

LYRIC VOICE AND AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

By

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PREFACE

The following abbreviations will be used throughout this dissertation for in-text citations of frequently used texts:

BB – *Breaking Bounds*, Betsy Erkkila and Jay Grossman, eds.

CP – *The Collected Poems: 1912-1944*, Hilda Doolittle; Louis Martz, ed.

DS – *The Dream Songs*, John Berryman.

EW – *Whitman East & West*, Ed Folsom, ed.

LG – *Leaves of Grass, Norton Critical Edition*, Walt Whitman.

LH – *The Collected Poems*, Langston Hughes.

MS – *The Measure of His Song*, Perlman, Folsom and Campion, eds.

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Lyric poetry is most often considered to be an asocial or apolitical art form, “timeless” or “universal” rather than socially engaged. This dissertation attempts to counter that perspective and show the ways in which American lyric poets have profoundly engaged with political issues of their times. It explores specifically the relationship between lyric voice and emerging, or changing, models of American nationalism.

I look at the way that the lyric “voice” can function simultaneously as “individual” and “choral,” personal *and* social. Criticism of lyric tends to focus on the romantic model in which a private form of speech is “overheard” by the reader. I contend that we need to see the way a romantic model intersects with the classical model in which poetry is performed before an audience that also participates in the poetic voice. This dissertation argues that the lyric should not be read through only a classical or romantic

lens, but to see how they function together, how the individual and the communal voices are conflated within the lyric.

This dual nature of the lyric voice is particularly productive for American poets as they work within a culture that is fiercely individualist at the same time that it demands national allegiances. The lyric poem, then, can embody the tensions inherent in American society; the lyric voice is metonymic of the national voice in which individuals and groups compete for representation.

Each chapter explores a particular era during which an American identity has been reevaluated and groups within the nation have struggled for representation: the Civil War and Reconstruction, the Suffrage Movement and the rise of Feminism, the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights movement, and the era of Cold War containment. For each of these eras, I examine a poet that engages with these issues: Walt Whitman, H.D., Langston Hughes, and John Berryman, respectively. I conclude this dissertation by examining how lyric poetry can engage effectively with the struggles of a pluralist American identity in the 21st century.

INTRODUCTION

In the wake of 9/11, the Bush administration began a campaign of cultural diplomacy by publishing an anthology of 15 essays that engage the question of what it means to be an American writer. The anthology—designed to be distributed internationally with translations in Arabic, French, Spanish, and Russian among others—was designed to “illuminate in an interesting way certain American values—freedom, diversity, democracy—that may not be well understood in all parts of the world” (Clack, George, ed. “Writers on America.” *U.S. Dept of State International Information Programs*. 09 Dec. 2002. 15 April 2005 <http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/writers>).¹ Appropriately, the anthology uses a passage from Walt Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” as its epigraph:

It avails not, time and place—distance avails not,
I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many
generations hence,
Just as you feel when you look on the river and the sky, so I feel,
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd,
Just as you are refresh’d by the gladness of the river and the bright flow,
I was refresh’d,
Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift current,
I stood yet was hurried,
Just as you look on the numberless masts of the ships and
the thick-stemm’d pipes of steamboats, I looked. (n.pag.)

¹ An interesting side note to this anthology is that technology has allowed a reading that American law does not. The Smith-Mundt act of 1948 does not allow the domestic circulation of any official information meant for a foreign circulation, including this anthology. Technology has made the act irrelevant as internet sources are not tied to international borders, and thus allow an interesting look at American culture as it is specifically crafted for an external audience.

Certainly this poem captures the promise that such an anthology attempts to fulfill: the opening of one person to the many, one culture to another, the blurring of past and present, self and other, in some *timeless sense of shared humanity*. Yet certain ironies and contradictions also present themselves in the use of this poem as a form of cultural diplomacy. For instance, in Whitman's claims of human unity, the individual is washed away as each individual becomes part of a larger scheme, a scheme that for Whitman is synonymous with "America."² Whitman's democratic claims, then, intersect with a global version of Manifest Destiny, mirroring the odd paradox inherent in this anthology that attempts to show how we are all similar ("just as you feel . . . so I feel") at the same time as exclaiming an American exceptionalism. Where this anthology sets out to counter ideas of American hegemony, the opening poetic lines unwittingly reinforce notions of American cultural dominance.

This problematic use of Whitman's poetry shows the way that the American lyric is integrally tied to social and political concerns, a fact often overlooked as poetry is usually relegated to an ahistorical or acultural position, the most private art. More importantly, Whitman's poetry shows how the voice of the poem engages these contradictory American impulses: his poem can be seen as promoting an egalitarian, inclusive view of world democracy but it can also be seen as a form of cultural imperialism. I would argue that such contradiction stems from Whitman's effort to simultaneously construct an "individual" voice—one that speaks from an American culture of individualism—and a "choral" voice—one that speaks as a national identity. In other words, Whitman's voice strives to be both the one *and* the many.

² As an example, in "Democratic Vistas," Whitman says, "I shall use the words America and democracy as convertible terms" (LG 758).

This dissertation will argue that the dual nature of the lyric voice allows it to serve as a productive genre in which individual-social dynamics can be investigated and re-envisioned with radical possibilities. This tension of voice has been especially productive for American poets whose culture simultaneously promotes a fierce individualism and demands a group/national allegiance. The struggle to construct a lyric voice reflects the struggle to construct a political voice; poetic and political representation become conflated within the lyric voice. At the same time, because the voice functions in multiple ways, the lyric can often reveal the contradictory impulses at the heart of the democracy as we see in the Whitman quote and the uses to which it is put.

