong, unemployment is high, and Bangladeshi laborers will often work for much less than the going rate for Khasi laborers. The unease of the local populace in the Khasi Jaintia Hills is not restricted to the Bangladeshi migrants, but is in general directed to the non-tribals who come to the hills even from the plains of mainland India. The resulting conflicts mostly simmer, but bandhs called by Khasi groups are employed several times a year: word goes out that people must stay off the roads for a day or days, or face stones, fires, attacks. Some the bandhs have to do with getting the local government, generally passive and largely bereft of transparency, to function. Others have to do with Bangladeshi migrants, or with ethno-racial conflicts that turn on land claims within Shillong.

Most of the time, Shillong’s elite and non-elite cosmopolitanist composition, maintained since British times, has a kind of tense stability. Perhaps half the jobs in Shillong have a link to the state government, but there is not a lot of non-work-related cross-socializing. Churches are the centers of Khasi social life in Shillong. Another big issue is food: Christian and non-Christian Khasi cuisine features both beef and pork. While many events are often designed around navigating that, and the relative neutrality of chicken abounds, many potential childhood friendships are prevented by the tacit fears related to visiting houses and eating together, and the same is true in many public spaces. Relatedly, the Christianity in Shillong is generally not a particularly inclusive form; one sermon at an English-language Presbyterian church I attended featured a 45-minute anti-Semitic rant from a guest-lecturing parishioner, during and after which no one blinked. The bigger issue, however, is control of the city’s
land. There are districts of Shillong itself where, like the rest of the state, people from the Indian
plain, Nepal, Bangladesh (places from which outside workers might arrive) cannot enter on foot
completely freely (as opposed to driving though), let alone live. The same is true of non-tribal
dominated localities as well. When people from the North-East go to live in Delhi or other cities on the
Indian plain, they face far higher incidences of violence and murder—particularly women from the
North-East. And while non-tribals generally cannot own land in Shillong (one major exception is
formerly British-controlled districts), many arrangements are struck, adding to tensions. Apart from
Shillong and a few other municipalities (including Sohra and Jowai), Meghalaya is otherwise almost
wholly rural, and its literacy rate, tied to a faulty public school system, sits just slightly above the
union average. At the same time, Shillong also has the highest concentration of colleges in the North-
East. Several had already been founded when Shillong was the capital of Assam (as it was until 1973),
and, before that, the summer capital of what was the British Bengal Province. The colleges draw the
children of the North-East's aspiring middle class, and their money, into Shillong's mix. Coal money
from the Jaintia hills unfailingly ends up there. The streets are full of recent-model SUVs where Maruti
800s once dominated.

To represent Meghalaya, Thayil includes the work of poet Anjum Hasan, who was born in Shillong after
her north Indian Muslim family settled there to teach. Hasan now lives in Karnataka and edits the
journal Caravan. To leave Hasan as the sole representative from Shillong, which is basically the poetic
equivalent of the Bombay of the North-East, is to make an elite-cosmopolitan case for multicultural
Shillong (Shillong itself has figured in Hasan’s work), but it also erases Shillong’s poetries from non-
exclusively anglophone Khasi and Garo poets, as well as poets like Robin Ngangom, who is from
Manipur, and whose work concerns ongoing conflicts there, who has lived and taught in Shillong for
decades. The problem is not the high rate of Christianity in the North-East: Kerala has a large Christian
population too; Thayil’s family is from Kerala; he includes a significant percentage of Christian poets.
The problem is the perceived link of work by non-exclusively anglophone tribal poets from the North-
East to “identity” work and to secessionist movements. The omission is in line with the unstated policy
of post-Independence India, which has worked to erase the tribal North-East via land encroachment by
the military, and by packing appointed government positions from without. Thayil received training in
the US as a young poet at a time when poets received as “identity” poets were met with the kind of
reception that Wang details, and that is still prevalent in many US institutions. It is not surprising that
60 Indian Poets has omissions of this kind.

The English-language anthology Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from North-East India came out
around the same time as 60 Indian Poets. Edited by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih and Robin S. Ngangom of
Shillong’s nationally-funded North-Eastern Hill University, much of Dancing Earth makes strong identity
claims or investigations that are permutations of the Indianness equation: questions of what is “Indian”
while being “Khasi” or “ Manipuri” run up against their representations in English to startling effect.
Nongkynrih’s own “Blasphemous Lines for Mother” describes the poet’s childhood in then-rural
Cherrapunji (in Khasi, Sohra) and draws on Khasi idioms that sound shocking in English:

My mother is retired, toothless, diabetic and bedeviled
by headaches and a blinding cataract. In short,
she is a cantankerous old woman.

I remember the time when she was a cantankerous
young woman. When she took an afternoon nap,
she was tigerish: “You sons of a vagina!” she
would snarl, “you won’t even let me rest for a moment,
sons of a fiend! Come here sons of a beast! If I
get you I’ll lame you! I’ll maim you! . . . Sons
of a louse! You feed on the flesh that breeds you!
Make a noise again when I sleep and I’ll thrash you
till you howl like a dog! You irresponsible nitwits!
how will I play the numbers if I don’t get a good
dream? How will I feed you, sons of a lowbred?”

The poem’s shocking crux brings Khasi idioms into English in an offhand manner that’s at once as
intimate as it is eerily defamiliarizing. Both languages seem to shatter for an instant and fall to the
ground at the poet’s feet as he voices inheritances at once with unflinching humor and perspective.
The mother’s epithets and her allusion to a particular Khasi betting practice, are
rendered with a literal starkness that departs from standard English. Departures from standard English,
explored ironically in India by poets such as Nissim Ezekiel, are turned, though reception, into identity
markers, but not (or not necessarily) of the kind assigned in the US. It is a transformation that, to be
successful, requires English’s relative neutrality: among small populations speaking unrelated, mutually
unintelligible languages far from the “Hindi belt,” English is a means of mutual recognition, of being North-East and of being Indian. Nongkynrih’s poem is unthinkable in Hindi: that language still retains its connections to bhasha identity claims and all that comes with them. English’s meanings in India’s North-East thus differ from those in (largely Hindi-speaking) Delhi, or even those in Bengaluru, which has a large population speaking primarily English.

I will go a little further into Nongkynrih’s work, at the very least to try to clarify this point. (A fuller, accessible account of his work can be found in that of Bhattacharjee and Guha.) In the prose Around the Hearth, a book that can be found in most English-speaking houses in Shillong (and, also, with some frequency, across India, in Wales, and in the US), Nongkynrih retells Khasi myths in beautifully-paced prose that brings Khasi origins, ethos, and mythology to life. He has written a groundbreaking study of foundational Khasi poet U So-So Tham, co-edited the major English-language anthology of poetry from India’s North East, and provided the text for numerous children’s books. Nongkynrih’s collection for HarperCollinsIndia, The Yearning of Seeds, collects much of his English-language verse up to the point of its publication (2011). As of this writing, a massive work of prose fiction, Funeral Nights, centered on the social side of Khasi funerals and loosely inspired by the Decameron, is set to appear from the Amazon imprint Westland in India. Two poems in The Yearning of Seeds formed my impressions of Nongkynrih’s poetry, and help underscore the achievement of his most recent book of poems, Time’s Barter. The first is “Blasphemous Lines for Mother.” The other poem, “Bangladesh Impressions,” conveys the promise and excitement of first crossing a border fortified in the imagination over a lifetime. In juxtaposing the poet’s impressions with his guide’s as he travels for a festival-based reading, Nongkynrih brings charged expectations into a wry, moving homeostasis:

Dhaka University: a huge colorful pandal, giant loudspeakers, musicians, folk-singers and a thousand-strong crowd, humming. Have we come to a carnival? But Murasingh said, everyone is a poet. Bangladesh produces poets like paddy.

A park of trees, birds and lovebirds. Wall magazines, photos of past festivals, dead poets, living poets, news stories,
comments and reviews. Murasingh revealed, next year our photos will also flower here.

It is this laconic, not quite cynical, resigned yet nevertheless still searching sensibility that Nongkynrih fully realizes in *Time’s Barter*, a book of Haiku and Senryu. Given his ability to convey multiple competing impressions within a few lines, Nongkynrih’s turn to Haiku and Senryu in the collection makes sense. The time of the book passes in and around Shillong, where Nongkynrih lives and teaches (at NEHU, the North-Eastern Hill University), and often lingers on commutes to and from work and its environs. The book begins with multiple images of plums and cherries, a meditation on the nature of promise, mixed in a manner similar to “Bangladesh Impressions”:

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juicy-looking plums, watery taste—shouldn’t have been plucked on a rainy day.
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Fructification, with its possibility of neglect and of rot, has long been associated with poetry; Nongkynrih extends the metaphor with a vividness, and an only-partial acceptance, that underlies the collection as a whole:

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late-blooming cherries by the highway—how else can I describe my haiku?
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The poet of *Time’s Barter* is self-consciously ageing (“rainwater gurgling/ gaily in the gutter—/ how can I run so low?”), yet is still in contact with youth—both his own, and that of others he meets. He seems to be moving in first or second gear most of the time (Shillong’s traffic is notorious) and the familiarity of the scene affords deep glimpses into its character. In one poem, soldiers in green, with their consumption of land, are unfavorably compared to a particular kind of crawling insect. In another, a rooster appears on top of a cathedral, and its symbolic incongruity (as a symbol of Ka Niam Khasi) is quickly and humorously explained. Right at the book’s center is an unforgettable description of Shillong on a winter evening that I will leave to readers to discover. Its perfection is dazzling.

As the people, places, and things pass by in *Time’s Barter*, the truths accrete sardonically. One often sees, in Shillong, hills lost to development and sand-mining (sand and stone is often shipped clandestinely to Bangladesh):
progress—
the hill will flatten
because of you.

The lack of citizen control in Shillong over development or the land itself is reflected in a foreboding kind of wonder:

that blue light behind
dark clouds, whose world, luminous
above this night gloom?

Shillong is also rife with political utopias which sometimes fuel agitation that wins incremental, cyclic gains, and sometimes ends up just talk:

classless society—
professor and mechanics
whiskey and grilled pork.

One leaves the book with the sense that its time and tradeoffs are eternal.

Pressed by both the diaspora and the regional Englishes, Indianness, in India, as a nationalist construction built partially from vernacularity, is a problem more fraught than bhasha criticism captures. At the same time, the cosmopolitanism and the ideas about India’s contours within India that led Thayil to mostly leave the tribal North-East out altogether remains as controlling as ever. It is, nevertheless, worth getting a sense of the 60 Indian poets that Thayil does include. I will begin, as Thayil does, with Nissim Ezekiel. The work of Mumbai poet Ezekiel (1924-2004) is the generally agreed-upon starting point for modern Indian poetry in English. As Thayil writes in his introduction, “[u]ntil Ezekiel, Indian poetry in English was a nineteenth-century product that had survived well into the twentieth,” full of archaism, under-motivated rhymes, and fantastical themes. When he began publishing poems in the early 1950s, Ezekiel aimed to displace “the amateurism and windy, shapeless, overblown spiritualist epics prevalent when he began to write,” as critic Bruce King puts it in an essay that Thayil includes.

Thayil begins with Ezekiel, placing his poem “Night of the Scorpion” second in the book. The poem is often taught and anthologized in India, but, as with certain Robert Frost poems, its actual content
often gets lost in the process. It’s a monologue as deviously simple as Frost’s are insidious. “Night of the Scorpion” records an adult’s recollection of a childhood incident, the night the speaker’s mother lays in agony after being bitten, “flash/ of diabolic tail in the dark room.” In the hours that follow:

The peasants came like swarms of flies
and buzzed the Name of God a hundred times
to paralyze the Evil One.
With candles and with lanterns
throwing giant scorpion shadows
on the sun-baked walls
they searched for him: he was not found.
They clicked their tongues.
With every movement the scorpion made
his poison moved in mother’s blood, they said.
May he sit still, they said.
May the sins of your previous birth
be burned away tonight, they said....
May the poison purify your flesh
of desire, and your spirit of ambition,
they said, and they sat around
on the floor with my mother at the centre,
the peace of understanding on each face.

The speaker goes on to contrast the thinly veiled schadenfreude of the “peasants” with the responses of his father, a “rationalist, skeptic” (who nonetheless deploys various bogus home remedies over the course of the night), and with rites performed by a “holy man” (who gets two perfunctory lines). After the mother has been “twisted through and through/ groaning on a mat,” bearing both the scorpion’s poison and what Marx called “the idiocy of rural life,” Ezekiel finishes off with an exquisite anti-climax (that I will not spoil if you have not read the poem).

Bruce King, in the still-standard monograph Modern Indian Poetry in English, argues that Ezekiel, part of the now-vanished Marathi-speaking Bene Israel Jewish community of Bombay, “represents the opposite of the Hindiiizing, peasant-idealizing, Soviet-sympathizing nationalist cultural assertion of the government and many intellectuals” (18) in post-Independence India. “Night of the Scorpion” is a textbook parody of the rural glorification verse prevalent in India’s 1950s, ‘60s and ‘70s - one from which the ironies are often stripped when it is read in real textbooks. In another monologue Thayil includes, “The Patriot,” Ezekiel works in withering dialect to similar effect:

I am standing for peace and non-violence.
Why world is fighting fighting,
Why all people of world
Are not following Mahatma Gandhi,
I am simply not understanding.

The poem continues, merciless with the speaker’s pompously rehearsed received opinions, and his lack of actual power. His “standing” in the world is deeply circumscribed, a position from which persistent violence is explained away with mis-repeated stock phrases—“Friends, Romans, Countrymen, I am saying (to myself)/ Lend me the ears” —or by reference to the “funny habits” of other groups. That sort of standing is something that hadn’t been articulated in poetry when Ezekiel started to write, though it may have had its ultimate expression in G.V. Desani’s magisterial picaresque *All About H. Hatterr*, which appeared in England in 1948, right as Ezekiel arrived there for a near four-year stay.10

The poet Daljit Nagra, born in 1966 in West London and also included by Thayil, works with dialect parody to get at the aspirational diaspora: the title of Nagra’s first book is *Look We Have Coming to Dover!*. Though he remains largely unknown in the US, Ezekiel played a crucial, contentious role in building a literature from within the Bombay scene he helped found, amid notorious personal scandal and abusive behavior (and eventual dementia). Other Ezekiel poems center on conflicts within and surrounding sex, and on a rapidly metropolizing, Mumbaiizing Bombay. All of this is evident in poet Amit Chaudhuri’s “Nissim Ezekiel,” which Thayil includes:

This man, in a room full of papers
in the Theosophy building,
still young at fifty-five,
the centre of his small universe,
told me, for fifteen minutes,
that my poems were ‘derived’.
I was seventeen.
I listened only to the precision
of his Bombay accent, juxtaposed
in my mind with the syllables of his name.
In some ways, he did not disappoint.

The standard line of descent for modern Indian poetry in English11 generally records two or maybe three foundational poets from within the generation just slightly younger than Ezekiel: Dom Moraes (1938-2004), A.K. Ramanujan (1929-1993), and Arun Kolatkar (1932-2004). (Rabindranath Tagore, for his part, probably doesn’t count as a predecessor in this sense: *Gitanjali* was written in Bengali and translated by Tagore into English.) Thayil’s anthology preserves the standard lineage, but chops it up with inheritors, productive juxtapositions and coterie cohorts: Ezekiel, at the book’s beginning, is
followed by US-born and based poets Aimee Nezhukumatathil and Srikanth Reddy, who seem to have been placed there to take the book as geographically and generationally far from Ezekiel’s claustrophobic Bombay as possible: both poets were born in Chicago in the early 1970s. The anthology closes with Kolatkar, a Bombay poet who wrote in Marathi and in English; he is preceded by the poet Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, who ingeniously reads Kolatkar in “What Is an Indian Poem?,” an essay Thayil also includes. At the center of the book are Dom Moraes, who had early success in the UK before also returning to Bombay, and A.K. Ramanujan, who left India for the U.S. at 31 for an academic career as a linguist and multi-lingual scholar at the University of Chicago.

Of Ezekiel’s immediate inheritors and younger contemporaries, Moraes remains the best known in India, and, to a lesser extent, in the UK; in the US he remains largely unknown. His first book won the Hawthornden Prize in 1957 while he was a student at Oxford, and he went on to lead an eventful London literary life for a decade or so. Work in journalism took him to New York, Israel, and elsewhere, before Indira Gandhi’s government forced his return to Bombay. He wrote a ton of prose, including an autobiography published in 1968 that I haven’t looked at; a full biography in political context would be fascinating indeed. Moraes’s verse is heavily anthologized in India, particularly his Audenesque early work:

Things happen here without my full consent.
And I accept them all. What is my choice?
I have few muscles; I must trust my voice.

Moraes has not, however, had much continuing impact outside of India. Moraes worked in modes that are mostly out of fashion in the US, at least in academic circles. Thayil includes a number of Moraes’s very last 12 sonnets, written as Moraes knew he was dying, and singled out by King. It is as someone who responds (in a kind of hateful way) the flawed Robert Lowell of Notebook, The Dolphin, and For Lizzy and Harriet that I approach late Moraes, whose anguished self-examinations, including a childhood dominated by an abusive, mentally-ill mother, have a paradoxical rococo lightness and a vatic distance-in-intimacy that recalls Lowell. Here is the opening sonnet from the sequence:

From a heavenly asylum, shriveled Mummy,
glare down like a gargoyle at your only son,
who now has white hair and can hardly walk.
I am he who was not I. It’s hot in this season
and the acrid reek of my body disturbs me
in a city where people die on pavements.
That I’m terminally ill hasn’t been much help.
There is no reason left for anything to exist.
Goodbye now. Don’t try and meddle with this.

Why does your bloated corpse cry out to me
that I took from the hospital, three days dead?
I’d have come before, if the doctors had said.
I couldn’t kiss you goodbye, you stank so much.
Or bear to touch you. Anyway, bye-bye, Mumsie.

I can hear lines like “There is no reason left for anything to exist” as comic, as an ironic comment on narcissism, but I can also hear them as an absolute despair. “Don’t try and meddle with this” refers as much to the actual poems (i.e. “don’t try to change these poems after my death”—very much an editorial possibility in India at the time) as to the poet’s own resignation. The three days it takes to find and claim his mother reads less like oedipal payback than disgust, and fear for the state of discovery, at what the poet’s own fate, smell already begun, will soon be. It will be interesting to see what becomes of these poems as critical tastes swing back; Moraes could easily be taught as one of the stronger poets working in the wake of Lowell, Auden and Larkin (if one wants to preserve that line).
And there is no question that Moraes continues to influence Indian poetry in English, a point that Thayil underscores by placing his own work immediately following Moraes’s sonnets in the anthology.

In the U.S., Ramanujan is a much more familiar poet. Born in the South Indian city of Mysore, Ramanujan spent his career at the University of Chicago, where he held a joint appointment in the departments of Linguistics and of South Asian Languages and Civilizations. He was a Sanskritist, a multilingual translator, and a member of the school’s notorious Committee on Social Thought. He wrote poems in English and in Kannada. In the US, Ramanujan is beginning to be read as one of the first poets of the Indian diaspora, addressing “my confusions, my absent presence,/ faraway rivers amok in my continents.” He published three books of verse in English during his lifetime; Thayil has taken poems exclusively from The Black Hen, published two years after Ramanujan’s death. Here is the title poem:

It must come as leaves
to a tree
or not at all
yet it comes sometimes
as the black hen
with the red round eye

on the embroidery
stitch by stitch
dropped and found again

and when it’s all there
the black hen stares
with its round red eye

and you’re afraid.

Two of Ramanujan’s contemporaries, G.S. Sharat Chandra (1935-2000) and Srinivas Rayaprol (1925-1998), are often left out of accounts of Indian poetry in English, but their inclusion in the anthology should help solidify their places in the founding canon, as will the publication of Rayaprol’s near lifelong correspondence with William Carlos Williams, in preparation at the time of this writing. Sharat Chandra and Rayaprol’s work is part of the anthology’s tacit running theme of an emerging diasporic imagination: Chandra, also originally from Mysore, emigrated to the U.S. and became an English professor at the University of Missouri, Kansas City; Rayaprol, from Secunderabad, another city in South India, trained as an engineer in the U.S. and later returned to India and edited the transcontinental journal East/West. Here is Chandra’s “Reasons for Staying”:

I am talking to the kitchen table
full of roses.
The language is my own,
I tell them
I own them.

There are roses because I say so,
the vase is mine,
so is the kitchen.
I like them red,
I pay for the water.

The chairs immediately respond,
the table,
the knives and plates,
the salt shaker,
join in.

Arun Kolatkar, who closes the book, published three books of poems in English (only Jejuri is available in the US as a separate volume); a posthumous volume of uncollected work and translations, The
Boatride & Other Poems, has appeared in India; almost all of his English-language work appears in a Bloodaxe Collected available in the US. In Marathi, Kolatkar is considered a major 20th century poet, having published more than 15 collections, including the nearly 400 page Bhijki Vahi, or Tear-stained Notebook. As Mehrotra describes it, Bhijki Vahi’s 25 poems are fugues on “[the] sorrowing woman – from Isis, Cassandra and the Virgin Mary to Nadezhda Mandelstam, Susan Sontag, and [Kolatkar’s] own sister, Rajani.” Though he could have chosen a full elite cosmopolitanism, Kolatkar, while working as a highly-paid illustrator, chose to remain in Bombay, working in Marathi and in English. His career recalls Pollock’s formulation: “some people in the past have been able to be cosmopolitan or vernacular without directly professing either, perhaps while finding it impossible rationally to justify either” (593). For anyone who has read Kolatkar’s work in English, also canonical in India, the Rabelaisian fusion of high and low, mythic and modern, serious and playful that Mehrotra’s description promises seems very familiar. Kolatkar’s back-and-forth between Marathi and English is the subject of Anjali Nerlekar’s excellent Bombay Modern: Arun Kolatkar and Bilingual Literary Culture. Laetitia Zecchini’s Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism in India works directly from that perspective as well. I defer to these two studies of this great poet, and particularly to Nerlekar’s particular conception of the sathottari period (1955-1980) in Bombay, but I will say a little bit more here.

Maharashtra, the state in India where Mumbai is located, was created in 1956, four years after Nissim Ezekiel’s first book, A Time to Change was published in 1952. Kolatkar, born in 1932, published his first book in English in 1976, but was by then a well-known poet writing in Marathi. That collection, Jejuri, is a serial panorama of a sacred Hindu site in Maharashtra, incorporating numerous ironies that play the site’s actual physical state off its accepted spiritual significance. Kolatkar’s second book written in English, Kala Ghoda Poems, was published in 2004, a year after his death. Sarpa Satra, a third English book and a retelling, in very modern terms, of a tiny piece of the Mahabharata, was published that same year. Kolatkar was born in rural Kolhapur, but his work and reputation are inseparable from Bombay in general, and Kala Ghoda in particular. Kala Ghoda is a Mumbai district that was once sleepy, shabby, and radiating past history, and is now completely gentrified while retaining glimmers of its aura. “Pi-dog,” a longish serial poem included by Thayil nearly in its entirety, opens on a Kala Ghoda
traffic island. From there, the poem effortlessly combines myriad inheritances and tweaks multiple sensibilities in channeling the title canine, who lingers with crossed paws in the middle of the island—the city writ small. (Bombay was originally seven discrete islands.) I don’t want to spoil all the small shocks of reading the poem for the first time by saying anything more about it here, but “Pi-dog” makes the city’s endless pain and self-renewal come to life; it belongs in anyone’s personal Anglophone anthology, particularly as laid out in the Pras Prakashan edition. The poem ends when the morning hour advances, and it becomes time to “surrender the city/ to its so-called masters.” The poem resists any attempts to reduce its specificities to perspectives that accrue to any one individual.

The poem is also a kind of open secret. Anne-Lise François, following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, calls an open secret a “gesture of self-canceling revelation [that] permits a release from the ethical imperative to act upon knowledge” in environments of threat. For François, an open secret is “an essentially preventative or conservative mode of communication that reveals to insiders what it simultaneously hides from outsiders, or, more specifically, protects them from what it is in their power to ignore.” Poetry, in that sense, can be an open secret, “a way of imparting knowledge such that it cannot be claimed and acted on.” Poets use poetry in this way. Kolatkar’s writing in English may have been a kind of open secret, with regard to forms of Maharashtrian and Hindu nationalism. It is a kind of communication that is under explicit threat. “The Evolution of Covert Signaling” is a paper that defines its subject as “the transmission of information that is accurately received by its intended audience but obscured when perceived by others. Such signals may allow coordination and enhanced cooperation” (Smaldino, Flamson and McElreath). The authors present a possible way of computationally modeling (and thus working to counteract) that threat, introducing “a novel mathematical model to asses when a covert signaling strategy will evolve, as well as how receiver attitudes coevolve with covert signals” (ibid).

Poets cannot help producing poetry in environments of threat. To give one example, Shrikant Verma’s Magadh, which Vivek Narayanan characterizes, in introducing Rahul Soni’s translation, as “one of the most highly regarded books of Hindi poetry from the 1980s” and “among the best books of poetry” that
he himself has read, can be read as an open secret. Narayanan says Verma’s “ambiguous invocations of half-mythical South Asian cities bring Borges and Cavafy automatically to mind, but there is also a canny and even bitter political outrage… that sets him apart,” that also makes me think of Mandelstam, and of Robert Duncan’s *Passages*. “Bizarrely,” Narayanan writes, “Verma was a senior Congress Party functionary under Indira Gandhi in the late 70s and early 80s—it’s hard, for me at least, to resist reading *Magadh* as his way of speaking about some aspects of that close-up experience in the only way he could” (Narayanan, AI4). Here is Verma’s “Corpses in Kashi” as translated from Hindi by Rahul Soni:

Corpses in Kashi

Have you seen Kashi?
Where corpses come and go
by the same road

And what of corpses?
Corpses will come
Corpses will go

Ask then, whose corpse is this?
Is it Rohitashva? No, no
all corpses cannot be Rohitashva

His corpse, you will recognize
from a distance
and if not from a distance

then from up close
and if not from up close
then it cannot be Rohitashva

And even if it is,
what difference
does it make?

Friends, you have seen Kashi
where corpses come and go
by the same road

and this is all you did -
made way and asked,
Whose corpse is this?

Whoever it was
whoever it was not
what difference did it make?
Kolatkar’s generation in Mumbai includes Dilip Chitre (1938-2009) who also has complete oeuvres in Marathi and in English. In the latter language, Chitre is equal parts phenomenologist and noirish beat. Keki Daruwalla, born a year earlier, is somewhat notorious for his service to the Indian intelligence agency (he’s a former chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee); his work pursues rhyming forms and Hellenic preoccupations through to pessimistic takes on big questions. Kamala Das (1934-2009), is famous in India for a tell-all autobiography (which she all but disavowed) and for frank poems on marriage and infidelity, all of which shocked readers in India on a scale that exceeded Anne Sexton’s impact in the US, for example. That Das’s work had similar impact while not being nearly as graphic as Sexton’s points up a major way that it requires being carried across. Indian mores at the mid-20th century were such that even Das’s most “revelatory” poems can seem restrained in more permissive contexts. Poems like “The Maggots,” though, are crushingly Ledaen:

At sunset on the riverbank, Krishna
loved her for the last time and left.
That night in her husband’s arms, Radha felt
so dead that he asked, what is wrong,
do you mind my kisses love, and she said
no, not at all, but thought, what is
it to the corpse if the maggots nip?

The generation born around the time of Indian Independence includes K. Satchidanandan, whose recitations of his poems in Malayalam are astonishing (he’s known in Kerala as “the Neruda of Kottayam”), but whose poems in the anthology don’t hit similar sonic highs. Sadana’s exploration of his work and career is an excellent place to start with it. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, the great critic of his generation (he has stood for election as Oxford’s Professor of Poetry), has poems in the anthology that tread ironically on Iron John territory, but the full scope of his career is only beginning to come into focus: the Fall 2019 release in the US of his collected poems should be a major event. Eunice de Souza’s sharp, unsparing book, Fix, published in 1979, deserves a full critical republication and reevaluation, along with many more readers. De Souza’s poems, driven by her unmistakable voice, don’t sit well excerpted within the anthology, but Fix’s vivid, caustic clarity opens out into the world in a way that reminds me first of Alice Notley’s writing from the same decade. A revised edition of De Souza’s collected poems, A Necklace of Skulls, was published in 2019.
Gopal Honnalgere (1942-2003) is, with Sharat Chandra and Rayaprol, among Thayil’s most intriguing finds. I can’t stop re-reading Honnalgere’s “The City,” a longish poem of married love that’s unlike any other. Its effects depend on nursery-rhyme-like repetitions that get very close to lovers’ play, and its intense, real-time tableaux can suddenly pull back into commentary: hard, yet full longing. Parts make me think of Joseph Ceravolo’s poems, and of Bernadette Mayer’s great *Midwinter Day*. One hopes that Thayil’s superb detective work will spur the republication and reconsideration of Honnalgere’s six long-vanished Indian small press titles. The work of Lawrence Bantleman (1942-1995), only slightly less obscure, and also included by Thayil, deserves similar reevaluation. The generation born in the 1950s includes Vikram Seth, more famous in the U.S. for his memoir *Two Lives* and for the novels *A Suitable Boy* and *An Equal Music* than for his agile formalist verse; and Vijay Seshadri and Agha Shahid Ali, both of whom are well-known (and very different) Indian-American poets. Meena Alexander’s elegy to Allen Ginsberg asks this “Engine of flesh, hot sunflower of Mathura” to “teach us to glide into life,/ teach us when not to flee.” A discovery for some US readers will be Manohar Shetty, whose lyricism in his poems of the 1980s at once recalls that of Theodore Roethke, and, at moments, Al. Here is Shetty’s “The Hyenas”:

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  My asthmatic child coughs - her throat
  Is emery paper. Her tiny
  Hands are wet
  Petals in my hand. Hyenas cackle
  From the Governor’s banquet grounds.

  Eyes glint as a fencer’s
  Mask, I stare them down. I whisper,
  They’ve gone, dearest child, sleep;
  They laugh with the Governor’s gang
  Of kingmakers, fatcats, gold-toting ogres.

  She sleeps, her temples damp.
  To the carrion call the drooling
  Packs converge: amidst red

  Laughter, claws tear
  At gizzard, sweating pigling,
  Roe, soft brain, and lamb.
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From there in the anthology, things are as scattered, various and unsettled as they were elsewhere in the mid-2000s in poetry for the generations born in the 1960s and 1970s. Mukta Sambrani emigrated to the US from India as an adult; her entries in the anthology are forceful personae-based lyrics and
invocations: “Anne Carson lives in Canada, in Greece, in Rome, and in China/ Mothers of gods everywhere suffer prolonged pregnancy and unnatural labour.” Sambrani’s *Broomrider’s book of the dead* was published in 2015 by *Paperwall.in*. Mani Rao, who was born in Mumbai and splits her time between the US and India, writes, in the poems included in the anthology, directly and abstractly about sex and desire in a manner at once distinctive and full of echoes; the three books of Rao’s I have been able to locate were published by Hong Kong’s Chameleon Press. Anjum Hasan, based in Karnataka and editor of the literature journal *Caravan*, recalls “agonized deputations to the sitting room” that preserve a Shillong childhood’s stasis. Mumbai-based poet Sampurna Chattarji, writing of an unnamed elsewhere, finds “She understands nothing of this place,/ and so it moves her”; Chattarji’s work over 14 books and her curating at *IQ*, among many other projects, are formative. An art critic and curator, Ranjit Hoskote is a critic and intellectual mentor of the Bombay visual art and poetry scenes, and remains their most accomplished poet: “graphite smudges to mark/ where cloud-hidden peaks will rise.” A book detailing the work of Hasan, Chattarji, and Hoskote, within poetry and arts journalism and the ways they relate institutionally in India (and disparately don’t) would be very useful.

The younger poets based in the UK seem, in the anthology, less touched by modernism and its aftereffects. The younger poets based in the US are more broadly represented in the anthology *Indivisible: An Anthology of South Asian American Poetry*. My favorite selections from among the younger writers in the anthology are from poets living in Missoula and Fairfax County, respectively: Prageeta Sharma’s beautiful and unclassifiable love poems, and Vivek Narayanan’s *bildungsdictungs*, profuse with the confusions of early adulthood:

Thus with the darkly dreaming town colluding
I iced my post-adolescent angst in a heartbeat.

As with most of the living poets in anthology, Sharma and Narayanan’s work has evolved a great deal in the intervening years.

Despite the critiques of writers who leave or are born outside of India, returns are just as complicated. Thayil includes Adil Jussawalla’s *Missing Person* in its entirety. Thayil’s own “Malayalam’s Ghazal”
conveys a poet’s fear of imperfect vernacular mastery. Arundhati Subramaniam’s “To the Welsh Critic Who Doesn’t Find Me Identifiably Indian” takes on the West’s demands for ethnic authenticity with a rhetoric that’s “about as rustic/ as a mouth-freshened global village.” Kazim Ali’s “Two Halves” takes the Indianness equation’s concrete givens (language, location) and makes them oblique:

two halves circle each other
each aching for the other’s arms

they’re rent in their itching
to hit the ground at the speed of sound

the half of you is tone deaf
but the other half still sings

one half forgot the other’s face
his ‘collision or collusion with history’

the two lock now one to the other
sink blazingly below the clouds

In his introduction, Thayil says that he hopes the anthology serves as an “introduction to undeservedly little-known literature.” He love for that literature is palpable, and is part of what makes the book much more than a survey. But just as Donald Allen’s The New American Poetry 1945-1960 cannot be accepted as a model of its moment, the same is true of Thayil’s anthology: its first ten years have already revealed unrecoverable limitations. At the same time, I have lost months to it.
Chapter 2: Archival Power: Individualization, the Racial State, and Institutional Poetry

This chapter focuses on an attempt, using poetry, to co-opt and contain an ongoing social movement, Black Lives Matter—#BlackLivesMatter—in 2015. It argues that a poetry performance by Kenneth Goldsmith at Brown University on March 13 of that year, entitled “The Body of Michael Brown,” was an attempted use of archival power. Archival power is a strategy for containing social movements by keeping their demands discursive and relatively confined to the US university system (Ferguson). Goldsmith’s performance has already been situated within the context of Black Lives Matter by a number of critics; I am seeking here to understand it specifically as an instance of archival power. Before giving an account of the Black Lives Matter movement, of archival power, or of Goldsmith’s performance, I need to give a brief, particular account of the current US university system, one set of institutions through which archival power works.

US universities contain ideas that threaten US society’s existing organization; at the same time, US universities work to maintain existing US class hierarchies and political horizons. That contradiction is not a design flaw. As a semi-closed system (admission, tuition, library paywalls, credentials), the US university at once produces and lets off pressure in accordance with contradictions in the larger economy; as its governance evolves and reacts to conditions, it produces more pressure than it lets off. The main form of pressure that the US university currently creates is enormous personal debt. At the same time, the university prepares an increasingly less-employable middle-class workforce, the country’s bureaucratic and surveillance back office, resulting in diminishing mobility (Bailey). Marxist critiques of capitalism are taught at US universities, and committed Marxist scholars radicalize students, but the main political horizon that the university actually promulgates is tied directly into the racial capitalist state, which needs the university’s ultimate surpluses. And Marxist and other scholars who do speak out and radicalize students face attacks inside and outside the university, a phenomenon with a long history.
Scholars Piya Chatterjee and Sunaina Maira’s collection *The Imperial University: Academic Repression and Scholarly Dissent* (2014) responds to recent forms of the phenomenon, “a calamitously repressive series of well-coordinated attacks against scholars who have dared to challenge the national consensus on U.S. wars and overseas occupations” in the years following 9/11. Those challenges, in the form of demand-based occupation and protest, often take place on university campuses themselves; in response, “administrative policing flexes its muscles along with the batons, chemical weapons, and riot gear of police and SWAT teams” (Chatterjee and Maira 5). Instances of even speech-based solidarity or can lead to opaque denials of promotion or resources, or outright ostracism and smears, as with Steven Salaita (Pettit), with the goal of “containment and censorship of political critique” (Chatterjee and Maira 5). That containment and censorship is “enacted through the collusion of the university, partisan off-campus groups and networks, and the state” (ibid).

A recent incident as of this writing involved the arrest and forcible removal of Johns Hopkins University students and others who took over a university administration building to protest the university’s plan to employ an armed private campus police force, and to protest the university’s contracts to provide medical and leadership training to US border enforcement. Following a month-long occupation that attempted to get the university to abandon its plans for armed private police and to terminate its government contracts, two undergraduates, two graduate students, and three community members were arrested, and the building was cleared. The demands were not met (Campbell and Richman).

The US was founded on the twin tracks of slavery and genocide, obscured via elevated rhetoric invoking autonomy and freedom, relatively available to a protected class that is by default white, the definition of which expands as necessary. The contemporary US consumes 25% of the world’s resources to support 4.4% of its population, while housing 25% of the world’s known incarcerated people, a disproportionate number of whom are Black (Reed), (Lee). Some US poetries acknowledge the US’s founding settler-colonial white nationalism. The textual record of acknowledgement stretches from the demands of *The Resolutions of the Germantown Mennonites; February 18th 1688* and James M. Whitfield’s “How Long?” and before, to Audre Lorde’s “Power,” Jayne Cortez’s “Rape,” John Keene’s *Counternarratives*, and
after. These works are not easily grouped together; at the same time, they all seek to disclose the US’s continuing settler-colonial practices and US slavery’s afterlife (Hartman). While the US’s relatively permissive speech laws have allowed strains of poetry to act as an open secret in the US, fully-realized reactionary strands of “quietism” (Silliman) run just as deep through US poetry and thought, presenting a default white world shot-through with demand-weariness, rue, avoidance, melancholy, apathy, quasi-ameliorative hand-waving, and acidic satire that betrays lingering investment (here I’m thinking of Frederick Seidel, but there are lots of examples). Whatever one wants to call them, quietest tendencies want to represent default-white being-in-the-world in order to solace, consume, or transcend it. Some poems demonstrate competing false responses; some show some ways of trying to enjoy oneself, even if they don’t work or are temporary; some indulge in “ecstatic capitulation” (Borzutzky). In the years following WWII, the production and reception of poetry in the US increasingly came under the auspices of the US university (Rasula), via a proliferation of writing programs (McGurl), that are de facto white supremacist (Díaz).

The split among poetic strands under US capitalism mirrors the pistonized pressure-valve construction of the US university; that contradiction is US poetry institutions under racial capitalism, which has produced racialized modes specific to poetry. For example, poets from The Black Arts Movement entered and remained within the academy at varying points in their careers, as did poets from white-dominated poetries that present themselves as oppositional, including Language poetry. For those coming in from the Black Arts Movement and other movements, however eventual reception within the university happened almost completely under the sign of “identity politics” (Ho). That term, as noted earlier, is “highly contested” (Haider); its most clarifying incarnation has been as, as Haider defines it, “the neutralization of social movements... the ideology that emerged to appropriate their emancipatory legacy in service of the advancement of political and economic elites” (12). Roderick Ferguson’s 2012 book The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference details the mechanics of that neutralization within the US university, and calls the major force behind its containments in the US university “archival power.” Through archival power, the processes of identity politics produce “identity poetry” as form of reception in Haider’s sense, regulated from
within US universities, in ways that have worked to make race “illegible” within US poetry and literature (Ferguson 43). This reordering continues within writing programs. Its activity was exposed to particular and painful scrutiny during an institutional “crisis” (Yépez) within US poetry in institutions in 2015, when identity-based reception strategies came into conflict with an attempt to co-opt and contain Black Lives Matter.

It is not for me to claim or tell the ongoing story of the Black Lives Matter movement. I am going to synopsize a part of the chronological account of its development by the scholar Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor. I am doing so to try to clarify what another straight, white, Jewish, male, cis poet from Long Island did with regard to it.13

“On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown Jr., an 18-year-old African American man, was fatally shot by 28-year-old white Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson in the city of Ferguson, Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis.” That is how the current Wikipedia entry that comes up in searching for “mike brown murder” begins (Brown). The Black Lives Matter movement arose in the immediate aftermath of Brown’s death. Its origins and early phase have been documented in the 2016 book From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor:14

Every movement needs a catalyst, an event that captures people’s experiences and draws them out from their isolation into a collective force with the power to transform social conditions. Few could have predicted that white police officer Darren Wilson shooting Mike Brown would ignite a rebellion in a small, largely unknown Missouri suburb called Ferguson. For reasons that may never be clear, Brown’s death was also a breaking point for the African Americans of Ferguson—but also for hundreds of thousands of Black people across the United States. Perhaps it was the inhumanity of the police leaving Brown’s body to fester in the hot summer sun for four and a half hours after killing him, keeping his parents away at gunpoint with dogs. “We was treated like we wasn’t parents, you know?” “That’s what I didn’t understand. They sicced dogs on us. They wouldn’t let us identify his body. They pulled guns on us.” Maybe it was the military hardware police brandished when protests to Brown’s death arose. With tanks and machine guns and a never-ending supply of tear gas, rubber bullets, and swinging batons, the Ferguson police department declared war on Black residents and anyone who stood in solidarity with them. (153-154)

Taylor’s account of the four and a half hours that Brown’s body was left in the street argues that Michael Brown’s body itself was a primary site of contention for the movement. That view is widely shared (Coates). Taylor quotes Charles Pierce, whose own account, she notes, “captured what many
felt”: “Dictators leave bodies in the street. Petty local satraps leave bodies in the street. Warlords leave bodies in the street... as object lessons”—object lessons making clear who is in power (154). The #BlackLivesMatter movement, organized largely through social media, gained force locally in Ferguson in the aftermath of Brown’s death; called by movement membership, a larger resistance began to converge there. The movement linked Brown’s death to the death, three weeks prior (on July 17, 2014), in Staten Island, New York, of Eric Garner. Garner was choked to death by police officer Daniel Pantaleo during an attempt to arrest Garner. Awareness of the disproportionate number of Black people in the US who are killed by police, ongoingly, began to spread, and the deaths began to be more widely regarded as the extrajudicial executions that they are. Over 300 people were arrested over the course of nightly riots in August 2014 in Ferguson.

The stakes became further defined as time passed: in the ensuing months, “Black protestors went on to unmask the kleptocracy at the heart of municipal operations in Ferguson, revealing that the Ferguson police department, directed by the mayor and city council, were targeting the Black population as a major source of revenue for the town” though punitive “fines, fees, citations, tickets, and arrests” for which officials had revenue-generating targets (Taylor 155). The result: “By December 2014, the department had 16,000 outstanding arrest warrants, mostly for minor offenses. Ninety-five percent of traffic stops were directed at Black drivers” (ibid). For many, it became clear that these tactics could not possibly be limited to Ferguson. Then, as Taylor recounts, on November 24, 2014, “a grand jury in Ferguson decided not to indict Darren Wilson for the murder of Mike Brown” (168). Two days before the announcement, Taylor notes, 12-year-old Tamir Rice had been killed by police Cleveland (the boy had been holding a toy gun); a week before that, Tanisha Anderson had been killed (also in Cleveland) as part of an attempted arrest. On December 3, 2014, nine days after the Wilson decision, “a Staten Island grand jury returned a decision not to indict Daniel Pantaleo, the officer who choked Eric Garner to death” (169). Riots, protests, and walkouts erupted at points nationwide and around the world, and continued into the ensuing months: “Researchers at the Rudin Center for Transportation at New York University... counted more than 1,400 protests in nearly 300 U.S. and international cities related to the Black Lives Matter movement from November 2014 through May 2015. Half or more of the protests in
that time in Saint Louis, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Oakland, Calif., wound up shutting down transportation infrastructure” (Badger). As Taylor recounts, on December 8, 2014, five days after the decision on Daniel Pantaleo, LeBron James and other basketball players wore a t-shirt emblazoned with Eric Garner’s entreaty to police, “I Can’t Breathe,” which had been widely circulated; other celebrities followed suit. The gesture carried charge: it backed blocked highways and burning police cars.

As Taylor recounts, then-president Barack Obama “quickly organized a meeting of some of the more visible activists from Ferguson and around the country to discuss police violence.” It was a highly unusual request: “[t]hat such a meeting was ever convened was proof alone that this was no longer just about Ferguson. The nation’s political establishment was concerned about containing the movement” (ibid). As 2015 began, #BlackLivesMatter seemed like a potential threat on the order of the US’s recent past. The Occupy movement had happened in 2011, and had led to semi-coordinated riots and takeovers. Black Lives Matter, however, aroused the white power structure’s memory of Black militancy:

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, it often looked as if a major national uprising might possibly happen. There were major [Black militant] rebellions in Rochester, Philadelphia, and Harlem in 1964; in Watts in 1965; in Cleveland in 1966, in Newark, Detroit, and Minneapolis-St Paul in 1967; in Chicago, Baltimore, Washington, DC, and Cleveland in 1968. Politicized bombings were a regular occurrence. There were over 4,000 bombings [by various groups] between January 1969 to April 1970 in the United States. Universities were having a similar moment of militancy in the 1960s with huge protests and shutdowns. After Kent State, as Kirkpatrick Sale notes, “students at a total of at least 350 institutions went out on strike and 536 schools were shut down completely for some period of time, 51 of them for the entire year.” (Spahr and Young, The Program Era and the Mainly White Room)

It was in an atmosphere of political uncertainty and seeming (if dissipating) revolutionary possibility that on March 13, 2015, at the Interrupt3 conference at Brown University, conceptual poet Kenneth Goldsmith read a piece titled “The Body of Michael Brown.” The piece was what Goldsmith later called a “massaging” of Michael Brown’s autopsy report (Steinhauer): Goldsmith edited the report so that his recitation ended with the report’s routine and compulsory description of Brown’s genitals. (The description actually occurs in another part of the report.) The poet John Keene, writing as a critic in characterizing the performance in the days immediately following it, places the performance in its historical and political contexts, and names its interests:
[The very fact that Goldsmith], as a wealthy, socially privileged cis-gender straight white male, chose to appropriate and perform the remixed report, within (and despite) the broader and longstanding social and political context of the crisis of police harassment, the prison-industrial context and the New Jim Crow, and the state-sanctioned murder of black people, especially black men, made it an overtly political act. That he remixed it, ending with a riff on the murdered black man's genitalia, to entertain a mostly white audience at one of the nation's most elite universities, underlined the political valence of the performance. The dismemberment and display of black bodies before white audiences has an ugly history in the US, such that one might view Goldsmith's performance as a form of symbolic lynching. Here the appropriate practice was neither “uncreative” [as Goldsmith often claims his work is] nor apolitical; in its commodifying and reifying action-as-spectacle, it reinscribed the violence of Brown's (and other black people's) tragic death and its aftermath, and the erasure of his humanity, in an effort at ironic, clever entertainment. It was thus an act of oppression-as-art that fits well with the logic of white supremacy as it has long functioned in American society. (Keene, Limit)

Keene goes on to name other Black men murdered by police in the period after Brown’s murder—Walter Scott in North Charleston, South Carolina; Tony Robinson in Madison, Wisconsin; Eric Harris in Tulsa, Oklahoma; Freddie Gray in Baltimore, Maryland—making clear the routine nature of the extrajudicial executions of Black men, and women, in the US. That routineness is something Goldsmith’s performance implicitly draws on when appropriating Brown’s genitalia, as Keene notes.

Goldsmith had in the years prior been working in a self-described “uncreative” “conceptual” mode of composition, one that he described as rule-based and appropriative, and that was presented as opposed to the individual “expression” of voice. That set it explicitly against so-called identity poetry; voice-based expression is perceived as central to identity poetry, which is in fact a default-white reception strategy and not anything immanent to the work it is used to denote. Conceptual poetry’s self-canonizing anthology, published in 2011, is titled *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*.

While attacks on and critiques of conceptualism’s engagements with race had already been made by the time the performance occurred, it’s hard to overstate conceptual poetry’s institutional dominance in the US at the moment of the performance: Goldsmith, who teaches at the University of Pennsylvania, had been selected to visit the White House on May 11, 2011 to help lead a poetry “summit,” and in 2013 was appointed the first poet laureate of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. As word of Goldsmith's performance began at Brown to circulate, condemnations were immediate, including Keene’s comprehensive critique. The poet Ken Chen, writing as a critic about the
In Seven American Deaths and Disasters, Goldsmith transcribes news broadcasts responding to the tragedies [the JFK, RFK, and John Lennon assassinations; the space shuttle Challenger explosion; 9/11; the Columbine High School mass shooting; Michael Jackson’s death]—in other words, an imagined public sphere. The tragedies are conceptualized as having happened to “us.” In his most recent piece, Goldsmith did not transcribe mass media responses to Michael Brown’s death, perhaps because he did not see Brown as one of “us.” Instead, he read Michael Brown’s autopsy report. He literally performed the role of the state, the man slicing apart the fallen body of Michael Brown. When I first heard about the performance, I was initially struck by how Goldsmith’s reading felt less like a faux-pas or a mistake, than the kind of deeply revealing slip from a psychoanalytic case study, that gesture by which the subject reveals the unconscious self-knowledge that they did not know they possessed. What I learned when Goldsmith read the autopsy report of Michael Brown is this: Conceptual Poetry literally sees itself as white power dissecting the colored body. Goldsmith saw Michael Brown not as a body but as a death-archive to be enumerated, dissected, and possessed (in the sense both of property and haunting). He wrote in another lineage—not just Western Modernism, but also the literary tradition that made modernity possible: the documents, the ledgers and the logs of the slave trade.

The “us” that Chen invokes, from Goldsmith’s perspective, is the default white power structure of the state and the elite university as expression of accumulated capital. Chen is arguing that Goldsmith’s performance literally marshaled white power in the service of that audience, and that the performance must be understood as an operation on the “death-archive” of slavery. Through Ferguson’s concept of “archival power,” one clearly sees that the power that Chen describes really is a form of state power: the framing of Black bodies and social movements within white supremacist narratives, hierarchies, and discursive horizons. That is what Goldsmith’s piece did to Black Lives Matter in appropriating the movement’s primary site of contention, Michael Brown’s body, and treating it as a “death-archive.” As Chen notes, the moment was “deeply revealing” of the nature of default-white textual appropriation within racial capitalism. Seeing more of the mechanism of that appropriation, in terms of its relationship to the state, requires defining more of the terms under which it operates.

As Spahr and Young note in their piece “The Program Era and the Mainly White Room,” the Brown University audience that received Goldsmith’s performance was “mainly white.” The piece details the specific history of the “mainly white room” within the US university’s developing set of writing programs. Following up that piece, Spahr’s monograph Du Bois’s Telegram pulls back to give a detailed overview of the US government’s attempts to curtail social movements and related movement
literatures of the 1950s, 60s and 70s. As Spahr shows, the US government made explicit and successful attempts during that time to control the political horizons of US literature (and non-US literature) using the US university and various funding strategies that run through it. The reason for the desire for that explicit control has been laid out in the foundational study by Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formations in the United States* (1994). For Omi and Winant, as for everyone, the US is a “racially organized social and political system” (Omi and Winant, Formation 245)—“a racial project that combines essentialist representations of race (stereotyping, xenophobia, aversion, etc.) with patterns of domination (violence, hierarchy, super-exploitation, etc.)” (Omi and Winant, Resistance). That system’s appropriation, in the service of its own power, of mid-20th century social movements and their attendant literatures is cogently summarized by Roderick Ferguson in making Ferguson’s own argument about archival power.

Ferguson analyzes the US university’s response to the campus uprisings of the 1960s, which led directly to the controls documented by Chatterjee and Maira, whereby the “nation-state used local differences to mediate the upheavals brought about by the student movements.” Those movements were confronted and absorbed, Ferguson argues, following Stuart Hall, by the “racial state” under the sign of “difference.” The use of difference was codified, within the academy, under the sign of “identity politics,” which, as Haider and others show, it had appropriated from a Black feminist activist and scholarly collective, the Combahee River Collective. On the surface, within the academy, the term “identity politics” was presented as immanent to the movements, as a “demand for inclusion in the structure of society as it is” (Haider 25), erasing the collective’s actual transformative demands in the process. Thus, as Haider argues, the term must be understood as “the neutralization of movements against racial oppression... the ideology that emerged to appropriate [the] emancipatory legacy [of Black social movements] in service of the advancement of political and economic elites” (Haider 12). The erasing of transformative demands while capturing some of the energy and symbolic capital of the movements in the service of distortions is what archival power does. For Ferguson, “[t]he racial state is not simply the entity on which political demands are made. It is also that political formation that receives its identity and contours from having archived”—or, in Omi and Winant’s terminology,
“absorbed”—the social movements of the past (26). Ferguson goes on to detail Omi and Winant’s argument in *Racial Formations in the United States*, whereby “state institutions within the United States responded to political pressures of antiracist movements by, in part, adopting policies of absorption” (27). He quotes a key passage in their study: “Absorption reflects the realization that many demands are greater threats to the racial order before they are accepted than after they have been adopted in suitably moderate form” (86). From there comes Ferguson’s key transformation:

What Omi and Winant refer to as “absorption” we might understand as the gestures and routines of archival power. Indeed, in its absorptive capacities, the state becomes a subarchive that “documents” past struggles and thus achieves power through control of that broad assemblage of “documents” known as “the student movements.”

To speak through and with local culture and difference and to absorb them, state and capital needed the assistance of the academy. In point of fact, the academy was positioned prominently in this moment because of its historic task of representing national culture. In the moment of the sixties—because of the student movements around race and gender—the U.S. academy would take on the imperative of American literature. Put plainly, it would attempt to resolve the contradictions that govern and constitute the U.S. nation-state. In the moment of the multinational firm’s emergence and capital’s explicit engagement in local culture and difference, the academy would become the handbook on the absorption and representation of those differences, the manual for state and capital’s unprecedented deliberation. As such, the U.S. academy would become the model of archontic power—using and assimilating texts to engage the problematic of “e pluribus unum.” In doing so, U.S. higher education would become the capitol of archival power, training state and economy in its methods of representation and regulation. Rather than the academy losing importance because of the attack on national culture, the American academy and things academic would become the place where enfeebled institutions might make sense of difference, its fortunes, and its disruptions. to foster an entirely new relation between academy, capital, and state. This new relation would revolve around the very question promoted by the U.S. student movements, the question of minority difference—how to understand it, how to negotiate it, how to promote it, and how to regulate it. This question would inspire power to run a new archival errand. (27-28)

The purpose of archival power is to keep demands discursive; the US university is the major medium through which that horizon-limiting power runs. Chen’s evocation of slavery’s ledgers is correct: Goldsmith’s performance was a show of his project’s discursive power over a Black body, and, explicitly, over Black sexuality and Black death. Goldsmith turned Michael Brown’s body into a text and brought it into the university under the auspices of a white stereotype (a white narrative, a white hierarchy, a white discursive horizon) that centered on Black male sexuality, presenting it as such to an elite, default white audience. In doing so, Goldsmith was working to neutralize the demands of Black Lives Matter by reframing its primary site of contention and appropriating it to signal the capacities of his own project, aligned with state containment. The performance brought Michael Brown’s body into
the university in order to begin to reframe the movement under state-sanctioned forms of signification, and to limit its power to the discursive realm. Its aim was archival.

Archival power works in the same way that capitalism and (we are told) terrorism work: via agents who act without explicit instructions in what they believe to be their own interests. Archival power works by absorbing movements, and movement literatures, narratives, and documents, and those who create them in exactly the same way. By appropriating Michael Brown’s death, Goldsmith was acting out of his own interest (in ways that I detail further below); at the same time, he was doing the state’s work of, in a moment of crisis, bringing the Black Lives Matter movement out of the realm of action and demand and into a policed, paywalled archive. The Brown university performance, owned by Brown, has not been released, at Goldsmith’s request, following its reception, which only underscores this point.

As Ferguson, following Stuart Hall, notes, social movements came under the auspices of US universities specifically under the sign of “identity” and “difference”; Goldsmith’s reordering of the autopsy text does so in the service of bringing Brown’s body into the US university under the terms of a white narrative, one that explicitly invokes difference. Just as “the U.S. nation-state and American capital in the 1960s used U.S. revolutionary movements to bolster the global standing of U.S. political economy,” it continued to do so in 2015:

    With the government’s overtures to minority communities and its promotion of nationalist ideas like “self-determination,” the state began to refashion itself into a structure that would partially and selectively affirm minority difference, evolving ways in which institutions could use rather than absolutely dismiss the demands of minority activists. In such a context, minority activism would be for power both a potential antagonist and a collaborator, inspiring critical transformations and new funding technologies at the same time. ... In order to refashion minority difference as an opportunity for power, the state would also construct racism as an increasingly illegible phenomenon in U.S. society, the unfortunate past that was gradually receding. (Ferguson 41)

Ferguson’s concept of archival power is thus not concerned just with literal archives, although it is built on top of the conventional sense of literal archives. When Ferguson talks about “absorption,” he is talking about actual people, in the sense that many activists end up academics within departments that separate the discursive side of demands for change from the direct action that must always accompany them. You don’t crush social movements with archival power; you do that with state
violence. At the same time, you can denature and neutralize histories though archival power (which often takes the form of funding), and integrate them into stories you want to tell (sometimes about incremental gains).

The strategy was showing signs of strain at the time of Goldsmith’s performance. It was, for institutional poetry in the US, a step in a developing “crisis” following of decades of steps taken toward diversity. The timing of Goldsmith’s performance makes clear it was an explicit response to a contestation, within the university and within poetry specifically, over the control of archival power, which was itself a step in the institutional crisis. That step itself, which I will now detail, had multiple precursors. In September, 2013 Heriberto Yépez’s essay “Goldsmith y el imperio retro-conceptual,” a series of theses, was posted in English on Guillermo Parra’s blog:

Goldsmith is emblematic of the decade of war against “terrorism.” His work consists of accepting and retransmitting (as is) what power emits, finding it beautiful without having to read it. Using the ready-made as take-over.

He transcribes texts, makes books of pure copy-paste, runs ubu.com, his celebrity prospers. “Uncreative Writing” is already a part of the canon he desired.

His innovation is questionable. One example among others: three decades ago, Ulises Carrión did things that are championed by North Americans today.

They reiterate colonialist practices. By means of manifestos, anthologies and membership, they erase or take over other histories.

His politics attracts students, academics, writers and readers who are undecided between the consensual and the arty. Conceptualism is a cultural manifestation derived from expansionist North American politics. That’s why appropriation is its foundation.

His campaign for stardom and an enterprise of symbolic capital uses a retro-frivolous look as a system of self-defense.

Goldsmith in the White House or on the Colbert Report isn’t the problem, but rather his promotion of a “silly” conformity, complicit with capital and laugh tracks. By depoliticizing writing, he disempowers emerging critical communities. His defect is ethical.

His aesthetic achievements, measured on an international scale, are scant. It’s not conceptualism but a pastiche of other conceptualisms.

Vanessa Place or Goldsmith embody North American expansionism and they give it good taste, post-experimental refinement, radical-soft.

They demonstrate what’s happening with critical post-theory writing that chooses to embrace capitalism while boasting about the twist. A performance of hegemonic possession? No. That would threaten its institutional click.
By denying its apology for capitalist logic and leaving a supposed irony open, a referential machine or a could-be role play, retro-conceptualism collapses. They could have been a performative denunciation but they wanted spectacle and approval, they prefer cynicism to criticism. ...

The Language poets themselves lost credibility by encouraging heirs with reactionary ideals.

As with Chen, Yépez’s argument lines up directly with Ferguson’s description of archival power. His reference to language poetry is to the movement that had proceeded conceptualism and that had sponsored conceptualism institutionally (doing a complex baton-pass that is the subject for another book). Dorothy J. Wang’s Thinking Its Presence, discussed earlier, was published in December 2013; in May 2014, Sueyeun Juliette Lee, a poet writing as a critic, published “Shock and Blah: Offensive Postures in ‘Conceptual’ Poetry and the Traumatic Stuplime,” a carefully theorized treatment on conceptual uses of archival trauma; in October 2014, Cathy Park Hong, a poet writing as a critic, published “Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde,” which, like Yépez and Lee’s pieces, targeted conceptualism and Goldsmith specifically, along with language poetry. Hong’s essay, which explicitly invokes Wang’s study, was the one to get institutional traction. It begins “To encounter the history of avant-garde poetry is to encounter a racist tradition.” It frames the avant-garde as an intra-institutional formation whose “most vocal, self-aggrandizing stars continue to be white and even today these stars like Kenneth Goldsmith spout the expired snake oil that poetry should be ‘against expression’ and ‘post-identity,’” picking up the thread of Wang’s argument regarding identity politics in Thinking Its Presence.

Hong’s piece was widely read and commented upon, and on March 10, 2015, three days before Goldsmith’s performance at Brown University, the Boston Review published “Race and the Poetic Avant-Garde,” a set of responses to Hong’s essay that the magazine had commissioned, co-curated by Dorothy J. Wang. Language poetry’s self-positioning as “against expression” has been well-documented (Kreiner). Dorothy J. Wang’s book and Cathy Park Hong’s essay focus on identity politics as a barrier to the work of poets of color being taken seriously within the academy; Hong’s essay contains attempts to theorize so-called tokenism and “bean counting” within the academy. The target of Hong’s critique
was creative writing program-based poetry reception, where poets “dread the possibility of being
tarred as an ‘identity politics’ poet, and perhaps to such a degree that it’s turned into our own
detriment: we may overly exercise a form of self-restraint, scraping our writing of explicitly toxic
racial matter, so we won’t be exiled to that ghetto.” Hong’s essay was published in a print journal in
October of 2014; Black Lives Matter probably had not happened by the time Hong finished the essay
and it began the process of production. Hong invokes the Black Arts Movement, but not the Black
militancy out of which the movement emerged. The sentence above signals is the limit of its target:
the discursive realm of institutional poetry. It is not a statement of wider solidarity outside of the
academy; it is a description of discursive strategies employed within it. As Wang and Hong note,
avoidance as a strategy seems less available to Black faculty. I want to talk about individualization as a modality of archival power in poetry in that context. The

poet Reginald Shepherd, writing as a critic, framed the issue in the Michigan Quarterly Review in 2003:

The identity card school of poetry is very popular in our current era, when rhetorical fantasies
of democracy and equality in cultural life have become tin-pot substitutes for the real things in
social, political, and economic life. But literature is one of the few areas of life in which I do
not feel oppressed, in which I have experienced the possibility of freedom. In the literary
realm one is not bound by social constructions of identity, or required to flash one’s assigned
identity card: one can be anyone, everyone, or no one at all. This is one of literature’s most
precious qualities, the access it allows us to otherness (including our otherness to ourselves),
and it is one of the things that I cherish most about poetry. Unfortunately, black writers are
too often expected to embody and deliver a predictable and familiarly packaged commodity of
what used to be called Negritude. One is expected or even obligated to write in a certain mode
or address a particular subject matter in order to be considered a legitimate writer, or even in
order to be considered at all. If one writes about a range of subjects in a range of modes, one’s work is reduced to that portion of it which is recognizably “black,” and the rest is just ignored, if not actively disqualified. Even if, like me, you don’t usually engage such subject matter, many readers both black and white will see only that part of one’s work that fits into the box marked “black.” (Shepherd)

By the time Shepherd is writing, “identity poetry” had already become a pejorative term within US poetry institutions. There, it was seen as a non-rigorous, apolitical product developed in response to MFA diversity agendas rather than something with deep roots in the social liberation movements of the 1960s, a particularly ironic state of affairs, and a direct illegibility effect of archival power.18 Shepherd identifies racial capitalism’s effects in assigning value to race within poetry reception and the academic job market, where demands are made in advance on the work in order to qualify for value. Diversity initiatives come with requirements to which white writers are not subject. Shepherd’s critique, written earlier, bears out Sara Ahmed’s analysis of academic diversity initiatives in every way. Ahmed’s devastatingly and subtly articulated On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life (2012) is a by-now canonical assessment of diversity in university hiring practices. Because it is so well-known and well-cited, I will use a sharply cogent summative review to synopsize its argument:

Ahmed treats the apparent commitment to diversity as an ‘institutional speech act’ which works in a circular manner, gaining value from its proximity to things that are already valued, such as ‘excellence’. Institutions develop ‘good’ diversity policies in a fetishistic manner that makes such documents a ‘paper exercise’, the main purpose of which is to be auditable in terms of compliance with legislation and policy. Diversity, she argues, is a ‘non-performative’ that does not produce the effects it names. But this is not due to a failure of intent, but a way in which diversity is or can be a way of ‘not bringing something into effect’. The response of universities and ‘critical’ scholars to accusations or suggestions of racism brings together the main arguments. As Ahmed shows, when racism is raised as an issue, universities respond as if it is the institution that is ‘suffering’ a blow or injury to its reputation. As with the response to institutional racism, a kind of ‘institutional therapy culture’ operates in which an admission of racism is made to pave the way to ‘treatment’ as a way of ‘getting over it’. Having an embedded diversity policy or a commitment to anti-racism becomes, Ahmed argues, a way of not recognizing racism at all. It becomes a method for protecting whiteness from injury because diversity policies enable white subjects to ‘feel good’ about their anti-racism. Diversity workers find out what becomes sedimented in institutions when they try to bring about change in them. (Murji)

The anger in Shepherd’s passage is right on the surface, but also I read the passage as a writer’s attempt to clarify one writer’s ability to survive and continue despite that. For Shepherd, literature allows a momentary transcendence of larger social conditions through which, as writer and as reader, individually, he has “experienced the possibility of freedom.” The individualization of that moment that is, I think, key here. Shepherd is, pointedly, trying to get at individual experience. “Identity,” in
the individual sense that it is being imposed on Shepherd, the sense produced by archival power, is 
looking to colonize that space, and to do so it presents identity as a domain of production. It is, in fact, 
a domain of reception, a sleight-of-hand that the US university helps train readers to perform.

It is thus not an accident that Goldsmith seizes on this formulation of identity in trying to explain how 
conceptualism works:

> If my identity is really up for grabs and changeable by the minute—as I believe it is—it’s 
important that my writing reflect this state of ever-shifting identity and subjectivity. That can 
mean adopting voices that aren’t “mine,” subjectivities that aren’t “mine,” political positions 
that aren’t “mine,” opinions that aren’t “mine,” words that aren’t “mine,” because in the 
end, I don’t think that I can possibly define what’s “mine” and what isn’t.

BUT—and here’s where subjectivity enters—it’s my choices that make the work “mine.” I have 
chosen—for some specific reason—a certain text to appropriate or to reframe. (Goldsmith)

This quote, to which Ken Chen, Cathy Park Hong, Dorothy J. Wang, Heriberto Yépez and other poets 
writing as critics refer in critiques of Goldsmith, is the inverse of Shepherd’s literary transcendence 
argument: in the “up for grabs” formulation of identity, the author’s subject position can, supposedly, 
through production, shift; in Shepherd’s formulation of reception, the reader can, through reading, 
become anyone. Through reading, Shepherd says he can experience, on an individual level, “the 
possibility of freedom” and “access” to “otherness,” while insisting that outside of that moment of 
literature, oppression remains. Goldsmith attempts to make that moment the truth about identity, one 
that writing, in production, “reflects.” They are both specifically individualized instances produced by 
identity’s own categorizations and value-assignments. As Hong puts it, the writer who is marked, 
individually, with “identity” is marked out racially rather than granted the right to transcendence. For 
Chen, to perform identity is to become the opposite of “a disembodied white self: the self as hero of 
individualism and technology, a cogito levitating freely above the racial mob.” (Chen). Identity and 
difference discourse in US institutions thus works to produce what Ferguson calls “the hegemonic 
affirmation of minority difference” (54). It does so through the individual, which is the level at which 
legitimation takes place, as at a job interview. As Shepherd notes: “One is expected or even obligated 
to write in a certain mode or address a particular subject matter in order to be considered a legitimate 
writer, or even in order to be considered at all”: a case-by-case process.
This individualized racial demand is a recognized strategy in the US for controlling labor. Consider a discursive distillation of a form of the demand from more than 100 years ago:

In the 1913 Mr. Block [comic] strip “He Meets Others,” [IWW artist Ernest] Riebe shows workers in the Louisiana Piney Woods region as a most diverse group, a fact not lost on the boss. A suit-wearing manager circulates among a group of workers, drawn with slight variations to identify them as being of varied races and nationalities—Anglo-Saxon, Irish, German, Italian, Chinese, Polish, and Black. These various others are easily set against one another by the manager. The boss threatens and cajoles them to compete by appealing to masculinity, to fears of joblessness, and especially to their willingness to believe in racial and national differences among themselves. Management-by-race proceeds individual by individual in the comic, suggesting that the idea is to keep competition alive by putting each individual worker on trial, racially and personally. By the last frame in Riebe’s strip, the manager is reclining serenely, successful in getting the men to work frantically while swapping racial slurs among themselves. (Roediger and Esch 4-5)

The personalization and individualization of race is a very old technique in the US, utilized even in the US university, where workers fight over ever smaller and less secure parcels of work. At the same time, the individualized space of freedom from oppression granted in reading alone, and even in writing alone, is denied on entering the institution in the form of the identity demand, where it is presented only as a possibility for, and a demand on, production. The individualization of reception, meanwhile, is used to maintain the circular production of identity and, through diversity, a false simulacrum of structural change—with which Shepherd begins. Individualized transcendence will always be there in reading and writing. It is powerful. As Shepherd makes clear, though, it is not a politics.

It is thus “not simply that ‘diversity is for white people’ but rather that diversity itself is a product of whiteness,” as sociologists Ray, Randolf, and Underhill note (151). Diversity discourse, in tandem with identity, serve “white individuals and organizations” and “reduce minority life and concerns to commodities whites may consume for pleasure or advantage” (153). Understanding identity and diversity in this way helps explains the persistence of Spahr and Young’s “mainly white room.” Diversity within programs allows white powers within these institutions “to position themselves as a different kind of white—one who is tolerant, progressive, and cosmopolitan” (152) while actually working in the service of racialized power. Doing so literally adds monetary value: “Diversity enriches (white) organizations” (ibid).
As Ray, Randolf, and Underhill note, diversity thus brings the greatest amount of benefit to non-Blacks, and leaves whiteness at the center of diversity projects: it is, after all, whiteness that requires diversification. For Black writers, all of this presents very specific contradictions, given “the distinctness of antiblackness from other forms of racism” (149). Following Sylvia Wynter on the construction of humanness, Ray, Randolf, and Underhill summarize those conditions in summarizing “Afro-pessimism” as a sustained critique:

*Afro-pessimism is an influential account of antiblackness among humanities scholars, which sociologists have been slow to adopt. Although Afro-pessimism shares [Critical Race Theory’s] skepticism about the racial progress narrative, it departs from CRT in several ways. Afro-pessimism insists upon the distinctness of antiblackness from other forms of racism. Antiblackness is the notion that the construction of blacks as nonhuman structures the status of all other racial groups (Sexton 2016).* 

Afro-pessimism also resists the push to abandon the black-white binary for studying race in the West. Instead, Afro-pessimism argues that existing scholarship inaccurately portrays the black-white binary’s role in structuring racial inequality. Afro-pessimism replaces the binary between whites and blacks with an antagonism between blacks and nonblacks. Therefore, for Afro-pessimism, antiblackness, not white supremacy, explains the social conditions of blacks across the globe (Sexton 2016). Afro-pessimism challenges the idea that a triracial hierarchy is emerging and would identify the “collective black” as a construct hiding the specificity of being a person of African descent (Bonilla-Silva). Additionally, Afro-pessimism critiques the construct “people of color” as inadequately conflating largely incomparable group experiences.

Afro-pessimism also concerned with slavery and slavery’s “afterlife,” or how slavery lives on in modern times (Hartman). A basic tenet of Afro-pessimism is that slavery has changed form since its formal abolition (Sexton 2016). Sociologists such as Loïc Wacquant have made similar claims. Wacquant (2002) outlined four “peculiar institutions” of black subordination, claiming mass incarceration is the functional surrogate of slavery. Historians and criminologists have begun to focus on the legacy of slavery, charting the empirical continuities and divergences in markets, organizations (Roediger and Esch), and the penal system (Wacquant).

Ray, Randolph, and Underhill’s article, and its bibliography, make a very good starting point for piecing together the bigger picture of archival power and the institutions of racial capitalism. Unfortunately, it is behind a paywall. If one does not have university library access, buying the article is, as of this writing, $36. If one uses the DeepDyve service ($49 a month) one may “rent” the article (whatever that ends up meaning). I have added all of the above references to my bibliography; Jared Sexton’s “Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word,” to which Ray, Randolf, and Underhill refer repeatedly, is an open access article. I will discuss closed-access scholarship’s role in archival power in the next chapter.

What I want to stress here is that, as Keene, Chen, and others make clear, Goldsmith’s performance
was a reactionary, specifically anti-Black attempt to use archival power to contain Black Lives Matter, which was providing the social force behind the critiques made by Cathy Park Hong and others directly attacking Goldsmith’s work.

As the contradictions mounted for conceptualism, however, the eventual response in the US by the institutions that had supported it was disavowal. Goldsmith and Vanessa Place, another conceptualist poet, were eventually de-platformed within the US (although not, apparently, within Europe): the market of US academic readers decided that Goldsmith and Place did not have the right to these, as Goldsmith puts it, “choices.” There was an intentional, targeted heightening of institutional contradictions that played a large role in making that happen: as Heriberto Yépez, Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young, Ken Chen, and others note, not only the institutional rejection of Goldsmith and Place, but Goldsmith’s performance itself almost certainly happened in response to the Mongrel Coalition Against Gringpo (MCAG). The Mongrel Coalition was itself an intra-institutional response to Black Lives Matter (McArdle) from a group that included poets and then-graduate students, which, in January 2015, “began to issue a series of statements about race and contemporary literature” (Spahr and Young) through various media. Members of the coalition have remained basically anonymous, but are known to have attended the University of Pennsylvania, where Goldsmith teaches, and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Much of their critique was focused from the beginning on conceptual poetry, including that of Goldsmith and that of Place. MCAG has been described as hastening the end of “the white privilege-enabled dominance of conceptual poetry in the United States,” in a moment when “American writers of color [used social media] to undo the misappropriation of minority races and cultures by networks of white literary privilege” (Harrison and Villa-Ignacio). The reality, as Yépez saw right away, is both simpler and more complicated.

While there was relative institutional furor about Goldsmith’s performance online almost immediately, and the event was eventually slowly and carefully critiqued despite the lack of a video, what Yépez called the full institutional “crisis” actually took hold a little later. On May 16, 2015, conceptualist poet Vanessa Place became the subject of a petition for her removal from the committee that selects
participants for the Associated Writing Programs’ annual conference. The reason was that she had for several years been tweeting out the novel *Gone With The Wind*, including passages containing the *n*-word, ostensibly to get Margaret Mitchell’s estate to sue her (Helmore). As Keene points out in his critique of May 18, 2015, Place’s project had been ongoing for years, but in the wake of Goldsmith’s performance Place’s project became a more visible target for the Mongrel Coalition in particular. As the group continued, on social media, to troll poets it deemed complicit in maintaining Place’s position, Place was eventually disinvited from the conference, issuing what Chen calls a “non-apology” for the project on Facebook. Keene, in his piece, recognizes the bad faith of the petition, pointing out that Place’s project had been “reproducing the very power relations she allegedly aimed to be critiquing” for years with no comment from poetry institutions, and with plenty of power accrual for Place. Keene notes that, in addition to the Twitter account tweeting out the novel, in 2009 Place published a poem in *Poetry* that lineated a fragment of it.

In addition to issuing statements, the Mongrel Coalition specifically targeted poets of color it deemed complicit in sustaining Goldsmith and Place’s projects. The targeting included significant archival research, going back many years, into places like the Buffalo Poetics List. From there, it took David Antin’s racist dog-whistle at the end of a post-9/11 post to the list—about the need to “squash” terrorists like “bugs”—and threw it back at poets of color: the coalition promised to similarly “squash” poets of color who did not disavow Goldsmith and Place. The threat of violence was as ironic as it turned out to be completely discursive. As Yépez noted at the time, what MCAG was doing was the same thing that Goldsmith and especially Place were doing, with a slight shift in who benefits institutionally. The tactics also resemble those detailed by Roediger and Esch. A further problem was later pointed out in the title-based aside of Wendy Trevino’s about-something-much-greater poem *Brazilian Is Not a Race*, which was that some members of MCAG were, in fact, white.

The Mongrel Coalition was understood relatively quickly as a purely discursive entity with a limited membership, and not a collectivity on the scale of a movement with engagements outside of the university. That the Mongrel Coalition’s tactics, as a semi-anonymous group, were deemed, at the
time, a “threat aesthetic” (Low, House) points up the difference between the individualized institutional construct of identity, and what are often conceived of as “collective identities that can stand in opposition to the colonial and postcolonial state” (Harrison and Villa-Ignacio). As *Brazilian Is Not a Race* makes clear, that collective action requires a collective identity is one of the myths of archival power; mass action is what the institutionalization of social movements sought to archive through identity and difference. Militancy’s surfacing as a purely discursive “threat” during US institutional poetry’s 2015 crisis is an kind of false echo: the tactics of archived social movements came back to haunt the English departments that had helped to archive them. Harrison and Villa-Ignacio attempt to tie MCAG’s trolling tactics back to the student editors of the mid-1960s Moroccan journals *Souffles* [in French] and *Anfas* [in Arabic]. The stakes, however, were quite different for those poets: Abdellatif Laâbi and others were opposed to the Moroccan monarchy; Laâbi went to jail for eight years. The contrast points up not just differences in context, but the effectiveness of archival power in effacing the difference in the stakes between institutional critique and struggle, and the awareness (if often inarticulate) of writers in the US that they are working within discursive limits. Yépez, in summing up these events, had a keen awareness of this, and concluded, with some approbation, that the “undeniable facts” were that: “1) a cycle of North American poetry officially ended in 2015 and 2) the new North American poetry will be more and more dominated by non-white poets. … The struggle between literary white (matriarchical-patriarchical) supremacy and the poetics of minorities will determine the path of poetry in this new century” (Yépez, Berkeley).

The recognition of that institutional struggle was immediate, as was the expression of its institutional demands and contradictions. On May 20, 2015, just after the institutional de-platforming of Goldsmith and Place in the US, the poet Tricia Low published an entry in her then-ongoing series “On Being-Hated” at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art’s Open Space blog: “On Being-Hated: Conceptualism, the Mongrel Coalition, the House That Built Me.” The essay, as an intra-institutional response, attempts to reconcile conceptualism’s failed appropriations along with Mongrel Coalition’s explicit use of identity to highlight them:
With the Mongrel Coalition come real questions of what it means to write as a person of color. And although I’m glad these questions have been raised, answering each one feels like another complication, another emotional labor: about the ways in which race has been made legible in aesthetics and how problematic assumptions about that legibility can be, about whether racial heritage must always be engaged positively, about whether a person of color’s work will always either be reducible to one’s identity position or a “passing whiteness” via aesthetic strategies they choose to engage, about assimilationist impulses and the value of being honest about them, about gratitude and lineage, about the grand institution of Poetry that has a history, beyond conceptualism, of structural racism and cultural appropriation. Answering any of these questions has real consequences for the way I look at myself, my identity, my work, the way I want to write, read, be read. (Low, House)

The passage begins in a similar vein to Shepherd's point about compulsory Negritude: entertaining questions about the legibility of race in aesthetics feels like an emotional labor; in the moment Low is writing out of, pressure from MCAG and others for making race “legible” made it feel like a demand of the same kind that drives many diversity job searches. The passage wants the right to refuse that pressure, even as it wants the questions answered, too. The moment is marked by individualization, which Low is clear about throughout: the piece opens with specificity about her class background. The tension Low’s piece is trying to negotiate between structural issues as they played out in particular instances among those close to Low, and the reception that the writer would like to control, is involuntarily mediated by racialized identity, which the passage then pushes through an individualized conception of art and agency. That structural issues are boiled down to issues of Low’s own work and authorship is a conscious product, here, of the Low’s explicitly confessional approach, and by the piece’s tacit background: Low had been a student of Goldsmith’s at the University of Pennsylvania; Goldsmith published her early writing in Against Expression. While moments of “access” (in Shepherd’s sense) may be available to individuals at particular moments in protected spaces, they cannot be enacted in public with guaranteed outcomes, as Low is again very clear about: whether one answers the questions for oneself or not, their entailments are part of the labor to which the passage refers. The passage is in line with an earlier piece of Low’s in the “On Being-Hated” series, where she synopsizes the project of artist Lee Lonzano, and asks “But what if hyper-materialized performances of being-hated could become a method of, as she says, ‘TOTAL REVOLUTION SIMULTANEOUSLY PERSONAL AND PUBLIC’?” (Low, Violette).
In working through these questions, Low gets at the contradictions produced by “identity politics” as a form of reception in Wang’s sense, as further articulated by Haider:

In its contemporary ideological form, rather than its initial form as a theorization of a revolutionary political practice, identity politics is an individualist method. It is based on the individual’s demand for recognition, and it takes that individual’s identity as its starting point. It takes this identity for granted and suppresses the fact that all identities are socially constructed. And because all of us necessarily have an identity that is different from everyone else’s, it undermines the possibility of collective self-organization. The framework of identity reduces politics to who you are as an individual and to gaining recognition as an individual, rather than your membership in a collectivity and the collective struggle against an oppressive social structure. (23-24)

In Ronald Aronson’s essay “The Privatization of Hope,” individualization, or privatization “displace[es] aspirations and responsibilities from the larger society to our own individual universes. The detaching of personal expectations from the wider world transforms both,” which in turn “weaken[s] collective capacities to solve collective problems, but ... also deadens the very sense that collectivity can or should exist, as the commons dissolves and social sources of problems become hidden.”21 As a form of reception, identity poetry has thus worked as designed. Goldsmith’s disavowal of it in his description of his production (or “practice”) is explicitly formulated in opposition to fixed identity and “expression,” and thus to racialization, yet conceptualism relied on individualization as a mode of reception not applicable to it as a way to distinguish itself. Foucault’s opening paragraph of “What Is an Author?” should be familiar to anyone reading a literature dissertation: “The coming into being of the notion of ‘author’ constitutes the privileged moment of individualization in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy, and the sciences” (205)22; despite the disavowals, as Yépez repeatedly makes clear, the work authorizes relentlessly, “recapitulate[ing] the globalizing logics that treat immigrant populations as reservoirs of disposable, recombinant, and plastic laboring subjects” (Sheldon). The liberal sociological literature on individualization, meanwhile, largely sees individualization as a good, a process by which an individual strives to become “the author of his or her own life” via making choices while navigating “institutional guidelines and regulations” and finally “tak[ing] personal responsibility for the choices they make and the consequences that follow” (C. Ray).23 Conceptualism, as a self-proclaimed out from that, skated on the resulting contradictions within institutional forms of reception within which it explicitly operated; it relied on the individualization of reception that it
disavowed in production to produce the contradictions and ambiguities that fueled it, and finally
destroyed it (at least as an explicit movement), in reception.

I don’t want to end there. In New York, City College’s Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge
(SEEK) program, founded in 1965, was “established to provide comprehensive academic, financial, and
social supports to assist capable students who otherwise might not be able to attend college due to
their educational and financial circumstances” (CUNY: The Office of Special Programs). Many SEEK
students were, and are, Black. Hiring for the program was one way that CUNY diversified its faculty.
Toni Cade Bambara, June Jordan, and Audre Lorde simultaneously taught at CUNY’s City College
through SEEK, and remained a part of social movements for Black liberation and women’s liberation.
Together, they developed an identity and difference discourse with a collective sense, one that was
subsequently turned against it in the manner Haider documents. To try to summarize it here in a few
lines will do violence to it. Instead, please stop reading this, and find the poet and scholar Alexis
Pauline Gumbs’s account of Audre Lorde and June Jordan’s teaching at CUNY, “Nobody Mean More:
Black Feminist Pedagogy and Solidarity.” The piece was published in Chatterjee and Maira, which is
paywalled. It is, Gumbs writes,

> a meditation on what it means to be nobody in a university economy designed to produce
> somebody individuated, assimilated, and consenting to empire. Is it possible instead to become
> nobody in the academic space? Is it is possible to align with the illegible
> oppressed/contemporary subaltern, the falling apart abject nonsubject, inside a university
> English class?” (237)

Gumbs’s reading of Lorde’s composition of the poem “Power,” which Lorde wrote while teaching at
CUNY through SEEK, is as powerful an example of norm translation as one will ever find in criticism. It
includes Gumbs’s account of how Lorde and Jordan worked within and were made to accommodate the
university.24 For Lorde and Jordan, as Gumbs shows, the university was an attempt at refuge (in the
sense detailed in Harney and Moten’s *The Undercommons*)25 that ended up working them “literally to
death,” denying them, at different points in their later, separate careers, time to seek cancer care. I
will end with entreaty to read the piece, and with the observation that the Poetry Foundation and
*Poetry* magazine, the focus of the next chapter, did not publish “Power,” even though it can now be
found on the Foundation’s website.
Chapter 3: The Poetry Foundation as Site of Archival Power

The previous chapter looked at the way archival power and the surface-representational strategies of diversity work within the US university of racial capitalism. With the coming of the Internet over the last 30 years, the process by which global non-exclusively anglophone poetries come in contact with archival power has been very effectively streamlined. In that process, one player, as they say, has come to define the space.

In 2002, Eli Lilly & Co. heiress Ruth Lilly granted the posthumous steward of Harriet Monroe’s Poetry magazine—the then-explicitly reactionary, semi-moribund Modern Poetry Foundation—nearly $200 million US dollars (Kinzer), (Goodyear). In February 2004, John Barr, poet and founder of the Natural Gas Clearinghouse, aka Dynegy, was appointed to chair the board, and oversee the foundation’s transformation (Goodyear). In 1999, Barr had published a book-length verse-defense of empire in the dialect-equivalent of blackface called Grace, recently carefully critiqued as such by Spahr (Du Bois’s Telegram 158-162). Alongside that fact, the foundation worked to transform itself into an entity that has a relatively expansive, markedly inclusive view of what poetry is, and can be. The reason for that transformation was touched on in the previous chapter, and has been tracked (if not within poetry) by scholar Jodi Melamed, in her account of “official or state antiracism.”

Melamed, in her 2011 book Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism, cites the 2002 National Security Strategy of the United States of America as a “great document” of “official or state antiracism,” an articulation of “racial equality as part of U.S. international manifest destiny.” Melamed points to the self-represented end of segregation in the 1960s US as “meant to prove the moral legitimacy of U.S.-led transnational capitalism,” and describes how the “neoliberal multiculturalism” that followed “portrays an ethic of multiculturalism to be the spirit of neoliberalism, and, conversely, posits neoliberal restructuring across the globe to be the key to a postracist world of freedom and opportunity.” Melamed ties the ethic of multiculturalism to Aihwa Ong’s concept of “differentiated citizenship” whereby “to maximize profitability, governments subject
populations to differing treatments according to their [relative] worth.” Melamed specifically
documentsthe way the US figured “literature as an antiracist technology” that was then “enfolded into
the charge of universities to produce individuals of value for globalization.” From there:

[L]iterature entered into the training of global transnational professional-managerial classes as
an element of the technologies of subjectivity that influence the self-making of elites and of
the technologies of subjugation that elites learn to exercise in order to manage less profitable
populations[.] ... [L]iterary training prepares them for the part they play in within disciplining and
civilizing / disqualifying regimes that manage populations cut-off from (or exploited within)
circuits of global capitalism. (Melamed 137-141)

Melamed’s study was published in 2011, the year that Occupy happened, and the year that, arguably,
globalization’s image of having a multicultural ethic began to fall away. The partial loss of image has
not, however, curbed the effectiveness of the technologies described, or changed the dynamic with
regard to “cut-off” populations of non-exclusively anglophone poets. It also has not changed many
institutions in terms of their actual power structures. In 2016, the Poetry Foundation appointed
another late-life white man, Willard Bunn III, who “has served as chairman, chief executive and/or
director of several commercial banks during his 40-year career” to the position of Chairman of the
Board (The Poetry Foundation). The editor of Poetry magazine is a white, Boston University MFA-
trained man named Don Share. In curating multiculturalism for Poetry, Share recently published a
poem by poet Toby Martinez de las Rivas in November 2018 featuring fascist imagery with a positive
voicing; it was not Martinez’s first poem to do so. There are lots of rationalizations one can make about
this, but it points up the generally alienated place from which Poetry’s top-down multicultural curation
is emanating. Poetry, under Christian Wiman’s editorship, also published Vanessa Place’s “Miss
Scarlett,” a blackface dialect poem soliloquizing sections of the film version of Gone With the Wind, in
its July/August 2009 conceptualism issue (Keene, Limit). The poem is still up on the Foundation
website (Place).

Following Ferguson and Melamed’s analyses, it becomes clear that The Poetry Foundation’s website has
made itself into the de facto archive for global anglophone poetry as part of its national orientation
and pluralist vision of US poetry, mediated by cis white male plutocrats. Its president, Henry Bienen,
an octogenarian white man, is a former “member of the board of directors of the Council on Foreign
Relations, serving on the executive committee and chairing the nominating and governance committees” (The Poetry Foundation, Bienen). The Foundation’s form of archival power assigns racial value that helps maintain a multicultural image of US hegemonic power. As Ferguson writes, “minority activism would be for power both a potential antagonist and a collaborator, inspiring critical transformations and new funding technologies at the same time.” This thesis is borne out clearly in many activities of The Poetry Foundation, and particularly in its Website. It’s a very well-run site. The value produced there is re-represented within English departments, which in turn represent the US. As one poet remarked to me: “if you are not there, you don’t exist”—because you are not inscribed with the value it generates.

At this point I should make a full sour-grapes disclaimer, and not in a footnote: I am not in Poetry as a poet; I also haven’t been asked to write paid essays for their Harriet blog/subsite. I sent Poetry one poem a number of years ago, after Share took over, and it wasn’t an experiment: I wanted it to appear there. My point in saying this here is that I am not making an argument about purity of intent with regard to people who publish in Poetry or with the Poetry Foundation. I don’t have the moral or affective authority to do that, even if I wanted to.

What Poetry and the Poetry Foundation are doing, however, is working to manufacture consent to empire in the sense that Gumbs invokes. And the fact is that Ruth Lilly did not give her money to Poetry as a form of reparations or because the magazine had a history of egalitarian publishing practices. Anyone who remembers Joseph Parisi’s editorship, long in force at the time of the grant, will understand what I mean without the tedium of my having to dissect his selections, or rehearse the story of Lilly’s own submissions and rejections from the magazine.

Poetry is also not, historically, the magazine of Tolson, Brooks, and Baraka, even though all were published there, or of Hayden, Knight, and Clifton. Hayden was published there once; Knight and Clifton not at all: if one looks at Knight’s or Clifton’s or Audre Lorde’s Poetry Foundation page, one finds no little “P” beside any of the poems because none of them originally appeared in Poetry. The
same is true for June Jordan’s page and work, and that of Jayne Cortez, and that of Wanda Coleman. Sonia Sanchez has one poem, and it does have a “P.” It is from April 2018; Sanchez was 83 when it was published.

When readers look for Audre Lorde poems and the Foundation comes up first, few are going to notice the lack of a little “P.” This is what allows institutions like the Poetry Foundation to remake themselves without explicitly acknowledging their histories. In this, as in much else, they are like candidates in electoral politics. At the same time, the foundation does not represent itself as a specifically US institution. Its website mission statement says nothing about the US: “The Poetry Foundation, publisher of Poetry magazine, is an independent literary organization committed to a vigorous presence for poetry in our culture. It exists to discover and celebrate the best poetry and to place it before the largest possible audience” (The Poetry Foundation, History and Mission). As of this writing, the Poetry Foundation site houses significant samples of the oeuvres of more than 4,000 non-exclusively anglophone poets, with a thoughtful design and searchability. It remains centered on US-based work, however, and insufficiently represents current anglophone poetry from outside the US. What “our culture” actually means, however, is intentionally illegible.