The editorial comment about American values—“freedom, diversity, and Democracy”—offers a valuable lens through which to consider these contradictions. “Freedom,” in American terms follows a Jeffersonian model in which *individual* freedom reigns supreme. This, of course, runs counter to the implications of the collective in which the needs of diverse communities clash against such individual liberties. While *E Pluribus Unum* serves as an idealistic motto for the possibilities inherent in American democracy, it is also the source of endless struggles for representation and “voice” within the government and culture. Central to my discussion is Gary Gerstle’s useful distinction between “civic nationalism” and “racial nationalism” that reflect fundamentally conflicting notions of the nature of American society, the former an inclusive, egalitarian society while the second reserves rights and national identity for particular groups.³ As we have already noted with Whitman, it is possible for these two ideas to challenge each other even within the same lyric. I argue, then, that the lyric is uniquely situated to

³ Gerstle’s *American Crucible* explores the dynamic between these two versions of nationalism as they play out across the 20th century, arguing that America is essentially a “nation divided against itself” (80).

negotiate these national struggles and to construct alternative narratives of self and national identity.

The American lyric tradition as I define it rests on three innovative strategies: the use of musicality as a means to embody multiple voices; challenges to the author-reader or text-reader relationships and conventions that construct new reading subjects; and most importantly the construction of a simultaneously individual and communal voice. This lyric voice likewise is constructed out of three often competing strains: the classical lyric in which the voice is a performed choral voice, the romantic based on the “individual” voice, and the modern with its emphasis on “making it new,”⁴ an experimental model that pushes at the very conventions of lyric. These three traditions offer the American poet a means to negotiate a culture of fierce individualism, the struggles over group/national allegiances, and the demands of an increasingly complex modernity.

While I argue that American poets have effectively negotiated these traditions to craft a unique tradition responding to the dynamics of American culture, criticism most often reads through the lens of individualism. I contend that more often than not American lyric is misread due to the inability to see these traditions in dialogue; my goal in this dissertation is to offer a new paradigm to offer effective means to read the lyric poet’s engagement with American culture. I do not intend, though, to construct a rubric that can simply be placed over each poet equally. What is important is to offer a framework that points to the ways in which poets have engaged with the evolving demands of American democracy.

⁴ This phrase was Ezra Pound’s rallying cry for a “modern” art.

This project specifically explores the ways in which the lyric has been configured at points in history when the narratives of American national identity have been destabilized. Each chapter investigates a particular poet's struggle to redefine an American nationalism through the construction of a lyric voice. First, I examine Walt Whitman's engagement with a divided America that was struggling to define itself in the face of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. I argue that Whitman is one of the first poets to experiment with the lyric form as a medium to develop a new national narrative and offers a useful model against which we may consider other poets—and a model to which, as Ed Folsom has pointed out, poets have continually attempted to “talk back.”⁵ Following my discussion of Whitman, I examine the ways in which H.D.'s lyric voice embodied the struggles of women in America in the first half of the 20th Century. Her poetry engages with the emergence of feminism and the suffrage movement, attempting to redefine American national identity as inclusive in terms of gender and sexuality without essentializing such identities. Langston Hughes, writing during the Harlem Renaissance, similarly attempts to redefine American identity in ways that will afford racial inclusivity. Hughes uses the individual/choral lyric voice to affirm an essential black identity worthy of American rights at the same time as constructing a hybrid, “modern” American identity. John Berryman's voice also confronts an increasingly consumer-oriented American society in an increasingly isolationist, cold-war era of containment and growing racial unrest the growing at the same time as engaging with the Civil Rights movement as it heads into the 1960s. Berryman's voice circles back to Whitman in which the multiple voices reflect American diversity, even as he

⁵ Folsom argues that much of 20th century American poetry is ultimately a dialogue with Whitman. (“Introduction,” *MS*, 21-74)

reflects a White, middle-class, male perspective. His voice, then, again puts us squarely in the middle of the conflict between a civic and a racial nationalism, between the one and the many. Each of these epochs—Reconstruction, Suffrage, Civil Rights, Cold War containment—represents a point in which the lyric underwent major changes not in artistic isolation but as a response to changing social conditions; the struggle for political/cultural representation necessitated new forms of artistic representation. In each instance, the attempt to redefine the lyric voice was an attempt to redefine America.

Because criticism has often distorted these poets' work in counterproductive ways, each chapter will attempt to accomplish three things: first, I will show the ways in which the work has been misrepresented through particular "lyric" lenses. Second, I will examine the artistic/cultural conventions of the time to understand the environment in which each poet was writing. Third, I will attempt to offer new ways to read each poet. Such a project, however, demands some working definition of lyric and an understanding of how poets have historically engaged with this evolving form. To begin, then, I will attempt to construct a brief history of lyric criticism and to pose a new model for the American lyric.

TOWARD A THEORY OF LYRIC

The Lyric as Voice

From Plato onward, the nature of lyric poetry has been tied integrally to questions of voice—whether voice is synonymous with authorial self-presence, a synecdoche for an autonomous identity, or viewed as a figure or trope for lyric itself. Because of the insistence on voice, though, the genre has always had a vexed relationship to social discourse and critique, read most often as individualist rather than social. Even as many poststructural critics have argued the “death of the author,” the lyric is, more often than not—especially in contemporary America—read as self-expression, a romantic “Wordsworthian” overflow of emotions.⁶ It is the last genre in which the notion of coherent, sovereign authorship and mimetic self-representation maintain a persistent hold.