It doesn’t seem to mean, for example, canonical poetry by living poets outside the US. Cursory searches turn up no poems or author pages for Jussawalla or Nongkynrih in India, or Dionne Brand (close by in Canada), among established poets. Among the dead in India, there are two poems by the often-abroad Moraes, and a ton by Ramanujan, who emigrated to the US and taught at the University of Chicago. Here Melamed’s analysis comes into play, as Ramanujan played a role in managing less-profitable populations abroad, or Melamed’s “charge of universities to produce individuals of value for globalization.” It’s an arrangement that continues to reproduce itself, and that guides the Poetry Foundation like an invisible hand. For example, there is a lot of material by or on Aditi Machado, a younger poet from Bangalore who recently got a US MFA, has a book out with a US small press publisher, and is now teaching in the US university system, but there is nothing from Kala Krishna Ramesh, who lives in Bangalore, and published a recent poetry debut with HarperCollins India in 2016.
Following Melamed, the Foundation’s role as arbiter of “our culture” means that it “prepares [poets] for the part they play in within discipling and civilizing / disqualifying regimes that manage populations cut-off from (or exploited within) circuits of global capitalism.” Following Roderick Ferguson, those roles exist explicitly within nation-states, with the US as the current mediating anglophone dominant. That is why, in the Poetry Foundation version of cosmopolitanism, “our culture,” means, tacitly, who can play a role in the US, which means that Machado matters, and Nongkynrih and Ramesh don’t. This doesn’t say anything at all about Machado’s or Nongkynrih’s or Ramesh’s work, and is obviously not Machado’s fault or intent. Rather, it is the mechanism by which racial capitalism assigns value based on access to possible roles. Access to possible roles within the US university requires physical presence in the US.

Digital accesses also plays a big part in how racial capitalism assigns value based on access to possible roles: Melamed’s conception of “cut-off” populations can be linked directly to ideas of digital cosmopolitanism (as “discursive appearance”), and, relatedly, of open access. To get to open access, which is crucial to a less-national cosmopolitanism, I will look quickly at definitions of open source.

“Free software” and “open source software” are not the same thing, though they have been compressed into the same term (“free and open source”) and acronymized as FOSS. One group, the Free Software Foundation, founded in 1985 by Richard Stallman to support forks of UNIX (an operating system developed at Bell Labs in the 1970s that has become the basis of the open Web and open computing generally) maintains a definition of free and open source:

“Free software” means software that respects users’ freedom and community. Roughly, it means that the users have the freedom to run, copy, distribute, study, change and improve the software. Thus, “free software” is a matter of liberty, not price. To understand the concept, you should think of “free” as in “free speech,” not as in “free beer”. We sometimes call it “libre software,” borrowing the French or Spanish word for “free” as in freedom, to show we do not mean the software is gratis.

We campaign for these freedoms because everyone deserves them. With these freedoms, the users (both individually and collectively) control the program and what it does for them. When users don’t control the program, we call it a “nonfree” or “proprietary” program. The nonfree program controls the users, and the developer controls the program; this makes the program an instrument of unjust power. (Free Software Foundation)
While it may be easy to download something and look at the code (i.e. open source code) that does not necessarily mean the user (notice the creator is not mentioned) is “free” to modify or redistribute it. An analogy might is copyrighted sheet music that is printed by someone and made available for free. People might be able to play the song and sing it, but if certain rights are reserved and licensing codes enforced, they are not free to change the chorus, reprint, and redistribute the song. It is there that software licensing rules come into play: even open source projects (where the source code is able to be viewed) can come with restrictions on use, modification, and distribution. The many software licenses that have evolved to help community and corporate users alike deal with that—the Apache, BSD, Creative Commons, GNU, Mozilla, MIT licenses among them—have different sorts of permissions and ways of articulating them (GitHub/Microsoft).

Software can thus be free and open source (as in free to modify), or unfree and open source (as in not free to modify), or free (as in free beer) and closed source—meaning that an application is distributed freely, but the user can’t easily see its source code, let alone modify or redistribute it. There are degrees of being closed: software may have pieces that are completely open dependencies (i.e. modules or functions or algorithms that the software needs to work) of a greater proprietary whole that is closed. In terms of academic scholarship, the fact is that that most scholarship is neither free (as in free beer) nor free (as in free of copyright). The argument of Open Access and the Humanities: Contexts, Controversies, and the Future by Martin Paul Eve, a scholar and expert developer at Birkbeck, University of London, is that scholarship should be free as in free beer and free as in free as in free of restrictive copyright—i.e. open access, or “freely available, digital, online information” (Cornell University Library). One of Eve’s main arguments is that scholarship should be free because academic labor is (relatively) compensated by universities: the for-profit production and distribution system that has been built on top of academic scholarship is an artefact of a time when basically free (as in free beer) printing and design were beyond the reach of groups of scholars, scholars who are already paid to produce the work. The facts on the ground, as Eve acknowledges, do not bear this out: the underfunding of tenure lines and of scholar salaries generally is a product of the capitalist university, which is not designed to serve faculty or primarily advance knowledge, but rather is
designed to generate prestige for students, and thus value. As Eve notes in an interview, “[w]e designed a system to free academics from the market. We then came up with a model for research dissemination that entailed selling work (i.e., is market based)” (Berlatsky).

In September of 2014, Eve published a notification of the publication of Open Access and the Humanities on Eve’s website, and noted that, while the book would be published by Cambridge University Press and be for sale, it would also be available as a free PDF “under a CC BY-SA 4.0 license” (Eve). Thus a practitioner in the field, whose doctoral degree was granted only two years before, in 2012, took a stand: Cambridge University Press does not usually give away texts for free, but allowed Eve to do so because it wanted Eve’s book. Eve was able to engage a systemic player into practicing, in this one case, open access, by refusing to publish the book in an unfree manner. Even within digital humanities scholarship, however, things usually go quite differently.

The recent title New Digital Worlds: Postcolonial Digital Humanities in Theory Praxis and Pedagogy, by scholar and expert developer Roopika Risam, engages issues of the archive, the capitalist university, and of non-open access publishing. As part of a scholarly collective, Risam collaborated on the Torn Apart / Separados project, which gathered, visualized, and published open data on the US system of concentration camps for asylum seekers, along with the camps’ funding sources (Group for Experimental Methods in Humanistic Research at Columbia University). New Digital Worlds itself is a seamless, deeply researched end-to-end survey of the state of archival scholarship and of the contours of the global “digital cultural record,” in terms of what kinds of projects are out there, and the ways and places in which they are produced. To the latter point, Risam offers multiple suggestions as to how scholars in the digital humanities can avoid reproducing colonialist practices and relations when doing digital scholarship, or when assisting communities in constructing or analyzing their own digital archives. Risam is careful to note the importance of caution and self-awareness in these situations. Of the digital cultural record as a whole, Risam writes: “Because the digital cultural record exists in a media environment that is caught in a battle between public interest, academia, and the cultural heritage sector, racial and cultural politics, and consumer power, that record itself has become a spoil
of war” (10). Risam goes on to detail the ways in which “paywalled scholarship” reproduces colonial practices, and lauds the Digital Commons platform for open access. The book repeatedly calls for open access in scholarly publishing and demands the “interrogat[ion of] colonialist and neocolonialist projects through project design.” In short, “digital humanities practitioners of the Global North must redress their practices” (19). Doing so “requires considering how digital archives perform and resist colonial violence, examining how scholarly organizations influence digital humanities practices on a global scale, teaching students that they can intervene in the digital cultural record, and understanding the forms of the human that are sanctioned through digital humanities scholarship” (ibid).

Passages such as the above are exactly on point, and thorough scholarship throughout allows Risam’s densely packed examples and meticulous footnotes to serve as an exemplary introduction to a profusion of fascinating projects. At the same time, however, Risam’s book is priced at $34.95 US for either the paperback or the digital edition, and $99.95 in cloth for the library edition. That puts it far out of reach for most of the people that Risam, as a scholar working in the Global North, is writing about—both outside of the Global North, and those who are within the Global North but cannot routinely spend that kind of money on a 144 page book (excluding notes). The book’s conditions of publication perpetuate precisely the relations that Risam warns against, and that Melamed outlines between scholarship within the US, and “cut-off” populations outside of it. Why did Risam fail to make the same stand that Eve made for such an important title?

At the time of the book’s publication, Risam was untenured tenure-track faculty at Salem State University, a small, under-funded college in Massachusetts. That suggests that Risam, as a digital humanities scholar aware of open access, might have felt compelled to make a choice based on the prestige publishing equation, or the symbolic compensation that paid-access university press publishing affords, despite the extreme contradictions for New Digital Worlds. As a non-tenured woman of color at a non-major university, Risam was not in a position that would make is easier to make the sort of demand of Northwestern University Press that Eve made of Cambridge University Press. Women
scholars of color in the US have to prove their merit to a much greater degree than white male scholars, in part to combat claims (or whisper campaigns) that their hires were based on diversity mandates and not based solely on merit. Everything about the US university system under capitalism, including, crucially, scholarly publishing, is designed to get scholars to make this same choice in order to create their own value, part of what Melamed calls “producing individuals of value for globalization.” Ted Underwood, a leading digital humanities scholar who is white, male, tenured, and from a working class background, published his recent *Distant Reading* as a closed access book just a few months after *New Digital Worlds* appeared. It is $27 for a paperback in the US. The careers of scholars are sustained by the symbolic capital of the university press brand, while the capitalist university system is sustained by closed access publishing, which makes the scholarship produced within the university very difficult to obtain outside of it.

As much as scholars like Risam and Underwood are aware of the issues and their potential role in US/Global North-based domination, they are also aware of a great release from this structural problem: piracy. It’s unclear how much of a role piracy plays as a kind of pressure-valve when scholars like Risam and Underwood, who are aware of the stakes, decide to publish conventionally. Piracy allows scholars in the Global North to escape the contradictions of knowing that many of the people that one is writing about will never be able to afford the closed-access scholarship of which they are the subject because those books and papers do, in fact, become available for free over time, housed on servers that are out of the reach of US-based academic publishers. Those publishers have neither the time nor the resources to go after those who upload them or those who download them (as opposed to the way that, say, pirated recent Hollywood films are scrubbed from YouTube). Piracy, in addition to allowing a form of (often degraded) access, allows scholars of the Global North to play a role in perpetuating the system without delving too deeply into the contradictions, or the risks to others, including malware, of doing so. As detailed in the documentary *Paywall: The Business of Scholarship* (Schmitt), the fact is that while scholars, particularly scientists, may not like closed access, university boards do. Closed access is part of what keeps universities intact: it allows a monopoly on information, which is part of what students pay for. I, for one, could not have written this dissertation without
access to a university library. Most of the works I consulted I consulted electronically, from home, via the university library, using a proxy service called Zotero. Almost all of the works were available only after I authenticated as a student in good standing. Without the paywall, a big part of the mechanism that keeps education university-based goes away. It’s not the only thing, but it’s a big thing, and it’s a net moneymaker, even as university presses themselves struggle. Closed access is part of what keeps universities in business. It’s a form of state power. It’s part of a monopoly on the production and dissemination of legitimatized knowledge.

This begs the question of why the Poetry Foundation is not actively working to change this situation with all of the many resources at its disposal. Poetry, as a literary form, as we know it (i.e. within racial capitalism) has always been about the tension of receiving, transforming, and re-representing impressions under the auspices of the state, ultimately in the service of its ends. Government-level funding of the Poetry Foundation makes it a de facto arm of the US and “our culture,” of the US of Barr and Bienen and Bunn. Its publication and arbitration of contemporary poetry are part of this same system of value creation. The Poetry Foundation operates in tandem with the US university: it provides symbolic capital which poets can use within their academic careers. Its website is free as in free beer; it posts things quickly and in response to developing events; poems are easy to screenshot and share. At the same time, users do not “have the freedom to run, copy, distribute, study, change and improve the software” behind the Foundation’s website. Users cannot add poems, comment on poems or posts, or directly download work. Despite its origins as poet Harriet Monroe’s project, Poetry has not, for many decades, been something that happened organically from within the poetry community, and it was never subject to the demands of the poets it represents. In remaking itself following the Lilly grant, the Poetry Foundation, in getting itself up to speed with current cultural conditions, has basically drawn on existing poetry communities of the past and used them to brand itself. (Thus, again, all the missing “P”s on poets’ pages—including that of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha.) Its mission in “our culture” is legitimation: it is to be a responsive, in-the-moment site of archival power, a preliminary site of neutralization, a state horizon for demand operating in near-real time. Most magazines and presses operate on a time-line of months and years. That is true for much of Poetry, but not for its
website, which responds to political and cultural events with relative news-cycle quickness. It has the relative resources for that.

A further revealing tell is that the site does not allow comments. One problem with comments, one that the foundation itself points to, is trolls. “Trolls have applied the same basic model—show up, turn a social networking platform and community against itself, lol—to countless online spaces,” (Phillips 130) including those devoted to poetry criticism. Abuse has been a problem in previous blog-based poetry discussions: Ron Silliman, who hosts Silliman’s Blog, once a hotbed of poetry discussion, had to turn off comments in 2010 when he proved unable to moderate effectively on his own (Clauser). The Poetry Foundation site did, in fact, allow comments on certain sections of the site when it was first inaugurated. The Harriet blog (named after founder Harriet Monroe), was founded in 2006 (Marvin), and, for a number of years, allowed comments on its guest author posts. Those comments, which are still findable, were a major place where anglophone poets from outside of the US could find one another, as well as poets inside the US, and exchange ideas. Eventually, comments were turned off due to trolling. When, in 2011, the Poetry Foundation inaugurated its editorial blog, editor Don Share wrote: “No, we won’t have comment boxes—for what I presume are obvious reasons” (Share). Offensive content, however, is manageable, especially for a Foundation with resources as vast as the Poetry Foundation. That’s not the reason for the lack of comments. Comments interfere with value creation, with “produc[ing] individuals of value for globalization.” They interfere with the control of who participates in value creation.

If the Poetry Foundation were serious about “our culture”—the one that includes everyone—they would be allowing discussion, publishing open access books, and generally empowering poets. That is not what it has been designed to do, however. That is not its function.
Chapter 4: TextFrame: An Open Archive for Poetry

As a means of getting at the inherent “corruptibility,” in M. Jacqui Alexander’s sense, of archival power, this chapter describes TextFrame, an idea for free and open source software that can be used to facilitate, in real time, the self-archiving of global non-exclusively anglophone poetry communities. It describes the scope and objectives of the project in an implementation-agnostic manner, partially because technological landscape continues to shift, and partially, but crucially, because the logistics of building things collaboratively and transnationally (as the project must be if it is to be built at all) have to be worked out by those participating. As noted in the introduction, Thomas Farrell’s idea of a rhetorical culture—“an institutional formation in which motives of competing practices are intelligible, audiences available, expressions reciprocal, norms translatable, and silences noticeable” (1)—is operative within global non-exclusively anglophone poetry communities inside and outside the US.

The Poetry Foundation has a $200 million head start on pulling together the technologies for containing the world’s anglophone poetries. The Foundation is top-down: it is paid-curator rather than contributor-based. University press publishing, for-profit scholarly journals and closed-access small presses have locked up a large segment of poetry and poetry scholarship, usually via prohibitive cost. Those outside the US can get around this via piracy sites, but those sites and that practice are not safe. The same is true, if usually unwittingly, for much fugitive cultural productions such as paper-only chapbooks—they are inaccessible to much of the world, and most local non-exclusively anglophone poetries. In proposing TextFrame in this project, I am outlining a shitty substitution: i.e., instead of abolishing discursive value relations within poetry (which an application obviously cannot do), I am proposing a potentially more autonomous form of archiving, with a pitch towards transition. It is a form of incrementalism for something “only ever to come,” as Stefano Harney and Fred Moten put it. That’s what makes it a shitty substitution. If it’s ever built, whatever form it takes, TextFrame, or whatever it ends up being called, will not be able to resist being re-inscribed into racial capitalism. It will become a medium of power and value within the rhetorical community of global non-exclusively anglophone poetry, which still exists within racial capitalism, and never exists outside of it. It will be part of the
way capitalism is inscribed into the institutional value relations of the community. At the same time, it may be possible to find ways of “building away” from the nation-state, in that the application can truly be produced and maintained collaboratively transnationally, and in a bottom-up, collaborative, contributor-based model, rather than via a top-down, foundation-funded front. Devolving control of archiving to global non-exclusively anglophone poetries themselves—as a Farrellian rhetorical culture, which really is “our” culture—will not accomplish actual changes in economic relations, but it might improve and strengthen non-exclusively anglophone poetry’s rhetorical culture, a set of discursive relations.

“Virtual” discursive relations created or maintained on the Internet are real; the interactions, textual or otherwise, on the Internet are as real as other kinds of discursive interactions. They form a “real virtuality”, rather than a “virtual reality”:

What is historically specific to [the Internet], organized around the electronic integration of all communication modes from the typographic to the multisensorial, is not an its inducement of virtual reality but the construction of real virtuality[: “virtual: being so in practice though not strictly or in name” and “real: actually existing.”] Thus reality, as experienced, has always been virtual because it is always perceived through symbols that frame practice with some meaning that escapes their strict semantic definition. ... [A]ll reality is virtually perceived. (Castells 403-404)

Disputes over the mechanisms of reality perception are less problematic than believing that discursive changes necessarily lead to material changes, to changes in actual economic relations. Re-appropriating archival power by allowing poets, globally, to self-archive local struggles might foster a real virtuality, but it would be subsumed at all times by larger social forces. Risam’s New Digital Worlds looks in detail at a number of inspiring projects that can help in thinking through how the self-archiving of global non-exclusively anglophone poetries might look. At the same time, it’s very important to have a sense of the limits of any such project. A crucial work that looks at non-discursive archival realities is Ward One: Race, Urban Renewal, and Community Memories in Columbia, South Carolina, which virtually reconstructs a Black voting district in Columbia, South Carolina that was literally destroyed and incorporated into the campus of University of South Carolina (Cooley and Buell). It is a case where an actual living community has been physically displaced and then archived—first into
the capitalist university, and then again, this time recuperatively, as an application and writing project.

In terms of pedagogy, which I think should be one focus in poetry's self-archiving, the project “Reassessing Inequality and Re-Imagining the 21st-Century: East Harlem Focus,” is instructive. It was a POOC (or participatory, open, online course) which, among many other things, worked to open the university seminar room to the East Harlem community that was its subject (as well as to the world at large), while still working to preserve a seminar’s feeling of scale. The project provides a case study in what grassroots pedagogical development requires. Top-down aspects of the project led to critiques from within the community, which found it a form of neo-colonial practice. At the same time, the collective running the seminar made technical achievements that are exportable. The scholarly collective that ran the course, in its write-up after the fact, seems responsive to criticism and to be genuinely working to “provide a vision of digitally augmented learning that prizes openness, community-building, and participatory action above massiveness of scale” (Daniels and Gold).

The cosmopolitanism that I imagine for TextFrame also does not make massiveness of scale, in terms of initial participation, a necessary value. That scale itself doesn’t guarantee anything should be clear from, to take one prominent example, Reddit. I discuss what Reddit is and why its specific community model won’t serve as a corollary in chapter eight. Other social media company products, such as Facebook and Twitter, have certainly been used, and continue to be used, by poets. A cogent discussion the question of why existing apps like Reddit (or, in this case, Facebook) don’t work for rhetorical cultures in general, and for pedagogy in particular, came out of the Looking for Whitman project, an “inquiry into the relationship of Whitman’s poetry to local geography and history” (Gold). The following condenses points made there:

- the need for “data ownership” and “data portability”
- the fact that using Facebook or Reddit constitutes “building equity” for Facebook or Reddit (and the same can also be said for the digital pedagogy framework provider Blackboard)
- the desirability of Christopher Kelty’s idea of “recursive publics”: “publics concerned with the ability to build, control, modify, and maintain the infrastructure that allows them to come into being in the first place”
• in pedagogical situations (often the case with poetry), the fact that “meeting students where they are” risks “undesirable interactions between personal and professional lives” whereby institutional presences on social media come off as what Jared Stein describes as “creepy treehouses.”

The idea of recursive publics has a lot in common with Farrell’s rhetorical cultures. Kelty defines recursive publics as follows:

A recursive public is a public that is constituted by a shared concern for maintaining the means of association through which they come together as a public. Geeks find affinity with one another because they share an abiding moral imagination of the technical infrastructure, the Internet, that has allowed them to develop and maintain this affinity in the first place.

I call such publics recursive for two reasons: first, in order to signal that this kind of public includes the activities of making, maintaining, and modifying software and networks, as well as the more conventional discourse that is thereby enabled; and second, in order to suggest the recursive “depth” of the public, the series of technical and legal layers—from applications to protocols to the physical infrastructures of waves and wires—that are the subject of this making, maintaining, and modifying.

To get to Farrell’s rhetorical cultures and to poetry: for a “series of technical and legal layers” one can see Farrell’s “competing practices”: layers of small presses, and volleys of critical essays. For Kelty’s “shared concern” one can read Farrell’s “motives of competing practices,” or the thing that drives poets and critics of poetry. Gold’s own advocacy of recursive publics in *Looking for Whitman* points to a belief in self-sustaining, and perhaps self-archiving, communities—communities who build the frames and maintain the infrastructure behind them by which they are understood. For poetry, small press publishing, often by individuals from within the communities themselves, has played that role both before and after the internet.

All of the issues *Looking For Whitman* raised came to the fore in a more general way following the 2016 US presidential election, when Facebook’s misuse of user data gained widespread attention (Halpern), instantly making scholarship on adapting Facebook itself to the classroom (Lipton) look naïve at best. Any application that is built with a classroom-like pedagogical component should also be designed to allow the kind of permission controls that Facebook does not. Facebook does allow fine-grained controls on who sees what, but posting on Facebook also means “you grant us a non-exclusive, transferable, sub-licensable, royalty-free, worldwide license to use any IP content that you post on or in connection with Facebook (IP License)” (Facebook). The same is true were the application to feature
messaging; the Slack platform, while having a less proprietary relationship to user data, is explicitly task-based: it’s the “collaboration hub that moves work forward” (Slack Technologies), but it is not free or open source. While open source platforms like Mastodon solve many of these problems, they do not quite solve the creepy treehouse issue for pedagogy, and they are not fully customizable as applications. The Commons In a Box (Commons In a Box), which extends the WordPress platform, does solve this problem, and is a possible implementation of a LMS around which one might build TextFrame. A possibility in terms of collaboratively developing tools for TextFrame is the relatively language-agnostic Glitch platform; its terms explicitly grant full intellectual property rights, and thus make attempting to code up a collaborative coding app unnecessary (Glitch).

TextFrame, then, might be engineered by the global non-exclusively anglophone poetry community to work in the following ways:

- Provide a means for uploading and indexing individual poems in an easily searchable manner. It should allow both uploads in some form of open standard (unlike PDF), and some form of markup-based uploads, whereby input is uploaded, presented on a correction-screen for adjustment, and then published. Uploads should, ideally, be OCR-ed for indexing and search.

- Provide a means for uploading, indexing, and publishing individual monographs, allowing it both via direct finished upload (and OCR for indexing) of uploads, and by the transformation of some markup text into a finished digital book.

- Provide a means for poets and teachers of poetry to debate, together, the assertions and force of individual poems, based on the information they can, in concert, bring to bear upon it—and to do so either in an open manner, or in a privacy that they themselves can contrive and control.

- Provide robust real-time broadcasting, video upload, and organized embedding of other platforms’ ability to do the same.

- Provide a real-time open source social media platform an accelerant for the global poetry community, one where varying sets of assumptions grow ever more legible even as meanings proliferate in concert with connections among people.

- Consider providing some form of Twitter search functionality and the ability to embed Twitter threads on a page. Allow users to enter a poet’s (or really anyone’s) Twitter username, and a timeframe, and have a series of Tweets come up. Allow users to maintain lists of usernames for easy one-click searches. Allow a set search results to be presented within a TextFrame for discussion.

- Provide playlist functionality allows a user to compile, save, and share lists of links to poems to create virtual anthologies, syllabi, and other list-like constructions.
In addition to its main archival function, TextFrame should prioritize building a means for allowing a self-defined group of people to present and respond to a text in a collaborative manner. In that sense, TextFrame can be thought of as an implementation-neural way of saying: any digital re-presentation of a text that allows collaborative commentary. A TextFrame is the unit of presentation after which the application is named.

In terms of publishing texts oneself, I suggest that the best current existing technology is Manifold 2.0, a collaborative project of University of Minnesota Press, CUNY GC Digital Scholarship Lab, and Cast Iron Coding, a dev shop based in Portland Oregon. Manifold is designed to serve the transition of academic journal and monograph publishing away from for-profit publishing and toward open access. It provides a free and open source platform that allows the creation of digital texts from multiple sources, and it has support for cross-platform (here I mean device) comment and annotation functionality. Instead of the author-pages of the Poetry Foundation, one imagines Manifold-based author anthologies with multiple contributors, and content from multiple sources—poems, but also videos of readings, scans of archival material, pages from the web, and any number of other sources. The uses of Manifold are only at the very beginning of coming into focus. And it is completely free and open source.

Manifold could also help address lingering issues of the availability of contemporary US-based poetries, in the sense that many poems from smaller or older presses are unavailable, inside the US or outside. In term of work from the past, the Eclipse project, led by conceptualist Craig Dworkin, were an early-ish model of presenting archival reading texts of rare poetry (Eclipse). The ubu project, led by Kenneth Goldsmith, provides reading copies of a wide variety of texts, along with an extensive archive of digital video and sound (Ubuweb)—often presented without permission. Conceptualism’s experiments with archives are a topic for another study. Many small presses in the US now provide free PDF versions of the works they publish, or they publish only in that form—as do some individual poets and critics.
The TextFrame project should also be designed for users whose hearing or sight or other abilities are different from what one usually imagines as a default user. Users with different abilities should be part of the build team.

In terms of group annotation of the web that does not involve publishing texts or other documents, another possible currently-existing technology choice, one that might complement Manifold, is Hypothesis, an open annotation platform that puts a “conversation layer over the entire web that works everywhere, without needing implementation by any underlying site” (The Hypothesis Project). A Hypothesis instance would allow the build group to deliver social annotation fairly quickly: it’s basically a means for maintaining a stable identity for users while they comment on existing web pages—not using those pages’ own comment functionality (if it exists), but that of Hypothesis itself. The privacy controls allow users to select who can and cannot see the pages they comment on, and what they say.

If TextFrame, as an application, is developed from scratch, poems might be uploaded to it and presented for discussion in a manner similar to a Poetry Foundation poem page, given rights to the works in question (a big if, one that suggests the use of Hypothesis if encountering issues and the text is available on the Web). One can imagine linking a main screen for a particular poem to what one might call context screens, where a text, photo, video or other piece of relevant non-poem material could be uploaded and similarly presented for discussion—such as a letter a poet wrote in relation to a poem. Ideas such as this are covered in the Manifold documentation.

In terms of preventing commenting abuse, participant-based flagging systems, as on the programming site Stack Overflow, have come a long way in the last few years in terms of helping moderators. Moderators, in turn, depend on terms of service (TOS) and a codes of conduct in order to make decisions. This project assumes that groups will do this for themselves, collaboratively, but flagging capability for posts and comments are essential tools for any user or moderator.
One can also imagine, in an application built from scratch, a slightly different take on current implementations of “threads” for discussion. Currently, when subthreads develop out of main threads of discussion on most platforms, things get messy fast, with applications having to decide what to display with what: check any long Twitter thread to see what I mean. One might thus put the ability to re-define and re-display subthreads into new threads in the hands of users, perhaps using a distinction between what one might call “knots” and “threads.”

By marking a post as a “knot,” users define a post as the beginning point of a particular discussion. This is basically what quote-tweeting on Twitter does: resets the origin point of a discussion for the things that follow, with clicking on the quoted tweet leading to the original thread. On other platforms, like Facebook and Reddit, indented sets of comments indicate who is responding to what, and at what level. Different still is the sophisticated annotation that is available at the site Genius. For example, for the poem “Sunday Morning” by Wallace Stevens, Genius allows portions of the text to be clicked on with user commentary coming up in a sidebar; separate user commentary appears at the end of the poem; and an embedded video of a reading of the poem is also available (Genius Media Group. Inc.). I don’t think Genius is an answer for the global anglophone poetry community (again, please see chapter eight on why), but annotation functionality at this level seems definitely desirable for TextFrame. At the same time, it seems worth noting here a very impressive commercial pedagogy site that does a pretty amazing job explicating “Sunday Morning” with a very simple but thoughtful design: the site is called shmoop (Shmoop Editorial Team). The close reading of the poem that is walked through there is engaging and colloquial in genuinely trying to get at the poem’s meaning.

At classroom scale, one can imagine a discussion screen centering on a poem that features lists of users who have defined knots. Perhaps hovering over the name shows the assertion itself; multiple knots can be displayed on hover. The current user clicks on an assertion to reveal the thread. Or the current user can click on “new knot” (with an icon for knot) and start a thread. Users could also break out their own comments that start out as thread responses and turn them into quote-knots. Permissions settings could allow users to distribute texts to a defined group that can comment on them collaboratively, i.e.
control in a fine-grained manner who can see the text, who can see the comments, and who can comment—with the global option available. Outside the classroom, in a perfect world, one would like to be able to represent the all the various knots of a discussion, and see its various permutations, but that already is starting to feel like it is getting into surveillance territory, which brings me to my next subtopic.

As of this writing, Twitter is the de facto app for poetry discussion. Discussion often happens, however, via subtweet, where the person or thing being discussed isn’t explicitly named, which makes it very hard in terms of search, for example. As an archive, Twitter is pretty terrible: the search that the service does provide via its client seems skewed in opaque ways. Twitter does have an API that makes it easy to pull in sets of tweets by user, date, and search string, and it would not be difficult to then embed those tweets on a particular poet’s page. Doing so, however, feels like it would be an intrusive thing: people seem to rely on the clunky-ness of the application clients (mobile and desktop) that twitter itself provides, in the sense that people really have to work hard to find old things that one tweets. That allows a kind of freedom, I think, analogous to conversation. At the same time, some poets produce incredibly incisive Twitter threads, as good as poets’ letters, or criticism in any other form. Perhaps a solution is an opt-in on a poet’s TextFrame (or whatever the unit ends up being), allowing users to use an UI built on top of the Twitter API that does search-and-embed. At the same time, all of the reasons for not using Facebook or Reddit apply to Twitter, yet the sense of being in the larger world that Twitter provides makes retreat to a specialized application unattractive.

In terms of real-time video broadcast, the commercial platform Twitch (“a community where millions of people and thousands of interests collide in a beautiful explosion of video games, pop culture, and conversation”), based around video streaming with comment functionality (Twitch Interactive, Inc.). It is perhaps possible to imagine coding real-time broadcast video into TextFrame, but there are numerous problems with doing so in lower-bandwidth contexts where real-time video transmission is too laggy or too costly—what is known as the “digital divide” (Bessette), which reproduces the same colonial relations that costly texts do. In the spirit of minimal sufficiency, regardless of its full suite of
capabilities, TextFrame should have a lightweight client available that automatically cuts out high-bandwidth content (perhaps via feature flags).

Funding would certainly be an issue from the start. The global non-exclusively anglophone community itself is a kind of hybrid, in that many, but not all members of the community are institutionally affiliated. Supra-institutional professional organizations in the US, such as the Modern Language Association (MLA) and the Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP) are already captured by the Poetry Foundation, at least in terms of who gets presented there. TextFrame, by contrast, is designed to approach the Freireian horizon of not requiring any institutional affiliation or money for adding work or for commenting. And it should be able to be run by anyone, at any scale: one TextFrame application (or set of applications) for everyone, or lots of little sub-applications, all open. A set of, say, Victorianists, could break away at any moment and start their own thing, either forking by the code repository or repositories and customizing them, or running the code as is. One ambition I do have for TextFrame, though, is that there be a recognizably central instance running at global scale, maintained by a dedicated team, supported by individual anonymous donations. Funding sources would obviously be an issue in trying to “build away” from the nation-state. Maybe lots of little networked applications, in the manner of Mastodon, solves that.

Lastly, I should clarify the sense of the term “build” used throughout. For the purposes of digital pedagogy and scholarship, “[b]uilding is constructing something digitally, through which a scholarly discourse community can generate knowledge” (Endres 46). In the context of an English department, however, I should note that, in preparing to thinking about building TextFrame, I faced moments of a common departmental prejudice: against building, and toward critical writing:

Building faces the challenge of not being writing. However, the commonalities between writing and building far exceed their differences. The present circumstances that exclude building from institutional rewards, especially tenure and promotion, have more to do with the institutionalization of scholarship. (Endres 44)

The “present circumstances” are likely due to a lag in departmental conceptions of what the field is, or should be—which has in itself become a field of study. It is likely, however, that future scholars will
not only be building, but will be floating extra-institutionally, running their own courses, and building their own student bodies in the manner that one currently builds a following on social media. That is already the main way that scholars and practitioners keep up in fast-changing and growing fields: “growing a diverse personal learning network [PLN]... often is more useful than having a large, homogeneous social network,” writes Internet scholar Howard Rheingold, “I learned from master educators on Twitter that growing and tuning a PLN of authoritative sources and credible colearners is one of the success strategies in a world of digital networks.” (Rheingold, Net Smart 25, 144). Further, applications themselves serve a rhetorical function through their very construction:

[D]igital objects are rhetorical objects. Recognizing their rhetorical nature increases understanding of their limits in generating knowledge and kinship with scholarly text. ... Digital objects are made to participate in an ideologically charged scholarly discourse community and to generate, transmit, and debate its knowledge. (Endres 49-50)

The digital humanities scholars Stephen Ramsay and Geoffrey Rockwell address the problem of getting institutional credit for digital work within traditional departments by proposing a version of the Turing Test:

As Alan Turing proposed “What happens when a machine takes the part of [a human interlocutor] in this game?” as a replacement for “Can machines think?”, so may we substitute “What happens when building takes the place of writing?” as a replacement for “Is building scholarship?” The answer, too, might be similar. If the quality of the interventions that occur as a result of building are as interesting as those that are typically established through writing, then that activity is, for all intents and purposes, scholarship. (Ramsay and Rockwell)

In terms of building TextFrame or some other collaborative poetry project, I don’t want credit. What I want is for the same thing that has happened over and over not to happen again. That will require something more than building a collaborative application for archiving poetry.
Chapter 5: Narayanan’s Language Events as Free-Tier Application

After deciding not to try to build TextFrame, for reasons that should be clear from the last chapter, I still wanted to build something for this project. Around that time I went to visit the poet Vivek Narayanan, who teaches creative writing at George Mason University, which is in Fairfax County, VA. Narayanan told me about a classroom practice he had developed based on the “Language Events” of Robert Desnos.

I first met Narayanan in 2008 when he was doing a residency at the Sarai Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi. Since 2000, the Centre has centered on questions of “media, urban life, and the public domain”; at the time, Narayanan was putting together a performance with the artist Sophea Lerner for the KhojLive Performance Art festival. The project was driven by the idea that “the audience itself should... generate poetry” and that the work that resulted should be “site-specific while, at the same time, addressing dislocations of time and place” (Narayanan, Lines). For the project, Narayanan developed prompts for audience-based line generation that were deliberately simple: “I heard...” and “It is...” Narayanan assembled lines that he solicited “walking around with a clipboard during the Khoj performance festival and convincing people to sit down and compose a couple of sentences for me; in addition, I solicited lines over email.” Narayanan and Lerner also set up a dedicated phone number whereby people could respond to the prompts via SMS, with the thought that they could also be projected live in real time on a screen during the performance, though the latter idea had to be abandoned due to time constraints (Narayanan, Lines). The performance, titled “What Have You Heard,” took place on March 28. After being read, the poem was eventually posted (Narayanan, Heard).

During my visit in the summer of 2018, Narayanan described a classroom practice whereby he had adapted Desnos’ Language Event One and Language Event Two for the real-time classroom. Here is
Desnos’ recounting of the events, and couplets produced by the exercises that Desnos published as examples:

**Language Event One**

*Sitting around a table, each participant writes on a sheet of paper, without looking at those of the others, a clause beginning with “if” or “when,” and, on a separate sheet of paper, an independent clause in the conditional or future mood, unrelated to the preceding. Then the sentences are shuffled at random, two by two, & read together.*

1

If night was endless  
there would be nothing more, nothing, nothing at all.  
*(Louis Aragon, Georges Sadoul)*

2

When shoestrings grown in the workers’ gardens  
railwaymen will blow their noses with sugar tongs.  
*(Benjamin Péret, Suzanne Muzard)*

3

When children slap their father’s face  
al all young men will have white hair  
*(Yves Tanguy, André Breton)*

4

If tigers should prove grateful to us  
sharks would volunteer to be used as canoes.  
*(Elsie Péret, Suzanne Muzard)*

5

If orchids grew in the palm of my hand  
masseurs would have plenty of work  
*(Benjamin Péret, André Breton)*

**Language Event Two**

*Two poets. Questions and answers are always independent.*  
*(Suzanne Muzard, André Breton)*

What is a kiss?  
A divagation, everything capsizes.

What is daylight?  
A naked woman bathing at nightfall.
What is exaltation?
It is a blob of oil in a brook.

What are eyes?
The night watchman in a perfume factory.

What is hovering between Suzanne and Me?
Great black threatening clouds.

What is a bed?
A fan quickly opened. The sound of a bird’s wing.

In Narayanan’s initial adaptation, he collected responses to Desnos’ prompts from writing students via their phones using a variety of intermediate internet-based steps. Narayanan explicitly wanted to eschew SMS/text-messaging for collecting the student responses, as there are sometimes fees associating with texting depending on one’s phone plan. He eventually settled on Mentimeter, a live-polling app, for collecting responses. He chose Mentimeter for its free-tier service, its “crystal clear” user interface (as Narayanan described it to me), and for the ability of students/participants to use the university wifi network to access it. Narayanan waited until mid-term to stage the events; the timing allowed relationships among the students to form, which in turn would allow sharing in cases where a student did not have a smart phone (a situation which in fact did not arise).

There were several issues with this iteration of the project. The major one was that Mentimeter did not have a means for combining and presenting the responses in the manner Narayanan wanted. Instead, Narayanan developed a manual process for combination and presentation: he exported the responses to an Excel Workbook, and, as the students stood by, chose combinations to paste into a presentation projection from his laptop. It was a cumbersome process that broke the flow of the event.

As we discussed Narayanan’s process further, we decided to collaborate on writing a custom application. We finished the first iteration on June 16th, 2018: a Jupyter Notebook in Python that read-in Narayanan’s existing Excel Workbooks and printed out random combinations of the existing responses to the prompts. The combinations were selected via using Python’s pseudo-random number generator picking elements from among the sets of responses from the Desnos’ couplets. The main bit
of presentation logic that we worked out that evening was the rate at which combinations would be displayed: too quickly, and the resulting poem soon became overwhelming; too slowly, and the poem seemed to drag, as if someone were speaking too slowly. After many iterations, we settled on a rate of one couplet every three seconds. With the notebook code in hand, I left to develop an web application version on my own, one that would both collect the lines from participants and display them.

In the days that followed, I thought about the publication of the US version Narayanan’s debut book of poems, *Universal Beach* (Narayanan, UB) and the ways in which its publication reflected the participatory and accessible nature of his teaching. The book is concerned with exactly the themes its title promises: the nature of the universal, in a very material sense. The book was published in India by the poet Anand Thakore’s Harbour Line press; I had been the co-publisher of the book in the US. I mention this here because it was Narayanan’s demand that the book be freely available as a PDF (in addition to the for-purchase print edition) that set the press’ policy of publishing free PDFs three months after print publication, a policy that other small presses in the US employ (with some providing free versions from the start). And I saw those same aims in Narayanan’s version of the Language Events: take the events out of the classroom, and they could be scaled-up as much as one liked. I wanted to make sure that the implementation allowed that.

As I was building Narayanan’s Language Events, I began thinking that shifting the entire TextFrame project to being pedagogically-based might rescue it from some of the contradictions of a social app (trolling, value-creation). I quickly came to the conclusion that making the project entirely pedagogy-based would not save it from anything. At the same time, though, I wanted part of the application to serve as a repository of writing exercises and prompts, either as sets of written instructions, application programming interfaces (APIs), or fully functional single- or multi-page applications.30

Part of the reason for seeing a pedagogical need within poetry is negative experience with Blackboard. Blackboard is a commercial, for-profit, closed-source product developed for large institutions, and it has an institutional feel.31 The fact is, “the way [instructors] teach in those spaces,” i.e. electronic
learning management systems (LMS) is “shaped by the limitations and constraints they perceive as existing in those spaces” (Salisbury). That was definitely true for me. And implementing something like the Language Events within Blackboard would feel icky, like I was giving them something that does not belong to them.

As I starting thinking through the implementation details of Narayanan’s project, and how it might fit in with a larger pedagogy-based project, it occurred to me that another major problem with some of the versions of what I had in mind—the need for one centralized app to serve world-wide, and the costs and logistical problems with collaboration associated with that—disappeared when one began thinking about individual events, workshops, and classrooms such as Narayanan’s. One classroom, one event, one instance, is what I thought. What I mean is, it occurred to me that classroom-scale is also free-tier scale: that I could implement Narayanan’s language events as a stand-alone Flask application that would run on free-tier services from cloud providers such as Amazon or Heroku without incurring any charges. And that anyone with a credit card and a little bit of developer knowledge, while neither trivial requirements, could do the same. In our initial discussions, I had told Narayanan that I would try to incorporate the Language Events into the larger project, which at that point was a skeleton application that had a working authentication flow that included a working database connection, and working drafts of two projects I had worked on earlier on my own (and which are detailed briefly in the appendix) and which could be re-focused toward pedagogy. Incorporating the Language Events in this way, however, committed me to running a centralized server, the users to an auth flow, and likely costs. The login itself, I soon thought, also posed problems: what was the point of adding another step to the student experience, adding yet another password to their lives, and also collecting and storing information about them in a database that might at any point be demanded by some state agency. And if I decided to go the OAuth2 route, then I was introducing—requiring, really—a third party provider such as Google/Gmail. At that point I decided: no login should be required for the instructor or students to use the app, and the app should do one thing and do it well (the language events, and that’s all), and it should be free to deploy using free-tier.
Free-tier is a shitty substitution for free as in free beer, free because free for all, and not tied to someone’s property. Free-tier relies on tech surfeit for its existence. It’s nice for hobbyists and for projects like this that it exists as a business model, but that’s what it is: a business model.

I poked around on AWS and the on Google Cloud Platform, neither of which I had used in more than three years. They had both changed a lot, and I didn’t feel like getting involved with figuring out how they now worked. I thought about starting up a Digital Ocean instance, but it’s not free, and it’s not super easy to manage everything involved, despite their excellent tutorials. I ended up on Heroku, which takes a Docker-like proprietary Procfile, the one concession I had to make to the platform. I had never used Heroku, but it was as advertised: easy to configure, and still free for hobbyists. I built the app around a Redis cache, assuming that I could scale it up with Cassandra if need be (though again, scalability was not the goal). I designing the endpoints such that they are made unique by the users, and that’s what makes the event itself unique. That leaves the app open to denial of service attacks (by flooding the instance with bad requests to bogus events), but I figured each classroom could get around that problem by naming its Heroku app something unique just before class.

The free-tier Heroku Redis says that it does not persist: it self-erases after 24 hours if one does not upgrade to a non-free tier. We found that didn’t happen, but I still upgraded for a month ($15 US) so that the students would definitely have access to their work. I ended up naming our Heroku deployment desnos, rather than Narayanan or language_events, but it doesn’t feel right. The current endpoints are available in the digital manifest at the beginning of this document. The user creates specific “event” by making up something unique for the “some-random-id” field: for use in the classroom, the instructor can change that to whatever makes sense for that session: each time you want to start a new session, or anytime you want to keep a set of responses together, create a new id.

After a demo for Narayanan, he asked that I add an easy way for him to cut the displayed poem out from the browser so that he could paste into a text file—something that would strip out all the HTML etc. He also asked for a pause button: something that would stop the flow of generation of the poem so
that he could discuss it with the students as it unfolded. The first time Narayanan used the app in the classroom, in the Fall of 2018, the pseudo-random line picking operation gave a lot of repeated entrees, and some entries didn’t get used at all. This disappointed some students greatly. For the second iteration, I changed the line picking such that once a pseudo-random element has been chosen for combination and display, it cannot not be chosen again until all the elements from that set of responses have been shown. That fixed it.

You should be able to try it right now. Just make sure you put in all the slashes in the address (one known pitfall). Also: every time you refresh a “combine” page, it is a new set of combinations that will be created and displayed. For now, the deployment is backed by a free-tier in-memory cache, which means that your texts are not guaranteed to persist more than 24 hours, and that if the site somehow suddenly gets a lot of traffic, things should start to fall out. I haven’t load-tested the deployment at all, actually. The digital portion of this thesis includes screen captures of the two language events as deployed, plus captures of two free-tier scale projects in a working but unfinished state. The code for all of the projects is also included. What follows is a brief description of the unfinished projects, parse! and xlanguage, which can also be seen in the screen-captures included with the project.

The first project, parse!, does sentential and phrasal parsing. Its goal is to develop into an application that allows arguments about the effects of various sentence structures to have an ostensive basis. Right now it does one best parse, and diagrams the input text. The goal is for this tool to be configurable to produce alternate parses when a sentence or phrase is grammatically ambiguous. This can be especially useful in the discussion of enjambment: ambiguities among different grammatical resolutions for particular sentences, when broken in different ways, could be easily produced and displayed. For example, “The horse raced past/ the barn fell/ everyone was distraught” might be parsed several ways. The first two lines might mean: “The horse raced past. The barn fell.” Or they could mean: “The horse [that was] raced past the barn fell.” The competing parses would be shown, allowing easy reference during a discussion. A second phase of development using the parse functionality would allow for stylistic analysis, such that a poet’s entire oeuvre could be uploaded via PDF (or other format) and
parsed, with a report on the most common phrasal structures used, and the contexts or points in the poem where they generally appear. For example, a poet might turn to the conditional as inflection point three-quarters through a poem, and this might be a kind of signature, demonstrable across more poems in the oeuvre than not.

There are many suggestive possibilities for stylistic analysis of uploaded poems, but doing so would require that the uploaded poems be encoded in some sort of markup language. A recent pedagogical experiment within The Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) documents the “painstaking process of selecting bits of text and wrapping them with tags reframed reading as slow, iterative, and filled with formal choices” in putting together a digital edition of a poem using “the Text Encoding Initiative’s broad-based humanities tag set” (Singer). If the set of tags could be restricted to getting the title, stanzas, line-breaks, and sentences correct, then it’s possible that some form of machine learning (ML) could be used to do markup. A natural language processing (NLP) pipeline specific to phenomena like enjambment could then be developed utilizing the tags. I’m wary of advocating this, however, as I think it would be abused and be used to draw meaningless conclusions. The simple diagramming functionality, in contrast, can be used to teach the (lost art of) sentence diagramming, whereby user hand-parses can be quickly compared with machine parses.