While critics from different schools have argued the nature and intention of the lyric voice, the genre predominantly has been seen as outside the domain of social or historical discourse. On one hand, Marxist and cultural critics, following the lead of Althusser, tend to argue that such self-representation is merely a form of bourgeois individualism, an art form marked by false consciousness. For instance, Antony Easthope claims that the Romantic lyric is “individualist, elitist and privatized” as

⁶ The notion of lyric as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” was developed in Wordsworth’s “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*” (Kaplan 260). What is less-often remembered is the second part of Wordsworth’s poetic equation—“recollected in tranquility”—which suggests a very different perspective of the romantic project than has been historically constructed.

compared to earlier forms of the ballad that were “collective, popular, and intersubjective”(75). On the other hand, the New Critics—who seemingly take personal or historical considerations out of the poem, considering voice a construct distinct from authorial identity—argue the poem as a linguistic object, similarly separating the poem from the social sphere. For the New Critics, though, its separation from the social and historical is what gives the form its power; the lyric becomes universal experience, a non-relative aesthetic. From quite different critical perspectives and to quite different ends, then, the effect is the same: the poetic voice is removed from social engagement, defined as personal not social, timeless not historically situated, universal not culturally contingent.

At the same time, a plethora of contemporary poet-critics tout authorial “voice”—or more specifically “personality”—as the epitome of poetic achievement, that presumably coherent, pre-existing entity that a young poet must struggle to find. This image of the poet most closely reflects what might be considered poetry’s “mass audience,” the popular narrative of the solitary poet struggling to express his or her inner, tormented self. Ted Kooser sums up this narrative: “I grew up believing a lyric poet was a person who wrote down his or her observations, taken from life [. . .] When ‘I’ says something happened, I believe it happened, and if something awful has happened to ‘I,’ I feel for the poet” (Sontag 158-9). There is, then, a marked divide between a variety of critical approaches to the lyric and its popular lived experience.

Both approaches to the form, however, set unfortunate limits on the way that an audience reads. On one hand, the “self-expressive” model easily allows voice to slip into a closed or totalizing ontology, limiting the lyric possibilities of embodying a divided or

fragmented experience and/or engaging in rhetorical self-critique. On the other hand, any critical approach that removes the lyric from social discourse ultimately denies the voice its potential as a position of both personal and social agency. To bridge this gulf, it is necessary to see how the lyric still retains a connection to its Classical Greek roots in which the lyric was foremost a public performance. Such a performance was often accompanied by a chorus so that many voices merged to speak as one. By seeing the lyric as performance, I argue that 1) the lyric voice is not self-presence but rather a figure for presence—a prosopopoeia—that is embedded in historical formations and 2) any supposed “self-expression” or “self”-presence is not merely a capitulation to capitalist ideology but a potential site of individual *and* group resistance. In fact, the lyric is useful as a tool to deconstruct any strict boundaries between the “individual” and the “social” on which American capitalist individualism relies. The lyric voice cannot, and should not, be read as merely autobiographical nor as a naïve or false consciousness but rather as a form of social engagement and cultural critique; the lyric “I” functions as a locus for resistance and imaginative reconstructions of individual and communal/national identities.

The Problem of Genre

In contemporary usage “lyric” is often considered synonymous with “poetry.”⁷ To some extent, this is a valid perspective: any poetic utterance carries at least the vestige of voice. As Chaviva Hosek argues, unless signs directly point to the contrary, we infer a voice whenever we read a poem (16). Yet certainly important distinctions exist, for instance among traditional forms such as lyric, epic, and drama or, more recently, the

⁷ See, for example, Holden, “The Prose Lyric” (*The Rhetoric of Contemporary Lyric* 57-68).

divide between “Language” poetry and lyric. If lyric and poetry become synonymous, these distinctions get lost and the canon of “acceptable” or “important” poetry can be shaped in ways that ultimately affect cultural narratives negatively.

The problem, though, is that even as I claim the importance and viability of maintaining generic distinctions it is true that no transhistorical or transcultural form can delineate the lyric poem, no generically pure “lyric.” It becomes necessary, then, to ask how the term has functioned in different historical eras. The lyric has evolved, for instance, from its Classical Greek origins in which the poem was performed before an audience (with choral support and/or audience involvement) to what is now considered the most private genre, that intimate form of speech that we “overhear.”⁸ The Western lyric’s source is communal but has developed into an extreme form of individualism. Historically, the primary models of lyric have revolved around two poles: the Classical Greek and the “Greater Romantic” lyric. From Wordsworth on, the romantic has served as the predominant model; critics have varied widely, however, about the nature of the form. There are two main challenges with the romantic bias.

First, as Raymond Williams has clearly shown,⁹ the “romantic” designation ignores and/or misreads the actual work of the original romantic poets. Within the lyric models that have predominated from the late 19th century through the 20th, the romantic notion of the artist is of one “indifferent to the crude worldliness and materialism of politics and social affairs” (*Culture* 30). But as Williams notes this is not the original sense; what

⁸ The notion of lyric as “overheard utterance” was first suggested by John Stuart Mill and was later developed into a nearly ubiquitous concept by Northrop Frye in *The Anatomy of Criticism*.”