The second unfinished project is called xlanguage, or “cross-language.” It was inspired by work attempting to measure the “distance” of one language from another (Petroni and Serva). It lists a number of languages, and asks the user to choose one, and to enter some text in English. It then transposes texts entered into the text box into the other language, by the following criteria: each word entered is transposed into a word in the chosen language by applying the Levenshtein distance algorithm, or by the fewest insert, delete, or substitution operations at the character level needed to change one word (in one language, in this case) into the another word (in this case, from another language) (Petroni and Serva). In the implementation included with this project, the list of available target languages is currently limited by the number of languages that the Ubuntu Linux distribution is
available in; it’s from there that I have taken the lexicons for each language. The given transpositions can then be used as writing prompts. Or the transposed text can be taken as a poem in itself.

Critic Jerome McGann and poet Lisa Samuels, writing together, note that “we may usefully regard all criticism and interpretation as deformance,” whereby the original work is subjected to a form of reduction. For McGann and Samuels, paths toward interpretation involve actual material reductions or changes to the text itself in order to ascribe meanings to it: “interpretive lines of thought spin out of some initial nondiscursive ‘experiment’ with the primary materials,” including reversing the order of the lines of a poem as a form of “reading backwards,” or reading a poem by erasing all but its nouns, or, in a separate move, all but its verbs. In performing the latter operations on Wallace Stevens’ “The Snow Man,” McGann and Samuels are able to identify a “noun arc... from ‘mind’ to ‘nothing’” and a “verb arc from ‘have’ to ‘is’, from (imperative, self) possession to (indeterminate, absolute) being” (McGann and Samuels). One can imagine automating a number of deformance techniques for criticism. I imagine xlanguage as a composition tool for generating new sounds and relationships, but it could just as easily be a critical tool, revealing words just a short “distance” from one another, unarticulated within a text. One could also imagine allowing for different kinds of distances to be calculated (like N+7, where the word seven places further on in a lexicon is substituted for the original word in a poem). The articulation of distances reveals unspoken affinities.

That ends the first section of this thesis, the main argument for TextFrame. What follow are case studies: conventional historicist criticism that I imagine could be represented with TextFrame. The argument involves things like the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Goethe’s theory of colors, and Google n-grams, all things that lend themselves to dramatic display, as well as to discussion, on the web. It is with that use in mind that I ask the next section be read.
In 1924, Gordon W. Allport (1897-1967) created and taught “Personality: its Psychological and Social Aspects” at Harvard. The course was the first at a US college to treat personality theory as a discrete branch of psychology (Nicholson 1997). Allport formally joined Harvard’s psychology faculty in 1930, and, in 1937, published *Personality: A Psychological Interpretation*, which became the standard US textbook of personality theory (Nicholson 2003). He remained at Harvard for the rest of his career, publishing his 1954 book *The Nature of Prejudice* from there. The book, which describes prejudice in terms of “In-Groups,” “Out-Groups,” “ego defenses” and “rejection,” arrived right at the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, and it “defined the field of intergroup relations for social psychologists,” making the focus “the study of prejudice and its effect on group interactions” (ibid). Coming from the author of a textbook that was compulsory for anyone who took a psychology course in the US, the book, after being reprinted in paperback in 1958 (de Carvalho), sold more than a half-million copies in the US over the next 25 years (Dovidio, Glick and Rudman 17). “Almost four decades after its appearance, [the book remained] one of the most influential and oft-cited publications in the field of intergroup relations” (Katz 125). The book is likely the source by which the term “in-group” entered the American vernacular, as the term’s use spikes around the book’s publication, as can be seen in the below n-gram of “in-group”:

Illustration 6.1: Google. N-gram view for “in-group”

When *Allport’s Becoming: Basic Considerations for a Psychology of Personality* was published in 1955, it thus received more widespread academic attention than a set of essays on personality theory normally would, despite the fact that the paperback had not yet hit the shelves (Dovidio, Glick and Rudman 25). In *Becoming*, Allport elaborates the concept of the “proprium” (or self) partially through “Personalism,” a long-extant philosophical construct with multiple contradictory meanings (Williams and Bengtsson). Allport’s concept of Personalism describes every mental function as embedded in “personal life”: there is no separable symbol processing or space perception; there are only people who have senses, feelings, and impressions. The Personologist—a real Allport construct—approaches the
work the questions “How shall a psychological life history be written?” and “What are the individual consistencies?” (Polansky). The Freudian “depth psychology” then-prevalent in the US, Allport felt, “may plunge too deep” (Allen 419); being in the moment and being present were, he thought, the keys to psychotherapy and to development (Allen). Allport used the terms “proprium” and “Personalism” to distinguish his constructs from the nascent “Self” psychology of Heinz Kohut (1913-1981), and from work by Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) (ibid). In a 1943 paper titled “A Theory of Human Motivation,” Maslow adopted Kurt Goldstein’s concept of “self-actualization” and placed it atop a “hierarchy of human needs.” Maslow defines “self-actualization” as “the desire for self-fulfillment, namely the tendency for man to become actualized in what he is potentially” (Maslow). Carl Rogers (1902-1987), in Client-Centered Therapy (1951), favors terminology whereby it is the “client” who “has within himself or herself vast resources for self-understanding, for altering his or her self-concept, attitudes and self-directed behavior,” which are resources that require “a definable climate of facilitative psychological attitudes” adding up to the “freedom to be” (Rogers). When The Nature of Prejudice started selling, Personalism, as part of Allport’s work, reached a very wide audience.

Allport’s “person” was defined alongside Rogers’s “client” and Maslow’s motivation; all were subject, or so it seems, to an indelibly tossed-off poetic parody by poet Frank O’Hara, who had attended Harvard in the late 1940s, and who was then living at the center of US psychoanalytic culture. Being young and gay in the 1950s, even when white, and even in New York, normally afforded a greatly reduced set of public opportunities for “self-actualization” and the “freedom to be,” with the threat of stigma and even criminalization constantly in the air (Roffman). Whatever else it is (and it is many things), O’Hara’s “Personism: A Manifesto,” written in 1959, a year after the paperback of The Nature of Prejudice appeared, can be read as a parody of Personalism, of related strands of 1950s US psychology, and of the poetry that developed alongside them. While critics have mentioned Personalism and Personism in the same breath (Nelson 88), I have not found a specific claim vis-à-vis Allport in the extensive literature that O’Hara’s piece has inspired.
O’Hara graduated from Allport’s Harvard in 1950 (a year after John Ashbery). In the piece, he writes that he “founded” Personism “on August 27, 1959,” in conversation with Amiri Baraka (then known as LeRoi Jones); “Personism: A Manifesto” was dated September 3, 1959 when it appeared in the 1961 issue of the little magazine Yugen, edited by Baraka and his then-wife Hettie Jones. A year seems a reasonable amount of time to have passed from the paperback release of The Nature of Prejudice for Allport’s Personalism to get vernacular traction. Just as circumstantially, and just as compellingly, the soi-disant founding happens to coincide exactly with the release of Robert Lowell’s collection Life Studies, published in the spring of that year (Byrne). In interviews at the time, Lowell said the composition of Life Studies was part of his psychotherapy, and indeed a whole subfield of Lowell studies has come to be dominated by his mental illness and relationship to therapy (Jamison). M.L. Rosenthal’s genre-founding review of the collection, titled “Poetry as Confession,” appeared in The Nation issue dated September 19, 1959 (Rosenthal). Rosenthal likely chose the term “confession” to recall Lowell’s 1940 conversion to Catholicism, much discussed when Lowell won the 1947 Pulitzer Prize, at age 30, for Lord Weary’s Castle (Hamilton). In his review, Rosenthal says that Life Studies contains the equivalent of “a series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honor-bound not to reveal,” and that Lowell himself “seems to regard” the book as “soul’s therapy.” For Personism, meanwhile:

[O]ne of its minimal aspects is to address itself to one person (other than the poet himself), thus evoking overtones of love without destroying love’s life-giving vulgarity, and sustaining the poet’s feelings towards the poem while preventing love from distracting him into feeling about the person. (O’Hara, Personism: A Manifesto)

I think O’Hara is serious about this, at some level, but I also think it can be read as a parody of the analysand-analyst relationship, where “overtones” are all that is allowed, and the “poem” is therapy itself. Whether one is willing to entertain such a reading or not, it is clear that “Personism” is immersed in its moment, attempting to put forth (even as it disavows them) “the most lofty ideas of anyone writing today.” “Everything is in the poems,” O’Hara says in the opening of the piece:

but at the risk of sounding like the poor wealthy man’s Allen Ginsberg I will write to you because I just heard that one of my fellow poets thinks that a poem of mine that can’t be got at one reading is because I was confused too. Now, come on. I don’t believe in god, so I don’t have to make elaborately sounded structures. I hate Vachel Lindsay, always have; I don’t even like rhythm, assonance, all that stuff. (O’Hara, Personism: A Manifesto 27)
The reference to believers creating cathedrals, or “elaborately sounded structures,” is probably a reference to Lowell, who was known for his baroque technique from Weary onward (or possibly to Anglican convert T.S. Eliot). Vachel Lindsay, who committed suicide in 1931 by drinking Lysol—“They tried to get me—I got them first!” were apparently his last words (Masters 361)—was known as a moralist and a socialist: “Would I might rouse the Lincoln in you all” begins his poem “Lincoln” (Lindsay). The parsing of poetic form using traditional metrics (“rhythm, assonance”) was, of course, a hallmark of the then-ubiquitous New Critics. Offhand ripostes directed at the generation or two ahead of him are common in O’Hara: “Memorial Day 1950” contains the line “Our responsibilities did not begin/ in dreams, though they began in bed” (O’Hara, Selected Poems 7) which inverts Delmore Schwartz’s “In Dreams Begin Responsibilities,” itself a borrowing from Yeats’ epigraph from 1914’s Responsibilities (Corcoran).32

Stephanie Burt’s reading of “Personism” inadvertently finds that self psychology—as the collective work of Allport, Maslow, Rogers, and others came to be called, in opposition to “ego psychology,” once Heinz Kohut added his contributions—may have served as an influence (as well as a straw person):

The style O’Hara gradually invented (you can see it as early as “Autobiographia Literaria,” though it doesn’t take charge until maybe 1956) reverses the process by which you think more, get more from a poet’s work, judge the work more sympathetically, give it more play, if you already know and like the poet personally. Instead, O’Hara’s poems give strangers the feeling that we know and like him.

That’s how a Personist poem works, and it’s why Personism isn’t (as I once believed) just a parody of manifestos, but a good way to describe what O’Hara invented, though not an explanation of why it works. (Burt)

Burt is essentially saying that, for O’Hara, “depth psychology may plunge too deep.” And if Personism is a good way to describe O’Hara’s poetic idiom (i.e. using charisma—being a person being like and want to be like—to sustain a relationship), it is also a clarifying way of seeing what O’Hara invented in terms of a way of being in the world of the 1950s US: his life and work were, in some ways, a model of public self-actualization, of going on your nerve.

At the same time as O’Hara’s idiom was developing, his fellow Harvard alum John Ashbery was reacting against similar discursive realities in some very different ways. In a story told countless times in the
literature (by Marjorie Perloff, Brad Gooch, Mark Ford, John Shoptaw, Aiden Wasley, and, most recently, by Jesse Zuba and by Karin Roffman), in 1955, Ashbery and O’Hara, very close friends33 sent poems to W.H. Auden. The occasion was possible publication in the *Yale Series of Younger Poets*, then, as now, “designed to provide a publishing medium for the first volumes of promising poets.” Both Ashbery and O’Hara’s manuscripts had been initially removed from consideration by Auden’s assistants before they reached Auden himself; both poets re-sent their poems directly to “Wystan” upon hearing (from Chester Kallman) that Auden was unhappy with the field as it stood (Perloff). Ashbery’s manuscript became *Some Trees*, number fifty-two in the series. Perloff quotes an unpublished letter from Auden to O’Hara, where Auden explains his decision:

> I’m sorry to have to tell you that, after much heart searching I chose John’s poems. It’s really very awkward when the only two possible candidates are both friends.

> This doesn’t mean that I don’t like your work: lots of the poems I like very much, in particular Jane Awake.

> I think you (and John, too, for that matter) must watch what is always the great danger with any ‘surrealistic’ style, namely the confusing of authentic non-logical relations which arouse wonder with accidental ones which arouse mere surprise and in the end fatigue. (Perloff 249-250)

The difference between “authentic non-logical relations which arouse wonder” and “accidental ones which arouse mere surprise and in the end fatigue” apparently preoccupied Auden with regard to Ashbery’s poems, perhaps in part due to the fact that his hand in picking anyone at all was forced (Zuba). Perloff, and Ashbery himself (Roffman), point to Auden’s introduction to the Yale edition of *Some Trees* as “curious.” To better understand Auden’s take on the poems (a take one might consider emblematic of its time, given Auden’s stature then), it’s worth looking closely at what Auden says, in his compulsory foreword to *Some Trees*, about the poet’s role in society, and about poetic inspiration. For “the ancient Greeks,” Auden opines,

> a man or woman is only real when he or she impersonates a god or goddess; in what we should call “themselves” they are of no account. Real events are sacred ritual actions … An event that does not re-occur is nothing. The particular, the individual, the secular are nothing. Poetry, too, is a rite, which is why the poet speaks not in his own name but as a mouthpiece of the Muses. … Particularity appears only as the particular details of a rite; it is important, for example, that Hercules should perform neither more nor less than twelve labors or that iambic verse should only be used for satires and curses.
Such a period is golden for the poet because he has no problem of subject matter, communication with his audience, or style, and, in addition, is a highly valued member of society. (Some Trees 11-12)

This is the Plato of Ion, where the poet is “a passive agent of muses... ignorant both of the nature of poetry and of his personal contribution” (Partee 87). In Auden’s version, poetry, via the poet, elevates language above the particulars of the world by ritualizing language itself. In this view, the poet is not a particular person using language as a means of describing or representing the world, but a vessel taking dictation, à la Cocteau’s Orphée (where the poet is depicted sitting in a car, writing down the crackly emanations from its radio, to the detriment of his marriage). Through language, the poet, as medium, produces a sacred space removed from false divisions. Orphée was released in 1950. Ashbery saw it “repeatedly” at the 55th Street Playhouse in New York (Roffman 194). I haven’t yet found evidence that either Auden or O’Hara definitely saw it (but how could they miss it?). Nevertheless, by 1956, Auden was able to feel that that view of language and poetry had all but disappeared, at least with regard to the actual lived world:

How different such an age is from our own... no one seriously regards [our rituals] any longer as sacred. ... For us, there is a sharp distinction between reality and meaning. Only concrete particulars seem real, and all concrete particulars seem equally real. ... Human experience of time is an experience of a succession of unique moments, each of which is novel and will never recur. (ibid 12)

Auden’s “Greeks” see poetry as the medium by which reality and meaning become one; Auden’s younger contemporaries, having lost this sense of language as ritual to a world of “concrete particulars” can no longer reach this sacred place; they must settle for meaning in personalized, individual instances. All of this has the feeling of a hobby horse, but it also sets up a critique of Ashbery’s work that Auden never quite comes out and delivers. It would be inappropriate to critique a young semi-protégé’s work in a foreword having chosen that work for a prize, and the selection itself, coupled with Auden’s hedging, may also reflect an inarticulate knowledge that Auden was out of his depth. What Auden does do next is chart a line of descent “[f]rom Rimbaud down to Mr. Ashbery” that locates “old magical notions” of imaginative life “in childhood largely, dreams and daydreams entirely,” an individuated approach that commits such poets to “strange juxtapositions of imagery” and “singular associations of ideas” (13). Singular is a pejorative here, set against Greek holism. Dreams without responsibilities are also not a good thing, for Auden, and they are, I think, the crux of
what Auden thought of *Some Trees*: Auden liked the ritualistic affect of the poems, but couldn’t follow the point of Ashbery’s constant linguistic misdirection, seeing it as (mere, for him) subjective intellectual inventiveness. In the two poems he quotes in the foreword, he looks for the literal: In “Illustration,” he reads an angel’s suicide as a literal ritual rejection of modern life, while in “The Instruction Manual,” Ashbery is faulted for “demanding an active re-creation by [the reader]” of a kind of “private property” of the poet’s imagination, a demand that “ancient poetry with its public references does not” make (14). At the same time, Auden is not wrong about the influence of surrealism on Ashbery (though he does not utter the word, about which more in a moment), just as Burt is not wrong with regard to manifestoes and O’Hara. As Auden probably knew that at the time of the book’s selection, Ashbery was preparing to begin Fulbright-based work on Raymond Roussel (Roffman). But for Auden’s purposes, in following out juxtapositions and associations from the realm of dreams, the poets of the surreal will be “tempted to manufacture calculated oddities, as if the subjectively sacred were necessarily and on all occasions odd” (16). That’s not what Ashbery, or O’Hara, were doing. Because of all the misunderstandings still surrounding Surrealism itself and its influence on the New York School poets in particular, I want to say a little bit about why, though in a circuitous fashion, through the “coded” reading of *Some Trees* that have become the standard for it.

If one were to try to take inventory of “calculated oddities” in *Some Trees*, one might think that Auden was reacting to the talking-past-each-other faux shepherds in “Eclogue” (“Father, I have long dreamed your whitened/ Face and side to accost me in dull play) (24); the anthropomorphized “patience” of “Sonnet” that notes “His pain is the servant’s alive” (49); or “The Mythological Poet” that asks “Might not child and pervert/ Join hands in the instant/ Of their interest” (48). Calculation was certainly in the air in the 1950s: Norbert Wiener’s *Cybernetics; or, Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* had appeared in 1948. The theory of communication found there is a lot closer to what Ashbery was doing than what Auden ascribed to him:

> a message is “a sequence of measurable events distributed in time” and... the *information* it carries is a selectional indication that allows the receiver to pick one of a pre-established set of alternative meanings. []It is not *meaning* that travels in a communication channel, but signals that cannot be interpreted except by receivers who are in possession of the particular code. (Glasersfeld)
Following Shoptaw, critics Wasley, John Vincent, and Catherine Imbroglio read *Some Trees* as less calculated than coded: the book has been productively read as performance of Ashbery’s gay (white, US, male) identity—an angle that Auden could not have explored in his YYP foreword even had he the inclination. Auden knew that Ashbery was gay; that he selected the book says that he knew something was happening, even if he did not know, or was not able to allow himself to know, what, specifically, it was. Whatever Auden really thought of *Some Trees*, the “coded” readings of Shoptaw and others have become primary for it. I am not arguing that Ashbery was directly adapting Wiener. Most poets, as *bricoleurs*, don’t pay too much attention to the disciplinary history of the ideas that surround them.

Western lyric forms have always developed alongside theoretical trends to cope with and articulate the very same problematics faced by the scientific purveyors of explanatory paradigms. But the turn in US poetry, beginning with Gertrude Stein, to a kind of abstracted syntactic approach that effaced conventional word-meaning associations, can be seen as part of a general intellectual trend in US thought that included behaviorism and, later, generative grammar (defined in the next chapter). Those two disciplines were part of a larger a reaction against US-based versions of psychoanalysis and the Freudian interpretive impulse. At the same time, US-based psychoanalysis explicitly saw homosexuality as pathological arrested development, and played a major role in upholding its medicalization (and criminalization). As Shoptaw and others argue, Ashbery’s early poetry is explicitly reacting against that, and that its oddities are in fact coded. Ashbery himself says as much, telling Karin Roffman that after ejaculating for the first time during a teen encounter with a friend, “he wrote a poem-note in his diary made up with phrases from their conversation that he did not want to forget. John wanted to remember what happened, but he also did not want anyone else to know or find out” (Roffman 87-88). This was the first instance of “this leaving out business” (Molesworth) that evolved into Ashbery’s poetic—and also the nascent ethos of the poems. Ashbery later said, half-jokingly, while composing the poems of *Some Trees* that “[m]y poems are usually in form of solemn precepts for spiritual conduct” (Roffman 198). I want to argue that the poems are actually coded “self-actualization”—that the humanistic (later ‘self’) psychology of the moment is one of the explicit pressures on the work: as psychology’s is medicalizing and criminalizing homosexuality, it is, at the same time demanding the
manifestation of an authentic self. As Catherine Imbriglio’s puts it: “Ashbery’s poetry… especially the early poetry of the 1950s, reflects, in part, some of the difficulties of articulating sexual difference in the face of repressive social and cultural prohibitions. These prohibitions produce for gay men and women a condition of social and cultural unacceptability that Ashbery might be responding to…” (Imbriglio 257). What I have to add is a further reconstruction of the context that I think the work is coding within and against, with some discussion of how Surrealism also plays in.

It’s not an exaggeration to say that by the end of the first third of the 20th century, language had become the incorporeal organ of the psychological. While it was to be some years after Freud that the unconscious would come to be described (by Lacan) as “structured like a language” (Gasperoni) most means of access to it—if it exists—were and are linguistic. Using the dream’s reliance on syntagmatic bits of waking life, strung together metaphorically and piled up metonymically, Freud made language the road to psychical structure. Dream narrative, taken as means of access to the dream itself, became a record of the patient’s conversion of drives into symbols. Interpretation converted them back again. For the pre-Lacanian analyst, a particular dream-narrative, while not always necessarily seen as an explicitly linguistic performance, was the product of a chain of associations, which were traced down via lexical ambiguity, yielding up the condensed source material. Interpretation, here, depends on a strong but ambiguous form of lexical and syntactic symbolism, where verbal descriptions of dream objects and actions “stand for” something else, for the “truth” of the form one’s desire takes, and the objects it settles upon. There is, however, a secret history of resistance in the US to the idea that interpretation is the correct way to experience a dream, a desire, or psychic life in general. Some Trees, beautiful on its own, is a part of that history. To put it another way, there is a history of US resistance to the idea that “‘interpreting’ a dream implies assigning a ‘meaning’ to it” (Interpretation 170), a history of the idea that interpretation may be the wrong way to experience a dream, a desire, or psychic life in general. US interpretations of psychoanalysis were often much harsher in their pathologizing than Freud’s relative neutrality (Bayer). Freud, who thought homosexuality was essentially environmentally or temperamentally stalled progress from an essential bisexuality to hetero-identification, was skeptical about the possibility or value of trying to bring homosexuals into
the hetero-fold. Despite Freud’s insistence that homosexuality “cannot be classified as an illness” and that “[i]t is a great injustice to persecute homosexuality as a crime - and a cruelty, too” (Freud, Letter), the US psychiatric establishment characterized homosexuality as a “deep disturbance” and set out with “therapeutic zeal for its ‘cure’” (Hale 298). In resisting that, it is not far from Some Trees to “an erotics of art” as called for 10 years later by Susan Sontag (Against Interpretation). The process of historicizing the psychoanalytic and psychological constructs of mid-century America, the process of recalling their pervasiveness and inextricability from ideas about identity, and ways of talking about it continues, from frameworks like the “anti-psychological” (Pfister and Schnog) and on. At the same time that psychological theories of language were tying the self to linguistic expression in ever closer and arguably more repressive ways, theoretical and philosophical linguistics were moving further and further away from views of language that made appeals to meaning in explaining the functions of words and sentences. And linguist theory was showing up in psychology.

Four years after Freud’s 1909 lectures at Clark University in Massachusetts, J.B. Watson (1878-1958), a psychologist at Johns Hopkins and editor of the Psychological Review, read his paper “Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It” at Columbia University, and later that year published the paper in the Review (Cohen). Claiming that psychology had “failed signally” to take its place “as an undisputed natural science,” Watson placed the blame on the use of introspective method [reported feelings] and that method’s assumption of underlying states of consciousness. What provoked Watson was the use of such states to explain behavior—the argument that such states were behavior’s cause. Behaviorism, by contrast, would look only to external causes and observable effects to account for behavior. Behaviorism would, Watson argued, at once enable psychology to become a “purely objective branch of natural science,” with its “theoretical goal” being nothing less than the “prediction and control of behavior.” Watson went on to have a large impact on the culture-at-large, not only in his infamous experiment with “Little Albert” (whereby a nine-month-old infant was taught to fear a rat by associating it with a loud noise), but in his writing for popular magazines like Harper’s. His 10-page article “The Analysis of Mind” appeared in a 1922 issue of the Dial, and thus reached the avant-garde. Watson, after a marriage scandal, went into advertising (Cohen). Gertrude Stein’s Tender Buttons,
published in 1914, a year after Watson’s “Psychology as a Behaviorist Views It,” was widely read, by a young B.F. Skinner and others, as having accomplished the “destruction” of meaning, even as Stein’s brother Leo was being psychoanalyzed (Wineapple). In the summer of 1933, sections of the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* were published in the *Atlantic Monthly*; they mention her time studying with William James at Harvard, and her work in his lab. In the January 1934 issue of the *Atlantic*, B.F. Skinner published an attack on Stein, who, after attracting a flurry of popular press attention in 1914 with *Tender Buttons*, was now, with the *Autobiography*, again a focal point for debates about the merit of ‘modern’ art and writing (Leick). A lot was at stake. If Skinner could show Stein’s writing to be simply automatic “verbal behavior,” rather than inspired artistic genius, then much modernist practice would seemingly have no basis, given then prevailing ideas about intentionality, art, and the artist (Will).

Recall that in Skinner’s behaviorism, it is the law of *effect*, rather than cause, that controls learning and behavior. A cat’s reduced response time in getting to food in a maze is not due, for Skinner, to the *pleasure* of getting it, since Skinner thought pleasure was a mental construct. It is that the actual getting of the food “strengthens”—i.e. increases the probability of—the response. One cannot observe the cat’s satisfaction, only its actions. Key controls to behavior lie in the environment, not in the interior. Skinner, now at Harvard himself, dug up Stein’s 1896 article titled “Normal Motor Automatism,” co-authored with one Leon M. Solomons, and proceeded to use it to deconstruct Stein’s writing style (Watson).35 Skinner titled his paper “Has Gertrude Stein a Secret?” and argued that Stein’s seeming stylistic innovations were nothing more than the mind’s equivalent of motor movements. If the source of Stein’s perceived “unintelligibility” were “ordinary,” then Skinner could claim that it was “more probable that meanings are not present, and that we need not bother to look for them” and therefore that “there is no experimentation at the time the writing is produced.” Skinner refers to a number of Stein’s works in his article, including *Three Lives, Tender Buttons, An Elucidation* and *Lucy Church Amiably*. The article did not, obviously, succeed in destroying Stein or modernism. What I want to highlight is that Skinner saw something in Stein’s work that reflected what he thought were his own ideas, and thus could not help but put his work through her lens, over and over again. The major work
of his early career, *The Behavior of Organisms*, would not appear until 1938. It explores Skinner’s rejection of “pleasure” as explanatory of behavior, pairing it with Stein’s explicit incorporation of pleasure in her essay “Poetry and Grammar,” with a detour through “Beyond the Pleasure Principle.” The something that Skinner saw in Stein is probably something like an anti-psychological impulse, if by psychology one means determinate meanings used to describe and explain behavior. A closer look at Skinner and Stein is beyond the scope of the present work, but I want to register them both as unlikely fellow resisters of US-based Freudian determinism.

At the time Stein was writing the *Autobiography*, she was also at work, in her notebooks, on *Stanzas in Meditation*, which would not be published until 1956. Stein, who lived in Europe from the time of Freud’s Clark lectures on, didn’t have to contend with the clinicizing atmosphere of America that reached its height after World War II. John Ashbery departed as well, beginning a decade-long exile in Stein’s beloved France in 1955, the year before the publication of *Some Trees*. He names the cultural climate regarding homosexuality as a major cause (Shoptaw). Ashbery reviewed *Stanzas in Meditation* in 1957 on the occasion of its being published by his own publisher, Yale University Press (Ashbery, *Impossible*). It’s worth lingering over his opening paragraph:

This is the latest volume in the series of the unpublished writings of Gertrude Stein which the Yale University Press has been bringing out regularly for the last decade. It will probably please readers who are satisfied only by literary extremes, but who have not previously taken to Miss Stein because of a kind of lack of seriousness in her work, characterized by lapses into dull, facile rhyme; by the over-employment of rhythms suggesting a child’s incantation against grownups; and by monotony. There is certainly plenty of monotony in the 150-page title poem which forms the first half of this volume, but it is the fertile kind, which generates excitement as water monotonously flowing over a dam generates electrical power. These austere “stanzas” are made up almost entirely of colorless connecting words such as “where,” “which,” “these,” “of,” “not,” “have,” “about,” and so on, though now and then Miss Stein throws in an orange, a lilac, or an Albert to remind us that it really is the world, our world, that she has been talking about. The result is like certain monochrome de Kooning paintings in which isolated strokes of color take on a deliciousness they never could have had out of context, or a piece of music by Webern in which a single note on the celesta suddenly irrigates a whole desert of dry, scratchy sounds in the strings.

I don’t think Ashbery is merely rehearsing the set-up litany of complaints against Stein’s writing; he seems rather to be venting passing feelings he has caught while reading her work over the years. Ashbery was at a very different point in his career, but one can’t help noticing how much more generous he finds a way to be in this introduction-like review than Auden was to Ashbery: there is no
sentence like “[The work] generates excitement as water monotonously flowing over a dam generates electrical power” anywhere in Auden’s piece. Although he doesn’t come out and say it, Ashbery implies that the power is located somewhere in the relations between words that do not belong together syntactically.

Pauline Kael may have had this sentence in mind in 1961 when she said of Billy Wilder’s One, Two, Three that the comedy “pulls out laughs the way a catheter draws urine.” Also, when Ashbery says “colorless” in 1957, one can’t help thinking “Colorless ideas sleep furiously”: Chomsky’s Syntactic Structures was published the same year. Ashbery’s description of Stein’s Stanzas might apply equally to something like the following:

“I was . . . in there . . . shooting some pool . . . I was in there shooting French . . . and . . . I . . . touches . . . What’s his name put the 3-ball in the pocket.” (Sullivan 82)

Using a microphone “concealed by an ornamental piece” on his desk, psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan (1892-1949) recorded his analytic sessions with some patients (Sullivan xxi). Sullivan, who was Director of Clinical Research at Sheppard and Enoch Pratt Hospital in Towson, Maryland, published “The Peculiarity of Thought in Schizophrenia” in the American Journal of Psychiatry in 1925. It was the most extensive published selection of schizophrenic discourse, along with case histories and examples of analysis, ever for the time (Sullivan 23):

“Well, you’re smoking . . . you’re burning . . . your building is burning down . . . symbolizes a cigar. . . . in my mind . . . it symbolizes man.

“I slept with my brother ‘till after the war * * * that homosexual feeling H— spoke of. I’d tell him . . . anything, and . . . it seemed I got worse and worse. All our actions and talks were tensions between us, you see. It was on the morning of the eclipse . . . I was relating it to myself . . . and the morning it came, I was wild, I thought I was dying or something. * * * I was supposed to be in hell, I guess . . . and they had a language there; I’d hear things . . . I couldn’t smoke a cigarette or drink water.” (Sullivan 82-83)

For Sullivan, as for Jung, dissociated schizophrenic thoughts “are products of ideas and feelings that have been split off from waking consciousness and thus freed from the control of the ego” (Monte 312). Most often, for Sullivan’s many male patients, the thoughts and feelings that required splitting off, effecting a “unwitting recoil from the world” (Sullivan 96), were homosexual. Much of Sullivan’s writing on schizophrenia centered on schizophrenic use of language. For Sullivan, language has a
“peculiar” relationship to thought for the schizophrenic, being simultaneously the means of association and dissociation in interpersonal relationships. The explicit thought-word-world link here is significant. If a shared language is part of the social contract, then the schizophrenic’s inability to produce discourse conforming to expectations of exchange is major source of his or her estrangement:

[N]ot your meaning of the word, but its meaning to the patient must govern its use. The latter must be most often constructed from the contexts in which the word occurs in the patient’s productions. When there are no data to help in this procedure, we are but bucking ourselves up to talk about “scattered speech,” incoherence and so forth. In general, it is wise to be very wary of conclusions based upon the use by a patient of words well known to be highly ambiguous, or very diffuse in reference.” (Sullivan 89-90)

Sullivan was also the first to work through the implications of Jung’s analogy between schizophrenic discourse and dream work, attempting to trace the chain of associations back to the source of repression, as one would a with a dream (Kasanin). In “Peculiarity,” Sullivan describes the onset of schizophrenia as the failure of “adjustment” in young men. For Sullivan, “factors” in 1920s US society conspired to “effect castration of the boy” who, “loaded with dogma completely divorced from his biological necessities,” is “taught more or less clearly that his hand on his penis is his hand against God….” The boy is thus “confronted by a problem of no mean proportions” and “[i]t is not strange that such boys attempt to carry on the late juvenile attitudes and to satisfy the new impulses by the stimuli obtainable from members of their own sex. But this usually requires, in our so advanced society, an infinity of rationalizations.” Sullivan’s interpretation is in line with Freud’s characterization of homosexuality as a kind of arrested development, but Sullivan adds a coda that suggests that what is at stake is more than “stimuli”: “Moreover, the homosexual love object all too frequently fails to ‘stay put,’ and the youth is subjected to one disappointment after another” (Sullivan 95).

Sullivan was born and raised on a farm in Smyrna, New York, in south central Chenango county.

Ashbery was raised on a farm near Sodus, NY, in Wayne County. On August 3, 1947, in the Sunday New York Times Book Review, the sometime poet and painter Lloyd Frankenberg, who became a friend of Ashbery’s, published a review of Harry Stack Sullivan’s Conceptions of Modern Psychiatry (Frankenberg). I have not yet been able to establish a definitive link between Ashbery and Sullivan, who died just as Ashbery was graduating Harvard and beginning the poems of Some Trees, but
Sullivan’s ideas about schizophrenic discourse, and its links to homosexuality had become the standard thinking at the time within psychology, due to, as Frankenberg’s review makes clear, Sullivan’s heralded ability to successfully treat some cases of schizophrenia, which had previously been thought basically untreatable: Sullivan is the “psychiatrist who removed schizophrenia from the class of necessarily incurable disorders.” Frankenberg quotes Sullivan’s definition of psychiatry as “the study of what goes on between two or more people, only one of whom need not be illusory.” The “self” for Sullivan, he continues, is “composed of ‘reflected appraisals’: it is constantly adjusting to the approval and disapproval of others. To escape strong disapproval it will suppress whole systems of behavior by shutting them out of awareness, or ‘disassociating’ them. … It is when these ‘dissociated tendencies’ come into conflict with the conscious self that we have major or minor disturbances characterized as mental illness” (Frankenberg). Or, in the case of a supremely attuned poet, we get in the invention of a poetic idiom.

The performance of coded mid-century queerness of Ashbery’s poem “A Boy” in Some Trees forms a basis of John Shoptaw’s discussion of Ashbery’s early poetry. Shoptaw calls the poem “a tense encounter in which patriarchal and nationalist pressures are deflected” where “Ashbery’s evasive maneuvers against the enemy within are evident” (Shoptaw 8). Shoptaw finds this (self-)deflection particularly in the deployment of “the homophonic, homophobic stereotype audible in [the poem’s] last line,” where one hears “mincing fag” for “mincing flag.” Such “cryptography,” Shoptaw argues, “cannot simply be equated with concealment” (ibid). He instead calls the poem a “misrepresentative” (ibid 2) instance of “homotextuality” (ibid 4) that is a gesture of resistance: to mainstream culture, to homophobia, and to the persecutions of the era.

A Boy

I’ll do what the raids suggest,
Dad, and that other livid window,
But the tide pushes an awful lot of monsters
And I think it’s my true fate.

It had been raining but
It had not been raining.

No one could begin to mop up this particular mess.
Thunder lay down in the heart.
"My child, I love any vast electrical disturbance."
Disturbance! Could the old man, face in the rainweed,

Ask more smuttily? By night it charged over plains,
Driven from Dallas and Oregon, always whither,
Why not now? The boy seemed to have fallen
From shelf to shelf of someone’s rage.

That night it rained on the boxcars, explaining
The thought of the pensive cabbage roses near the boxcars.
My boy. Isn’t there something I asked you once?
What happened? It’s also farther to the corner
Aboard the maple furniture. He
Couldn’t lie. He’d tell ‘em by their syntax.

But listen now in the flood.
They’re throwing up behind the lines.
Dry fields of lightning rise to receive
The observer, the mincing flag. An unendurable age.

(Ashbery, Some Trees 32-33)

Code and coded messages were a pervasive trope from WWII films, and Ashbery was an avid filmgoer.

Ashbery wrote the poem “A Boy” after seeing John Huston’s film adaptation of The Red Badge of Courage in December, 1951 and with the ongoing McCarthy hearings in explicitly mind (Shoptaw, Roffman). Here is the voiceover that begins the film:

Stephen Crane wrote The Red Badge of Courage in 1894. From the moment it was published, it was accepted by critics and public alike as a classic story of war, and of the boys and men who fought war. Stephen Crane wrote his book when he was a boy of 22. Its publication made him a man. Its story is of a boy who, frightened, went into a battle and came out of it... a man with courage. More than that, it is a story of many frightened boys who went into a great Civil War and came out... as a nation, of united, strong, and free men.” (Huston)

In the film, a young soldier “perform[s] his mistakes in the dark” (as the voice-over narration also tells us) in order to find the sort of numb, non-courage to lead his regiment into battle, picking up the flag that leads the troop when its original bearer is shot. Shoptaw writes that “[the poem] finally raises the white badge of cowardice. The author behind these strange lines never quite surrenders them to understanding” (5). While that can be argued, it is the lines “He/ couldn’t lie. He’d tell ‘em by their syntax” that directly invite a schizophrenic interpretation of the poem’s language. “A Boy,” and other poems in Some Trees, are not surrealist (in a sense to be defined shortly), and they are also not coded in one-to-one fashion, or fully misrepresentative.
The Catcher in the Rye was published in 1951. Chapter 19 finds Holden Caulfield meeting up with his old student adviser Carl Luce, who “knew who every flit and Lesbian in the United States was.” Holden, who has already voiced, extendedly, his suspicion that that Luce is closeted (Salinger 143), asks Luce whether Luce’s psychoanalyst father ever psychoanalyzed him. Luce allows that his father helped him “adjust myself” (ibid 148). Connections, at the time, between “homosexuality” (in the pathological sense of the ‘50s) and a lack of psychological “adjustment”—i.e. the self that is “constantly adjusting to the approval and disapproval of others”—were a given in the post-war US. Homosexuality was, as is now widely known, listed in the first edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders, the American Psychological Association’s “official nomenclature of disorders” (Bayer 12) first published in 1952. Taken there to be an undefined type of “pathologic behavior,” homosexuality is one of a number of “Sociopathic personality disturbance[s]” with the accepted diagnosis for “Sexual deviation”:

000-x63 Sexual deviation

This diagnosis is reserved for deviant sexuality which is not symptomatic of more extensive syndromes, such as schizophrenic and obsessional reactions.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

The term includes most of the case formerly classed as “psychopathic personality with pathologic sexuality.” The diagnosis will specify the type of the pathologic behavior, such as homosexuality, transvestism, pedophilia, fetishism and sexual sadism (including rape, sexual assault, mutilation).

(American Psychiatric Association 38-39)

The connections and perceived pathologies go deeper, in the thinking of the time, to disturbances that manifest themselves linguistically as well as bodily. Recall that Freud’s main discussion of schizophrenia centers on the memoir of the German judge Daniel Paul Schreber (Freud, Schreber). There, Freud links Schreber’s elaborate fantasies of being “a woman submitting to the act of copulation” to the lack of an outlet in his life for “normal homosexual affections” (57), or what one might today still call homosocial desire—given the death of his father and brother, and his boy-childless (in fact, any-childless), marriage. However finely wrought and carefully distinguishing Freud’s account is, many US analysts, with lots of case histories to back them up, took the homosexuality-schizophrenia link to be a cause-and-effect relationship, where one pathology begets another, larger-scale disorder.
I think that “A Boy” explicitly ironizes the inability of the “homosexual” of the 30s-50s to pass from arrested development (Freud’s own take on the “why” of homosexuality) to “mature sexuality.” This irony is present in the poem’s very pointedly disjunctive syntax, which can be read as mirroring the failure of schizophrenic discourse, like that we’ve just seen, to progress from parataxis to narrative—to develop. It’s a rhetorical gesture very similar to Gertrude Stein’s, and, as when reading Stein, I think of it as a deliberate intervention: the language’s refusal to progress enacts the poet’s own stance of refusal of repressive ideas of socio-sexual development. While all disjunctive poetries can be read as “resistant,” Auden’s frustration with Some Trees points up the unfamiliarity of Ashbery’s coded approach at the time.

Their “calculated oddities” are throwing the age’s calculations and equations—its “this means that”-ness, its pressurized adjustments—back on themselves. It is in the poem’s syntax that “patriarchal and nationalist pressures” come to bear on the boy, who must truthfully pony up his identity as if to a house subcommittee. The non-accretive syntax of the poem, which resembles the seemingly unrelated, strung together declaratives published and evaluated by Sullivan, really means it as it asks us to tell it by its syntax; rather than raising the (false) flag of cowardice, “A Boy” can be read as a deliberate courting of danger. If to be homosexual in the late 40s and early 50s was to have an institutionalizable pathology, then a deliberate display of its symptoms, simultaneously is a sort of swagger or dare, a challenge to the definitions and structures that make behavior so. The poem’s final line is one of the great double-entendres of 20th century poetry: “An unendurable age.” It invokes the boy’s adolescence, and the entire set of culturally proscribed choices available in the US of the 1950s.

The linguistic choices available to the poet of “A Boy” are all unacceptable for what he wants to say, and so he resists with irony, with an interruption of the cultural telos. “This particular mess” and the “vast electrical disturbance” of the poem can refer both to the poem itself, and to the seismic upheavals within “the boy”—who “seem[s] to have fallen/ From shelf to shelf of someone’s rage”—rage that, despite the perfection of its sublimation (or perhaps due to it), I think one can connect back to the poet. Again: if a shared language is part of the social contract, then the schizophrenic’s inability to
produce discourse conforming to expectations of exchange is major source of his or her estrangement. And estrangement, in this poem, and in this book as a whole, is ironized completely. To go one step further: if “[i]rony is the permanent parabasis of the allegory of tropes,” and if the “parabasis,” or interruption, that defines irony is “not just at one point[,] but at all points,” (de Man 179) then the ghosts, lexical and otherwise, that divert a poem’s seeming trajectory toward a familiar trope or subject are irony’s vectors. In poetry, where “irony is everywhere” (ibid) one must read each word, each sound unit, each phrase, as containing the interruption of the poem’s own telos, and, by extension, of culture’s. “A Boy” thus “interrupts”— to use de Man’s own gloss on “parabasis”—a number of mid-century discourse norms and established lyric tropes at once.

The critic Nikki Skillman has recently codified the term “mindlessness” to describe a generative evasiveness and negation in Ashbery’s later work:

Ashbery evokes mental life in its wholeness through constant negation, relishing the possibilities of the incomplete. Ashbery’s unawareness, his forgetfulness, his narrowness of vision, his distractibility, his failures of comprehension, are qualities I condense in the term “mindlessness”—a condition he ascribes to objects and people alike, declining to distinguish between nonconsciousness of insentient matter and the forms of inattention and non-comprehension that distinguish the “experience of experience,” his major theme. From Ashbery’s first book... to his more recent ones, this mindlessness retains a close association with the resistant surfaces of the object world... (Skillman 169)

Whatever one might want to do with this as a lens for looking at Ashbery’s work, what I want to pick up on is here is that the “negation” at work, as already seen in “A Boy,” has specific psychological and linguistic qualities in Some Trees, qualities that come further in focus when looking at an Ashbery review of a 1968 MoMA exhibition of surrealism, where Ashbery points out that Breton’s banner of liberté total included every conceivable kind of sexual act except for homosexuality. ... This exception may seem unimportant, since homosexuality affects a relatively small fraction of humanity, but to restrict something proclaimed as ‘total’ is to turn it into its limited opposite. (Reported Sightings 50)

For de Man, “submit[ting] the evaluation of a certain ironic moment in history to its place in history” (183), i.e. describing of the particulars of the work’s situation, is how one connects works of art back to the conditions from which they emerged. Auden had tried to do this, in a way, by repeatedly tagging Ashbery and O’Hara, in various contexts, with Surrealist influence. But it turns out that, while a
surface influence (in terms of the similarity of the surface codes) is certainly there, deeper affinities are not. The surreal quality in Some Trees, the dream-life of the would-be Roussel scholar, is negated throughout.

Ashbery’s refusal of the surrealist tag has been documented (Suarez-Toste). Theorist Hal Foster has elaborated on surrealism’s ultimate failures in achieving its own aims. As a movement of “love and liberation,” it used “related sets of complex practices…[and] involvements in desire and sexuality” designed to get at “an unconscious based on originary unity rather than primal repression” (Foster 3). Breton’s idea of the unconscious was removed from Freud’s conflictual forces: “a champ magnétique of associations registered through automatist [practice]... a synthetic end rather than dissociative means” (ibid). What was one supposed to find when one got down to the magnetic field of associations operating outside of one’s conscious control? A path to our true selves, to self-understanding and freedom from repression. Foster finds, however, that surrealist work “exceeds its self-understanding”; what it isolates within the unconscious is not an essential unity, but “the uncanny... a concern with events in which repressed material returns in ways that disrupt unitary identity, aesthetic norms, and social order” (xvii). While the latter effects were not necessarily a bad thing, the determination of the surrealists to reach bottom took them too far, for they failed to realize that their practices “might not be liberatory at all, not because [they] voided the controls of the (super)ego (such was its express purpose) but because [they] decentered the subject too radically in relation to the unconscious” (4-5). Foster finds late Freudian psychoanalytic structures (the uncanny; the death drive) driving this fundamental dissociation. Ashbery and his predecessors, like Elizabeth Bishop, are often mentioned as either surrealist or influenced by surrealism. The strict senses of those claims—that the work is actually surrealist, or has surrealist aims—are demonstrably false, and it’s worth looking at the mechanics of why, as it has bearing on the general anti-psychological quality of Some Trees.