⁹ These ideas of the romantic run throughout Williams’s work but are discussed in detail in “The Romantic Artist” (*Culture*, 30-49) and “Romantic” (*Keywords*, 274-76)

became competing interests—“personal” feeling vs. “social;” aesthetic vs. political—were originally one and the same. Any understanding of the “personal” was also an understanding of the social. What complicated the evolution of this term was the fact that notions of the “individual” imagination or artist were originally responses to the increasing mechanization and industrialization of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and thus socially motivated developments. This has been distorted or ignored, though, as the individualism of the artist has been transformed into merely “personal” interests, or in Williams’s terms “indifference.” This is the paradigm into which “lyric” has generally been forced: an asocial, romantic art pitted against other social forms.

Second, even in the seemingly coherent romantic model, the genre is defined along different axes. The form is often defined, for instance, as musical language as opposed to speech or prose; personal language versus dramatic characterization; the individual voice as opposed to collective speech; a poetry of sincerity rather than artifice; emotion not intellect. But each defining set of terms is a gradient rather than an absolute binary. Where do we mark the line between any of these opposites? For instance, where exactly does music differentiate from speech? Can any writing be truly considered “sincere” and not an artifice? Likewise, while each of these factors is important, none of them can serve to define the form on its own. The lyric, then, should be defined not on a single axis but as the intersection of forces: the individual and the choral, music and speech, the contemporary and the historical, the formal and the organic, artificiality and sincerity, poet and audience. Most importantly, a returned focus on the classical model of the lyric as performance can help show how the lyric changes according to mutable historical circumstance at the same time as allowing the genre a historical continuity. For instance,

what defines “sincerity” to one age will certainly not represent “sincerity” to another.

The lyric, then, may be based on an idea of sincerity but that will not create a similar poetic expectation to different audiences. Poetic decorum, to say another way, functions as any other rules of discourse, delimiting the sayable but not defining the possibilities—and like any other discourse, poetic decorum changes.

These different elements may be grouped into two major lyric models within the romantic tradition. The first model defines the lyric as “musical” language. A wide range of critics see musicality as central to the definition of lyric, agreeing with C. Day Lewis who, early in the 20th century, proclaimed simply that “lyric is written for music” (3); likewise, they suggest that straying from its musical roots signals the demise of lyric (as many critics—Easthope as a prime example—claim is the result of the rise of the “voice-driven” poem (60-65)). What exactly critics mean by “musicality,” however, is contradictory at best or undefined at worst. For instance, music to Pound represented poetry’s connection back to its physical roots, its relationship to breath and dance. To Northrop Frye, it is the way poetry foregrounds the signifier over the signified (or as he terms it, “babble” versus “doodle”¹⁰). They both argue for lyric as musical language but are defining music on quite different terms. Music, rather than suggesting a clearly delineated poetic element, has functioned instead as a trope for lyric itself. Music is a way for the voice to maintain distance from mere communication and to focus rather on artistic creation—that is, it foregrounds the lyric as art rather than statement. The other important aspect that most critics seem to agree on is that the relationship to music

¹⁰ In *The Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye refers to what he calls “Babble,” or the musical/sonic quality of poetry and “Doodle” or the structure and rhetoric of poetry.

returns the lyric to its classical origins as poetry that was literally sung, which I argue allows the voice to serve a communal function.

The most important aspect of the classical model as I have said, though, is its nature as public performance. Music, I contend, originally served as a particular way of engaging a physically present audience. Lyric poetry, by being sung, was able to allow choral participation *and* the individual voice to speak as a dramatic construction. On one hand, the audience could actively take part in the enunciation, imaginatively identifying with the speaking voice; on the other hand, the voice could still speak/sing as an individual without, because of its nature as song, collapsing into mere individual expression. Even the individual voice maintained its effect as poetic artifice rather than mimetic representation: the sung lyric was still foregrounded as artistic construction, rather than transparent “self”-expression. The classical model, that is, was always concerned with its rhetoric. Where romantic theory tends to ignore the nature of the audience in favor of the speaker (although it is important to remember, as Williams pointed out, this is a misreading of the original romantic intent), the classical model is always concerned with how the lyric engages an audience and its expectations—always functioning as a rhetorical/cultural practice. The lyric, likewise, allows the poet to push at the boundaries of those cultural expectations and/or assumptions.

The second ongoing, influential model of the lyric is what T.S. Eliot referred to as “meditative verse,”¹¹ the most individual, private form of poetry. This notion of the lyric as the “self speaking to the self or to no one at all” (6) has been central to the thinking of

¹¹ In *The Three Voices of Poetry*, Eliot distinguishes the meditative voice from the voice addressing an audience and from the voice of the poet speaking through a dramatic character. This same model has also been used by others to make the distinction from epic poetry (Pound, for instance) or from “Epos” or recited poetry (Frye).

critics from Pound to Frye to Easthope to Vendler. Generally, this model distinguishes the genre from both the epic and the dramatic monologue, divisions to which I have already pointed: in the first, lyric is timeless as distinguished from the historical epic, and in the second, the “personal” lyric voice is distinguished from the dramatic, that of a historical character outside the self. It is also important to see that this individual model is exactly opposite the classical model—the only audience of the romantic lyric is one that is privileged to overhear the poet’s inner thoughts, not engaged directly as the lyric singer would on a stage, or to ever sing as a choral entity. Helen Vendler suggests that “Lyric, *unlike the social genres*, does not incorporate interaction with a ‘collective’; it privileges the mind in its solitary and private moments. The poet does not have to make any special effort to place himself in solidarity with the ‘collective’” (qtd Bahti 6, emphasis mine). In this model, genre distinctions actually feed the divide between the social and the individual. As Williams has noted, the decision that one is forced to make between being a poet and a sociologist is a rather recent development. During the early 18th Century when the romantic tradition was being developed, there was no such distinction. Any understanding of individual experience, Williams notes, was a reflection of social experience (*Culture* 42-48). The distinction has been fed by American individualism and has thus effectively pushed the genre out of the realm of social or political discourse.