André Breton’s 1932 poem “Le grand secours meurtrier,” a haunting meditation “en qualité de convulsionnaire” can be justifiably called characteristic of the US dissemination of surrealist output. Along with its publication in Breton’s 1932 collection Le Revolver à cheveux blancs, it appeared in This
Quarter’s surrealist number that same year, and was chosen by Julien Levy for *Surrealism*, a 1936 collection that was the culmination of various explicitly surrealist exhibitions at Levy’s gallery in the 30s; in his introduction to a facsimile edition, Mark Polizotti notes that it was the first collection to include a contemprarily representative range of surrealist output from Ernst to Éluard, Dalí to Duchamp, for US readers (Levy). It was a particular touchstone for the young John Ashbery: after seeing an article on the Surrealism exhibition in *Life* magazine in 1936 (at the age of nine), he asked to be taken to the Rochester Central Library, where he found and devoured a copy of *Surrealism* that December (Roffman 40). Paul Éluard reports that “Le grand secours meurtrier” was a piece of automatic writing, and that “Breton had no idea what its subject would be when he sat down to write” (Bohn 112). In *Surrealism*, the poem, titled “Lethal Relief,” is found only in translation, done by one Samuel Beckett, whose debut novel, *Murphy*, would appear two years later, in 1938. It is an astonishing translation, not just for Beckett’s adaptation of Breton’s tone to English, but for its highlighting of the central problem faced by the seeming speaker of the poem, and, perhaps, by surrealist poets generally: namely, in an attempt to get at the real, unmitigated ‘stuff’ of the psychological, how can one stage the self in verse while at the same time explicitly undermine its ego structures?

“Lethal Relief” begins with a paratactic inventory of objects and figures that form a disjunctive allegory of the state of French poetry:

Breton:

La statue de Lautréamont  
Au socle de cachets de quinine  
En rase campagne  
L’auteur des Poésies est couché à plat ventre  
Et près de lui veille l’héloïderm suspect  
Son oreille gauche appliquée au sol est une boîte vitrée  
Occupée par un éclair l’artiste n’a pas oublié de faire figurer au-dessus de lui

(Breton 99)

Beckett:

The statue of Lautréamont  
Its plinth of quinine tabloids  
In the open country  
The author of the poetical works lies flat on his face
And near at hand the hiloderm a shady customer
keeps vigil
His left ear is glued to the ground it is a glass case
it contains
A prong of lightning the artist has not failed to
figure aloft

(Levy 106)

The poem continues without punctuation, reeling off figure after figure, association after association:
“Le ballon bleu ciel en forme de tête de Turc/ Le cygne de Montévidéo dont les ailes sont déployées”
The notes to Breton’s *Oeuvres Complètes* point to Paris statues, extant before WWI but replaced soon after, of the chemists who isolated quinine (Breton). Breton has replaced the “missing” statues with a single imaginary one of the surrealist father-figure, Lautréamont. Few of the poem’s similarly complicated resonances detailed in the notes would seemingly have been available to contemporary US readers: minor fallen Parisian landmarks, the history of 16th century religious “convulsionary” practice in France, even the poem itself *en version originale*. The difference, then, between Auden’s “authentic non-logical relations which arouse wonder” and “accidental ones which arouse mere surprise and in the end fatigue” depends on the reception context, on what one knows and doesn’t know when reading, at least in some cases. Beckett, for his part, has located the source of the narrator’s detachment precisely in the paratactic nature of his descriptions. The structure is flat; there are no subordinate clauses, and prepositional phrases get their own lines. “I” am objectified, implied only, an onlooker, a watcher of my own dream, a movie-goer in that much of what “I” do in the poem is reel off observed details without comment.

Along with Foster, the theorist Rosalind Krauss has extensively documented surrealism’s engagement with psychoanalysis, particularly with dream-work and fantasy (Suarez-Toste). For my purposes, I would point to the direct similarities between the structure of the above poem, and the structure of the dream narrative as written within psychoanalytic discourse. Before any interpretation of dreams could be done, the patient had to be trained to “keep track” of his/her “involuntary” thoughts. In the famous piece of self-analysis that inaugurates “The Interpretation of Dreams,” Freud states that “I myself can do so very completely, by the help of writing down my ideas as they occur to me” (Freud
The resulting descriptions of dreams and scenes were written in a characteristic formula. Short, paratactic, with no analysis (that would come later), scenes were narrativized, but from the perspective of a writer-as-onlooker with no control over events, of a movie-goer:

-- She then opened her mouth properly and on the right I found a big white patch; at another place I saw extensive whitish grey scabs upon some remarkable curly structures which were evidently modelled on the turbinal bones of the nose.--I at once called in Dr. M., and he repeated the examination and confirmed it...My friend Otto was now standing beside her as well, and my friend Leopold was percussing her through her bodice... (Freud, Interpretation 139-40)

One can hear paratactic echoes of Freud’s dream/memory descriptions in the above poem. It would seem that it was not just the content of psychoanalytic theory that can be discerned in the content of the surrealism, but that the form its explorations took may have been inspirational as well. The “I” produced in such narratives carries over, as does the feel of a set “scene.” Beckett’s attention to the tone, however, does not prepare us for his key act of interpretation, which transforms these lines:

J'ai accès près de lui en qualité de convulsionnaire
Les femmes ravissantes qui m'introduisant dans le wagon capitonné de roses
Où un hamac qu'elles ont pris soin de me faire a de leurs cheveleurs m'est réservé
De toute éternité

(Breton 99)

into these:

Convulsionary in ordinary I have access to his side
The ravishing women who introduce me into the
rose-padded compartment
where a hammock they have been at pains to contrive
with their tresses for
Me is reserved for
Me for all eternity

(Levy 106)

When the “I” appears here, for the first time in the poem, it is rather helpless before the idealized, erotic, maternal image; “maternal plenitude” is typical of surrealism (Foster 25). The poet fails to fully totalize the images and figures he has become subject to; the “I” fails to unify its own perceptions. Beckett, by putting “Me” at the beginning of the lines here, where in the French the first person direct object pronoun is attached to the verb and buried in the middle of the lines, emphasizes this failure. It can be read as a direct comment by the translator on the poet’s lack of irony in grasping after some sort of symbolist unity-within-woman, a wish for a female source of “relief.” The original lines do not
seem to have this effect (at least, not as powerfully). However, note the line directly following: “Me recommandant avant de partir de ne pas prendre froid dans le lecture du journal”; Beckett begins his translation “Exhort me…,” which may in fact emphasize the first person slightly less strongly than the French line. The line may also have been Beckett’s inspiration for moving the “Me”s of the previous lines to the fore. At any rate, Beckett did transform the previous lines radically. Echoes of Shelley’s “The Triumph of Life” here are also almost certainly deliberate:

— I among the multitude  
   Was swept—me, sweetest flowers delayed not long;  
   Me, not the shadow nor the solitude,  
   Me, not the falling stream’s Lethean song;  
   Me, not the phantom of that early Form  
   Which moved upon its motion—but among  
   The thickest billows of that living storm  
   I plunged, and bared my bosom to the clime  
   Of that cold light, whose airs too soon deform.

I bring “Lethal Relief” into play as a poem that Ashbery read at a very young age, and almost certainly re-read. And the poem seems to have had a discernable influence on one of Ashbery’s biggest early influences: Elizabeth Bishop. Bishop was also often tagged, in her early work, as a “surrealist.” Shoptaw notes that Ashbery has said he “read, re-read, studied and absorbed” Bishop’s North & South and its sestina, “A Miracle For Breakfast” before writing his own sestina, “The Painter” which Shoptaw says is dated July 17, 1948, making it the earliest poem of Ashbery’s to be included in Some Trees (Shoptaw 28-29). Bishop’s early formalist poems address the above problem by revealing the question—in an attempt to liberate oneself from repression, how can one stage the self in verse while at the same time explicitly undermine its ego structures—to be the wrong one. “A Miracle for Breakfast,” first published in Poetry in July of 1937, is just one of several poems in Bishop’s first collection which use familiar verse forms to heightened grammatical effect, especially in her use of pronouns. Its reception has included the same sort of folk conception of surrealism that Auden used to tag Ashbery:

**Interviewer:** I wonder if you could reveal the donée for your sestina called “A Miracle for Breakfast.” It has an attractive surrealist quality about it, but I’m curious about the kind of experience that brought the poem into being.
Miss Bishop: Oh, that’s my Depression poem. It was written shortly after the time of souplines and men selling apples, around 1936 or so. It was my “social conscious” poem, a poem about hunger. (Monteiro 18)

As Bishop’s “poem about hunger,” begins, the poet-speaker is included among the “we” who are “waiting for coffee and the charitable crumb/ that was going to be served from a certain balcony.”

The poem continues permuting the end-words—coffee, crumb, balcony, miracle, sun, river—and with each repetition they start to lose their commonplace associations. After imaging that the coffee would be hot enough to warm them, and that the bit of bread they were to receive would by miraculously be buttered, the poem takes its turn. A man “step[s]” onto the regal balcony (“like kings of old”) and proceeds to crumble a single roll into the waiting hands of those below (one crumb per person, which “some flicked scornfully into the river”), and pour down a single drop of coffee for each. It is not just the regulated repetitions and word appearances of “A Miracle for Breakfast” that produce this “surreal” act; it is the dissonance produced by seeing the antagonism of possession vs. dispossession described, deadpan, in matter-of-fact terms that repeat like conveyor-belt items, and end in a dispossessed fantasy of possession:

I can tell what I saw next; it was not a miracle.
A beautiful villa stood in the sun.
and from its doors came the smell of hot coffee.
In front, a baroque white plaster balcony
added by birds, who nest along the river,
—I saw it with one eye close to the crumb—

and galleries and marble chambers. My crumb
my mansion, made for me by a miracle,
through ages, by insects, birds, and the river
working the stone. Every day, in the sun,
at breakfast time I sit on my balcony
with my feet up, and drink gallons of coffee.

When the “I” emerges, in the fifth stanza, it does not signify the poet’s “true” persona, but rather a negation of the significations of the previous four stanzas. The imagery of the poem is surreal: not just in the uncannily ornate villas, the real one and the imagined, appearing within this scene of desperation, but in the fact that the imagined one has been constructed “through ages, by insects, birds, and the river”—making dispossession a fact of life in geologic time. The imagery is not being used to undermine the ego structures of the speaker, but rather to highlight the contradictions of actual existing outer reality. The poems of Some Trees, none of which, according to Shoptaw, was written
before the sestina “The Painter,” adapt Bishop’s formalism and her use of shifting pronouns, not only
in the poem just mentioned, but in poems like “He” and “Pantoum.” Both Bishop and Ashbery seem to
pick-up on surrealism’s failed diction and marshal a de-psychologized version of it, one that is thus not
really “surrealist” at all. (The “insects, birds, and the river/ working the stone” in “A Miracle For
Breakfast” find an echo in the “baskets, birds, beetles, spools” of Some Trees’ poem “Sonnet,” one of
two poems with that title in the book, a practice perhaps derived from O’Hara’s multiple poems titled
“Poem.”)

Bishop’s “From the Country to the City,” written during her stay in Paris in the 1930s (Goldensohn), at
the height of surrealism, is a starker case in point. Its elegant arrangement of the lines on the page,
studded with complicated end-rhymes and elaborate assonance and alliteration, twists along, in the
poem’s opening sentence, filling out more than a third of its total bulk. The length of the sentence is
underscored as such by the lack of capital letters at the beginning of each line; they are “the lines/
that we drive on.” Though the print of the harlequin’s costume forms a pattern, it “carries the city
nowhere,” is meaningless and unable to convey anything but the harlequin’s own mute form. Anything
we try to inscribe on such a body is “nonsensical” and does violence to the dumb form’s mock
splendor. The description unravels as the costume seems to have, details are piled up by a “neutral
‘we’ whom we accept as the necessary plural of ‘I’”—as Ashbery himself notes in discussing Bishop’s
work (Ashbery, Bishop Complete). Yet the observer registering or reporting these fantastic details has
no need to point them toward an epiphany, or some emergent structure that, while not fully revealing
itself, might be glimpsed. If there is a “poet” presence here, it is one that is there only to make us
“conscious of the inevitable mediations of selfhood, the intrusions of the “I,” that make direct contact
with any literality—with any truth—an impossibility” (Edelman 182). The harlequin and the poem here
might be the same figure, each bedecked in meaningless splendor (gold lamé; assonance and
alliteration: “…throned ‘fantastic triumph’ …shines through his hat” etc.), each aware that they are
incapable of communicating anything beyond their own form. “We” then come closer, and actually
peer into the mind of this “wickedest clown,” finding, inside, the sort of “ravishing sirens,/ each
waving her hand-mirror” we might expect from surrealism. However, these wild reflections seem contained here; what draws our attention are the “telephone wires” of the road:

Flocks of short, shining wires seem to be flying sideways.
Are they birds?
They flash again. No. They are vibration of the tuning-fork
you hold and strike
Against the mirror-frames, then draw for miles, your dreams out countrywards,
We bring a message from the long black length of body:
“Subside,” it begs and begs.

Dreams, here, are vibrations, meaningless, if slightly menacing, sounds that are saturated with desire—not portentous, symbol laden harbingers. What’s holding the poem together here, holding together images one might be tempted to deem “surrealist,” is the combination of form (the poem itself as a “long black length of body) and a blank “we” which associates them through “its” perceptions without connecting them to its own drives. Whereas the statue of Breton’s poet, with which the poet himself was bodily associated, was “tuned each night like a piano,” the “tuning fork/ you hold and strike” is observed by the poet here, without him/her experiencing it, or feeling the repercussions. Dreams lead back to the body, not the “self.” The final rhyme of “begs” with the opening “legs” deepens the somatic pangs of the line; the harlequin seems lit up and shorted out, a spectacle off-course, out of place when pointed “countrywards.” Perhaps it is the dream impulse, the impulse to compress meaning within a structure which cannot articulate the forces which produced it, that is being ordered down. Bishop’s move is to remove the implication of repressed content from even the headiest of symbols.

What “we” get is an extended definition of a phenomenon, rather than its effects on the speaker. The abject, observing “I” of surrealism is transformed into an “I” capable of play, of the diffusion of (sexual) impulse. The empty structures of poetic form are perhaps more generative than automatic writing, since they allow the simultaneous subversion and retention of the ego, so thoroughly undermined in a poem like “Le grand secors meurtrier.”

In Some Trees, “The Mythological Poet” captures an emptiness similar to “From the Country to the City”—ironically by describing “a form/ So rarified there was no emptiness/ of sensation”—and purposefully ascribes it to the voice of classical poetry. In its opening lines, “snow-capped mountains
and heart shaped/ Cathedral windows,” seem more like distant, idealized forms than actual world objects—tokens not of this world. However, we begin to suspect that world does in fact intrude on this ritual, as the speaker(s) must leave an actual space, stopping to “pack[] the picnic basket.” In the second stanza, we become aware that the entire poem is a case of reported speech, rather than an address to reader by the “us” of the poem, in that the third person plural is introduced. Thus someone (the mythological poet?) is watching, or has watched, this scene for us. The “lighter than the air” participants realize that they, at any rate, have not been able to transcend “the world of things”; it is “beside” them, even though “they do not sustain” it. The world, in fact, “rages like a virgin” at the speakers’ attempt to transcend it, at their shunning of physical contact. In finally allowing it contact with their “silken thoughts,” their isolated “trellis” collapses, and “a new music, innocent and monstrous” is created. It sickens them, and they thus recognize in this new music “a warning we were not meant to understand.”

The failure to “understand” stems from an inability to admit the world, and the world of desire, to their thoughts and actions, and to then attempt to “touch” it from without, hermetic explorers. The subject of this poem, then, is, partially, the impossibility of hermetic poetry (discussed further in the next chapter). Any attempt at transcendence carries the world “beside” it, in the form of a shunned lover. The “warning” felt by the speakers is contained in the poem itself, in the “world of things” it admits. We then find out, in section II, what has become of Auden’s poet of antiquity, the one who has existence since before this cleave: “He has eloped with all music and does not care.” This is a mythological poet who is trying to mediate this lover’s quarrel:

...he is merely
An ornament, a kind of lewd
Cloud placed on the horizon. (47)

Beauty is taken in antiquity as an essence, as something that exists beyond its vessels. Thus, in the moment where the actual song of the muse is received, the poet, in this view, is little more than a distortion in the circuit of transmission of meaning, “a cloud placed on the horizon.” We can understand then, that “close to the zoo, acquiescing to dust, candy, perverts,” this poet, too, has
fallen for the world, less virginal here. In the interest of this corrupted “final diversion” which is “greater because it can be given”

    Might not child and pervert
    Join hands, in the instant
    Of their interest, in the shadow
    Of a million boats; their hunger
    from loss grown merely a gesture?

This art is “greater” for its contact with the world; it might even be a reclamation of “essence.” It is no longer clear who is the child and who is the pervert, each side hungering for previous completeness of expression. The poems of *Some Trees* reflect a deepening awareness that meaning remains in structure when the natural associations of words have been stripped from them. The poems, in conceiving of language (and of a language of desire) in the above fashion, directly reflect the direction linguistic theory was taking in the early 1950’s: a skepticism of meaning as extension, and of a belief in the autonomy of structure. In the next chapter, I will detail some of its period articulations.
What I claim is to live to the full contradiction of my time, which may very well make sarcasm the condition of truth.

—Roland Barthes, 1957

Gerald Bruns, in 1974, traced the history of the split between the ideal and the particular in literature, particularly within modernist poetry and poetics. In Bruns’s terminology, poetry of the ideal is “hermetic”: a hermetic work functions “as a self-contained linguistic structure” which in its “pure expressiveness” seeks “to displace or arrest the function of signification” (Bruns 1). It does so through the use of formalism, as well as through subverting “the structures of ordinary discourse,” the idea being that in suppressing meaning through use of form, both language itself and any reference language may make to a world are transcended. By contrast, “orphic” poetry tries to come as close as possible to actual reference; it takes “poetic speech as the ground of all signification—an expressive movement which ‘objectifies’ a world for man...or establishes the world within the horizon of human knowing” (ibid). The latter is taken to enable near absolute signification, in that it names from within experience. Naming thus allows reference from without, coming as close as possible to its object, if not becoming it. I want to apply this distinction in looking at some differences in approach between the 1950s poems of Ashbery and O’Hara, and at theories of language and meaning from the era. I am not making a strong cause-and-effect argument in either direction between the poetry and the theories, but rather seeking a kind of historical description and theoretical norm translation of the moment (for which Bruns’s later distinction also seems productive). Doing so, I think, clarifies some of the poems of Some Trees, and also Auden’s evident discomfort with them.

What troubled Auden was Ashbery’s failure to completely “reconcile truth to nature with accuracy of communication.” That is what led to the charges of surrealism. Some Trees is largely hermetic. The
objects in Ashbery's poems are not to be depended upon. In "Glazunoviana" the poet sets up a sort of
diorama of staged objects, a Cornell box on which a small scene is played out.

    The man with the red hat
    And the polar bear, is he here too?
    The window giving on shade,
    Is that here too?
    And all the little helps
    My initials in the sky,
    The hay of an arctic summer night? (34)

In setting up this scene, and placing himself “here” as observer, the poet gives the reader a false sense
of security. I, at least, feel comfortable within the confines of this expansive yet restrained and set of
images, a kind of peopling. (The arctic hay makes me think of idealized reindeer.) So one is unprepared
when “The bear/ Drops dead in sight of the window” and the poet simply continues adding to the
image:

    Lovely tribes have just moved to the north.
    In the flickering evening the martins grow denser.
    Rivers of wings surround us and vast tribulation.

It is to work against the poem to try to pull narrative content from it. If one reflects, however, on the
scene as it is constructed, a bear is “in sight” of the window, that is, on the other side of the window
from the poet. I read this as a kind of joke: both “real” reference and its extension (maybe as in
surrealism) fail, but one can still write lyric poetry, even if the things of it are fake (in reality and
psychically). The poem’s final line is disruptive; is it that “rivers of wings” surround both the poet and
the reader, or the poet and the objects he has gathered around him, as well as surrounding “vast
tribulation”? The “and” in the line is thus unsettling—where one expects a preposition, there is an
extension of the province of the wings to a non-concrete term, a seeming impossibility. The signal here
is that the dead bear, in the poem, is a dead orphic bear.

O'Hara’s poems unfailingly use “the particular, the individual, and the secular” (as Auden puts it in his
*Some Trees* introduction)—icons of the everyday—in an attempt to grasp experience by naming it. They
communicate on the ground of experience instead of attempting to transcend it:
Radio

Why do you play such dreary music
on Saturday afternoon, when tired
mortal tired I long for a little
reminder of immortal energy?

All

week long while I trudge fatiguingly
from desk to desk in the museum
you spill your miracles of Grieg
and Honegger on shut-ins.

Am I not

shut in too, and after a week
of work don’t I deserve Prokofieff?

Well, I have my beautiful de Kooning
to aspire to. I think it has an orange
bed in it, more than the ear can hold.

“Radio,” published in March of 1956, contains the following objects which refer to the real world: “the
museum” (New York’s Museum of Modern Art, where O’Hara was a special assistant in the International
Program); “Grieg”; “Honegger”; “Prokofieff”; “de Kooning”; and perhaps “Saturday afternoon” (in
that one must know what it signifies within the western workweek), as well as a narrative of the
speaker’s life with them. The poem talks, using the phatic devices of spoken discourse (“Well, I
have...”), and the simple nominative declarative (“I long”; “I trudge”; “I have”; “I think”). In order to
know what sort of “miracles” the speaker finds tiresome in O’Hara’s “Radio,” one must be familiar
with the world of composers that it mentions. If here “it is by the means of poetry that the world finds
itself present before man” (Bruns 3), then orphic poetry relies on the power of names. Naming, here,
differs from reference, in that it goes beyond mere type (O’Hara did not say “your miracle of late
romantic composers”) to token (Grieg et. al.), the difference between denotation and designation
(Quine, Quiddities 180). In order for such to tokens to have meaning for a reader, they must be
designated within the reader’s actual experience. Orphic poetry is often seen as “lower” than hermetic
because of this higher dependency on the world of things, on the writer and reader’s common
experience with certain particulars. O’Hara’s poem does not work properly on me, not having heard
Grieg or Honegger, and also not knowing anything about their particular personal histories (which may
have something to do with why O’Hara wanted them specifically at that moment). A cursory Web
search didn’t really help. In this way, orphic poetry requires a kind of norm translation, or something beyond it. And orphic poetry does not depend only on tokens, for one must be familiar with the general sound of what one might call late romantic composers in order for the poem to be present in even a less specified way. Both denotation and designation depend on the world.

W.V.O Quine attempted to make a distinction between tokens of experience and denotation (including associations), in his “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” which appeared in 1951:

Modern empiricism has been conditioned in large part by two dogmas. One is a belief in some fundamental cleavage between truths which are analytic, or grounded in meanings independently of matters of fact, and truths which are synthetic, or grounded in fact. The other dogma is reductionism: the belief that each meaningful statement is equivalent to some logical construct upon terms which refer to some immediate experience. (Two Dogmas 20)

As Quine relates it, analytic truths have been taken to mean relations between entities that hold in “all possible worlds,” meaning truths that would hold even if the most fundamental properties of the universe were to change—truths that hold “independently of matters of fact.” Being “grounded in meanings” rather than “grounded in matters of fact,” analytic truths hold from within a self-defined set of parameters, subject only to the internal relations among predicates, and not to the world. The analytic/synthetic distinction thus mirrors that of hermetic/orphic poetry. Any theory of meaning, for Quine, must be “sharply distinguished” from theories of reference, in that the theory of meaning must not be dependent on any connection with an object of reference, any “thing” or class of things. Orphic poetry, then, can be said to depend on the success of reference in order for its meanings to come into being, while purely hermetic poetry needs no such guarantee.

In trying to get at analytic truths, Quine distinguishes between meaning and reference. It is a move made in philosophy to assure the analyticity of meaning; reference is necessarily non-analytic—it engages, somehow, with the world. Within the tradition in which Quine works, denotation and designation are part and parcel of the same function: reference. The former is performed by “general” terms—common nouns, adjectives, intransitive verbs—and the latter by a singular term or proper names (Quiddities 180). However, “whereas a singular term purports to name an entity, abstract or concrete, a general term does not; but a general term is true of an entity, or of each of many, or of none” (Two
Dogmas 27). Thus, naming (picking out a particular) and denotation (picking out a class of particulars) are accomplished by separate but analogous means. A name, or a singular noun with a definite article, designates its object in a more direct fashion than a general term, in that the latter denotes a relation among or within particulars, rather than particulars themselves, creating a sort of second order reference, a class. Both kinds of reference, Quine claims, are subject to confused treatment, because they are conflated with meaning. It is a confusion, he says (almost echoing Auden), that dates back to Aristotle, where things themselves were thought to have essences, which were taken to be meaningful properties. For Quine, however, “Meaning is what essence becomes when it is divorced from the object of reference and wedded to the word” (Two Dogmas 26). Quine’s critique is aimed at the notion of analytic truth itself. Meaning and reference are to be kept quite separate, as terms that seem to designate or denote the same things can differ in meaning. Consider Quine’s example of general terms which can be imagined to pick out the same class of things: “creature with a heart” and “creature with kidneys.” While each of these terms might be used to denote the same thing, say, a rabbit, no one would want to say that just because both terms can be used to pick out a rabbit that the terms mean the same thing. Such terms are called co-extensive in that the objects terms refer to in the world are called extensions. The same confusion can arise over names: Quine reminds us of Russell’s comparison of “Scott” to “the author of Waverley”: same extension, different meaning.

The distinction between designation and denotation is clarified by the substitution I proposed earlier in O’Hara’s poem “Radio.” “Honegger” and “Grieg” are designations, picking out particulars, rather directly hooked up to their objects. The general term “late romantic composers” denotes a class, a relation within or among particulars, cut off from things in themselves. Thus one can, with Bruns, recognize the orphic technique of naming as an attempt to directly engage the world, to reify it, to evoke extensions as completely as possible. For orphic poetry, a name will always be stronger than a general term, even though the latter can also be concrete. Ashbery mocks the possibility and intent of such poetry in Some Trees’ “Meditations of a Parrot,” where a creature of empty talk rattles off a list of particulars sacred to him:

Oh the rocks and the thimble
The oasis and the bed
Oh the jacket and the roses. (73)

By placing these words in a parrot’s mouth, Ashbery strips them of any significance, mythical or otherwise; they become a sort of orphic shell, a null lyric discourse. He uses the juxtapositions not as an end in itself, but rather to show that the “possible world” in which a parrot’s talk is meaningful is identical to our own—all words fall equally short of their objects and significances. There is no possibility of their having “meaningful properties.”

“Two Dogmas,” can shed further light on the jacket, roses, and thimble. One finds analyticity, the idea that a statement may remain true in all possible worlds, placed there not within reference, but within meaning: “a statement is analytic when it is true by virtue of meanings and independently of fact” (26). Quine distinguishes two types of analytic statements:

(a) No unmarried man is married
(b) No bachelor is married

Sentence (a) is analytic because its “truth value” is not dependent on the adjective “married.” When Quine says “true” in his definition of analyticity, what he means is “logically true”—the truth of the logician, not the epistemologist—where every declarative sentence can be assigned the ethically neutral value T or F. The syntax of sentence (a) is such that the adjective “married” is the only term that has referential meaning. Should that meaning be different in some other “possible world” the truth value of sentence (a) remains the same: T. Such sentences are unproblematic for the formal semantics Quine is assuming. Sentence (b), however, is troublesome because it contains the noun “bachelor” which cannot be substituted for by just any other term and still remain logically true. While one can substitute the synonym “unmarried man” for “bachelor” and convert the sentence into a logically true one, one can find no satisfying way of proving such sentences analytic directly.

Two facets of Quine’s argument need concern one here. First, Quine argues that the reason that one can even make substitutions of the above kind within statements is simply because “any two predicates which agree extensionally (that is, are true of the same objects) are interchangeable” in the above fashion. For Quine, one cannot be sure that such exchanges can be made on the basis of meaning,
rather than “matters of fact”: extension. That is, any appeal to analyticity in such cases is unfounded, for one has no way of knowing if the substitution is allowed because the statement is “analytic” (the term Quine is trying to make sense of) or because agreement in extensionality, in “accidental matters of fact,” allows their use in the same context (Two Dogmas 31). This holds even in “counter-factual” instances involving terms such as “unicorn” in that such terms have their extension in the conditions of some possible world. Secondly, if one tries to appeal to the notion of definition by saying that “bachelor” is “defined” as “an unmarried man” purely in terms of meanings, one is simply recapitulating principles of use—for any conception of definition rests on pre-existing conditions of use—describing the way words are used rather than affixing meaning to them.

As noted earlier, Some Trees includes two poems entitled “Sonnet” (a practice perhaps derived from O'Hara’s multiple poems titled “Poem”); in the first one finds statements of the form X is Y, the very sort of identity statement used by philosophers in the analyticity debate: “The servant’s frown is the reader’s patience”; “His pain is the servant’s alive” and “Traffic is the reader’s pictured face” are all statements for which it would be impossible to either confirm or disconfirm analyticity. Reading them through analyticity, they serve to show that it is in use that words acquire identity, and that it is possible neither to fully entangle nor disentangle that use from the world. This poem, too, has a sort of narrative, in which one moves from “each servant” to “the servant,” one whose properties, such as “patience,” are detachable, much as in language, where one may speak of it as an entity itself, perhaps as having virtues of its own. It is no accident that the poem contains a library, soon to collapse under the alliterative weight of nature: “baskets, birds, beetles, spools.” Is it “the reader” in the poem, or of the poem, who is addressed?:

Dear, be the tree your sleep awaits;
Worms be your words, you not safe from ours. (49)

“Our” words here recalls schizophrenic discourse as a stand-in for queer speech as discussed in the previous chapter. If “our” words make a series of substitutions: “frown” becomes “patience”; “pain” becomes an “alive”; “traffic” becomes one’s imagined visage, then here, straights are not “safe” from such representations. It is again no accident that “Sonnet” directly follows “The Mythological Poet.” It
contains the reverse of the warning we were given in “The Mythological Poet”: if you trust a language
with too close ties to the earth (“worms”), you’ll not be safe from being represented “with a look.”

Interestingly, almost all of the poems in Some Trees contain only complete sentences. One can trace
the path of a sentence through multiple lines only to find no “sense” waiting there, but the path,
nonetheless is present. Analytic philosophy also takes the sentence as its primitive: “statements” are
the only units which may be true or false. It is from here that Quine wages his attack on analyticity.
Quine’s investigation serves, in effect, to blur the lines between orphic and hermetic poetry; for if one
cannot be sure whether it is the world or logical, morpho-syntactic truth which is driving language,
then poetry, too, must both come out of the world and be of it. There is a sense in which the actual
sentences of Ashbery’s poems seem to be saying much the same thing. What sort of “total science”
(see just below) would they form in aggregate?

Quine’s revision of reductionism—the doctrine that “every meaningful statement is held to be
translatable into a statement (true or false) about immediate experience “—is that “statements about
the external world face the tribunal of sense experience not individually but as a corporate body” (Two
Dogmas 36). This body is rather hermetic:

Total science is like a field of force whose boundary conditions are experience. A conflict with
experience at the periphery occasions readjustments in the interior of the field. Truth values
have to be redistributed over some of our statements...[which sends out waves of adjustments
through other statements logically connected to the first]...But the total field is so
underdetermined by its boundary conditions, experience, that there is much latitude of choice
as to what statements to re-evaluate in the light of any single contrary experience. No
particular experiences are linked with any particular statements in the interior of the field,
except indirectly through considerations of equilibrium affecting the field as a whole...I
envisage nothing more than a loose association reflecting the relative likelihood, in practice, of
our choosing one statement rather than another for revision in the event of recalcitrant
experience...[with] a natural tendency to disturb the system as little as possible. (ibid)

For Quine, statement—sentences—are nodes in a network of knowledge, to be evaluated for truth only
as a body. “Total science” or the network he is discussing, is the sum total of our theories about the
world, about experience. It is made up of language of one sort or another, although one imagines that
the “statements” referred to here are formal statements in a formalized language—be it mathematics
or predicate calculus. This network is not completely closed off from experience; its periphery comes into direct contact with experience, while its interior receives indirect impressions from that contact.

Thus, one can imagine orphic language as being near the periphery of this network, that which reflects more constant impact with experience, and hermetic near the interior. Quine believes this view to have affinities with pragmatism, in that constructs such as atomic particles or bricks “are myths on the same footing with physical objects and gods, neither better nor worse except for differences in the degree to which they expedite our dealings with sense experiences” (38). It is the same with the objects in Ashbery’s poems in Some Trees. They neither confirm nor deny their presence or reality, nor can they from within a network of sentential belief:

Still, as the loveliest feelings
Must soon find words, and these, yes
Displace them, so I am not wrong
In calling this comic version of myself
The true one. For as change is horror,
Virtue is really stubbornness

And only in the light of lost words
Can we imagine our rewards. (41)

Ashbery graduated Harvard in 1949, two years before “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” was published. I don’t know whether he studied with Quine at Harvard, or read a version of the work at the time. Neither Quine nor I know whether the statement “virtue is really stubbornness” is analytic. But in the climax of the poet’s above figuring of himself in (the justly famous) “Picture of Little J.A. in a Prospect of Flowers,” “we” find, within the Stevensian aphorisms, a representation which is both constituted and “displace[d]” by words. Experience forms words which in turn remove traces of their origins. A complex of sense-images, a network of sentences about one’s self: both are memory; neither is the “true” representation of self. For Ashbery and for Quine, one proceeds with pragmatic beliefs which can be neither confirmed nor disconfirmed.

If Quine took a series statements and built a network, Noam Chomsky took a network of data and attempted to divine its source. The theory of generative grammar took shape in Cambridge, between Harvard and MIT, in the early 1950’s; Syntactic Structures, published in 1957, is actually a series of
lecture notes. There, Chomsky develops a theory of the structure of sentences, of a mechanism that produces “all and only” the sentences of a particular language. Many of the sentences Chomsky considers as “data” from which to infer rules of production have analogues in Ashbery’s poems. One finds the latter’s sentences echo, or are echoed in the former’s, not just in form; both were after a structure that makes no necessary appeals to meaning. Chomsky took computational theory and applied it to linguistic behavior, a set of data. His approach took structural linguistics as a point of departure, whereby synchronic data for a language were seen as regular and rule-governed (or constrained). Chomsky, however, also, as is well-studied, took cues from then recent work in the developing field of computer science, and placed the terms of constituent analysis within the framework of a recursive computing engine, as first described in 1948 by Alan Turing:

A simple form of logical control would be a list of operations to be carried out in the order in which they are given. ... We wish to be able to arrange that the sequence of orders can divide at various points, continuing in different ways according to the outcome of the calculations to date. We also wish to be able to arrange for the splitting up of operations into subsidiary operations. This should be done in such a way that once we have written down how an operation is to be done we can use it as a subsidiary to any other operation. (Turing 34)

Recursion, for computing, is defined in Turing’s last sentence above: a case in which an operation is “used as a subsidiary” of itself. It presumes a set of instructions which are carried out in a particular sequence: an algorithm. Any algorithm, mathematical or linguistic, must be expressed within a formal language, a language whose terms have been stripped of all but logical force. Chomsky’s system joins the purely “structural” primitives of grammatical analysis with the formal apparati of analytic philosophy, and the recursive models of computing.

Expressed, then, in a completely formal language, a generative grammar is to be constructed so as to be completely “autonomous and independent of meaning” (Chomsky 17). It has its basis solely in the notion of “grammaticality”:

The fundamental aim of in the linguistic analysis of a language L is to separate the grammatical sequences which are the sentences of L from the ungrammatical sequences which are not sentences of L and to study the structure of the grammatical sequences. The grammar of L will thus be a device which generates all of the grammatical sequences of L and none of the ungrammatical ones. (13)
"Grammatical" here means "observable"—observable in the sense of something that an observer could witness the sentences in question being used by a speaker and accepted by a listener as well-formed sentences of "language L." The data for the construction of a grammar is thus a set of sentences that could be "used." Thus, the notion of grammaticality specifically makes no appeal to meaning; it asks only: does this string form an acceptable whole? The sentence is thus motivated as the "base unit" of grammar on the basis of grammaticality. What the above definition of grammaticality did, most famously, was to show how a sentence may retain "grammaticality" through the effects of structure, even if seemingly meaningless:

Colorless green ideas sleep furiously
Furiously sleep ideas green colorless  (15)

Readers are forced to recognize that despite the logically contradictory content of the first sentence, it is easily understood as English, while the second is not. The relations among the categories of the words, given in a particular order (that of the English sentence), allow it to be "parsed" as a possible sentence of English. (That it contradicts the conditions of the known world are of no concern.)

Many of the poems in Some Trees seem to be asking the same question: can these words be combined in this string? The majority of the poems seem to be an overt attempt to use formal poetic structure to gut our assumptions about the necessity of meaning within linguistic constructions. Formalism, here, is akin to generative apparatus—these poems are their structures. "Poem" is a sestina whose empty sentences do not flesh out the form, do not use the constraints of form for play within conventional meaning:

With the broken sky of peace
Peace means it to the sky
Let down your hair
Through peaceful air the top
Of ruins because what are lamps
When night is waiting.  (36)

What is interesting is that the result is always a syntactic "whole"—grammatical relations are always discernable, if uninterpretable. One might correctly place a period at the end of the stanza. The lack of punctuation, however, allows the boundaries of possible sentences to blur from line to line and stanza to stanza. Structured only by the end of the text line, whereby the last words of each line
chosen in the first stanza are then proscribed for the rest of the poem, one can wander among the phrasal units at will, constructing “full” sentences out of numerous different bits.

Here, form is not used to enhance and elevate some intended meaning. Instead, one becomes aware only of how the structure is supporting an instance of what Bruns has called negative discourse: “a form of speech which attempts to isolate the act of signification from its results, that is, from the formation of a signified.” Thus,

\[
\text{to isolate the word in the void between things and meanings is to establish it as a transcendent reality; but it is at the same time to situate in the realm where beauty can be discovered.} \quad \ldots \\
\text{L}anguage \text{ is [here] understood to be corporeal in character, a substantial medium that is not to be effaced by the formation of meaning. And to the extent that the poet amplifies the corporeality of his language, he actively pursues the dissociation of words and things: he constructs a negative discourse, in which language itself moves to become the subject or purpose of the act of speech. (Bruns 194-7)}
\]

Ashbery’s negative discourse nearly always works to underscore the empty syntax that underlies all sentences. Further, in doing so, he severs the relationships of the words in those sentences from their extensions; “he actively pursues the dissociation of words and things” not for the sake of pushing the limits of the surrealist image, but for showing that those limits themselves are a fiction when words have no necessary connections to things.

“The Young Son” takes a differing tack to a similar end, delivering a determinate Proustian barrage of qualifications, all of which point in the same direction, but lead only to “no subject apparently intent on its heart’s own demon”:

\[
\text{Yet now a wonder would shoot up, all one color, and virtues would jostle each other to get a view of nothing -- the crowded house, two faces glued fast to the mirror, corners and the bustling forest ever preparing, ever menacing its own shape with a shadow of the evil defenses gotten up and in fact already exhausted in some void of darkness, some kingdom he knew the earth could not even bother to avoid if the minutes arranged and the divine lettermen with smiling cries were to come in the evening of administration and night which no cure, no bird ever more compulsory, no subject apparently intent on its heart’s own demon would forestall even if the truths she told of were now being seriously lit, one by one, in the hushed and fast darkening room. (53)}
\]

This, the poem’s fifth and concluding sentence, contains one hundred thirty-seven words. It contains many stock figures from Some Trees; it and other poems are littered with birds, mirrors, forests, shadows, nights. Thus, while this and other sentences are not completely empty, neither are they
“surreal” in the modernist sense. As one progresses through the many above clauses, it becomes clear that the mere extension of reference to some other possible world, surrealism’s heft, is not the point. The words in the above sentence are placeholders that allow the poem’s syntax to function, virtually on its own. However, its automatic-ness is deeply human; the stock phrases are like partial condensations from a bad gothic novel. The sentence affirms that is not simply “empty” sentences which are automatic—much of human discourse operates in the same manner.

Before Chomsky, there had been some attempts at articulating of the idea that a seemingly infinite diversity of syntactic structures can in fact be derived from a finite set of grammatical rules, such as that of Von Humboldt, but the necessary computational tools were not yet in place (Robins). The uncanny surrealist likeness intentionally parodied by Ashbery in “The Young Son” is reduced to a set of syntactic primitives by Chomsky. Any “meaningful” element in a sentence may, and must, be expressed by a “meaningless” categorical element in order to be modeled. The new framework pushed constituent analysis to now model production, the actual creation of sentences, rather than simply the end result. If the structural primitives of Syntactic Structures have meaning only via the sorts of combinations which are permitted among them, recursive rules simply and straightforwardly provide the means for producing an infinite number of unique sentences—as well showing how a grammar might construct one unboundedly long sentence—using a finite set of primitives and relations. Linguistics thus moved from looking at language as a set of effects, behaviors, and expressions to seeing it as an algorithmic engine, closed but capable of infinite productivity. The symbols used by the engine of a generative grammar fall under several categories, or “levels of representation.” One of the goals of Syntactic Structures is to independently motivate several discrete structural levels, to not simply take their existence for granted.

One such level, one which involves recursion, is the level of “phrase structure.” The simplest example is a phrase structure rule for generating a prepositional phrase:

\[ PP \rightarrow P \ NP \ (PP) \]
In prose, this rule says “Rewrite a structural marker PP (prepositional phrase) as a sequence of a preposition, a noun phrase, and as many more additional prepositional phrases as you need.” Thus, one could “use” this rule to produce either “in the garden” or “in the garden of roses” or “in the garden of roses on that day”—the second and third phrases take advantage of the recursive aspect of the rule (parenthesis being the notational equivalent of “optional”). The motivation for accepting the phrase structure level of representation was, at the time, that it provided the simplest way expressing the infinite generatability of human language. It did so not with appeals to meaning and the inexhaustibility of ideas, but to the infinite number of combinations possible among finite elements strung together in linear fashion. By removing much of their content, forms such as the sestina allow Ashbery to express the same sort of generative-ness of pure structure. “Poem” and other formalist poems in Some Trees allow their structures to be discovered by the reader. Other poems, like “Pantoum,” are named for their forms, drawing further attention to their constructed nature:

That is why a watchdog is shy,
Why the court, trapped in a silver storm, is dying.
These days are short, brittle; there is only one night
And that soon gotten over.

Why, the court, trapped in a silver storm, is dying!
Some blunt pretense to safety we have
And that soon gotten over
For they must have motion. (42-3)

A pantoum is a closed generative circle, endlessly recycling its own phrases into novel contexts. Ashbery revives it here to explore pure grammatical relations as offset by re-contextualization. With a finite set of elements, the poem plays clause against clause, drawing out the various grammatical senses of each phrase while imparting a fully realized meaning to none. “Why, the court, trapped in a silver storm, is dying” is first explanation, then exclamation. While this may result “from the poet’s having no intended meaning in mind as he investigates what meaning might be created automatically” (Keller 241), the reverse might also be true: the poet is intending to see what relations are always-present when conventionally referential meaning is stripped away.

An insistence on the sentence as primitive of the grammar, beyond lay conceptions of the sentence, led to the development of Chomsky’s particular brand of generative grammar: transformational
grammars. It is the transformational component of the grammar that was created to effectively handle cases of “constructional homonymity” at the sentence level, such as “Why, the court, trapped in a silver storm, is dying.” Consider the following examples:

(I) John ate an apple  
(ii) the shooting of the hunters

(II) did John eat an apple  
(iii) the growling of the lions

(III) what did John eat  
(iii) the raising of flowers

(IV) who ate an apple  

(Chomsky 71)

In transformational theory, each of the sentences in (I-IV) can be derived by applying transformational rules to a “terminal string” from the phrase structure level of representation. (i) is ambiguous between the interpretations exemplified in (ii) and (iii) -- it is not clear if the hunters are shooting or being shot. The surface structure “looks” the same for either interpretation; their transformational representations, however, will differ. By contrast the sentences in (I-IV) all look different, but are all derived from a single “kernel” sentence. The sentences in sets (I) and (i) were taken as justification for the transformational level of representation—ambiguity at one level of representation is justification for claiming the existence of another. The autonomy of a linguistic level of transformations provides a straightforward account of such cases of “constructional homonymity.” The pantoum, then, is a poetic structure that plays upon this very distinction. “Empty” formalism, or what one might call “generative” formalism, marks Some Trees throughout.

At the same time that Chomsky was revolutionizing linguistics, Claude Levi-Strauss, drawing on the then-forgotten Ferdinand de Saussure, was doing the same with anthropology. Structuralism transformed a variety of fields, and arguably created the discourse now known as “theory.” “Myth Today,” the theoretical section of Barthes’ 1957 collection Mythologies, may be the first piece of theory. It makes Levi-Strauss literary. And the orphic-hermetic distinction is in play for it.

For Barthes, “myth is a type of speech” in that it always bases itself on a system of signification, verbal or iconic. Because myth is not dependent on anything except signification, “the semiologist is entitled to treat in the same way writing and pictures: what he retains from them is the fact that they are both signs” (Barthes 115). What myth does, then, is to co-opt and suppress the Saussurian sign and comport
it toward its own ends. In myth, “That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second.” Myth thus creates a second-order system of signification, in which complete first-order signs are “reduced to a pure signifying function” (114). The function of myth is to strip a meaningful sign of its significance, forcing it to merely “stand for” something else. When taken as the first term of the second order system (myth), the sign is called by Barthes form:

When it becomes form, the meaning leaves its contingency behind; it empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains…but the form does not suppress the meaning…it puts it at a distance, it holds it at one’s disposal. One believes the meaning is going to die…the meaning loses its value, but [it] keeps its life, from which the form of the myth will draw its nourishment...like an instantaneous reserve of history. (117-8)

Debates in the 1990s about the future of the National Endowment for the Arts, for example, center around myth. For many so-called conservatives, the NEA was a signifier for “failed democratic public policy,” the epitome of the sort of thing that government should not spend money on. The first order sign is “already complete, it postulates a kind of knowledge, a past, a memory, a comparative order of facts, ideas, decisions” because it was originally enmeshed within a particular (liberal) discourse. Thus, the original purpose and intent of the NEA, itself suppressed and distorted by liberal myth, is suppressed, distorted, but left intact in order to be incorporated into a new system, the myth of privatization.