The main challenge of the meditative, interior model is that it assumes, or perpetuates, a belief in a coherent subjectivity. For instance, the argument suggests that the dramatic monologue is clearly a construction of a voice when the poem spoken from the presumed “self” is not. The textual subject is always already radically split from the

author and, thus, even the meditative verse represents a dramatic construction of an historical figure. Likewise, as Barbara Herrnstein Smith has pointed out, even the poem supposedly grounded in an author's own sense of voice can still, at best, only represent a *possible* utterance, not an actual one (Holden, *Style and Authenticity* 114). The divide, then, between the lyric and the monologue is arbitrary. In the same way, Pound's notion of the epic as the poem containing history¹² is also arbitrary. To suggest this division is to suggest that the lyric voice can simply transmit its transcendental existence unproblematically through language rather than similarly being constructed by language (and, thus, history and culture) in the first place.

Recent paradigms of the lyric have emerged, however, as poststructural thinking has helped to break down the clear divide between the individual and the social or historical, but certain lyric definitions persist. For instance, the essays in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond the New Criticism* (1985) offer productive reevaluations of the genre—most notably making lyric studies more interdisciplinary, defining the lyric as more intertextual, and focusing on voice as a self-reflexive figure¹³—all of which are central to my conception of the form. More traditional lyric models, however, are reinscribed in counterproductive ways. For instance, Tilottama Rajan and Herbert Tucker still both conceive of a transhistorically delimited lyric form. Rajan refers to “the deconstruction of the lyric moment through its insertion into a narrative or dramatic context” (206), clearly marking lyric as distinct from narrative or drama, and Tucker considers the dramatic

¹² For Pound, the distinction is between his early “lyric” work and his later “epic,” *The Cantos*. *The Cantos* attempt to poetically embody large portions of the history of civilization, most importantly European culture.

¹³ Jonathan Culler “Changes in the Study of Lyric” (Hosek and Parker 38-54). Culler also notes the deconstruction of the symbol-allegory opposition as a central change in lyric studies.

monologue as “a response to lyric isolationism” (243), perpetuating the notion of lyric as “personal.”

I contend that the lyric bridges the individual-social divide and, thus, cannot be distinguished from “narrative” or “drama.” These terms, rather, are culturally specific, reflecting poetic conventions of a given historical era. For instance, W.R. Johnson has suggested that by the 3rd century BC, the conventions of lyric had changed so dramatically—from a sung genre to a spoken one, from an inclusive audience to more specifically an educated one—that many Latin poets struggled to re-envision their role within the community: where earlier Greek poets such as Sappho and Pindar could sing of communal emotional and religious experiences, Latin poets such as Catullus and Horace sang of alienation and distance from an audience. These Latin poets still attempted to function within the theatrical model of Greek lyric but in the context of radically different cultural expectations.¹⁴ The history of lyric has been a perpetual reinvention of poetic (and social) engagement, not a static genre but a constant dynamic between poet and culture.

The text and poetic convention are always in dialogue as a process of evolution, the poet making use of conventions while simultaneously distorting them. Static notions of genre do not allow for an understanding of the ways in which a reader is always forced to position him or herself in the midst of such change and allow, rather, for a view of the reader as passive recipient. A more flexible model of lyric, however, forces the reader to adopt a new stance to read, to construct the author-reader contract in the very process of reading. As Jonathan Arac has suggested, lyric refers as much to ways of reading as it

¹⁴ See Johnson’s *The Idea of Lyric*, especially 110-122, for a more in-depth discussion of these changes.

does to defining characteristics of the text (Hosek and Parker 345-356). Bahti, in *The Ends of Lyric*, agrees: “Lyric, it seems, shapes and reshapes itself between the limit cases” (254). Most importantly, since the lyric is still grounded in the illusion of a speaking individual, the assumptions that an audience brings to the lyric are based on assumptions about the subject; by constantly rethinking or reimagining the lyric an audience reshapes its assumptions of reading itself—and thus the larger implications about the nature of human subjectivity. The construction of a lyric self is a performative means of claiming agency; lyric criticism has reduced the lyric to mere “self”-expression perpetuating a bourgeois, capitalist ideology, not the lyric itself. As Judith Butler argues, it is a false assumption that “to be constituted by discourse is to be determined by discourse, where determination forecloses possibilities of agency” (182). Within the lyric, the subject is paradoxically engaged in both its own construction and deconstruction; the lyric drive itself, I contend, is the drive to locate the agents of personal and social change.

Who Speaks? The Problem of Voice and Agency

Obviously, any claim that a discursively constructed subject can also speak with agency is problematic at best, yet any agenda of personal or social change rests precisely on this notion. Claiming such agency is double-edged: it can create the site of possible change but risks reducing the subject to a humanist and/or essentialist figure. Constructed by historical and discursive forces, the individual does, nonetheless, accrue meaning and material effect, and thus agency as well. As Butler says, “Construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary site of agency” (187). I build on Butler’s ideas to argue that the lyric “I” is always a performative utterance (as both linguistic

performativity and as theatrical performance) that, rather than expressing any a priori 'self,' constructs an identity as a perpetual process.