There are two ways of reading John Ashbery’s poem “The Instruction Manual” in terms of myth of Barthes’ sort. One may assume that in constructing this vision of “Guadalajara! City of rose-colored flowers!” that the poet is well aware of the reductive nature of his imaginings, and is consciously playing with the white anglo “myth” of Mexico. Or, one may assume that he is merely unconsciously working within a neo-colonial discourse of the exotic other. In that, Ashbery is drawing on “the world in which North American writers of the first half of the twentieth century were created. The world of the closed-off U.S. citizen and the mythology of the exterior world; which includes the fantasy of Mexico as more alive, but also illegal, sexual, and dangerous, that is, ‘more human’” (Yépez, Neomemory). Drawing on one part of the myth, within which many people actually lived (of the closed-
off US citizen), along with the other part (the fantasy of Mexico), signifies ambiguously in the poem: it is unclear how consciously or unconsciously Ashbery is engaging them.

The poem is unlike any of the others in Some Trees, in that its autobiographical content is concrete and accessible (unlike in “Picture of Little J.A....”), and thus the voice of the writer and the poet feel like a single voice. It’s almost orphic. It is also, perhaps, a self-conscious adaptation of the style of O’Hara, down to the mention of the score’s composer, Rimsky-Korsakov. It is possible to vacillate among all of the above readings, a comment upon the insidious and vague nature of myth itself. For Barthes, myth is also a way of reading, a particular sort of condensation of knowledge and intent: one may “unmask” a myth, or experience it (128).

If the signifier of myth is form, its signified, or second term, Barthes calls concept. Taken together, they form a myth’s signification. However, “the knowledge contained in a mythical concept is confused, made of yielding, shapeless associations. One must stress this open character of the concept; it is not an abstract, purified existence; it is a formless, unstable, nebulous condensation, whose unity and coherence are above all due to its function” (119). Such associations are ephemeral: “mythical concepts... can come into being, alter, disintegrate, disappear completely” (120). “The Instruction Manual” depends upon some of the same associations that would be distilled in the next year in Jack Kerouac’s On the Road: Mexico as far, warm, inviting, quaint, peopled with “dark-skinned” beauty, exotic-yet-domestic, available. These were not ephemeral associations for the US literary-type in the 1950’s; this was a dominant US myth of Mexico:

And nearby is the little white booth where women in green serve you green and yellow fruit. The couples are parading; everyone is in a holiday mood. First, leading the parade, is a dapper fellow Clothed in deep blue. On his head sits a white hat And he wears a mustache, which has been trimmed for the occasion. His dear one, his wife, is young and pretty; her shawl is rose, pink, and white. (26-7)

The “you” here is the white US tourist, wryly remarking that the women match the fruit they are offering. Leaning out of an US window affords a privileged view of Mexican society, where every day
brings a parade of carefully groomed, yet “natural” beauty. Everyone is swooning in love, so that only the poet, with his longingly detached eye, might “notice the mustachioed man’s wife” (27) for the tourist-reader. The entire poem is constructed around the contrast of these organic others to the dull reality of modern US life; the Mexicans who work in banks cannot be directly represented in the poem’s controlling mythos. This scene also reads, to me, like a white homosexual poet’s displacement of (rightful) rage against compulsory heterosexual life onto the exotic other: this is a myth of a life the poet will never been able to live, easy and carefree in its societal acceptability, like the mythic heteronormative US nuclear family of the 1950s. There are other examples of that rage later in Ashbery’s oeuvre.

In Barthes’ conception of “contemporary” poetic language, the poetic and the mythic work against each other. Poetic language tries to transform the sign back into meaning: its ideal, ultimately, would be to reach not the meaning of words, but the meaning of things themselves. This is why it clouds the language, increases as much as it can the abstractness of the concept and the arbitrariness of the sign and stretches to the limit the link between signifier and signified. (Barthes 133)

Interestingly, Ashbery fails to use his customary idiom in “The Instruction Manual.” He instead relies on O’Hara-style talky orphic prose, if a less colloquial version of it. The poem is thus not poetic language in Barthes’ sense, but rather mythic language, through which “We have heard the music, tasted the drinks, and looked at colored houses” (Some Trees 30). Reading this way, “we” experience the myth of Mexico. It seems, however, that the poet is winking at us as we do so: “How limited, but how complete withal, has been our experience of Guadalajara!” (29). It is therefore possible to read “The Instruction Manual” as a play on the very discourse it seems to be embracing: that the poet is well-aware that this “dream” of Mexico is a false representation. The poet exposes the myth by making it clear that while the Guadalajara “we” have visited is not the “real” Guadalajara, for “our” purposes, it might as well be. His deadpan speech may intentionally to mock the false naturalness his very discourse allows. (As Roffman notes, however, the poem came out of Ashbery’s actual trip to Mexico.)
If the orphic speech of “The Instruction Manual” is unnatural for the poet of Some Trees, re-examining Ashbery’s chosen mode of formal “negative discourse” clarifies why this is so. Barthes, in a footnote, has this to say about classical poetic formalism:

Classical poetry [is] a strongly mythical system, since it imposes on the meaning one extra signified, which is regularity. The alexandrine, for instance, has value both as meaning of a discourse and as signifier, of a new whole, which is its poetic signification. Success, when it occurs, comes from the degree of apparent fusion between the two systems….with an elegant absorption of one form into another. (Barthes 133)

Ashbery’s poems, then, both work within classical poetics, and consciously mock it as a discourse by refusing to let the signification “fuse” fully (or even partially) with the form. It is most clearly evident in Ashbery’s appropriations of the pastoral: “A Pastoral” is yet another playful sestina, somewhere between elegy and idyll, perhaps celebrating the Mississippian south, but never quite resolving into anything the form is supposed to support. “Eclogue” is one of several father/son dialogue poems (“A Boy” is another), one which become tinged with a desire to reach the mother through the father:

Cuddie: I tell you good will imitate this.
     Now we must dip in raw water
     These few thoughts and fleshy members.
     So that evil may refresh our days.

Colin: She has descended part way!
     Now father cut me down with tears.
     Plant me far in my mother’s image
     To do cold work of books and stones. (24-5)

The poet uses matter-of-fact body parts to defuse fetish, oedipal over-determination. The son’s wish to have the father “plant” him within his “mother’s image” could not be read as other than charged by the post-war psychoanalysis boom, the “cold work of books and stones” being perhaps the poet’s veiled, displaced compensation. The tongue-in-cheek character of the lines, put in mouths that are supposed to be speaking the archaic discourse of shepherds, disallows any psychoanalytic reading other than an “unmasking” of psychoanalysis. Ashbery thus plays upon the content of the pastoral discourse to his own mythic ends.

Why do some dislike poems of the real, of the world? Is it a distrust of reference, and therefore distrust the truth of those sorts of poems, of their ability to either represent or transcend their objects? In Some Trees, the reader is always cut off from solid ground; wires are literally stretched across many of
its landscapes: “The girls, protected by gold wire from the gaze” (“And You Know” 67); “When they first drew the wires/ across the field” (“Chaos” 50); “What, if not its commercial and etiolated visage, could break through the meadow wires?” (“Grand Abacus” 44). These images seem directly lifted from Auden’s early poems, such as “Control of the Passes...” (“They ignored his wires”) and “Who stands, the crux left of the watershed” (“Snatches of tramline running to the wood”). They reflect the condition of both poet and reader, each residing simultaneously in a world of inconceivable objects and the objects of one’s conception. Contradictions are good: they illustrate the gap between meanings and extension. Pure structure holds together meanings which would otherwise fly apart. Some Trees represents an attempt to reconcile hermetic art to the “particular,” the orphic; neither is found to be “the true one,” as in Quine’s attack on the analytic-synthetic distinction. Perhaps the poem “Some Trees” itself is emblematic of the poet and the readers’ place within the above space. Here, as in a grove of trees, each word joins “a neighbor, as though speech were a still performance”; a contiguous linear structure emerges and freezes; the lines of the poem unwind each clause, “Arranging by chance,” along with Cage, the elements to be come upon. Through language, “you and I” are always “As far, this morning, from the world as agreeing with it”; “we” can only listen and reflect within ourselves what the world inspires within “us,” a sort of reverse objective correlative. “You and I” are suddenly taken into a world where “merely being there means something,” where the poetry emerges from being part of the structure of the event, a “silence already filled with noises.” Roffman shows the poem recounts an early adulthood rendezvous. If speech be stilled in the face of such beauty, “these accents seem their own defense.”
Chapter 8: Before Conceptualism: Disgust and Overdetermination in White-dominated Experimental Poetry in New York, 1999-2003

Dan Farrell’s *ape*, published in 1988, is a serial work consisting of 20 unpaginated pages divided, *Heads of the Town Up to the Aether*-fashion, into blocks of verse-like near-lists on the pages’ uppers, and commentary-like prose on the lowers. The book begins, and ends, with a different form: a page containing a straight, single-line, list-like construction. The opening page reads:

intense. blinding drawing vicious nagging numb grueling nauseating feigning

Discussing and reassessing *ape* in the “Disgust and Overdetermination” issue of *Open Letter* in 1998, Farrell noted that the poem is composed of “…words used to help people describe the pain they were in to their physicians. Annoying to Wretched, not in that order. The original diagnostic tool presented lists of words in twenty categories, divorced from any definition or context except type and intensity” (Later). The poem then takes off from there:

thumb salt flickering stamp indolence joins
quivering enough true all neo-colonial niching
drop throw head noun pulsing percentage
juice shrewd still storm some throbbing
niggling round beating to the present day
pennyless lob pounding clean bidden reek

Gliding I noticed a slight problem presto. Also my anthem is already in the world to the lawn-kept-pressing. One of us really ran right out of our loafers. Been usurp. Shooting now for fairness on the parcel to a degree. Arranging is affirmed. (Farrell, ape)
There are multiple voices here. At the top are words from the diagnostic tool, and, presumably, from those who responded it with their own words. The presence of “neo-colonial” activates both the term’s Marxist history as part of the pan-African Organization for African Unity movement (Nkrumah) and the “indolence” that precedes it in the poem: Farrell was writing from within the Kootenay School of Writing in Vancouver, a poetic collective founded in 1984 with the explicit intent of activating relations between local workers movements and writers (Burnham). There have been numerous studies of the origins and aims of the KSW (including Wiens), and its poetic self-understanding is reasonably-reflected in its capstone anthology (Klobucar and Barnholden). My point here is that Farrell’s *ape* was composed, and meant to be read, within the context of an “indolent” 1980s populace battered into submission by global Reagan-Thatcherite revanchism, or “neo-colonial niching” that, through Canada’s Progressive Conservative Party, targeted specific social benefits won in previous years. The presence of “niggling” raises race in a most direct manner. What could this charged and ugly word possibly be doing here? It gains immense resonance in proximity to “neo-colonial niching”: Farrell seems to be highlighting the casual way in which racism penetrates to the unthinking core, and how it is at the same time directly related to policy. The fact that it is followed, just beneath, by “pennyless lob,” a neo-mondegreen for “pennyless yob,” or a stereotypically white working-class person who might, at the time, have used the N-word unthinkingly.

All of this is then taken up by the book’s own authorial voice in the lower paragraph: “Gliding I noticed a slight problem presto.” The “slight problem” here is not slight, as the ironic “presto” aims to indicate: the “problem” is the complications race introduces into class-based historical narratives of the sort the KSW were carefully working through at the time, and after. “My” anthem here is cis white-working class self-understanding, culminating in home-ownership, “the world to the lawn-kept-pressing”; “One of us ran right out of our loafers” to “usurp” the “parcel” via settler-colonialism, and is now, in an ironic remark on liberalism, “Shooting... for fairness on the parcel to a degree.” It’s the “to a degree” that’s telling (to say nothing of “shooting”): while the perspective given voice advances along these lines within the country, and its limit-cased is “lawn-kept” home-ownership. The fix is still in, and obliquely acknowledged: “Arranging is affirmed.”
While this subtle work operates on multiple levels by sifting oppressive linguistic infrastructure, Farrell finds, however, in his reconsideration, that ape reflects a “mistake” about language’s function. He further remarks on ape’s lists: “I was struck (struck? sharply? hardly?) at the time by how these words are, were, also often used in situations other than reporting pain, that is, everywhere else. Their ‘private’ use, pointing to something had only by one, paralleled a ‘public’ one” (Farrell, Later). The private language argument terminology here is wholly intentional: Farrell’s epigraph in the Open Letter piece—“This? What!?”—is attributed to Wittgenstein. The argument against a private language, famously, hinges on reports of pain, and the fact that they cannot find a referent in the ‘outside’ world. The Philosophical Investigations interrogate the idea of pain as a paradigmatically ‘inner’ phenomenon, one given its reference, and meaning, only by one’s own experience of it, which then directly result in the pieces of language of the kind Farrell realigns. Thus, Farrell’s use of a kind of coterie code to talk about complex macro issues gets overdetermined by conventional meanings when taken out of its context, the same way that the inner process by which one’s own experience ‘gives meaning’ to an expression is found by Wittgenstein to be finally illusory in the private language argument, “to participate in what is latently nonsensical with a view to allowing its nonsensicality to become patent” (Mulhall 83). Expressions of pain, far from being paradigmatically private, turn out to work the same way as the rest of language: through desire to communicate, prior acquisition of shared code, reasonable guess as to intention. Meaning must always be, then, in a sense, relational: constituted in real time and dependent on social drive. It’s here that Farrell locates ape’s error:

my mistake then was to believe that this vocabulary was referring to experiential objects, pointing to the pain; and could also be used to describe events in the shared world. Today I am more inclined to consider language, even in its descriptive use, to be an activity uncompelled by any object. So that when I tell you my finger is Numb, or September is Flickering, it is less a description of reality than an appeal for a particular kind of attention or response. When I say appeal I also mean demand, wish, plea; clearing my throat etc. (Farrell, Later)

While the private language argument had been well-covered Anglophone territory even by 1988, Farrell’s is a wry, knowing re-appropriation, not least because he codes the text with asides about the poetic struggle for self-definition in the face of older definers (for the KSW, the Black Mountain poets and Language Poets, as Wiens details) whose hands may have seemed to be stretching directly toward
one’s linguistic pockets, the late rich stealing from rentiers: “Lost generation, wax figure, going about it the wrong way. Not what’s in my wallet. A hunch a chrome marble. Distend this observation. Rents frequently attempt” (ape).

As its founders acknowledge, conceptualism is a label for tendencies and experiments under the sign of poetry that had already happened under the sign of visual art (Goldsmith and Dworkin, Against Expression). Other texts did significant shoring up work for conceptualism as a specifically a pedagogical brand: the 2005 edition of Open Letter (Cole and Emerson), a KSW journal; Notes on Conceptualisms from 2009 (Fitterman and Place); the Against Expression anthology; and Goldsmith’s workshop text (Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age). While I don’t want to linger on conceptualism’s self-conception, I do want to try to recover a kind of poetic lost generation, tendencies from the micro-period just before conceptualism that use similar formal techniques, but with resistant social aims more in line with the original conceptualism of visual art.

In the period just after Farrell’s reassessment of ape, he published two very different collections reexamining and redressing ape’s demands: Last Instance (1999) and The Inkblot Record (2000). A focal point of Last Instance, a collection of prose pieces, is “Avail,” which takes, permutes and distorts seeming multiple choice answers to a sort of health questionnaire, revealing the first-person sutures where corporate State enters subject as host. Staged from deep within the logic of the medical-industrial complex, the piece performs a brilliant reduction of the system’s terms to “anger” and “physical health,” whereby the seething indignation that lack of self-determination germinates is reassigned back to the subject in an infinite recursive loop:

I feel like my physical health is something that I myself am in charge of. I feel angry about myself a good deal of the time. Things are not more irritating to me now than usual.... I’m very direct with people when it comes to my own physical health needs. When I become sick or ill, I am the person to blame. Sometimes I am so angry that I feel like hurting others, but I would not really do it. (Last Instance 24-25)

The “I” here is simply a pivot point for contradiction, a negation of any category by which one might be assessed. The banalization of health, anger and violence, emptied of anything other than their significance as claims on resources and their inability to be reconciled, is an integral part of the
system’s self-representation, as if a built-in resistance to articulation, let alone resolution, were a normal part of its proper functioning.

The book’s five shorter pieces (“Stillstand”, “Fuming”, “Invigorator”, “Geal”, “Jumb”) track “particle[s] of a universal waning of a class” (19) with “no redreaming qualities” (20), and the algorithms that hold it in place: “Let’s say: ‘X’. Now that is going too far.” (20) Yet there are movements in some pieces toward escape. Following on the verse alterations of 1994’s Thinking of You, which quietly unseated the word (“F/ ear is my master” as the poem “Countenance” memorably puts it), Last Instance’s prose sentences hold the axis of combination steady while radically compounding that of selection, and thus demonstrating the possibility of movement even within normative convention. Its quick parodies of cliché—“Stop melee I’m robot to burst” (33) or “Out of the radish into the pan” (46) (which has neither frying nor fire, yet both are there)—are followed up by straightforward descriptions, which direct our heightened attention to incredibly finely resolved grammar-pictures that can then seem to point beyond their ostensive objects: “Pig iron on the anvil cooled misshapen, steaming coffee on the burner burned.” (21) Or:

The cat communicates by doing nothing. The feathers are warmest. Even the climate is huffy. Let’s dip in to light the candles. The coin is in the bucket and the earnings are battered ready to drop. (39)

Every expression of stasis is also a wry demand for attention to the possibilities, however compromised, that remain. That combination of stasis, rigorous attention, and black humor, as others have noted, is deeply Beckettian, but there’s something transformative and unmistakable about Farrell’s work.

In Last Instance, transformation comes through most clearly in “My Recognizance,” the longest poem in the book. “Recognizance,” may seem at first like a neologism, but my dictionary lists the following definitions:

re cog’ ni zance, n. [OF. reconoissance, later recognoissance, deriv. of L. recognoscere, fr. re-+ cognoscere to know.] 1. Law. An obligation of record entered into before some court or magistrate, making the performance of some act the condition of nonforfeiture. Also, the sum liable to forfeiture upon such an obligation. 2. Archaic. A token; symbol; pledge; badge.
The poem is thus a reckoning, recording, and promise, in which the poet both recognizes and reconnoiters his childhood, adolescence and early adulthood with acceptance, as if fulfilling an obligation not to harm them, without intending to linger nostalgically, “Away, a moment”:

While outside in crowded cards of skilled hockey players I saw my own reeling life clasped and slipped to clipping spokes. Sinking under shuttered glands, chafing beneath my dolled tonsils, with no effort I wafted upon my mother’s brownie effs. I cannot see the jaguar for its spots, tottering there above the fizzling bones, the tiny gristle, the flickering marrow. Pups of twisted balloons yipped by. Was lemon, salmon, or yellow, membrane fixed, as a bicyclist to her pedals, to the corollal lambskin skin. Swaying, seen in the breeze of winterly floss a quantum of batting was puffed away. A melt the hot toy plastic descended, in droplet to me. I could not force these primary emotions, like a lunch, sandwiched between definition and extension, on me. In decrements incompetent, nodding off during inattention spells, disguising the shallow branch tracks with slight foot-marks. What is a modificationist today may be a hoofer tomorrow. (33)

There’s a pun on spokes in the first sentence, where biking and speaking, both become, sort of, jokingly, castrating (“clipping”)—a kind of capture, “shuttered,” as one is by maternal photography (“my mother’s brownie effs”), which unfailingly affix an image of the child’s endearing awkward stage, glandularly produced. The toy images of living things one interacts with in youth are not analogues—they are life, those pups really yip. The “lambskin,” is a jacket—or a condom, a false flowery crown (“corollal”) that gets “fixed” to us, sex, since we’re not fixed. Intellectualizations (“definition”) and things themselves (philosophical “extension”) often add up to the same distasteful coercions, some of which we force on ourselves. Distinguishing these things is disgusting, and like death (there is “excrement” and “cremate” in “decrement,” an obvious “con” in “imconpetent,” and a retch in “force”), either at the time or in remembering, and we’re not always up to it, and we cover it up, “disguising” the tracks with “slight foot-marks” (I’ll say it: writing). What we might try to deal with at one moment we jauntily lie about or run away from the next, but the attempt, however tongue-in-cheek, to construct a usable past is inevitable. We are obliged to record the past, or its specifics simply recede into the general hot plastic—i.e. are liable to forfeiture. And we may even derive some pleasure from it.

“My Recognizance” doesn’t end there, and the above passage for it is somewhat unfair to isolate and try to close read or force allusions on, since it uses the most transparently autobiographical language in the book. Farrell is able to construct such passages so that it seems unnecessary to try to attach them
back to either a “speaker” of the poem or to the author function—rather we are able to examine such specifics of a life as if laid out on an archaeologist’s sorting table; they are the “fizzling bones, the tiny gristle, the flickering marrow” from which we are to project the general species. Farrell’s subjects, or characters, do nevertheless manage small pockets of self-determination similar to the meticulous organization of one’s oral fixation, as in Beckett’s *Molloy*, or the endless recontextualization of a lexeme, as with “on” in *Ill Seen Ill Said*. The kind of intentional lightness that pervades is anathema to ritual suckings and pocketings (though it would not reject them), and the non-neurotic attention that results is a model. It’s free and it’s available, and it has other precedential takers-up: the opening of *Last Instance*’s first piece, the wryly pistolized “No Future,” riffs simultaneously on late Beckett’s relentless self-reflexivity, Silliman’s adaptation of it in the opening of *Tjanting*, and Wittgenstein’s rejection of self-ostensive privacy:

The opposite up, the opposite early, fast put back, kaput. Had gone to the said beginning, again had gone. Now what. Put back and begun. Head. Kaput. Present perfect. But had begun. Again gone again more. Then lest then again. The snow mounted up, stopped, had it finished. As in, up, now what. Kaput. Now what. (7)


The single, book-length piece of *The Inkblot Record* partially answers that question by drawing on the results of an instrument deeply related to the health questionnaire of “Avail”: the Rorschach test. The book consists entirely of actual (altered?), alphabetized, unlineated, unparagraphed responses to the (absent) Rorschach images, separated by full stops: “Birds. Birds perched, wings out, up. Black hair strewn all over the barber’s floor. Black Sabbath.” *Inkblot*’s recontextualizations make the aesthetic value of the Rorschach responses far outrun whatever normative diagnostic component might remain in them, highlighted by Farrell’s organizing of the book’s sentences in alphabetical order. The major impression left by the book is that, lacking an aesthetics, the Rorschach test, like the larger psychiatric apparatus of which it is a part, could not account for the incredible charge, diversity and beauty (even in their stretches of banality) of the responses, and thus for the people that made them. The responses are great (“If the robe was closed, you couldn’t see the people or feet because the robe goes to the
floor”) and the abecedarian approach perfectly highlights the scale: there are thousands of subjects out there who produced these texts. Though it depends on the breadth of subject selection, there is a way in which a more democratic art cannot be imagined, a point which only underscores the subjects’ systemic co-optation. Each of responses was produced within highly alienating circumstances, which we also experience in reading them one after another, if with a kind of historical displacement: the Rorschach’s lo-tech lack of invasiveness now reads like relative humanity.

The test’s own history goes something like this, as told in an excellent recent study by historian of science Rebecca Lemov: in 1921, Swiss psychiatrist Hermann Rorschach published *Psychodiagnostik*, a monograph containing the same blots that are still in use, which he developed to streamline the process of assessing personality traits and diagnosing psychosis. Having a standard set of cards, questions, and evaluative parameters, it was thought, allowed psychiatrists to learn a single process and simply repeat it, rather than relying on impressionistic and un-replicable methods, and to develop a control group of normal responses. Rorschach died the following year, but the method was eventually adapted by US state and corporate entities for weeding out the bearers of potential problem personality traits, or for confirming suspicions of the possession of such traits (Lemov 20-24).

Farrell was undoubtedly aware of this history, and presenting “problem” traits as art is an oblique challenge to state-based evaluation. The structure and content of the book’s responses, like cries of pain (which in many ways they are), continue to claim agency *in spite of* the structure that “produced” or elicited them, since there will always be one system or another that produces us. So while there is surely a critique of the Rorschach process’s dehumanizing aspects implicit in Farrell’s stacking up of its detritus, there are also intimations of interlocutor, of the possibilities of real exchange. The back cover of the book lists “trigger” questions, some simple (“What do you see?”), some follow up (“What in the card gave you the impression of mice?”) and others more complex, and allowing, in classic style, for a direct importation of (and, goal-wise, reconnection with) personal history (“What might that reflect in your life?”). There are also extra-linguistic responses that are included in the body of the text as a kind of wry duty, parenthetical scene-setters attributable to the original data collector:
(inverts card)
(imitates sitting)
(traces outline with finger)
(demonstrates the sun’s rays using her body)
(pantomimes stomping)
(laughs)
(runs finger around blot)

Phatic openings play a huge organizing role here—many, many responses begin with “Well…” “Oh…” “Um….”—which is certainly comic, but also points to real people involved in real speech events, talking to others.

All of this is data which, by the 50s and 60s, actually would’ve been taken into account by someone administering the test, as evaluation moved away from just the contentful construal of imagery (Lemov 25-27). By silently moving these aspects of the data to the fore, as the result of a further abecedarian procedure, Farrell simultaneously makes us register the protocols of a system that attempted to record and evaluate even the smallest indirect response—a system of coercion and control—as well as the possibilities of a modest recuperation, of a provisional re-interpretation. Beyond the classificatory grid that presupposed a set of typologies for quick mid-century “scoring” by prospective employers or wardens, reading Farrell’s book, one can imagine a therapeutic component to taking the test. Rorschach began his career as an advocate for the then fledgling psychoanalysis (Lemov). Some of the therapeutic aspects ascribed to dream interpretation or word association were intentionally incorporated into its design, at least initially—and that further exchanges that were supposed to “happen” during Rorschach tests along the lines of Freudian psychiatry, analogous to catharses that are supposed to occur when conceptual connections are spontaneously generated during an analytic session (ibid).

A similar thing happens to the poet in classical accounts of composing poetry: the composed text is the trace of the poet’s platonic ecstasy, which simultaneously produces and is produced by connections,
which readers follow and try to reproduce via the work (Stanco). Some forms of reception put source- 
text-based work in a different, less ecstatic category. PET scans might reveal that there are no 
differences in the brains of those re-arranging pre-existing orthographic symbols vs. those generating 
them nearly ex nihilo, though preliminary research suggests otherwise (Cressey). We will have to wait 
for the final data, but Inkblot allows the thought that the generation of the Rorschach responses— 
which are ex nihio, unlike Farrell’s bricolative practice—might have changed the subjects’ psyches 
directly, that actual therapeutic “work” got done, even if it wasn’t usually considered the main point 
of the test. And Inkblot, in separating the material of the test from its supporting superstructure, 
shows that its own banal organization scheme clearly does psychic work. Any found work makes a 
similar statement, but Inkblot’s material, if read as therapeutic, works to heighten the contradictions.

If The Inkblot Record records through a kind of one-way mirror, then Last Instance tracks the 
meditative streams that lay behind the design and construction of the glass, and the modes and means 
of contact through it:

For years call to pretend calling, each other a stake in spontaneity. And what of it? How can I 
be but thankful for the boring contact. It would only be unhelpful to remind them this is 
actually a late returned call, not of their own accord. I ignore the slight. It would be selfish of 
me not to pretend.

These lines are from “K,” which permutes the possibility of contact with the eponymous character, 
throwing off a profusion of nuanced local reflections about the nature of supposed intimacy. In so doing 
it illustrates how we, callers and callees all (“I am the caller I have always been”), are forced to 
project ourselves onto nothing, rats who press the buttons when the empty light of desire goes on. 
Talking to a machine (and later imagining how K’s childhood produced the class-based eschewal of 
manners that may really be the key to happiness) or actually getting the roommate (remember: pre- 
cell phones) are the same thing. The protocols of contact replace the contact itself.

In The Inkblot Record and Last Instance both, Farrell sets up structures for displaying sentences, and 
tracking their fall in and out of discourse—either as found (Inkblot) or (mostly) composed (Last 
Instance)—so that their affiliations with power, if not dissolve, become nuanced. The form of historical
consciousness the books bring forth, pitching back and forth between multi- and univocality, institutionality and idiosyncrasy, is the art of that process. In *Inkblot*, the direct target is the huge, coercive, outdated, state-appropriated version of psychiatry which *ape* surveilles, and which “Avail” attacks. The twelve diffuse, stultifying forms taken by conventionally mediated relationships in *Last Instance*—familial, significant-otherial, occupational, temporal (see the calendric send-up “366, 1996” which ends the book), etc.—are picked-off one at a time at appropriately honed scales. Both *Last Instance* and *The Inkblot Record* find people behind the lexical curtains, and evince, at every decision point, play, a drive toward negotiable social meaning, and an awareness of the stakes. In that they work to reorient us within their moment, whether just ended, or still evolving. The idea is recognizance: to reconnoiter, recognize, reckon, rethink, record and respond. A section from *The Inkblot Record* was included in *Against Expression*, as was a section of “Avail.”

Farrell was living in New York with the poet and critic Sianne Ngai during the final composition of *Last Instance*; Ngai wrote the essay “Raw Matter: A Poetics of Disgust” around the same time; it was published in the same issue of *Open Letter* in which Farrell reassessed *ape*. The influence of Farrell’s work and of that essay can be discerned, I believe, in the poetics Lytle Shaw subsequently developed in New York. Farrell, Ngai, and Shaw were all were in dialogue at that point: Farrell and Ngai had recently moved from New York to the Bay Area, and Shaw had moved from the Bay Area to New York with artist Emilie Clark. I myself had discussions with Shaw about Farrell’s and Ngai’s work. I will shift now to discussing two of Shaw’s books from the same period, leaning on Ngai’s essay in interpreting one of them. I will also argue briefly that in Farrell’s, Ngai’s, and Shaw’s work from this period, much of what became Flarf and conceptualism is present, albeit with a political orientation that was explicitly stripped out by conceptualism’s self-representations and implicitly by Flarf’s intentional ambiguities. The first of Shaw’s books I’ll discuss, *Cable Factory 20*, is “written inside” conceptual artist Robert Smithson’s work, and it is with Smithson that I will begin.
It’s a long way from ‘no ideas but in things’ to ‘no ideas,’ but maybe less so for Robert Smithson, a New Jersey native and childhood patient of Dr. Williams:

Under shallow pinkish water is a network of mud cracks supporting the jig-saw puzzle that composes the salt flats. As I looked at the site, it reverberated out to the horizons only to suggest an immobile cyclone while flickering light made the entire landscape appear to quake. A dormant earthquake spread into the fluttering stillness, in a spinning sensation without movement. This site was a rotary that enclosed itself in an immense roundness. From that gyrating space emerged the possibility of the Spiral Jetty. No ideas, no concepts, no systems, no structures, no abstractions could hold themselves together in the actuality of that evidence.

(Smithson 145)

Despite Smithson’s claim of the lack of tenability of constructs on the salt flats, his description of first coming upon the section of The Great Salt Lake that would serve as host for the Spiral Jetty is actually driven by an idea: that of Site. Site, always a capital ‘S’ for Smithson, is a ‘series of points’ of ‘open limits,’ ‘reflection’ and ‘edge.’ Similarly, here is Carl Andre, speaking at a college symposium on April 30, 1968, as recorded by Lucy Lippard:

The kind of place I mean is not to be confused with an environment. It is futile for an artist to try to create an environment because you have an environment around you all the time. Any living organism has an environment. A place is an area within an environment that has been altered in such a way as the make the general environment more conspicuous. Everything is an environment, but a place is related particularly to both the general qualities of the environment and the particular qualities of the work that has been done. (47)

As place is for Carl Andre (who was later tried for second-degree murder following the death of his wife, Ana Mendieta), Site for Smithson is a medium for ‘making the general environment more conspicuous.’ His depiction of the lake as source of vast potential energy and possibility, stored within complex forms that surface as blank flatness and heat, is not just description, but part of Site itself.

Through the concept of Site, Smithson’s essay on the Spiral Jetty participates no less in the production of Site than the actual construction of the Jetty itself. The same is true of Smithson’s filmic documentary showing, as equals, trucks dumping earth, and the range of materials (from dinosaur skeletons to glacial patterning) that came to his mind in conceiving the project as a whole.

The artist that conceives, observes, describes, orders dumping and documents the entire process is a selector among different scales of Site, costlessly sorting information as it arises, like Maxwell’s
demon. Such an artist, for Smithson, has a physical solubility, and can seemingly expand or contract at will:

The sound of the helicopter motor became a primal groan echoing into tenuous aerial views. Was I but a shadow in a plastic bubble hovering in a place outside mind and body? Et in Utah ego. I was slipping out of myself again, dissolving into a unicellular beginning, trying to locate the nucleus at the end of the spiral. All that blood stirring makes one aware of protoplasmic solutions, the essential matter between the formed and the unformed, masses of cells consisting largely of water, proteins, lipoids, carbohydrates, and inorganic salts. Each drop that splashed onto the Spiral Jetty coagulated into a crystal. Undulating waters spread millions upon millions of crystals over the basalt. (Smithson 149)

The artist can locate the nucleus from any one of innumerable, and mappable, possible perspectives—from cells to (as he later puts it) ‘James Joyce’s ear channel’ to the salt flats. Smithson: ‘when one refuses to release scale from size, one is left with an object or language that appears to be certain’—but isn’t. Designating Site selects among scales, but only provisionally. In reading this now, however, in the US, it’s hard to read this beyond Ken Chen’s description of “a disembodied white self: the self as hero of individualism and technology, a cogito levitating freely above the racial mob.” Critiques of “Land art” in the west from indigenous perspectives are beginning to appear, revealing “Land art’s complicity with—or even its status as a distilled expression of” a settler-colonial perspective (Scott). In my research up to this point, I have not, in looking into Smithson’s construction of Site and the Spiral Jetty, found reference to the Goshute, Shoshone, Southern Paiute, or Ute indigenous people or societies. Such absences are one of the ways in which conceptual art is racially marked.

For Smithson, art is any ‘Nonsite’ relation to Site. Any point or series of points, visual or verbal, can be juxtaposed with another point or series, which relates to or reflects or contains it: Nonsite. In a note to the first sentence of ‘The Spiral Jetty,’ Smithson details Site and Nonsite’s ‘range of convergence’:

The range of convergence between Site and Nonsite consists of a course of hazards, a double path made up of signs, photographs, and maps that belong to both sides of the dialectic at once. Both sides are present and absent at the same time. The land or the ground from the site is placed in the art (Nonsite) rather than the art placed on the ground. The Nonsite is a container within another container—the room. The plot or yard outside is yet another container. Two-dimensional and three dimensional things trade places with each other in the range of convergence. ... A point on map expands to the size of a land mass. A land mass contracts to a point. Is the Site the reflection of the Nonsite (mirror), or is it the other way around? The rules of this network of signs are discovered as you go along uncertain trails both mental and physical. (153)
Thinking about the concept of Nonsite in relation to indigenous people and societies is chilling. It is critical work to do so with regard to conceptual and particularly land art. I have not done it in what follows, which is centered on explicating Lytle Shaw’s work at a particular moment, mostly within the limits of its seeming intent. It is a gap that renders the explication incomplete at best.

Lytle Shaw’s *Cable Factory* is a double path made up of signs, photographs, and maps that belong to both sides of the Site/Nonsite dialectic as conceived by Smithson, and that trade places with each other in a scalar range of convergence. Shaw takes Smithson’s life and work to be nodes in a larger network of Site, one that takes in the built and unbuilt environment of the San Francisco Bay Area, the microhistory of the western art and poetry of the last 200 years, Shaw’s own life and work, corporate capital’s 20th century incarnations (at least 20 of them), and the Enlightenment project that, to one degree or another, drove (and drives) it all on. Miles Champion has written poems within and between poems by other writers, taking their texts as Site and intensely focusing down to the level of the phoneme, simultaneously unraveling and preserving strands of the past, encoding a present. Similarly, Shaw has noted that his book is ‘literally written inside’ Smithson’s *Collected Writings*, to the point where *Cable Factory*’s cover fonts, colors and overall design nearly match the Smithson *Collected*’s in a manner that cannot be accidental. And Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*, the movie he made of it, the essay he wrote about it, his other written and ‘sculpted’ works, his life, and his death in a plane crash are all put in Site/Nonsite relation to each other, directly or indirectly, in *Cable Factory*.

Shaw’s use of photographs and other visual material in particular takes Smithson at his descriptive word, constructing a ‘double path’ through Smithson/Shaw, one that involves a highly ironized sorting demon similar to Smithson’s Site selector: “Who’s the filter feeder?/ Down at the bottom of the tank,” notes a scene-setting couplet at the book’s beginning (Shaw 13). In the process, *Cable Factory* shows, in an economically-cognizant manner alien to advertising (which uses similar techniques), how photography can be made to say a great deal more than Walter Benjamin’s (tactically reductive) ‘what a beautiful world!’:
But now follow the path of photography further. What do you see? It becomes ever more nuancé, ever more modern, and the result is that it can no longer depict a tenement block or a refuse heap without transfiguring it. It goes without saying that photography is unable to say anything about a power station or a cable factory other than this: what a beautiful world! (Benjamin 86)

When coupled with text, iteration, massive changes of scale and embeddedness in larger “network of signs.” Smithson’s “Network of signs” recalls Baudelaire’s forêts de symboles from Fleurs du Mal’s “Correspondences”: forests that are located just to the side of the “living pillars” of the temple of Nature, and watch man pass avec des regards familiers (Baudelaire). It’s an allusion that echoes through a key passage of Cable Factory 20. The poem ‘#4’ invokes, but is not quite narrated by, a transcendentalist flâneur figure who resembles Goethe (via Wilhelm Meister) or Linnaeus in passion for perambulation and classification. A park and its history are surveyed, but something cannot quite be accounted for:

What’s lacking in this picture —
Allowances,
The Sentiment of Abrasion?
Eyes catch and toast is casual but
a weakness in the eyes kept him
from books, and he formed the habit
of rambling about the countryside by himself:
in a mausoleum
windowed trees and light
are figures
for the permeability of shells,
Ready contents in the new language
of extreme joints
and partial correspondence. (Shaw 29)

Cable Factory 20’s project is the articulation of this language, dimly apprehended in the walker’s surroundings, jammed together between the living pillars of built environment, ideation, violence, and affect — the current forest of symbols. It’s a language that has basic parameters, sets of allowances, and handlings of sentiments.

One of Cable Factory 20’s main strategies for articulating a language of “extreme joints and partial correspondence” is maximizing ambiguity among phrasal units, particularly the simple declarative. In Quine’s indeterminacy of translation argument, one can never decide absolutely on a one-to-one correspondence between a phrase in one language and a phrase in another, since their components
connect down to entirely different associative semantic webs (Word and Object). Shaw uses the ambiguity of simple declaratives to draw out simultaneous, multiple meanings from the differing contexts and histories the book brings together. The book’s first sentence operates this manner: “Everyone loves Cable” (11). At least five determinate meanings come immediately to mind:

1. Everyone likes the experience of lots of channels and clear reception.
2. No one thinks the technology or content of cable pernicious.
3. Since everyone loves cable, you, reader, will like this book.
4. I’m joking when I imply that no one has objections to cable.
5. I’m joking when I recommend myself and my book to you.

Competing contexts — the technology of cable, its use in the book, the manner in which the book’s speaker is comported towards that history and its use — all make claims on attention, claims that are ultimately irreconcilable and undecidable, but reflect one another to some degree: partial correspondence.

Having made the promise of a multi-stranded experience in the ‘zero’ poem that serves as a preface to the 20 pieces of the book proper, the book continues to work in the overdetermined declarative mode. Situated on the first page of ‘#1’ with finger-sized photo of the young Smithson and the self-admonition “At first admit the fan” as the line preceding it, the two word complete sentence “Likeness dominates” (16) gets saturated with competing and equal claims on sense from multiple directions:

1. The similarity of my physical appearance with Smithson’s strikes me most of all.
2. Our physical affinity dominates this work as a whole.
3. Affinity of artistic vision strikes me most of all.
4. I really like Smithson.
5. Its similarities to Smithson’s book dominate mine.
6. The idea of likeness dominates my thinking, and this book.
7. There is something inherent in the relation of likeness that privileges it.
8. Likeness dominates, but doesn’t overcome, unlikeness.

Shaw’s use of this mode, and that two-word sentence in particular, points back to Smithson’s own complicated negotiations of likeness, as well as to previous poetic appropriations of them.

Observation, of likeness or anything else, is quite often, for many people, primarily visual, while thought, which can be iconic, is paradigmatically verbal, at least in terms of reason and communication; the two modes are intertwined but, like stranded cable, locked in a kind of dis-
imposition, not fully contiguous, though visual likeness dominates. Like the non-split between Smithson’s writing and sculpture, *Cable Factory 20* dramatizes the verbal/visual (symbolic/imaginary) distinction, showing it to be analogous to, or perhaps even a version of, the Site/Nonsite distinction—and just as ambiguously delineated. Before the age of digital reproduction, referential language was the ultimate medium for the Site/Non-site distinction, since it was able, and is able (at varying degrees of success), to remove things from their situations, and to make them re-appear within an infinite number of new contexts — infinite in the grammatical sense of an infinite set of sentences producible by a finite set of grammatical rules.

The whiffs of *Tel Quel* that rise from invocations of generative grammar are entirely apropos. On the one hand, language for Smithson could simply be heaped up as materialist humus. On the other, his writings provide crucial context for, and form part of, work like *Spiral Jetty*, and of Land and conceptual art. What is Site/Nonsite if not a this-and-that innovation on the this-or-that signifier/signified distinction? *Cable Factory 20*, thirty years later, among many other modes of recognition, embraces intellectual kitsch with equal portions of feeling and teasing, and also registers its own moment’s shifts. By the late 1990s, when Shaw was working on the book, language’s ability to call the signified into being was being eclipsed by visually recombinative technologies like Photoshop. And space’s implication of a future that is not ironic had become ironic. Time and space, for Shaw, become word and image, and they leak. *Cable Factory 20* takes a lot of its structure from linguistic accidentals, but in terms of pure page space, there is more ‘iconic’ material than orthographic — and orthography itself is highlighted as a spatial phenomenon. In an interview with poet Gary Sullivan around the time of the book’s publication, Shaw describes two basic types of intentionally visually-based material in the book: ‘backdrops’ and ‘icons.’ Via the icons, Shaw notes in the interview, “images take on the role they traditionally do in most books: exemplifying or literalizing the text.” The ‘icons,’ like the boyhood image of Smithson, may be smaller than originals, but they leave the original image intact. A compass repeatedly appears, “divided into 20 sections — with a blown-up salt crystal inside,” as Shaw notes in the interview, for orientation effects. A one-into-two coaxial line splitter from the WDM company (15, 20), and a “VX500 Low Profile 1 x N Switch” (25) grounds several pages.
‘Backdrops’ surround and provide spatial foils for the text-as-text (recognizable verse). They come from the photos and reproductions that had played a role in the writing (or construction) of the poem, and are enlarged or reduced into unrecognizability via repeated xeroxing.

Conceiving of language as a system that can be visually breached, or enhanced, has precedents for Shaw in the work of Robert Grenier and Henri Michaux, where hand-drawn material complements or replaces or becomes the orthographic — and in comics, perhaps the poetry comics of Jacques Debrot in particular. Shaw engaged comics (and scale) in an earlier chapbook (Low Level Bureaucratic Structures: A Novel); in Cable Factory 20, the visual-to-verbal leaks are mechanized, rather than empaneled, and they are often funny: the young Smithson standing in front of a dinosaur and smiling for the camera (43); something that looks like a powerful, doorless microwave oven (first appearance on 16); impedance shifters (61); two serious looking men in ties bent over a ‘project’ (36)— all acquire a kind of exhausting familiarity, seemingly reappearing through invisible productive algorithms. The blandness and ubiquity of the icons perfectly concretize the numbing sameness (WDM = ‘World Domination Modus’?) Shaw’s narrator finds at his chosen Site, the suburbo-industrial sections of the Bay Area. And they alter the language. Take away the surrounding facing-page glacier, and lines like “Uplift creases along edge words” (39) change. And where the drawings of Grenier and Michaux have expressivist elements, Shaw’s visual material seems to parody a kind of linguistic economism, the reduction of communication to words, by zeroing in on visual and syntactic normativity, and showing how their absolutes are impossible, at any scale. (Comics do this, too.)

The effect is heightened by the diction that Shaw employs for the written elements, a kind of neo-didactic 50s science film narrator who has taken some sodium pentothal and is proceeding to demythologize progress in the flattest of affects:

A garage opens to slanted paving.
Slats line and into dirt:
controlled by window seat, lake
lines evaporate, bake as
capitals unglue — and you,
making this work
of neighborhood gates mistake
pleasantness for tryst.

Note boats in park lakes
raw sewage bubbles over
embankments and a handy man
must be summoned. (58)

These lines are set within an enlarged map of the Bay Area, with an icon of what looks like a prison watchtower. The straight face with which the ‘lake/ evaporate/ bake/ gates/ mistake’ ‘unglue/ you’ and ‘Note/ boats’ rhymes are delivered may make their chimings into a kind of low comedy. Close looks at the book’s many (fragmentary) maps reveal the locations of many of the sites, but in the interview, names that don’t show up in the text of the poem get brought out: Oakland, Berkeley, Emeryville. The fact that these lines literally sit on the map of the place they are describing pushes the joke, which I take to be the Bay Area itself, completely over the embankments. At the same time, the watchtower, and the admonishment that passing by gates is not actual contact, lend a sense of the stakes of saying so. Shaw’s focus, he notes in the interview, tends toward environmental “givens that structure what one is forced to internalize and be transformed by”: the things that we see, hear, and grok when walking around.