Any notions of individualism, romantic "self"-expression, or humanism rest on notions of a subject that is originary, knowable, and expressible. As Julian Henriques has noted, at the core of American individualism is a humanist belief in the unitary and rational subject (ix-xi). Such a subject, Henriques goes on to argue, is also necessarily founded on notions of a recoverable archive—that individual's origins that are revealable or confessable (11-25). In fact, I would argue that the notion of the archive—and its necessary disclosure—has become part and parcel of the American ethos and its emphasis on personal confession and "self"-revelation. Freud and Lacan, however, both offer profound ways to see the subject as fundamentally unknowable and inexpressible, two characteristics that are essential to understanding the lyric "I." Rather than seeing the subject—as the humanist heritage of Descartes has dictated—as rational and unitary, Freud and Lacan posit a subject that is contradictory, decentered, and multiple. Both, however, retain their sense of the recoverable archive, those originary events that create the decentered consciousness. More importantly, both posit a universal subject, one that is not historically or culturally situated. Cathy Urwin effectively argues, however, that we do not need to lose the foundations of either theory in order to create a culturally specific subject. For instance, the subject's entrance into the field of language can be seen as derived from historical relationships (which are necessarily linguistically founded) rather than a pre-given symbolic order (Henriques 264-322).

The split subject is still created by its entrance into language but a culturally specific language; the subject, then, is still composed of the social, but the theory need

not be constrained by a single Oedipal Law of the Father. Rather than a pre-given or universal subject, subjectivity is always a contingent linguistic (and, thus, cultural) construction. Likewise, the subject does not consist of a singular archival history but of a multiple nexus of formative subject positions—that is, in relation to any particular formative experience, the subject exists in multiple, contradictory positions, of which no single position can be recovered.

In the same way that the rules of any discourse delimit the sayable but do not close the possibilities, a discursive construction delimits subject positions but does not represent closure. In American, capitalist culture, however, the belief in a unitary, rational, non-contradictory self—the illusion of a coherent subjectivity—is afforded a great investment; this illusory coherent subjectivity, then, accrues meaning and power. As Henriques argues, the subject is fragmentary and illusory, but not powerless—it is rather “repositioned moment to moment” (288). In other words, the subject, functioning from a position within a culture of individualism with the knowledge that the individual is not a closed system, serves as a radical presence, what Julian Wolfreys calls an “affirmative resistance.”¹⁵

The Althusserian position that individual agency is merely bourgeois ideology is an essentialization of both power and possible resistance *and* an essentialization of the individual and the social. Henriques has effectively argued the necessity of breaking down the individual-social binary that is the foundation of the Western, and especially American, imaginary (11-25). Any resistance to social structures is limited if the “individual” is a distinct construct separate from the social field. Notions of coherent

¹⁵ See Wolfreys, *The Rhetoric of Affirmative Resistance*.

subjectivity necessitate a firm border between inner and outer, self and other. Theorizing the self as part of an ongoing, non-originary discursive fabric, however, allows the subject to function as the nexus of possible subjectivities, and to see the self as intersubjective as well as interpenetrating the “outer” culture. The subject itself is a defensive posture against destabilization, an imaginary container of an inner self opposed to an external “other.” The subject, that is, is always in process, never occupying a coherent or stable position but becomes invested in its own identity. If seen as an imaginary container, though, the subject then is also capable of being re-imagined or re-constructed.¹⁶ Functioning as an individual, then, is a cultural performance rather than the expression of a sovereign self. Again, this does not mean it is powerless: being aware of the multiple ways in which one has been constructed allows the subject an active role in its ongoingness—what Annie Finch refers to as “coherent decentering,” functioning from an intelligible position that does not collapse into a mere humanist version of the sovereign self (Sontag 137-157).

Coherent decentering is the very foundation of the lyric voice that I am exploring. The lyric as I see it need not be radically fragmentary or disjointed as many critics, such as Marjorie Perloff,¹⁷ would claim in order to speak of the fragmentary or illusory subject. The divide between coherent and fragmentary is itself illusory, a re-essentialization of the self-other, individual-social binaries. As Judith Butler has shown,

¹⁶ I am indebted here to the work of Julia Kristeva. Though these ideas run throughout her work, I am particularly drawing from “The Semiotic and the Symbolic” and “Negativity: Rejection” in *Revolution and Poetic Language*.

¹⁷ Perloff’s ideas of the avant-garde traditions are developed particularly in “Can(n)on to the Right of Us, Can(n)on to the Left of Us: A Plea for Difference” and *Traduit de l’américain: French Representations of the ‘New American Poetry’* in *Poetic License*.

even if the stable self is an illusion, it becomes invested with potential power.¹⁸ In fact, speaking from a coherent position allows it a cultural intelligibility and position of power in ways that the completely fractured subject and/or text well may not.

Lyric and the Oral Tradition

In *Poetic License*, Marjorie Perloff makes a case for an avant-garde poetics that does not center itself in voice or self-presence. Perloff clearly believes that experimental “Language” poetry—poetry that, rather than speaking from a coherent voice or center, pushes the signified/signifier gap to its extreme—represents the future of American poetry. Her argument, though, conflates “poetry” and “lyric,” reducing the very canon of American poetics to an experimental work in which innovation is most often valued for innovation’s sake. What Perloff’s argument essentially accomplishes is to take American individualism out of American poetry. If for no other reason, this points to the necessity of maintaining distinctions under the broader label of “poetry.” Lyric and the individual voice serve an essential role in a culture so fiercely individualistic as America. Even in an era of poststructural criticism, American poetry and theory remain invested in a culture of individualism. For example, Rita Felski has noted an important and relevant difference between French feminist theory and American; the first, she claims, is based on psychoanalysis and issues of repression while the second is grounded in issues of autobiography/confession and individual expression¹⁹—even if acknowledging a radically decentered subject, American theory tends to search for, and retain faith in, the

¹⁸ Butler’s *Gender Trouble* is invested in the deconstruction of any stable notions of subjectivity. At the same time, she does not posit this as a lack of political power or voice, but rather sees the discourse in which identity is articulated as the very locus of the political. See especially “Conclusion: From Parody to Politics” (181-190).

¹⁹ Felski’s section of *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* of the same name, especially pp 19-30, highlights these distinctions.

individual agent that is at the center of American individualism. Despite cultural criticism, such as that of Raymond Williams, which shows the idea of “culture” to be more productive when considered as the whole of a society’s experience as opposed to the cultivated sensibility of an elite, (*Culture* 295-338; *Keywords* 87-93) arguments such as Perloff’s keep the “poetic” as a cultivated, avant-garde domain without any bearing to a larger public audience.

On the other side of the spectrum, Robert Pinsky has been the most prominent critic to explore the relationship between lyric, democracy and a popular audience. His book *Democracy, Culture, and the Voice of Poetry* shows how the lyric voice is central (or should be) to the workings of a democratic society. A strong proponent of a voice-based lyric in contemporary American society, Pinsky makes an impassioned case for the lyric voice as the embodiment of democratic individualism—the counterforce to a mass culture. While he does an excellent job of promoting this lyric potential—and promoting, in general, a somewhat populist version of poetry to American society—he falls into two problematic modes of reading. First, Pinsky sees the voice as absolutely mimetic and not performative, a definitive binary between lyric and theatricality. The voice for Pinsky represents a palpable presence that is transferred unproblematically to a reader. Second, while Pinsky suggests that the lyric’s individualism is simultaneously a “social” act, this social nature is merely because of the fact that it is read. “To some extent,” he suggests, “poetry always includes the social realm because poetry’s voice evokes the attentive presence of some other, or its lack: an auditor, significantly absent or present” (*Democracy* 30). While this is certainly important, it maintains the notion that the “social” is an “individual” effect, that is individuals speaking to individuals—never

for or as. The voice itself cannot become a communal entity which is the tension between individual and social that represents the lyric's larger possibility—especially in terms of democratic representation.

Walter J. Ong's work in *Orality and Literacy* becomes important here as he effectively argues that, rather than a "social" effect, the technology of print has constructed an ever-more individualist consciousness: "When a speaker is addressing an audience, the members of the audience normally become a unity, with themselves and with the speaker [while] writing and print isolate" (73). Ong shows how print played a dominant role in the growth of personal privacy. "The old communal oral world," he notes, "had split up into privately claimed freeholdings. The drift in human consciousness toward greater individualism had been served well by print" (129).

The implication for this discussion is that the lyric voice represents a drive to maintain the effects of oral cultures—even within a culture of individualism. In fact, we might consider the divide between "Language" poetry and "lyric" poetry as the divide between a rhetorically, self-consciously print medium and a medium that strives to retain its sense as an oral practice respectively. This is in no way to suggest that contemporary poets can simply ignore, or attempt to ignore, the materiality of their medium—there is no way to escape the fact that poetry exists as a print culture—but that poets can foreground the effects of orality in a way that allows a more communal experience than poetry that foregrounds the arbitrariness of language as "Language" poetry does. Oral utterance, as Ong has noted, also retains the sense that language is never autonomous (as New Critics would suggest) but always based on a non-verbal context.

A Poetry of Democracy

Since lyric can be seen to engage with changing audience expectations, lyric change intersects inevitably with cultural change. The form becomes especially important at those points in time when an audience is actively reimagining itself. The American lyric has been especially productive as the country has reconstructed the shape of its democracy, the mid-19th century, for instance, as the struggles over slavery and economic disparity led to war and eventually to reconstruction. Likewise, we can point to important moments in the struggle for women's suffrage and economic equality, the Civil Rights movement, and Cold War-era struggles over "privacy." In each of these instances, the shape of lyric representation embodied the struggle for political representation; lyric voice *was* political voice.

Yet a distinction is often made between the "poetic" (or aesthetic) and political. In New Critical or formalist models, for instance, the political becomes equated with "message" or "content" as opposed to form. John Crowe Ransom uses two metaphors to describe the lyric: a house and a democracy. Both metaphors make a distinction between "prose-sense" and the "poetic" quality. For instance, in a house, the poetic is equal to those changeable elements, paint, wallpaper, etc. Likewise, in a democracy the state (the prose-sense or message) does not control the individual (the poetic) as a totalitarian state does—the "poetic," that is, must be free and beyond the constraints of message.²⁰ What strikes me as curious is that neither of these two fundamental images/concepts—shelter and government, home and society—invokes the actual people living in either of them; they remain strictly aesthetic terms. In that way, the poem is still allowed to be divorced

²⁰ While these are recurring images in Ransom's work, they are most clearly defined in "Criticism as Pure Speculation" (Kaplan 450-469).

from its cultural situation: a poem may well *be* a democracy but not *of* a democracy, not of any political use.