Shaw, as he notes to Sullivan, found most of the 20 Sites of the poem in Emeryville (where he was living at the time): a “semi-public, multi-use, vaguely-dilapidated zone... residual and often transitional... not living up to presentation drawings... not failing wildly, just droning along... park-oid, or spatial leftovers behaving as parks.” Writing for Landscape Architecture magazine in 1968, Robert Smithson wrote of developing such patches:

Boring, if seen as a discrete step in the development of an entire site, has an esthetic value. It is an invisible hole. It could be defined by Carl Andre’s motto — ‘A thing is a hole in a thing it is not.’ (Smithson 95)

In addition to explicitly invoking Andre Smithson’s use of ‘boring’ as means for entering a space — undecidable between physically hollowing out or being hollowed out mentally — echoes Warholian boredom as formulated in POPism: “The more you look at the exact same thing, the more the meaning goes away, and the better and emptier you feel” (Warhol and Hackett 50). As Shaw’s narrator walks through Emeryville, “the exact same thing” imposes itself repeatedly. He is forced to internalize and
be transformed by it. The meaning goes away for the narrator, but not for the reader. The narrator, or narrators, since the perspective seems to vary from poem to poem, uncover in Emeryville a Site/Nonsite dialectic within the built environment that is almost infinitely extensive to (as Shaw notes in the interview with Sullivan) “historical or vertical axes that don’t connect with what’s there now, but with what had been there”: the discursive webs that produced the area’s architecture persist only in surface trace. So while the sentences of the poem track singly, there is disjunction in moving from one to the next, just as there are discontinuities when seeing buildings from different eras stuck next to each other, casting invisible roots into vanished ideologies and diffusing their toxins into the present. The text’s disjunctiveness is thus motivated by what we might call ‘discontinuities of site’ – impossible linkages perceived through space-time when at a particular point, and brought together, visually and verbally, by the observer-as-artist, and book-as-factory. But it is wrong to “mistake/pleasantness for tryst”: the encounters afforded by this landscape are not exchanges, but park-oid structures of control.

The visual-verbal riffs extend to smaller-scaled allusions. One page features a border of xerographically magnified neo-crosshatchings that suggest hills, paths and tree cover (23). At the same time, they recall, and apparently use the same technique of magnification as, the cover of Clark Coolidge’s 1980 book *Smithsonian Depositions*, which, like *Cable Factory 20*, riffs on Smithson’s essay “The Spiral Jetty,” its style and contents:

> Can you see me? I’m afoot below tilting. The sun seizes, lasting on a flat of pink colloidals. And basalt over limestone the sound circles the site. Worms rotate in a box of Pacific radio tubes. We’ve put the cap back on it though the heats will still arise. Sag to the center of the bones, so this rotation may be termed narration. (Coolidge 42)

While there is stylistic similarity between Coolidge’s laconic Smithsonian riffing and Shaw’s sentences, *Cable Factory* draws attention to it using visual, not verbal, cues, a rotation that may be termed narration. Even the orthography functions as a unit of visual organization, and of allusion: much of the verse is in fact structured by an acrostic:

> Recruits head out in that direction
> (owners trick poodles to distraction).
> Officers themselves had sat at such tables, unsure,
> as they themselves remind us, if their future
would be with Tegetal, though proud
of oaths, even

Concessions, like renaming the freeway
after traffic victims:
Klaus Fluzoig Way, from an overpass,
traffic speeding along the lagoon.
Slick rooftops after rain, first since
their return to the state,
rushing out for
the sudden heaviness in atmosphere:
clouds weighing on high-rises,
not quite repetition
in pools
which

Welcome the coincidence, crimes
appearing regularly
As newspaper reading increases,
institutionalized
below steady movement,
Teams having been washed down the street
before the hundred year parade,
Enamel on counters, drums suddenly
in blocked direction:
Recognition, they called it,
as if there were a before. (78-79)

Vertical, first-letter-of-the-line acrostics produce ROCKS and WATER — two of the four elements that Smithson saw from 20 different perspectives within the Spiral Jetty: MUD, SALT CRYSTALS, ROCKS, WATER. Cable Factory 20’s twenty sections clearly must correspond—at least partially—to the twenty directions (North; North by east; Northeast by north; etc.) Smithson turned within the Jetty.

If any passages of artworld prose can be said to be legendary, Smithson’s twenty nothing-in-that-drawer-like iterations are. Shaw’s poem is contained in the Nonsite of Smithson’s boldly empty observations, just scaled up. Shaw doesn’t let the acrostic be too deterministic; he keeps cataloging time-bound occurrences to get in effects like “unsure/future” and “Officers/Concessions” as consecutive line endings. The last line reveals power, pathos and anger in the “recognition” that as presently configured, the present’s obliteration of the past takes most people with it, and makes comparisons for correspondence impossible, transforming them into “coincidence.”
While working from twenty different perspectives fosters a peripatetic quality, there aren’t a lot of people in *Cable Factory 20*, so it’s difficult to speak of the book’s social imagination in the way one might of that of another frequent stroller, Frank O’Hara; the people, including O’Hara, are actually in Shaw’s follow-up book, *The Lobe*. Yet *Cable Factory 20*’s narrator—or “ethnographer,” as Shaw describes the definitely male protagonistic voice in the interview—describes places as if they had intentions and personalities. They are coercive and time-bound, like people: “Anonymous treks in the wetland, never worrying if the nine year old will drown/ Left on frontage, nowning” (44).

“Nowning” is, I think, a pretty complicated pun along those lines. One gets the sense that nowning, which transforms a noun into a participle, is a play on John Cage-adapted Zen empty mind practice, one that is intent on letting things come to one as themselves, literally becoming themselves within the particular context created by the observer’s perspective. For nowning, I believe we are meant to hear “crying,” as a cry is the ultimate non-nounal noun, a signifier of pain, which, in Wittgenstein’s private language argument, is the referent no one can agree upon. This reading I think is borne out by line 27, with its mention of Köningsberg, which is a synecdoche for Kant and Kant’s work. Superficially, it was Kantian metaphysics that separated things-in-themselves, or “noumena” from things-are-we-conceive-them, or “phenomena.” In the light of Kant, “nowning” can also be read as “getting at things in themselves,” an impossibility in Kant, but why not in the poem?

A parallel visual example is the photo of a boy next to a dinosaur on page 43, which turns out (after a little digging among internet Smithsonalia) to be Smithson himself (Estate of Robert Smithson). This is both a Warholian, Brillo-box maneuver, substituting the real thing for our expected experience of art, but it also adds a touch of flattened out nostalgia to the speaker-construct, as if that photo and its relation to Smithson’s subsequent production paralleled the relation of a new author to what he recognizes as his first major work. The simultaneous excitement and nostalgia, like the poems’ didacticism, are more found objects than affective states. The layeredness that Smithson found within the various strata of the jetty, Shaw finds in, and grafts into, the process of textual production. There are many more examples like this.
The book thus seems to be after a larger scale than the “personal” perspective on buildings, or anything else. As Shaw notes to Sullivan: “In the clamor to situate themselves in the sweep of History, most things miss. They begin to operate as black holes, sucking up the experience of time and reproducing it as self-interested arguments about history.” *Cable Factory 20* thus takes up “geological time as a way to complicate temporal frames of reference” produced by a faulty past exerting claims on the present:

*Asked for proof: a ‘Mediterranean’ parking complex with an amphitheater of sponge yellow seats. Here, we watch a foundation slab grown-over with grass patches, trash heaps and several sealed entrances to what must have been basements. (92)*

Anticipating objections from the imagined reader, the ethnographer here foregrounds his position within his surroundings, and within the book itself — his “apprentice work,” as Shaw calls his activities in the interview, consists not in knowledge gathering or in the construction of history, but rather in “effectivity” (93). Time becomes language, a rotation that may be termed narration, so that the demand for proof and its satisfaction becomes part of the landscape. Obviously, the-walk-around-and-describe-what-you-see-school of poetics has a pretty diverse heritage, one to which, the narrator notes, “Everyone, theoretically, has access” (93).

The specific embeddedness of these observations in *Cable Factory 20’s* mock enlightenment attempts at systematizing points to larger-scale axes of selection and combination: on the one hand, an acrostic, and on the other, the diachronic layers of a particular area as synchronically sliced by a body moving through them, and the demands that are made upon it. Time and space. And it’s these unveiled strata of time and space that *Cable Factory 20’s* (underspecified) socio-political structure is most apparent: in its providing a model for scalar perception. The difference here is that Levinas-like face-to-face encounters here take place with inanimate objects, and at scales impossible other than textually.
This is meant to send-up the dialectics of place. But Shaw is serious about the possibilities of scale. Even if he finds the materials of this preliminary investigation lacking, he is able to make something out of them. The textual component of the book ends with the following verse:

Now the views have been cut down.
Toner checked.
The prosthetic copy machine redescribes the world in grain. Does grain alert us?

R O C K S
NNNNN EEEE
SSSSS WWWWW
W A T E R

All week the in-between.
So steal them.
All that’s left is to see clearly, to think, to conceive, and to begin again.
What city itself could direct us to something even larger, but controlled? (103)

As Smithson notes (with a pun): “To be in the scale of the Spiral Jetty is to be out of it.” Shaw himself did leave the Bay Area for another city, “even larger, but controlled.” But this sweeping question of locale is not what ends the book: there is still one more verso-recto spread to the poem when one turns the page, one that actually shows “the world in grain.” Of the poem’s last two pages, page 105, on the right, offers a list of ‘Research Materials’ — a bibliography (one that ethically follows up on the admonition ‘So steal them’). Page 104, however, is completely taken up by a ‘bleed’ (where a printed image takes up an entire page without white-space borders) of a grainy xerox, along with a WDM icon. The xeroxed image has been enlarged to the point where the shading effects have been rastered into dark and light flecks that seem to have a three-dimensional life of their own, while also giving contours to the dark forms, seemingly a block plan of several buildings, of the image. The altered scale of the xerox mirrors the altered scale of the map’s version (and creation) of the territory. Such scalar shifts in perspective are “the world in grain”—so “Does grain alert us?” It does. Just as the orthographically giant ROCKS and WATER seem to respond to the question with blank insistence, Cable Factory 20 effects a removal from the normal experience of place via a kind of freedom of movement between visual and verbal, spatial and temporal, or what Shaw calls in the interview “temporary expressivity” —
an “active version of intertextuality, where there’s a kind of force and reciprocation between a place and a text….almost as a kind of substance, a pressure bearing down on the field ethnographer doing his ‘research’. Not just bearing down abstractly, but hooking up with what’s actually seen.”

In this way, the narrator can, near the book’s end, say “I’m not sorry I was fascinated with cameras and binoculars; that the wars passed. And galvanizing events had to be produced by will” (98). I don’t think the book can be fully identified with part of this position — that perspective “creates” events, a position that wryly echoes Language Poetry’s point about putting the onus of reading on readers (or readers on reading) rather than on texts and authors. The reader of Cable Factory 20 becomes surrounded by the Bay Area — its topography, its history, its dead forms — and is challenged to begin again, to try to make a piece of sculpture outside, one that might cause a change in state. One wonders, however, if everyone really can, theoretically, make a piece of sculpture outside and expect not to be disturbed. To be inside the cable factory is to be out of it—until “theoretically” starts to take on negative resonances.

If part of Cable Factory 20 is a kind of scalar laboratory experiment in working with artist-as-parameter, then Shaw’s follow-up, The Lobe, works with sets of artists as Sites for the poem as possibly parasitic Nonsite, destroying the host authority structures that form like crystals on their reputations, lives, and work, but leaving the desire for encounter intact, like a smiling ray from a carefully engineered machine. Shaw opens “The Lobe” section of The Lobe, his follow-up to Cable Factory 20, to which I will now turn, along with what I see as related work from the period, with a quote from Diderot, writing to Sophie Volland:

Why shouldn’t all nature be like the polyp? When it is split into a hundred thousand fragments the original polyp no longer exists, but all its elements continue to live. (17)

For ‘polyp’ and ‘lobe,’ substitute ‘self.’ In a review of Bernard Williams’s Truth and Truthfulness, Richard Rorty points up a chapter that dramatizes Diderot’s idea of ‘what it is to be a truthful person’:

Rousseau thought that you could be authentic simply by laying yourself bare, but Diderot explained why it was not that easy….Diderot’s proto-Freudian account of the agent as ‘awash with many images, many excitements, merging fears and fantasies that dissolve into one
another’ leaves us with the need to construct a self to be true to, rather than, as Rousseau thought, the need to make an already extent self transparent to itself. (Rorty)

Shaw jokingly refused to attribute many of the epigraphs in Cable Factory 20 — ascribing them to, among others, “A French Historian” (83), “A Dutch Architect” (95), “A liar living close by” (75)—sending up the desire for an authorless text. The Lobe plays off the desire to shatter the self-in-text, treating the desire for full fragmentation as a response to a time and place when writing was ‘forced’ to argue against the idea of the end of history, and against the idea of the self as a fully actualizable, discrete little world. It explains why it is no longer necessary to make those arguments, at least in the same way.

Bruce Andrews’s I Don’t Have Any Paper So Shut Up (or, Social Romanticism) (Andrews) is, among other things, a mirroring and spitting back of capital’s detritus and its terms for processing it, and a constant reminder of the hard power that lays behind the soft. The book, already and rightly canonical, arrived in some packaging: the idea of a de-selfed text. Why was that imposed on it? At the time, the discourse of the individual, atomized, bourgeois self was valorized by corporate media as the highest unit of organization and thinking. It did so in a crushingly totalizing way that has now mutated into ideologies, as the poet Alan Gilbert has noted, like “an Army of one.” On a much smaller scale, a lot of bad poetry was being written whereby the idea of the ‘self’ was what structured the poem — was what held together its impressions and descriptions. Analytical content was scorned, often explicitly, in such work. Charles Altieri identified the era’s “scenic mode” as a poetic whereby “an ideal state where mimetic criteria of naturalness and an ethical standard of humility can be integrated with moments of visionary self-transcendence sustained by careful attention to craftsmanly control” (Altieri, Self and Sensibility). While Marvell, Browning, Eliot, etc. had based the genre of lyric around exploring the self-as-structure (its fictitiousness, its layeredness), poets were often being paid well to take the self seriously as an essential whole. It was galling mostly for its political effects. Whereas previously, lyric was aware that most of what gets called the ‘self’ is conjured into being by forces over which we have little or no control, a certain post-Lowell poetry seemed to posit the non-racialized white self as whole, sui generis, natural, and as the only legitimate vehicle of self-transcendence. It was like
advertising. *Shut Up* was thus, on one level, designed to effectively mimic and disrupt the monolithic, totalizing media, even poetic media, by turning their terms and tactics against them.

When the book, and others, arrived, some critics claimed that they got ‘beyond’ the self via those techniques. Then, out of terminological laziness, ‘self’ and ‘author function’ collapsed in on one another. Just as anyone who reads the internet or *Ad Week* or watches a lot of TV can begin to see the signatures within the media combine, so trying to read *Shut Up* as without the author function cuts the real power out from under the book — the opening up of a subject position (not the construction of a ‘self’) out of negation, a position that rejects one form of power in order to begin producing others. *Shut Up* is not spitting for the sake of spitting, nor is it ‘ambient’ spitting — i.e. it doesn’t propose ‘spit’ as a category that has a metaphysical independence from the spitter. It’s directed and embodied. *Shut Up* and other books are productive, as well as resistant.

An eloquent formulation of the resistant/productive dialectic is Sianne Ngai’s essay “Raw Matter: A Poetics of Disgust.” The kind of disgust Ngai finds in Andrews and others “deliberately interferes with a reading practice based on the principle that what is at stake in every textual encounter is a hidden object, one that can be discovered by the reader only if he or she reads deeply enough.” It also has a further function:

> Because the force of its utterances is aimed outward rather than inward, the social attunement between subjects disgust does achieve is paradoxically effected by a distancing. One ordinarily thinks of the ‘face-to-face encounter’ as achieved through a process of drawing closer. But in disgust the opposite trajectory makes this ethically important moment happen. Pulling away from the object in revulsion, you’re suddenly in front of the other, who, unlike the others, is attuned to you, who stands in the space you’ve prepared for him through that act of withdrawal. Paradoxically, in the economy of disgust, it is by means of an originary exclusion that the textual encounter is made intersubjective. (Ngai)

This is what makes *Shut Up* and other texts of its era so effective. Beyond whatever effects it has in heightening the contradictions inherent in sound-bite rhetoric at as systemic level, there is a subject position to which one attaches an act of withdrawal, even if it is not ‘present’ in the text as a ‘self.’ It makes textual encounter intersubjective. The kinds of face-to-face encounters one gets in *The Lobe* are mediated by transformations of disgust, much as the investigations of *Cable Factory 20* are.
It is significant that Frank O'Hara (who shows up repeatedly in *The Lobe*) and Smithson are two white men who were arguably killed by their art. *The Lobe* works within what one might call ideational life-space, actual cullings from an artist’s work as mixed with myths and anecdotes about the life. It’s a space that most often produces fetish objects. What Shaw’s speaker seems to be after, at one level, is a new, non-fetishistic form of encounter, one that dusts off the 18th century “Man of Feeling” indirectly, through the angles by which the poems reject various receptions of art and ideas, and even take pleasure in the act. Shaw’s poet tries to think disinterestedly in the path of others, without repeating their presence or precise movements, or those of their admirers, and in the process creates a kind of mirror displacement: likeness dominates. But does he succeed in his walk? The book is saturated with the detritus of self in order to show that may be possible to construct a subject position without producing absolute presence or transcendence—but the presence that it does produce is ambiguous. There’s no spitting, just strong orderly bowel movements that refuse to let their revulsion hold back their acts of construction. The speaker sits pleasantly through the entire dinner…

…and, within a few pages, inserts Rush lyrics into “Wilhelm Meister” (20); makes Godard’s strike satire *Tout Va Bien* into a downtown 80s office-worker noir disrupted by Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc* (23); finds public restroom chunks of Olive Garden vomit “On Jeff Wall’s Wall” (25); peeks in on Bartleby and Uncle Fester romancing “Sara Merde” (24); visits with O’Hara and Guy Debord simultaneously in “Having a Coke with Guy Debord” (57); and is sure, in another O’Hara nod (dated July 2000) that “Bin Laden is coming on the right day!” (60). Though such references are set within complicating sets of circumstances, these seem to be the only kinds of encounters that occur in *The Lobe*.

O’Hara, for one, hovers over the entire enterprise, his presence-in-absence culminating in a section of sometimes homophonic “translations” that includes the Bin Laden poem, “An Extra Step in the Plaza” (“It’s my lunch hour so I go/ for a walk along the hum-colored arc,” 60) and a “homophobic” translation of O’Hara’s “At the Old Place”: “Earl checks out my twin-cap diesel combo./ Yeah, I got a wrench for that. (Dude, you comin’?)/ Earl hops in” (68).
In my opinion, Shaw’s “At the Old Place” in particular points to the stylistic invention of the poetic movement Flarf, its ambiguous affective component. In O’Hara’s poem, 1950s white gay New York poets congregate for clandestine dancing; in Shaw’s poem, it’s Dukes of Hazard-type guys. The poem’s appropriations say: “Identity may not be up for grabs, and it may have some immanent component that is not substitutable. At the same time, I believe that that immanent component is available to me discursively as someone who gets it.” Shaw is white, cis, and straight. He’s also a Frank O’Hara scholar. He is not intending to hurt or offend or shock anyone with the poem. He’s intending, I think, to say something about forms of masculinity. The poem, however, exceeds that, and I think it is partially from that same exceeding that Flarf happens. Gary Sullivan studied the work in The Lobe very carefully, and interviewed Shaw in depth about his work. It was around the time that Shaw was presenting the poems that became The Lobe that the Flarf collective was formed, and, later, that the first Flarf poems began circulate outside of it (Sullivan, Glory Hole). This was also the time of the brazenly stolen “election,” the ascension of the George W. Bush regime, 9/11, the run-up to the second Iraq war, and of the Internet becoming widespread and economically essential, and then seemingly going immediately bust.

Flarf evolved in response to all of those things, but so did a lot of other work. It was also at that same time that experimental poets of color were beginning to be published in greater numbers by presses such as Leroy and Krupskaya. Issues of race, and of the colonialism that was then called globalization, were explicitly coming to the fore in their work as the same issues came to the fore in white-dominated US discourse after 9/11 and, reflectively, in the white-dominated institutions supporting poetry in the US. Poets such as Rodrigo Toscano and Hung Q. Tu developed tremendously forceful, almost systematic critiques that were as wicked as they were blazingly incorporative of current events and, often, in the case of Toscano, that were compellingly calls to action. Flarf also took the discourse of the regime and its supporters and turned it forcefully back on itself, but the poems’ intentional ambiguities in framing and their Andrews-like outward force of utterance rely, in reception, on the kind of mutual recognition in disgust that Ngai describes: they rely on assumptions of the poets’ own
beliefs and intentions, and on the absurdity of ascribing the poems’ meanings to the authors. The poems, however, in their ferocity, regularly exceed those terms, “lampoon[ing] right-wing discourse,” for example, “with such gusto that they seem to express covert sympathy for their subject matter” (Reed 94). That sense of sympathy is, again, produced by a pleasure in disgust that is matched with an outward force of utterance and with ambiguities in the poems’ framing that exceed recognition in Ngai’s sense, something the poems do intentionally. They do not make the textual encounter intersubjective. Flarf, as it progressed, explicitly engaged race in ways that were intentionally “Not okay.” (Sullivan, Brief Guide), as when, to take one recently-cited example, a white Flarf poet brought the term “ofay” into a poem (Reed 96). Flarf was what it was because white discourse on the Internet after 9/11 was what it was. It leans on the same white discursive freedoms in the US of the time that its appropriated texts unthinkingly enforce. While Flarf understands itself as sending up what Melamed describes as “literature as an antiracist technology,” Flarf was, mostly, a reactionary movement: in its relentless white-centering in issues of race, colonialism, gender, and violence; in the manner that its ambiguous framing allowed its appropriated content to exceed its targets; and in the way that early, ironized forms of “The Promise of American Poetry” feels were burned off, under the banner of appropriation, in pleasure and disgust.

There is a concrete social sense in which that played out within the institutional rhetorical culture of US poetry. During its initial larger reception in 2006, Flarf drew reluctant poets of color into the kind of emotional labor—that of having to explain why, actually, it really was not OK—that Trisha Low describes as part of the 2015 conceptualism-initiated crisis. Reed specifies the issues surrounding Flarf as a movement and its 2006 engagements with race in detail (see pages 118-120 of Reed and the chapter footnotes in particular), but because Flarf lacked the institutional pull that would have made it a threat to academia or poetry nonprofits, the situation was allowed to continue—just as conceptualism continued before Black Lives Matter. Unlike Shaw’s work, which does not have an outward force of utterance and seems deflationary even of Smithson, Flarf’s self-referential ambiguities were as populist as they were parodic. Rather than being deflationary (with some exceptions), Flarf rode on top of, and used, the energy surrounding the discourses it appropriated to propel itself forward.
Promotional events such as the multi-night Flarf Festival, held in a rented theatre in New York in April 2006 (Wired), centered mostly white poets as they enacted their pleasure in disgust, mostly at white internet discourse, as entertainment.\textsuperscript{43} Other white-dominated experimental poetry formations from that moment that were also working with appropriated Internet texts were paying attention: Flarf’s intentional, inherent ambiguities in framing are a big reason it lent itself to, and was taken up as a partner discourse by, conceptualism, and why the two movements repeatedly institutionally co-promoted, as they did as late as April 17, 2009, at an event at the Whitney Museum of Art in New York (Whitney).

Flarf’s ambiguities are not different in intent from those of Place’s \textit{Gone With The Wind} project. The movement is best understood as the poetic equivalent of whiteness studies.\textsuperscript{44} An examination of its reception in terms of race (Yu), in terms of gender (Damon), and in terms of labor (Bernes) bears that out. The forgotten 2006 Flarf non-crisis (that Reed can keep to a few pages of a generally positive extended discussion) and the 2015 conceptualism crisis (that actually boiled over institutionally) played out in exactly the same way: with poets of color having to explain what the problem was, and with their being met with explanations of the ways that the work was new or complex or challenging. By the time 2015 finally arrived, from the perspective of poetry institutions, it was something like first time farce, second time tragedy. The recent release of a recuperative anthology that leaves out both the most controversial work and its reception is yet another means of using the movement as a re-centering mechanism.

If \textit{The Lobe} somewhat similarly critiques old school purveyors of “emotional content” (as one poem from the book puts it), the lack of outward force of utterance gives its critiques a different valence. Straight-edge linguophiles from all eras get equal amounts of piss taken out of them. “The Herder,” for example, unleashes a set of perfectly calibrated puns on the name, and ideas, of the 18th century linguistic philosopher. After Herder ruminates on the idea of a sheep, his idea calls back to him as a series of vocalizations, and epiphany is produced:

\begin{quote}
The sheep bleats!
\end{quote}
And the soul recognizes,
feels inside —

‘Yes, you are that which bleats.’ (55)

Herder goes on to imagine herding Goethe, but I also hear Robert Lowell’s car radio bleating “Love, O
careless Love.” Just as it’s impossible to write a poetry of place, it is impossible to write a poetry of
encounter, with ideas or other people — but that’s a good thing. Destroying (digesting) these inherited
terms clears the way for further encounter through a kind of disgust that is also not a turn away or a
regurgitation, but a recognition, one the book’s putative speaker can take also pleasure in:

Old School

Behind the consciousness barn raising,
instruments laid out the season’s gift drawings,
‘European Enlightenment’ the campy
organizational style of the gala. We winked
and sipped hooch from our canteens,
while umpteen members sauntered, mouthing
words in explanatory cartouches,
some with ties gone cloven at the seams.
The more we stared, wave patterns
lapped at the lowering clouds.
It was a thing of wonder, this glowing lamb leg:
I felt Ann Lee about and quivered
more than usual in the bowels. (47)

Sipping a cocktail au dehors as one’s inherited ideational structure forms nothing more meaningful than
a lamb leg (think “golden calf”) is a fairly provocative thing to do. Pleasure in disgust, and pleasure
generally, can freak people out. Marketing departments have become amazing at tying pleasure to
consumer culture (sent up relentlessly in the book), as have their counterparts in institutional poetry.
Having your pleasure and your critique too feels dirty, something the poem's reversed author of
Polyverse (Lee Ann Brown) might remark, and sometimes like an assertion of class privilege, as the
accoutrements of “Old School” signal. Repeated provocation of that reaction is an operative function
of The Lobe. Its satire is of encounters that reduce people and ideas, dead or otherwise, to cloaking
devices for power.

Andrews's book remains controversial because eros doesn’t get sent up completely. Alan Davies’s
Candor, which tropes even its own appropriations and the pleasure gained therein, hasn’t yet been
given the reading it deserves. Duchamp’s *Etants Donées* speaks of the impossibility of speaking any further through the female form (luridly abject or otherwise), but is very clear that the form’s deadness holds “The Illuminating Gas” by which one was supposed to see to proceed. *The Lobe* begins with a series of “Exemplary Acts” that include “Six Bodily Graphs” that describe the deadness of the terms by which everyday life proceeds, materially and ideationally. The pivot point for each of the piece’s six prose paragraphs is the first person singular possessive (“my”):

Taking its horizon line from the belt of coverings affixed to the “free time” courtyard’s marble piers, my sequence of bodily elongations and collapses attached quotation marks to the space’s de facto protective custody effect. (9)

The first person here is a place holder. The piece anticipates its own turn against the terms that surround that it (while also relying on a shared experience of them). It records the real-time unfolding of an non-history, but at the same instances betrays pleasure in the ability to construct something even out of the flimsy crap of forced internalization. Does this leave a self, or some other protective custody effect, to be true to, or to construct alternate power grids through? It depends on partial correspondence, of a spectral lamb leg to an abjectly thrust-out femur.
Chapter 9: Why Not Reddit?: Poetry Communities Online

This short chapter explains why Reddit, beyond its being a commercial service, isn’t used by the global non-exclusively anglophone poetry community even in the (inadequate) way that Twitter is. A failed attempt to use Reddit as a platform for explicating a particular poem excerpt is used to help clarify why it has not been adopted by poetry’s rhetorical cultures. Along the way, I present more detail on Thomas Farrell’s conception of a rhetorical culture, and link it, just for the sake of looking into critical-historical congruences, to Stanley Fish’s idea of an interpretive community.

The passage is from Will Alexander’s “Towards the Primeval Lightning Field”:

The body is now weighed on a broken axial cart, its blood conjoined as it rises within a nuclear darkness of ravens. So as Piscean chronology now shatters, dawn becomes an unclaimed resurrection, a tumultuous eikon of skin no longer formed around its old dendritic artifacts. The calendar of draconian enfeeblement with its integers of the past 20 centuries, erased, its linear Babels darkened by the extreme necessity for a new perpendicular burst, transmuting in demeanour, with history consumed in a roll of flaming aural dice, with its wizardry of tools subsumed in arcane vibration, turned into a power of splendiferous scorpions. The psychic wounds of the past eclipsed in this new millenium by the power of smelted dragon’s blood. (Alexander)

In this poem fragment, complexity is a kind of meta-encoding: the fact of it, and the attention it requires, signals an authorial intention to communicate without drawing on (or, rather, by actively blocking) conventional, low-effort associations that act as forms of cognitive oppression. That intention is underscored (for US readers) by the British and other unconventional spellings, which heighten the strangeness of the content that is actually encoded. Take the phrase “the extreme necessity for a new perpendicular burst, transmuting in demeanour, with history consumed in a roll of flaming aural dice.”

There are myriad associations that habitual readers of poetry will bring to this passage, not least of which being the endlessly deferred title-assertion of Mallarmé’s poem *Jamais un Coup de Dés n’abolira le Hazard* (“Never will a throw of dice abolish chance”) and its devastatingly aphoristic end line, “Toute Penseé émet un Coup de Dés”: *Every Thought issues a Throw of Dice*. Alexander’s poem reintroduces colonial realities of the era (meaning dice thrown would never abolish the fact of being a colonial subject in France or elsewhere) into Mallarmé’s seemingly liberating poem (i.e. its reputation as formally liberating within literary history). That is the fire in Alexander’s dice.
One can put a sentence like “The history, and specifically the colonial history, tied up in Mallarmé’s seemingly liberating poem, contributes to the fire in Alexander’s dice” into a critical study, and one can even unpack it to the point that the resonances it seeks to draw out feel verified rather than just asserted (as I haven’t). One version of historicism would be to look among authorial artefacts for evidence that Alexander actually had Mallarmé’s dice in mind as a referent for the dice when composing the poem. Another would be to look at different uses of dice in Mallarmé’s and Alexander’s differing historical moments as used to invoke historical time. The process of assertion in criticism (stating a critical insight in a manner that will alter the cognitive environment and result in an impression) and the process of verification (i.e. making a critical argument drawing on elements that seem to bolster the case) are largely conjoined.

Teasing out meanings from poems is difficult, and, like many other kinds of work, it happens more successfully in collaboration. Because the audience for poetry, in the US, is seemingly relatively small and is perceived as being largely professionalized, it takes place within specialized journals published behind paywalls, where the monetization of this labor is part of what contributes to the work’s legitimation, which allows the degree of professionalization to be easily tracked. Professionalization is also what keeps published critical activity mostly within academia and not a more open pursuit, as it was, in, say, 19th century England. Blogs, Facebook, and Twitter have changed that to some degree, with threads of, if not always explication, then appreciation. Probably more poetry discussions are happening outside academia than within it, but they are not happening on Reddit, where it would make a lot of sense for them to appear. In order to find out why not, I tried it.

Reddit is the fourth largest site on the internet in terms of daily traffic (Marantz). On reddit, users self-organize into “communities” that center on particular topics, or subreddits, but Reddit is a not a “walled garden” like Facebook (Guardian). Its landing page is simple: it shows the most popular discussions on the site at any given moment, according to proprietary metrics. The parameters can be adjusted to display results via various related criteria: by region, and by whether something is “hot,”
“new,” “rising,” “controversial,” “top,” or “gilded.” The posts themselves (consisting generally of
“stories, links, and images”) are given titles by the posters, and appear under the poster’s “handle.”
Each post must also be posted under a “subreddit,” or the discussion community formed around
particular topic, concept, or shared interest. Subreddits are always part of any search result for a post.
For example, it looking for current “hot” posts (those with the most traffic), a post titled “Australian
positivity!” with 8263 upvotes, from the subreddit “r/wholesomememes,” is listed toward the center.


Subreddits themselves can be searched via various metrics, including popularity. A search for “poetry"
on March 3rd, 2018, yielded the three results seen in the illustration below,

Illustration 9.2 Reddit. “Poetry” search result.

The subreddits listed are “r/Poetry,” a subreddit with more than 125K “subscribers” at the time of this
writing, “r/poetryreading,” at 1K+, and “r/poetry_critics,” at almost 7K.

These reddit “communities” were founded and are moderated by particular people; each has its own
rules of etiquette for what constitutes a relevant post or a relevant comment on a post. “r/Poetry”
consists of links to various poems by published canonical and non-canonical poets, in English and in
translation. Its “What We’re About” section says the following: “This is a forum to talk about the
world of poetry. Seek advice on submitting your poetry for publication. Offer a lesson on
enjambment. Spread the news of a new poet laureate. Etc.” Its moderators “reserve the right to
remove posts as best serves the community.”

Reddit is free as in free beer, but closed in terms of source code access and modification. Its sourcing
of content is cosmopolitanist: anyone whose internet providers allow them to reach the site can post,
but it’s a US-based site, processing memes and controlling populations in a manner no different, in
some ways, than the Poetry Foundation processes poems. The death of the dream of frictionless
transnationalism via the web—aka the borderless internet (Goldsmith and Wu)—has been hastened via
China’s and Russia’s (and Bhutan’s and Iran’s and many other countries’) internet censorship.
Relatedly, as the run-up to 2016 US presidential election and its aftermath shows, trolling and shit-
posting are phenomena that know no borders. That makes trolling, the bane of contributor-based websites, at once a transnational and state-mirroring pressure.

Illustration 9.3: Mowrey. “A group of white men is called a subreddit”

The “r/Poetry” subreddit is largest Reddit community based around the discussion of English-language poetry (r/Poetry). It works to eliminate the greatest source of noise—people posting their own poems—with a sibling subreddit dedicated to that purpose: at “r/OCPoetry”—i.e. “Original Content Poetry”—“redditors” can submit and get feedback on their own work, and moderators (“mods”) do try to enforce the distinction. One thus imagines that “r/Poetry” might be a possible platform for presenting assertions such as “The dice from Mallarmé’s Jamais un Coup de Dés n’abolira le Hazard seem present in Will Alexander’s ‘aural dice’ in his poem ‘Towards the Primeval Lightning Field.’” One could post the link to the poem, which is legally hosted (i.e. without copyright violation) at the Poetry Foundation site. So I did.

Illustration 9.4: Submitting a new post to r/poetry

Like most users, I invented a screen name for myself that does not track to my real name (hans_seraphim). As I posted the link, a textbox warned, in bold, that “POSTING YOUR OWN POETRY IN THIS SUBREDDIT IS A DECLARATION OF WAR.” Reddit is not a walled garden: one can view it without an account, though one needs a login to post. Nine hours after submitting my comment on “r/Poetry” there were still no comments on my comment, and no other comments at all. The total number of page views was 10. The same was true six weeks later, though the number of page views was up to 46. By any metric, for a worldwide internet discussion on poetry, this is a poor showing indeed. The problem on reddit, at least on “r/Poetry” does not seem to be trolls, although the problem with trolls on the site as a whole is very well-documented (Marantz). It is, I believe, a lack of “community”—specifically of a poetry community that might already recognize Alexander and Mallarmé. Further, my avatar was not known to members of “r/Poetry.” Still, if there are members who immediately recognize and appreciate Alexander’s work, one imagines there would be some response. Community is a key word for Reddit, and, in my community, as I imagine it, Alexander is very
well-known. That does not seem to be the case on “r/poetry.” Of the top posts of all time on “r/Poetry,” the one that has the most upvotes, at 1009, is titled “My friend made a deep poem out of common word fridge magnets. It got dark really fast.”

Illustration 9.5: Top poetry posts

The second most upvoted, at 681, begins: “My girlfriend’s Grandfather, who is a poet in his 90s, has set up a website for his poetry.” I liked that idea, but it wasn’t what I was looking for in discussing Alexander’s poem.

Farrell’s theory and practice of rhetorical culture are aimed at “empowering, engaging, and trying to ameliorate civic life.” His imagined audience is “those who would educate”; he wants to engage a history where “rhetoric was part of pedagogical philosophy”; he believes that rhetoric can be taught, and that “any practice worthy of the name should be capable of being performed by others” (2).

Farrell is serious about the ameliorative part of the practice of rhetoric, addressing “reform-minded individuals and groups who still hope for more responsive and participatory civic institutions” (3). As seen in previous chapters, the current US system of writing programs is not designed to be ameliorative in the way Farrell imagines. Their administrations might best be described in Farrell’s unintentionally caustic terms as “pluralists by necessity, rhetoricians by design” (47); the MFA world’s nods toward pluralism continue to be fraught (Schuessler). In defense of rhetoric, however, the other term in his equation, Farrell finds that “Aristotle offers the first, and perhaps the only justification for what rhetoric must be if it is to be a fully realized, historically significant human practice” (61): he believes that “the development and sophistication of rhetoric as a practice allows advocate and audience alike to develop important relational goods and virtues” (ibid). Rhetoric, in Farrell’s view of Aristotle, thus “moves from being an aesthetically significant form of activity to a practice, an activity with internal standards of excellence that, if achieved, yield conduct that is ethical” (62) and that helps create and sustain relations. I will discuss Aristotelian ethos in the next chapter, but suffice to say that the particular rhetorical culture I was looking for is not on reddit. Reddit’s reputation for low-end discussion precedes it, but even if that were the case simply creating a new subreddit with firm
guidelines and hoops to jump through will not create a community-based environment for productive discussion.

Farrell’s rhetorical cultures have more in common with (and were perhaps influenced by) Stanley Fish’s “interpretive communities,” and it’s worth revisiting Fish’s initial formulation of the concept of an interpretive community with regard to social media and digital pedagogy. Such communities are now eminently hostable. And social sites self-hosted by rhetorical communities might become a means of legitimation that allows the bypassing of paywalled academic publishing. In his classic paper “Interpreting the Variourum” (i.e. the Variourum Commentary on Milton’s poems), Fish finds the then-dominant procedure for interpretation assumes “that there is a sense, that it is embedded or encoded in the text, and that it can be taken in at a single glance ... [by] first stepping back from the text, and then putting together or otherwise calculating the discrete units of significance it contains” (Fish 473). That procedure, based on the code model of communication (discussed in the next chapter), might be enacted by, in part, “the bringing forward of another analogue, or by a more complete calculation of statistical frequencies [for word-sense disambiguation], or by the discovery of new biographical information, or by anything else” (468). Fish’s “quarrel with this procedure (and with the assumptions that generate it) is that in the course of following it through the reader’s activities are at once ignored and devalued” as “the disposable machinery of extraction” (473-474). Fish’s positive account of what doing a reading should mean looks like this:

The reader’s activities are the center of attention, where they are regarded not as leading to meaning, but as having meaning. The meaning they have is a consequence of their not being empty; for they include the making and revising of assumptions, the rendering and regretting of judgments, the coming to and abandoning of conclusions, the giving and withdrawing of approval, the specifying of causes, the asking of questions, the supplying of answers, the solving of puzzles. (474)

It will be obvious to the reader that what Fish is describing here is a comment stream avant la lettre. 

The result of the process Fish describes is the same one described by Aristotle, but with a second step—one that Fish says, explicitly, is actually not a second step at all:

In a word, these activities are interpretive—rather than being preliminary to questions of value, they are at every moment settling and resettling questions of value—and because they are
interpretive, a description of them will also be, and without any additional step, an interpretation, not after the fact, but of the fact (of experiencing). It will be a description of a moving field of concerns, at once wholly present (not waiting for meaning, but constituting meaning) and continually in the act of reconstituting itself.... Everything depends on the temporal dimension, and as a consequence, the notion of a mistake, at least as something to be avoided, disappears. (474)

What I want to highlight is the insistence on the temporal dimension, on process, which allows an updated perspective on Fish’s subsequent (later in the piece) definition of “interpretive communities” (483). For Fish, interpretive communities share strategies of interpretation and constructing authorial intention, providing “just enough stability for the battles to go on, and just enough shift and slippage to assure that they will never be settled” (484). For Fish, readers move fluidly in and out of interpretive communities depending on their sets of interpretive assumptions; the communities might in fact be described by those assumptions. It is now possible, however, to capture diachronic traces of the real-time collaborative interpretive acts that Fish describes—in, for example, a subreddit, or a Facebook or Twitter thread. Doing so may be closer to representing what Farrell calls a rhetorical culture (where “silences [are] noticeable”) rather than an interpretative community that seems more based on shared assumptions and skills than on relationships. In the concluding chapter, I will discuss a means of determining when, pedagogically, an interpretation of this sort is adequate: Aristotelian ethos.
Chapter 10: Ethos in Pedagogy as a Limit on Norm Translation

How does one know when a voice or an idea has been borne across in Ghosh’s sense? This short concluding chapter, a second theoretical corollary to the main argument that picks up from the previous corollary, proposes a non-definitive but perhaps satisfactory answer: when a poem or voice’s ethos is relatively clear. Ethos as a pedagogical limit may be useful in norm translation, particularly when teaching from it. It also has implications for historicist criticism generally.

It was common, during the rise of deconstruction in the US, for critics to reduce Aristotelian concepts of goodness and badness to simplistic universalist moralizing and to thereby reject ethos as a revealing critical construct. A main goal of Stanley Fish’s interpretive communities, developed in the wake of deconstruction, was the collaborative construction of authorial intention and textual meanings (however decentered), and, alongside of them, the reconstruction of how those texts conceive of goodness and badness in the Aristotelian sense of ethos. In order look at how that move relates to Farrell’s rhetorical cultures, I will trace a line beginning with Aristotle’s Poetics. I will argue that Ethos can be used, when teaching poetry, as a kind of metric, or stopping point. I will also argue that Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson’s Gricean maxim of relevance can be useful in constraining that use of ethos. The framework delineated by Foucault and elaborated by Fish remains congruent with such a set of constraints.

Aristotle, in the Poetics, proceeds from an inventory of poetic kinds, positing mimesis as the common element among them.47 Poetic kinds “are all in their general conception modes of imitation” (Aristotle); mimesis, while conventionally translated as imitation, refers to something beyond mimicry. For Aristotle, mimesis is intimately bound up with ethos, or moral character:

Since the objects of imitation are [people] in action, and [they] must be either of a higher or a lower type (for moral character mainly answers to these divisions, goodness and badness being the distinguishing marks of moral differences), it follows that we must represent [them] either as better than in real life, or as worse, or as they are. (ibid)
“Moral character” (or “character”) in the Poetics is something immanent to a person or persona, and it is revealed, in texts, through what is said:

Character is that which reveals moral purpose, showing what kind of things [someone] chooses or avoids. Speeches, therefore, which do not make this manifest, or in which the speaker does not choose or avoid anything whatever, are not expressive of character. Thought, on the other hand, is found where something is proved to be or not to be, or a general maxim is enunciated. (ibid)

“Moral purpose,” in Aristotle’s sense, is “activity of the rational part of the soul in accordance with virtue” (Kraut). It is discernable, once defined, in a relatively transparent fashion: people’s actions, as represented in texts, mark them as “higher or lower”; they have within them “goodness or badness”; they are, by the necessities of art, portrayed as “better or worse” than they really are. Choices reveal character: utterances where choices are not reflected “are not expressive of character,” but wherever “something is proved to be or not to be, or a general maxim is enunciated” thought is expressed. Ideas may thus be articulated, but, like passing clouds, not mark their medium.

While for Aristotle “the objects of imitation are people in action,” the speeches or actions performed in texts, the moments evaluated by readers for ethos, take place against, and take their meanings from, assumptions about the actions’ possible meanings within what gets shorthanded as a “culture”:

In contrast to modern notions of the person or self, ethos emphasizes the conventional rather than the idiosyncratic, the public rather than the private. The most concrete meaning given for the term in the Greek lexicon is “a habitual gathering place,” and I suspect that it is upon this image of people gathering together in a public place, sharing experiences and ideas, that its meaning as character rests. To have ethos is to manifest the virtues most valued by the culture to and for which one speaks—in Athens: justice, courage, temperance, magnificence, magnanimity, liberality, gentleness, prudence, wisdom. (The list is given in Rhetoric, I, 9.) (Halloran 60)

Whatever one thinks about the contemporary US and its place in the world, the poetry being written there provides insight into its conflicts, and discloses strands of its dominant ethos. One assumption in proposing that poetry communities self-archive is that real-time collaboration pitched toward negotiation will progress toward an Aristotelian state of realizing an ethos, at least when undertaken within a Farrellian rhetorical culture.
Despite the fact that figures such as Paul de Man were used as case studies in what happens when the belief in the possibility of “good” and “bad” as absolutes is removed, the “ethical turn” in deconstruction did not finally resolve the issue for criticism (Baker). Critic Reed Way Dasenbrock, sifting the aftermath, finds J. Hillis Miller stating that “an ethical judgment is always a baseless positing,” one that is always a form of will-to-power. And Dasenbrock finds Fredric Jameson noting that “conceptions of ethics depend upon a shared class or group homogeneity” (229)—a culture, rhetorical or otherwise.

Dasenbrock’s study does a very clear job of delineating the stakes of deconstruction’s ethical turn after De Man, tracking its insistence on non-universalist bases for making judgments, finding though that it involves some pretty fantastical pretzel logic, as when memorably tracing Lyotard’s attempt, threaded through Lyotard’s later oeuvre, to “imagine an ethics without universals,” or “judging without criteria.” Lyotard posits a Wittensteinian ethics based in language games. When competing games are “incommensurate”:

Injustice in this model comes from totalization, from the imposition of the ethical obligations of one language game on those committed to a different game, while justice comes from staying within the limits of a given language game and not imposing obligations felt by those within a language game on those who do not feel it. (Dasenbrock 100)

The result is “multiplicity of justices” that are “defined in relation to the rules specific to each game” (ibid). With ‘totalization’, we are, obviously, very close to Foucault, and if we substitute ‘discourse’ for ‘language game’ we are well within the world of Les mots et les choses and what followed, despite, at the time, some 30 years of attempted revision (Foucault, Order).

“When one says ‘Aristotle’, “ writes Foucault, famously, “one employs a word that is the equivalent of one, or a series, of definite descriptions.” From there, Foucault goes on to elaborate how that word, or name (that of an author) differs from conventional notions of naming, self, and personhood:

It would seem that the author’s name, unlike other proper names, does not pass from the interior of a discourse to the real and exterior individual who produced it; instead, the name seems always to be present, marking off the edges of the text, revealing, or at least characterizing, its mode of being. The author’s name manifests the appearance of a certain discursive set and indicates the status of this discourse within a society and a culture. It has no legal status, nor is it located in the fiction of the work; rather, it is located in the break that
founds a certain discursive construct and its very particular mode of being. As a result, we
could say that in a civilization like our own there are a certain number of discourses that are
endowed with the ‘author function’, while others are deprived of it. A private letter may well
have a signer—it does not have an author; a contract may well have a guarantor—it does not
have an author. An anonymous text posted on a wall probably has a writer but not an author.
The author function is therefore characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and
functioning of certain discourses within a society. (Foucault, Author 211)

Lyric poetry is one of the discourses within our society that has been granted an author function. The
author of a lyric poem “is located in the break that founds a certain discursive construct and its very
particular mode of being”—one where close identification with, and responsibility for, what is being
said within the poem is valued, and, despite efforts to the contrary, evaluated: that identification is
fundamental to what lyric is: lyric is the form that most explicitly and deliberately explores the
relationship between the functional construction of its author and the explicit construction of
sentences. It is a kind of staging, and it is also material: sentences are built from phonological,
morphological, syntactical, semantic, and, often, orthographical, units, with one measurable extension
or another in space. Lyric’s intimacy with the mechanics of signification makes it a telling expression of
a culture’s sensibility, of its most intimate projections.

At the same time, many readers see lyric as the form closest to the human mind and body. The
following, from an interview with poet Stephanie Burt, who writes often as a critic, clearly articulates
that perspective on poetic voice:

My colleague Helen Vendler (echoing a letter of Gerard Manley Hopkins’s) has described lyric
poetry as a score for performance by the speaking voice: the poem becomes yours when you
take it into yourself, which also means taking it into your body, your voice: both the body you
have, and the body you wish or imagine that you ought to have. (Barnett)

The reader enters, bodily, into the speaker-author equation. The degree to which the poem produces a
convincing voice and an absorptive reality is often called perspective, one which the reader explicitly
identifies and takes up, on this view, when the poem is successful. Perspectivalism, as a theory of art,
generally echoes the Eliotic ‘shred of platinum’ where the actual world is transmuted in an
individualized perspective that forms the poem. On that view:

Every poem, like the individual mind from which it springs, views life from a particular point of
view. By point of view I do not mean merely the literary term that designates the grammatical
person telling the poem; I mean the essential view of life that permeates the poem and makes
it unique from all other poems—the poem’s perspective. The poet cannot camouflage [their]
essence, [their] ego, the sense of reality that is [their] particular point of view, [their] locus, 
and [their] singular position on the rim of the world. ... Faulty perspective cannot be hidden 
under decoration; it is the poem’s central focus, its perspective, that determines the truth of a 
poem. The “realness” of the poem is inextricably linked to the reality of the poet. The poem is 
as real as he is. This fact determines the accuracy of the poem’s perspective. If the poem is 
not real and true (in the moral sense too), its perspective may be said to be askew. (N. Sullivan 5)

Minus the strong individualistic perspective, I think that this is true. Even with algorithmically produced
or other constraint-based poetry specifically designed to frustrate attempts at author construction, I 
am looking for this: lyric, as a mode of reception, makes me want to construct an author behind the 
work, one with intent, and to evaluate the choices made and resulting perspective. And I look to do so 
over time: authors have histories specific to them.

For Foucault, however, the trajectory of discourse, with regard to the author function, and in terms of 
social good, was away from that sort of construction, not toward it. For Foucault, the author:

is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in 
short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, 
decomposition, and recomposition of fiction. ... [T]he author is therefore the ideological figure 
by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning... it does not 
seem necessary that the author function remain constant in form, complexity, and even in 
existence. (220-222)

The famous Beckett reference that concludes the essay (“What does it matter who is speaking”) has 
profound political implications: reaching that point would mean a kind of freedom that is currently 
unknown. The word “chooses” (“limits,” “excludes”) leads back to Aristotle. In pedagogy, cultural 
assumptions, and the interpretative choices they lead to, are part of a text’s “rhetorical situation” 
within reception (Sproat, Driscoll and Brizee). The rhetorical situation, on the reception side, includes 
assumptions about the way actions’ possible meanings reflect on:

1. the people (or characters) within texts
2. the implied author or narrator within the text
3. the actual author or authors
4. the reader(ship) reconstructing and evaluating the actions

In this sense, ethos takes its place in Aristotle’s rhetoric alongside logos, pathos, telos, and kairos as a 
kind of argument or appeal. As such, ethos is what “we might call the argument from authority, the 
argument that says in effect, Believe me because I am the sort of person whose word you can believe” 
(Halloran 60). Ethos is thus:
frequently translated as some variation of “credibility or trustworthiness,” but it originally referred to the elements of a speech that reflected on the particular character of the speaker or the speech’s author. Today, many people may discuss ethos qualities of a text [sic] to refer to how well authors portray themselves. But ethos more closely refers to an author’s perspective more generally. In this resource, ethos means “author.” (Sproat, Driscoll and Brizee)

The slippage here, in an online resource for teaching Aristotelian rhetoric to undergraduates, between the speaker’s and the author’s perspectives with regard to ethos is telling: ethos is not individualized. For Foucault, reading in this way imposes a (bourgeois) limit on signification; the author function is deeply tied to ethos, and ethos, here, is a limit, an impediment, a figure that marks—marks-off. The ascription of meaning is a limiting act in the sense that it precludes further interpretation. The lyric, at this moment in our “civilization” (to use Foucault’s term) ties the author function, for many poets and critics in the US and elsewhere, very tightly to ethos: poems are read for how their meanings reflect on projections of the author. Not to see the connection between ethos and authorship, at this moment in the history of the US, reads as a gross dishonesty, a failure of solidarity with others who lack access to many discursive and economic spaces in the US. And since lives are limited, and destroyed, by the same forces that both project and limit meaning, understanding them—slowing them down, naming them—is integral to trying to understand the forces shaping society itself, in order to change it in the direction that Foucault advocates.

A person’s set of acquired beliefs and conceptual associations becomes the backdrop, or framework, against which actions, Aristotelian or otherwise, take place and are evaluated. That environment is constructed, innately, within a larger social context, in a process of human development described, if not quite commensurately, by Piaget and Foucault (Silverman). That set of beliefs and associations might be characterized as a person’s working theory or theories about the world, with specific assertions serving as nodes of association within the network, what Quine called the “web of belief.” That same network’s silent critical workings had previously been made manifest, in a literary-critical context, in a notorious experiment in pedagogy: “Irrelevant Associations and Stock Responses” (Richards, Practical Criticism), which demonstrates, unforgottably, how the operating theories of undergraduates can be wildly out of phase with poems being interpreted. More recently, “[i]t has
become almost a common-place that, in Jonathan Culler’s words, ‘one can never construct a position outside tropology from which to view it; one’s own terms are always caught up in the process they attempt to describe’” (Sperber and Wilson, Rhetoric and Relevance 141-142). Cognitive scientists Sperber and Wilson thus find criticism in the unsatisfying position of being only “interpretive” rather than “explanatory” about the how of meaning (ibid 142). They aim to solve the dilemma by locating a flawed assumption about how language works: what H.P. Grice called the “code model of communication.” The code model assumes meanings in the head of person a get transmuted into symbols, which get transmitted to person b, who translates them back into a’s meanings. Linguists and cognitive scientists don’t yet know what people are actually doing when communicating: while it is not inconceivable for human language to work according to the code model, the facts on the ground of language use suggest that that’s not what’s actually happening in people’s brains. For Sperber and Wilson, the fact that “unparaphrasable effects” are still present in speech and in texts “strongly suggests that more is communicated than is encoded” via “uncoded ‘implicatures.’” Implicatures, for them, work on the reception side. They are “inferred by the audience” by combining whatever can be decoded “with contextual information and general expectation of the communicator’s behavior”—which in the case of texts, means a concept of authorship. Thus, instead of having to encode all of a meaning each time, communication has inference hard-wired into the process “as a supplement to encoding and decoding, designed to economize on effort” (ibid 143-144). On this model, the transmission of meanings, and thus (and here is my point) of ethos, proceeds, at least partially, via inference: it depends upon knowledge of the world, and ideas about how things work, that are called up by association, and go beyond whatever is directly encoded in the text.

The inferential model, if true, thus offers a fascinating further justification for historicist criticism, beyond historical determinism itself: one must know what has been left out of any text in order to read it properly. Historicist criticism seeks to reconstruct the sets of assumptions that were in play—or had a high probability of having been in play—at the time that particular poems were produced, and to impart them to current readers (Gallagher and Greenblatt). The historicist readings in this study, especially in the Ashbery and O’Hara chapters, seek to reconstruct context along those same lines, but
with one eye always on the pedagogical situation for which such reconstructions are ultimately destined. Within poetry pedagogy, I think that \textit{ethos} can function in a manner analogous to relevance, i.e. for knowing when a reading of a poem is sufficient in a pedagogical situation with regard to meanings that may not be directly encoded. \textit{Ethos}, in pedagogy, can function as a kind of metric. The inspiration for treating \textit{ethos} as a metric in this way comes out of Sperber and Wilson’s idea of fully coded communication as the “limit” in the transfer of meaning:

Instead of viewing the fully coded communication of a well-defined paraphrasable meaning as the norm, we treat it as a theoretical limit that is never encountered. Instead of treating a mix of explicitness and implicitness, or paraphrasable and unparaphrasable effects, as a departure from the norm, we regard it as normal, ordinary communication. We define communication not as a process by which a meaning in the communicator’s head is duplicated in the addressee’s, but as a more or less controlled modification by the communicator of the audience’s mental landscape—or “cognitive environment” as we call it—achieved in an intentional and overt way. (ibid 144)

For Sperber and Wilson, encoded intended meanings are an idealized, asymptotic \textit{limit}, a possibility, a never-achievable. Their expectation is that meanings will be implicit, and that inference will always be necessary. Their model of communication, literary and otherwise, is one where someone with an intention (the speaker) works to modify an uncharted landscape (the addressee’s space of belief). That is achieved not with discrete units, but with systemic modification. It is the same with \textit{ethos}; the goodness or badness of an action is never an encoded absolute within the text, but rather is inferred through a non-individualized set of beliefs. And pedagogy itself, in terms of evaluation, can make use of \textit{ethos} in the sense of being able, given a particular and accepted reconstruction of an historical moment, to make decision about the goodness or badness of a speech or action within the poem, or the cumulative force of a poem as a whole as an author’s intentional object.

Effects of this sort tend, according to Sperber and Wilson, to be holistic. While an isolated factoid can alter a person’s cognitive environment, “it can equally well be modified by a diffuse increase in the saliency, or the plausibility, of a whole range of assumption, yielding what will be subjectively be experienced as an ‘impression’” (ibid). What Sperber and Wilson propose, in moving from meaning to “impression,” is that a poem may not have a specific, paraphrasable meaning to the person who reads it, but that the poem nevertheless alters the set of filters that they bring to the world, via inference:
“Decoded meaning structures are not directly adopted by the audience as thoughts of their own; they serve rather as very rich evidence that can be exploited by largely unconscious inferential processes to arrive at comprehension proper” (ibid). The process of “comprehension” described by Sperber and Wilson is analogous to the process of “implication” described by Quine in defining what he calls “the web of belief”; it is the thing, the assertional system, that “makes our system of beliefs cohere”:

If we see that a sentence is implied by sentences that we believe true, we are obliged to believe it true as well, or else change our minds about one or another of the sentences that jointly implied it. If we see that the negation of some sentence is implied by sentences that we believe true, we are obliged to disbelieve that sentence or else change our minds about one of the others. Implication is thus the very texture of our web of belief, and logic is the theory that traces it. (Quine and Ullian)

For Quine, writing about 12 years earlier than Sperber and Wilson, the mechanism of implication is logic: we evaluate the truth of a sentence and compare that truth to a set of stored statements, or beliefs, and evaluate the former in light of the latter, or reevaluate existing beliefs in the light of new information.

Sperber and Wilson’s “inferential processes” work similarly, but do not solely or necessarily proceed via logic; when evidence is “exploited by largely unconscious inferential processes,” comprehension is guided by the principle of (and here again is where I have been wanting to arrive all this time) “relevance”:

Human information processing requires some mental effort and achieves some cognitive effect. The effort required is an effort of attention, memory, and reasoning. The effect achieved is the alteration of the individual’s cognitive environment, by the addition of new beliefs, the cancellation of old ones, or merely the alteration of the saliency or strength of beliefs already held. We may characterize a comparative notion of relevance in terms of effect and effort as follows:

(a) Everything else being equal, the greater cognitive effect achieved by the processing of a given piece of information, the greater its relevance for the individual who possesses it.

(b) Everything else being equal, the greater effort involved in the processing of a piece of information, the smaller its relevance for the individual who possesses it.

We claim that humans automatically aim at maximal relevance, that is, at maximum cognitive effect for minimum processing effort. (Rhetoric and Relevance 144-145)

First, I want to argue that the principle of relevance, combined with ethos, makes a usable construct in the pedagogy of historicist criticism—in reading poems from other eras with students. Everything that Sperber and Wilson claim about our operating set of beliefs can also be claimed about any non-
operational ones (that is, the representations of prior realities we hold in our heads when reading historically). Secondly, and completely outside the realm of their intention but relevant to this study, Sperber and Wilson have described shit-posting *avant la lettre*. What the internet does best is exploit human attention and information processing: most gain for least effort (if gain be catpic-based endorphins). This aspect of relevance becomes salient when working to define community (as I believe Farrell has done, at least in terms of poetry). Thirdly, Sperber and Wilson principle of relevance also applies to lyric poetry as a discourse in what is perhaps an unexpected way: in some of its current forms, lyric engages in the explicit troping of relevance: it promises exponentially greater rewards for greater effort, and wraps itself in sonic packets that do not have any direct one-to-one correlation with a poem’s ostensible subject. Tap slightly along poetry’s fault-lines, and this insight reverberates across its varied plains: one can identify poetic oeuvres that, as a facet of the poet’s practice, are specifically, if tacitly, constructed to exploit the boundaries of relevance, and of processing load, so as to slip past conventional processing, and, thereby, conventional conceptions of history, as in Will Alexander’s poem.

Within the Aristotelian model, to close the circle, people come to poetry, the world, and to themselves in life through “two causes, each of them lying deep in our nature.” The primary cause is an inner, instinctive need to perform *mimesis*, which is tied to a psychological reward structure:

The instinct of imitation is implanted in people from childhood... We have evidence of this in the facts of experience. Objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and of dead bodies. (Aristotle)

Through the contemplation of imitative representation, people can literally transform pain into pleasure. That ability is, for Aristotle, the first cause of, and the locus for, the transformative power of art. And it may in fact be a human truth: there is a wealth of scientific evidence about how human imitation functions within human development (Jones); sets of similar studies confirm the role of mimesis in art (Sawyer). So ingrained is the human mimetic tendency for Aristotle that the *Poetics* finds mimesis functioning even when the original is missing, and also finds it in highly abstracted forms.
It is within these forms that one can discern the second human poetic drive: “the instinct for ‘harmony’ and rhythm”:

If you happen not to have seen the original, the pleasure will be due not to the imitation as such, but to the execution, the colouring, or some such other cause… even dancing imitates character, emotion, and action… by rhythmical movement.” (Aristotle 19-21)

It is here that the pleasures of the abstract, and of abstraction, lie. Among other implications, this form of mimesis actually gives “dancing about architecture” (O’Toole) an ancient foundation, with “meters being manifestly sections of rhythm” that at once reveal the characters of the architect and of the built world. That world is produced, in history, in tandem with, and against, time as represented in the web of belief. The common elements across different peoples’ webs of belief are what we call culture, or context. It is the set of constraints through which people derive dignity, and, relatedly, satisfaction. Isolating enough of one another context to make and evaluate meaning, intended and otherwise, is the task of historicist criticism. The relations produced by poetry form a community beyond constraints of time or locale.
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Notes

1 Here Spahr is quoting David Beech.


3 I’m going to use lower case c throughout when discussing conceptual poetry, but I mean the branded thing of Kenneth Goldsmith, Craig Dworkin, Vanessa Place, Rob Fitterman, and others, as detailed in chapter two.

4 More positive examples, partially successful in being at once discursively inside and outside, are utopian/dystopian works that try to imagine futures past the set of existing conditions. There are some examples in poetry (and within science fiction and comics) of representing existing conditions while at the same time discursively (only discursively) destroying their terms in the US. The work represents existing conditions and tries to imagine beyond them, or create space within them. Here I think first of Will Alexander, Renee Gladman, and Nathaniel Mackey.

5 Following Vivek Narayanan, I will prefer the term Indian Poetry in English to Indian Anglophone Poetry or other coinages. It was Narayanan, who has written repeatedly about Missing Person, who first introduced me to Jussawalla’s work.

6 Poets in the UK have a better chance of having heard of Jussawalla in part due to Commonwealth Studies: numerous departments in exist in India; there’s a degree-granting school at the University of London; similar scholarship happens in the Caribbean and in Australia; and the Commonwealth Foundation awards annual book prizes (in British Pounds). None of this changes actual economic relations. It is discursive cosmopolitanism. And the institutions distort the work.

7 Transpiling is associated with JavaScript frameworks, and here I mean taking something from one framework and putting it within the terms of another.

8 “Native speaker,” for linguists, basically means complete acquisition by osmosis in childhood.

9 Vivek Narayanan alerted me to this omission.

10 Vivek Narayanan introduced me to this book.

11 Documented in a single monograph by King; in minute detail in the giant and very rich edited collection from Chaudhuri; and more compactly in the edited collection from Agarwal.

12 I published a version of this argument in early 2010 without being aware of Fred Moten’s writing on the term “open secret” in B Jenkins, published that same year.

13 I internalized anti-Blackness on Long Island, directly, as a child, from family members, from friends, and from the entire structure of society in growing up white and Ashkenazi. I am not claiming any moral authority over Kenneth Goldsmith. I say and do things that I later recognize as racist in my writing and otherwise. When I do recognize it, I try to take responsibility for it in ways that do not perpetuate further harm.

14 I first learned of the book from Wendy Trevino’s Twitter feed, @prolpo.

15 See Jackie Wang’s Carceral Capitalism on this tactic.

16 The bombings took place mostly at night with very few casualties, according to Time (Burrough).
Lee’s piece includes the following, to which I feel sure Goldsmith’s performance was intended to be a riposte: “A quick but important side note: [Goldsmith] avoids events rooted in racialized narratives or communities—Martin Luther King Jr.’s and Malcolm X’s assassinations are left untouched [in Seven American Deaths and Disasters]. This in itself begs the question if an ‘American death’ or an ‘American disaster’ requires ‘white’ victims.”

Spahr and Young’s study, which takes its title from Mark McGurl’s The Program Era, notes that McGurl makes this same move:

[McGurl] has, for instance, some disdain for Chicano/a literature, because he only notices its appropriation by higher education and not its origins in the resistant moment that also produced El Plan de Aztlan. This means that he unfairly presumes that Chicano/a literature is created for “the increasingly paramount value of cultural diversity in U.S. educational institutions” and is yet another “new way of accumulating symbolic capital in the fervently globalizing U.S. academy, pointing scholars toward valuable bodies of expertise they might claim as their own and offering a rationale for the inclusion of certain creative writers in an emergent canon of world literature.” This unwillingness to trace larger histories and to see higher education as a manipulative force is one of the failures of McGurl’s otherwise excellent project. (Spahr and Young)

The MCAG site at http://gringpo.com/ has been taken down as of this writing (September 1, 2019). Several dispatches from the group at the moment in question can be found on the Poetry Foundation website: see “Gold Star” and “Dream Library.”

The poem was published with the following note on its composition: “Taken from Prissy’s famous scene in the movie version of Gone with the Wind, Place phonetically transcribes the ‘unreliable’ slave’s words, which are then set in Miltonic couplets.”

The individualized idea of the writer with hidden social sources, in the US, retains historical nuance from US transcendentalism. In his 1842 address entitled “The Transcendentalist,” Emerson defines a tendency that had already taken shape in New England:

We have had many harbingers and forerunners; but of a purely spiritual life, history has afforded no example. I mean, we have yet no man who has leaned entirely on his character, and eaten angels’ food; who, trusting to his sentiments, found life made of miracles; who, working for universal aims, found himself fed, he knew not how; clothed, sheltered, and weaponed, he knew not how, and yet it was done by his own hands... Shall we say, then, that transcendentalism is the Saturnalia or excess of Faith; the presentiment of a faith proper to man in his integrity, excessive only when his imperfect obedience hinders the satisfaction of his wish. (Emerson)

Emerson’s excess of faith, with universalist aims, but strictly personal results, is what transcendentalism ran on, and it is a thread that runs through US thought and poetry. It is the foundation of the self-psychology detailed in the chapters on Ashbery and O’Hara. And it is embedded in US lyric itself. In Self and Sensibility in American Poetry, Charles Altieri identifies a major thread of later 20th century poetry in the US as “The Scenic Mode”: poems by white male poets that evince “the concern for modest, highly crafted narrative structures producing moments of sudden illumination” (Altieri, Self and Sensibility 5). Altieri draws examples—mostly set “in naturally conceived scenes”—from the work of poets including William Stafford, Richard Hugo, Stanley Plumley, and Charles Wright. For Altieri, the main goal of The Scenic Mode “is not to interpret experience but to extend language to its limits in order to establish poignant awareness of what lies beyond words” (10-11): excess of faith (in language), with universalist aims, but strictly personal results. It is a poetic that takes individualized transcendence to be a form, the fullest form, of self-realization, or self-actualization; Altieri’s “poignant awareness” is a hedge on individualized transcendence. The Scenic Mode—and what Ron Silliman has called “Quietism,” and, in a slightly later (and more anxious) form, what Stephanie
Burt has called “ellipticism” (The Poetry Foundation)—partake of individualized transcendence via faith in their own use of language. The practitioners of poetry in these modes in the US are almost all white.

Saturnalia itself was a Roman solstice festival that was marked by a reversal of social roles, with slave and master changing places. Some poetry is descriptive of conditions by reproducing them, or mimicking their forms of attention or desire. Individualized transcendence is, in that sense, part of the master-slave dialectic. At a time when Gordon Allport was still at Harvard, Ashbery wrote his undergraduate thesis for F.O. Matthiessen on Wallace Stevens’s “Chocorua to Its Neighbor.” The poem, first published in 1933, was collected in 1947’s Transport to Summer (as in army transport) and is obliquely name-checked in The Pisan Cantos published the following year. Ashbery’s use of quotation throughout Some Trees echoes the vatic emptiness of Chocorua’s reporting of what it heard from within a “shadow.” Stevens’s poetry was, in contemporary reviews, denounced as something like, in the self-description of poet John Wilkinson, “neo-baroque flummery” (Wilkinson). Frost, probably thinking of Dorothy Parker’s 1928 poem, said that Stevens wrote poems about “bric-a-brac” (Barron). And “Personism is to Wallace Stevens what la poésie pure was to Béranger” (O’Hara). The mainstream, or mainstreaming process, remains the same regardless of the system to which it is hooked up. Mayakovsky was a mainstream poet. Every era really does get the poetry it deserves, but description is not always subscription.

22 Here it is again, with the line that follows: “The coming into being of the notion of ‘author’ constitutes the privileged moment of individualization in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy, and the sciences. Even today, when we reconstruct the history of a concept, literary genre, or school of philosophy, such categories seem relatively weak, secondary, and super-imposed scansion in comparison with the solid and fundamental unit of the author and the work” (Foucault 205).

While “Foucault provides no evidence but his own authority” for this formulation, which links the invention of copyright to modern authorship, but further formulation and historical work has in fact largely borne it out—while maintaining that anonymity has a place in the market as well. (See Griffin 877-879.)

23 This literature, while aware of Foucault, tends to err in a manner exemplified by the following, which seems to ignore or elide completely racism as a constraint on individualization: “The very high and growing rate of incarceration in the highly individualised society of the USA is a vivid example of the difficult relationships between individualisation and the observation of the moral and legal norms of community life” (Genov).

24 Adrienne Rich moved from Columbia University to City College at the same time, and, in teaching and collaborating with Lorde and Jordan, and in working toward the transformation for under-served students, aided a self-transformation that increased the value of her work. For a useful account of Rich’s time at CUNY and SEEK, see Savonick.

25 Chapter two originally contained a discussion of the Undercommons and some issues surrounding SEEK. The discussion was basically an extended close reading of the opening of Harney and Moten’s book, which was my way of coming to understand the terms of their argument. I will put it here in this note in case it is of similar help to someone.

Harney and Moten’s definition and description of structural racism and how it works draws, in its opening, on Hollywood depictions of colonialism inside and outside the US. Harney and Moten begin with Michael Parenti’s “classic anti-imperialist analysis of Hollywood movies” where Parenti “points to the ‘upside-down’ way” that Hollywood depicts the colonial process:

In films like Drums Along the Mohawk (1939) and Shaka Zulu (1987), the settler is depicted as surrounded by ‘natives’, inverting, in Parenti’s view, the role of the aggressor so that colonialism is made to look like self-defense. Indeed, aggression and self-defense are reversed in these movies, but the image of a surrounded fort is not false. Instead, the false image is
what emerges when a critique of militarized life is predicated on the forgetting of the life that surrounds it. The fort really was surrounded, is besieged by what still surrounds it, the common beyond and beneath—before and before—enclosure. The surround antagonises the laager in its midst while disturbing the facts on the ground with some outlaw planning. (17)

The “forgetting” that Harvey and Moten are talking about is erasure, the erasure of the reality, and persistence, of Black social life outside the fort and within the surround, or already-existing forms of Black self-determinative life that exist beyond settler colonialist enclosure. The book elaborates on the power and beauty of the surround in language that is consciously not conventionally philosophical, theoretical, or academic. As the book’s second paragraph begins, Harney and Moten make clear how conventional forms of colonial representation damage the structure of the surround:

Our task is the self-defense of the surround in the face of repeated, targeted dispossessions through the settler’s armed incursion. And while acquisitive violence occasions this self-defense, it is recourse to self-possession in the face of dispossession (recourse, in other words, to politics) that represents the real danger. Politics is an ongoing attack on the common - the general and generative antagonism - from within the surround. (ibid)

Harvey and Moten use the first-person plural to take up an “us” that recognizes that Black life in the US is there, and continues, and continues to be itself, despite the fort, and beyond politics. The common is the general, and generative, antagonism: the resource that the surround produces, through Black social life, the thing that the settler’s incursion is trying to settle along with the land. Politics, when taken up within the surround as a means of self-defense, becomes an attack on the common, because politics is always directed within and toward the fort and its laws, and it also implies that there is something that needs to be changed about Black life. Recourse to self-possession, to individualized, representative conceptions of individual or family life, in the face of repeated, targeted dispossessions via state or other armed incursions, becomes an attack on the common because recourse to self-possession fails to recognize and give primacy to the common as it exists. That is part of how politics itself becomes enclosure, something not to be taken up, since the thing one wants from politics already exists and can be generated within Black social life.

The third paragraph begins with the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, “first theorists of the revolution of the surround” (ibid). It took a few readings before I realized that the book is talking at once about The Black Panther Party as an actual concrete source of inspiration, and also as a synecdoche for talking about not just self-defense, but about the use of violence in explicitly anti-capitalist self-defense:

Their twinned commitment to revolution and self-defense emerged from the recognition that the preservation of black social life is articulated in and with the violence of innovation. This is not a contradiction if the new thing, always calling for itself, already lives around and below the forts, the police stations, the patrolled highways and the prison towers. The Panthers theorized revolution without politics, which is to say revolution with neither a subject nor a principle of decision. Against the law because they were generating law, they practiced an ongoing planning to be possessed, hopelessly and incessantly indebted, given to unfinished, contrapuntal study of, and in, the common wealth, poverty, and blackness of the surround. (18)

Gloss: Black social life exists; it does not need to be created or changed from being Black. The history of Black Panthers is a history of self-organization: the People’s Free Food, Free Medical Centers, and Free Ambulance Service, the Intercommunal Youth Institute; Seniors Against a Fearful Environment; the Black Student Alliance (Chiles). All of these programs were created from within, and for, the surround, with no reference to the tower, no political maneuvering to get funds, generating the law. Harney and Moten’s book is written to work at several levels at once: for people who are aware of this history, and see it as a model, they are saying things that are unsayable within the academy by a Black scholar; the Undercommons is an open secret, a concept that Moten’s book of poems B Jenkins
engages, as does an essay that is a kind of pre-cursor to *The Undercommons*, “Black Op.” The new thing as a false, political necessity exists only in accepting a false reversal, in trying to reconcile the tower to the surround: to change in order to try to end the threat. Though they do not use conventional terms, Harney and Moten follow the Black Panthers in rejecting electoral politics within racial capitalism, in rejecting struggle for rights within the system’s terms and limits, because it is in the moment of politics that the common disappears within the enclosure:

The hard materiality of the unreal convinces us that we are surrounded, that we must take possession of ourselves, correct ourselves, remain in the emergency, on a permanent footing, settled, determined, protecting nothing but an illusory right to what we do not have, which the settler takes for and as the commons. But in the moment of right/s the commons is already gone in the movement to and of the common that surrounds it and its enclosure. What’s left is politics but even the politics of the commons, of the resistance to enclosure, can only be a politics of ends, a rectitude aimed at the regulatory end of the common. (ibid)

For Harney and Moten “politics” requires an acceptance of a false belief that the tower’s aims are finally democratic, when in fact democracy is only an asymptotic image offered by white supremacy as bait. Part of the price of admission is the surrender of identity:

In the trick of politics we are insufficient, scarce, waiting in pockets of resistance, in stairwells, in alleys, in vain. The false image and its critique threaten the common with democracy, which is only ever to come, so that one day, which is only never to come, we will be more than what we are. But we already are. We’re already here, moving. We’ve been around. We’re more than politics, more than settled, more than democratic. We surround democracy’s false image in order to unsettle it. Every time it tries to enclose us in a decision, we’re undecided. Every time it tries to represent our will, we’re unwilling. Every time it tries to take root, we’re gone (because we’re already here, moving). (19)

To be “more than what we are” is a false because “we already are,” and failure to see that is an implicit rejection, an exclusionary mechanism couched in the terms of inclusion. The mechanism, the engine, for politics as described here is the institution: “all institutions are political, and all politics is correctional, so it seems we need correctional institutions in the common, settling it, correcting us. But we won’t stand corrected” (20). Harney and Moten devote a stand-alone chapter to the university as an institution of this kind. Poetry is produced and consumed in these institutions; poetry, within the university, has a close relationship with compositional pedagogy partially due to the number of programs where MFA instructor-poets are also teaching so-called “basic writing.” In the 1960s, tower-based institutions teaching basic writing and composition began to recognize Black social life, sometimes recruiting from the surround, and sometimes from the tower. It was a complex process that is still becoming clear, with demands for education coming from within the surround, changing the tower, and the tower responding with attempted absorption.

An important early instance of this phenomenon has recently been carefully-documented, from a pedagogical standpoint, by pedagogy scholar Danica Savonick, who looks at the faculty of City College’s Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge (SEEK) program, “the nation’s first state-mandated educational opportunity program” targeting underserved students, many of whom were Black (Insurgent). Savonick’s study focuses on classroom practices and the effect of the program on the work of the practitioners involved: Black writers Toni Cade Bambara, June Jordan, and Audre Lorde. In 1968, Adrienne Rich, who was white, Jewish, and gay, took leave from Columbia University to join them at the SEEK program at City for two years. Savonick’s study details the deep ties to social movements and innovative pedagogies that the four writers developed, often collaboratively, at City.

Early in her narrative, however, Savonick follows Alexis Gumbs in noting that, over time, the university system worked Jordan and Lorde “literally to death”; after they left City College, their respective universities “repeatedly deny[ed] them the medical leaves they required as they battled cancer” (ibid 39). Savonick touches on Harney and Moten’s assessment of the situation of Black intellectuals within
the university, but does not come down on the side of Harney and Moten’s bleak conclusions for the impact of teaching for Black faculty.

Harney and Moten’s account of university diversity practices bear out Sara Ahmed’s analysis in every way. Drawn from two careers’-worth of witness, Harney and Moten depict a moment, in 2014, where archival operations on the 1960s and 70s social movements are complete (SEEK was, arguably, one of archival power’s early moves), and where the professionalization of the field is its paramount driver. Harney and Moten are here writing about the moment where the subversive intellectual (I read their “subversive intellectual” as a Black subversive intellectual) realizes that any changes she tries to effect will be deflected, and any criticisms she raises will be seen as a reputational attack. They depict the place in which the work she wants to do might actually get done, and get recognized:

[T]he subversive intellectual came [to the university] under false pretenses, with bad documents, out of love. Her labor is as necessary as it is unwelcome. The university needs what she bears but cannot bear what she brings. And on top of all that, she disappears. She disappears into the underground, the downlow low-down maroon community of the university, into the undercommons of enlightenment, where the work gets done, where the work gets subverted, where the revolution is still black, still strong. (Harney and Moten 26)

For Harney and Moten, reformation of the university is not a goal, because it is not a true possibility: the university is situated in the laager; its “hiring hall” within the tower. Regarding the commons, and the irredeemability of the university, Harney and Moten’s are unequivocal: “THE ONLY POSSIBLE RELATIONSHIP TO THE UNIVERSITY TODAY IS A CRIMINAL ONE” (ibid). For subversive scholars, the university becomes a place where resources should be exploited in a manner commensurate with the way that their teaching labor is exploited, and their identities are appropriated.

As Savonick notes, the move from Columbia to City and SEEK definitely “catalyzed a major shift in Rich’s work” (Savonick, Changing) into a period that critics are beginning to find her best (Chiasson). Rich, Savonick continues, “was part of a pedagogical movement in which words had impact, and the literature classroom embodied the possibilities of personal transformation and the difficulties of institutional and social change.” The classroom, here, allows the kind of access that Reginald Shepherd describes—access even to one’s own experience of alienation. That is a very non-trivial thing. “Difficulties,” however, are the structure, not the impediment of possibility. For Harney and Moten institutional and social change are defined by the fact that they are “only ever to come.” If, as archival power gained force and refined its techniques, what happened for Rich, as for Bambara, Jordan, and Lorde, was something that finally did not translate into a sustained collectivity outside of the classroom, then it was so by design. Their collaborations were engineered by the early forms of a diversity that was designed to be discursive. Thus, while the transformations that happen in the classroom are not trivial, for students or for instructors, changing education in order to change society is not part of the program: the fort remains the fort. Institutions becoming more inclusive of the surround is a function of archival power. It also improves people’s lives: that is what is known as incremental change, which tends to be cyclic, taken away as the political pendulum swings back.

The point that I want to make here is that, from the perspective of many instructors coming to the university from the surround, personal transformation is a product that practitioners offer for hire, and it is a purposeful limit on what they do, a form of individualization. For practitioners like Rich, coming from the tower, the reward for working toward transformation in under-served students was a self-transformation that increased the value of her work. For writers like Lorde and Jordan, it was a refuge that ended up denying them time to seek care against impending death. For Harney and Moten, the only possible outcome for scholars like Jordan and Lorde when reporting within university precincts today is disappearance. The reason is a concept of professionalism that requires them to reify the system:

[E]ven as it depends on these moles, these refugees, it will call them uncollegial, impractical, naive, unprofessional. And one may be given one last chance to be pragmatic—why steal when
one can have it all, they will ask. But if one hides from this interpellation, neither agrees nor disagrees but goes with hands full into the underground of the university, into the Undercommons—this will be regarded as theft, as a criminal act. And it is at the same time, the only possible act. (ibid 27-28)

Professionalization has become a field of study in itself, with its own definitions and jargon ("Acculturation, or as it is often called, professionalization, is the process of preparing students to fit into the culture of the professional community" (Rockwell and Sinclair).) It is not an accident that Harney and Moten published their critique through a non-academic publisher (minor compositions) and have made it available (as all titles via the press are) as a free PDF. They advocate, for scholars entering the university from the Undercommons, a subversive use of the university; in the face of a professionalization that leads to effacement, Harney and Moten find the subversive scholar will seem "unreliable... disloyal to the public sphere... obstructive and shiftless, dumb with insolence in the face of the call to critical thinking. (Harney and Moten 34). There have been multiple responses to this state of affairs in the university, including calls for “slow scholarship”—"to slow scholarship down as part of challenging the growing inequities in higher education”—as in this statement by a feminist academic collective:

As feminists who have commitments to antiracism and social justice, we have no nostalgia for a university that excludes women and people of color. Our call to support slow scholarship is part of the struggle for accessible higher education and for the decolonization of knowledge, in which experimentation, creativity, different epistemologies, and dissidence are all valued and encouraged. (Slow Scholarship 1254)

Their call invokes “care work” as theorized by Sara Ahmed, where carving out space for one’s own needs within the proscriptions of capital can be radical for scholars besieged by university demands and lack of support. Self-care, however, has actually been repurposed within the corporate US as a way to increase productivity, and emptied of meaning to the point of banality (Bright Space Coaching). The call for slow scholarship does not, in addition, include an account of the university’s role in the archiving of collective action, with professionalization (and its attendant time commitments) as major strategies toward doing so. It does acknowledge the need for a certain degree of already-attained privilege in order for the call to be enacted. It is also a call for atomized, rather than collection action or the kind of social refuge in Harney and Moten’s sense of the Undercommons (which allows contradictions to reproduce themselves at the surface while finding solace in work getting done below).

Appropriation of the concept of the Undercommons, which is already well underway in academia and beyond, should be categorically rejected. What I hope I have established in presenting fragmentary versions of the arguments of Harney and Moten is the fact that there is a real case for the abandonment of many institutions as we currently know them, including the university as currently instantiated within racial capitalism. And that professionalization is not what leads to satisfaction for scholars or for those who want to develop an understanding of the world, as Alexander proposes. What this project proposes for global non-exclusively anglophone poetries is a shitty substitution, but one that does not require professionalization for admission or participation, and one that allows poetry communities to perform their own inevitable archival operations. Self-archiving might allow for the preservation of intent, and the maintenance of frames that do not directly funnel value back into the state.

26 See Isobel Bess, a poet writing as a critic, for a full critique of Henry Bienen’s role at the Poetry Foundation, part of Bess’s larger critique.

27 See Jamie Berrout, a poet writing as a critic, for a full critique of the collaborationist model, part of Berrout’s larger critique of the Poetry Foundation.
That is a fascinating but oft-told story that is beyond my scope here. Similarly, there is a lot of contention over definitions of what “free” software, and elucidating it and taking a position on it requires a monograph in itself.

Vivek Narayanan, after reading a draft of this argument, reminded me of the fact that the Poetry Foundation’s Harriet guest blogger platform initially allowed comments, along with the popularity of Kenneth’s Goldsmith’s comments there. Narayanan, who was living in Delhi at the time that the Foundation allowed comments, used the site to have exchanges with US-based poets whom he didn’t otherwise know. He also noted that the posts were a major way that Goldsmith built his early reputation.

The poet Charles Bernstein, writing as a critic, has a list of more than 30 “EXPERIMENTS” for teaching posted at his current departmental site (Bernstein, EXPERIMENTS). Many of them could be similarly digitized.

Confusingly, there is an open source product on offer from Blackboard called Blackboard Open LMS - this turns out to be what was formerly known as Moodle’s Moodlerooms product, which Blackboard now controls (Lederman).

To continue a bit: “a track star for Mineola Prep” is a ludicrous invention to anyone actually from Long Island. Mineola is a county seat that is known for its drab and industrial setting; there is no such institution there that could disgorge a prep school track star of the kind being invoked here. That said, O’Hara would absolutely have passed, or even stopped at, the Mineola Long Island Rail Road station on his way to Southampton. At the same time, it’s very unlikely he got down there. If he did, he is being mercilessly ironic here about its isolated way-station blandness.

Ashbery and O’Hara’s friendship is beautifully detailed by Roffman.

Vincent offers caveats: “While Shoptaw’s theorization is the best offered so far for homosexuality as semiotic access to Ashbery’s poetry, it seems itself to misrepresent homosexual content in John Ashbery” (Vincent, Looting).

A nice review of Stein’s lab work, in the sense of describing what actually took place there, is available in Hoffman.

Ashbery’s interest in the form can also be linked to Auden’s sestinas “Have a Good Time” and “Paysage Moralisé” (Wasley).

This chapter takes the opposite approach to William Kherbek’s dissertation Chinese Whispers Chinese Rooms: The Poetry of John Ashbery and Cognitive Studies, titled for a later Ashbery collection and an early Ned Block paper respectively (and unfortunately in all three cases), which “us[es] Ashbery’s poetry as a means of entry into controversial areas in formal cognitive studies” and into theories of syntax and of context. My argument in this chapter looks, from a specifically historical perspective, at possible parallels between theories of language and mind that were in play in Cambridge, MA, when Ashbery was an undergraduate at Harvard and afterward, on Ashbery’s Some Trees; I’m trying to make a weakly historical argument about the 1950s. I discuss Chomsky’s generative grammar in an introductory manner, presenting it as first developed in the 1950s, as Kherbek does on page 77-79 of his thesis; we both also refer to the famous Colorless green ideas sleep furiously formulation of the independence of syntactic organization (as does Weinstein, of whose work I was unaware before reading Kherbek’s thesis). Kherbek looks most closely at The Tennis Court Oath and at current versions of Chomskyan linguistics. Sperber and Wilson’s work, which I discuss in chapter 10 and which Kherbek also discusses (although we focus on different constructs) is something I’ve been aware of for a long time: it features in my 1991 undergraduate thesis on James J. Gibson’s concept of Affordance. Kherbek’s work is extremely insightful, and I think my work here and Kherbek’s much more extensive work along these lines are complementary.
38 The region where the Kootenay School of Writing was founded and remains takes its name from the Kutenai First Nations and indigenous societies. At this point in my research I have not been able to determine what relation, if any, the KSW, which has been white-dominated, has had to indigenous societies or movements in the area.

39 This particular use of “in grain” with rendering dates back at least to Shakespeare, here in Twelfth Night:

Viola: Good Madam, let me see your face.
Olivia: Have you any commission from your lord to negotiate with my face? You are now out of your text. But we will now draw the curtain and show you the picture. [She removes her veil.] Look you, sir, such a one I was this present. Is’t not well done?
Viola: Excellently done, if God did all.
Olivia: Tis in grain, sir; ’twill endure wind and weather.

40 It is also right at this same time that Douglas Rothschild published the precepts of the “Poetry School of Poetry” as part of the subpoetics collective’s subpublish or perish project. The three precepts are:

1. Poems should be good.
2. A poet must have a sense of temperance.
3. A poet’s first job is to learn to edit.

Rothschild and Ngai lived in the same building in Brooklyn, on Cumberland Street. Both knew Sullivan. Sullivan’s extended reaction to the Poetry School of Poetry, Rothschild remembers, was intense (and negative).

41 A comment on the Flarf review piece by Shell Fischer (see the bibliography) references the work’s outward force: “When I read some flarf I feel somewhat deflated. As if the poet is laughing at me...” <https://www.pw.org/comment/743#comment-743>.

42 I’m not making a moral argument. I did something analogous at least once in my own writing, in the title poem of the first version of my first chapbook, Telemachiad, in 1999. I wrote about what happened afterward in a piece called The res poetica, which was published in the Web journal Sustainable Aircraft in 2010. The context of the poem “Telemachiad” and of the book was schizophrenic discourse, but the framing of both poem and book was ambiguous—it never explicitly said anything was appropriated, or from where, or what the speaker’s relation to schizophrenia was supposed to be. Here is the relevant passage of discussion from The res poetica:

Poetry is capable of sustaining any form of ironic communication.
Poetry can attempt to recapitulate and reiterate stereotypes
without the poem’s author function seeming to be a node
for drawing pleasure in discharge from the stereotypes themselves.
Or, in an ironic effort to drain the stereotypes of charge,
the node may draw pleasure in disgust,
as a sign of self-implication, a white flag.
Pleasure in disgust, and pleasure generally, can freak people out.
The res poetica requires constant renegotiation of forms of permission.
Deriving pleasure from disgust and deriving pleasure from re-iterating stereotypes can, during discontinuous communicative acts, look like the same thing.

I once published a poem that contained the [three] lines:
The Asian woman sat eating Tam crackers.
I laughed.
This stuff is endless.

When I first read the poem at Halcyon in Brooklyn in 2000, a member of the audience had a visible visceral reaction, and the res poetica, running like a current through that moment, was damaged and destroyed.

43 “It’s all geared toward entertainment,” Rothschild said when interviewed regarding Flarf in 2009 (Fischer).

44 That includes K. Silem Mohammad’s Deer Head Nation, a book whose circumstances of composition have never been fully articulated publicly. Damon recounts how Flarf anticipates this critique: “‘His Whiteness Writes a Poem’ by one poet begets ‘Beyond the Complexity of My Whiteness’ by another (who is not white); ‘Houston, We Have a Problem’ begets ‘My Problems with Flarf’ begets ‘My Problem with Gary Sullivan’s Problems with Flarf’ begets ‘My Problems with Flarf’ Business Model’ begets ‘What is Your Problem’ begets ‘No Problem’” (140).

45 According to the site’s “about” page:

Reddit bridges communities and individuals with ideas, the latest digital trends, and breaking news (...okay, and maybe cats). Our mission is to help people discover places where they can be their true selves, and empower our community to flourish.

46 I arrived at this insight on my own as a product of the texts I have put into play here, but it is likely that I’m not the first person to have had this insight. I have searched things like “Stanley Fish comment stream” but have not found anything. If I have missed something, I wish it to be known that I am a poor researcher, not a plagiarist.

47 Aristotelian poetic kinds listed in the Poetics include epic, tragedy, comedy, Dionysian dithyrambic poetry, and most forms of flute and lyre music.