In *The Well-Wrought Urn*, Cleanth Brooks, likewise, argues that the “poetic” is that which cannot be paraphrased, not some effect that is hung on the poem like clothes on a rack but as the structure itself (192-214). This idea that became a New Critical staple—that the “poetic” is the unparaphrasable aesthetic—lends itself, though, to a vision in which the aesthetic is inherently separated neatly from the political—the political being defined as message. I would contend that we need to view the political in two ways: as both voice and structure—not merely message but as poetic structure, the relationship between self and world, individual and society. Likewise, “voice” is not important as merely identity politics—that is, the expression of some marginalized group—as many critics would claim,²¹ but in the way that the tensions between individual and social are aesthetically embodied within the voice, an aesthetic negotiation of the individual/social dynamic. Poetic structure is simultaneously subjective *and* social. If we view the political in this way, the very structuring of the poetic house, of a structure mediating a constructed subject interacting with the world is itself the potentially radical poetics of the lyric. I argue, then, with Rachel Blau DuPlessis that a methodology of close reading need not necessarily force the poem out of the social domain. DuPlessis specifically uses what she calls a *social philology*: “an application of the techniques of close reading to reveal social discourses, subjectivities negotiated, and ideological debates in a poetic

²¹ The distinction between identity politics versus aesthetics has been widely debated. In this dissertation, I have already noted the ways that avant-garde theorists such as Perloff maintain this binary. I would also point, though, to the re-emergence of a Formalist school of poetics that maintains the New Critical distinction between poetic/political. A short list of such poet-critics would include Dana Gioia, Jonathan Holden, and Timothy Steele.

text” (*Genders, Races* 12). Where DuPlessis is mostly concerned with words and word clusters, phonemes, and puns, I am mostly concerned with questions of voice and structure.

My sense of structure here relies heavily on the notion of the poetic house to which Ransom refers, but in the sense that structure—like a house’s architecture—enacts the subject’s interaction with the social. A tightly shuttered, locked building represents a very different posture toward the world than an open, large-windowed and terraced-style house. Poetic construction likewise represents a means of interaction, and as such the linguistic subject embodies all of the latent, yet fundamental, contradictions of the American experience: public and private, self and other, individual and group. The lyric is uniquely able to interrogate and deconstruct the individual-social binary that is essential to enabling new visions of individual and group agency and which is integral to the ongoing evolution of a Democratic society.

Lesley Wheeler’s *The Poetics of Enclosure* productively defines the lyric as an enclosure that embodies cultural forms of confinement and privacy, enacting gendered relationships to the world. I build on Wheeler’s ideas, but conflate the idea of the lyric house with the notion of a democratic house of representatives, not merely an individual relationship to the social sphere but a choral structure in which competing interests struggle to find voice. Where Ransom’s house is a strictly individual, solitary aesthetic object, I would argue that the lyric house is inherently social and political. In fact, we can think of the lyric voice as a house, an imaginary container in which subjects (individual and group) are constructed, compete to be given voice, and thus cultural/political representation. Rather than claiming some extra-cultural, transcendent

aesthetic, the lyric should be seen to be engaging the fundamental, historical questions of the nature of American democracy. The shape of the lyric house necessarily engages the democratic house.

The poets that I will examine in this project all work, in quite different ways, to restructure this house of representatives to reveal the contradictions of the American “I” and attempt to negotiate new possibilities for the American subject. One of the defining characteristics of the lyric as I am defining it is based on Finch’s model of “coherent decentering” as a way of engaging a given audience. The tradition of American lyric, I contend, is founded on placing speaker and audience not in a formal, linguistic house but within an always changing cultural performance. Such a definition of lyric allows an elasticity to the genre that is essential (and what makes it so culturally important) at the same time as situating it within ongoing traditions. Other genres may have more definite borders; lyric, though, remains an opening, a space in which things intersect, a house where people come and go, move in or move out; there is redecoration, renovation and reinvention. Each lyric redefines the possibilities of the house itself. That founding gesture is one in which the reader is allowed to participate, to imagine the shape of the house, or the democracy, along with the poet.

Rather than seeing lyric poetry in America as simply privileging the individual self, we need to see the way that selves are constructed and examined. This puts the genre at the very center of contemporary critical theory debates. The lyric is particularly suited to explore issues of privacy and disclosure, of representation and voice, of individual and group allegiances that are the heart of the American experience. Lyric is a form that forces an investigation of the intersection of linguistic and social forces that determine

subjectivity. Identity is always a constructive, performative process—in life and in the poem. Lyric is a structure, then, in which discursive forces and individual agency can be explored in order to imagine new paradigms of identity. As the poets that I will examine in this dissertation show, the American lyric serves as an invaluable cultural practice, a space in which our deepest beliefs and visions can both be affirmed, challenged, and changed.

To say that any of the poets in this project are most interesting as figures embedded in historical circumstance is not to suggest that they are merely reflectors—or mere products—of their culture; it is rather to see their poetics as most radical in their confrontation with historical experience, as figures *in time* rather than beyond. The lyric poet is inherently positioned at the nexus of contradictory cultural energies. These energies are particularly poignant in America, a culture based on the contradictions of identity: the American is expected to be both profoundly individual and defiantly “American,” to retain one’s cultural heritage while simultaneously “melting” into an American identity. An American national identity, founded on notions of exceptionalism, requires that members pledge allegiance and commonality at the same time as remaining unfailingly unique. The writers in this project all confront, through the very structure of their work, these contradictions that compose the American ethos; each poet, in creating an art that challenges *how* we read, challenges us to re-read America itself.

WALT WHITMAN: THE INDIVIDUAL AS NATION

An oft-quoted passage from *Song of Myself* indicates the new poetic voice that Walt Whitman attempted to construct in his *Leaves of Grass*: “Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself / (I am large, I contain multitudes)” (LG 78). The “I” here, rather than a distinct individual, is a composite persona, embracing the masses and the complex variance inherent within such a disparate body. The “I” speaks as the nation itself and its intrinsically contradictory diversity. At the same time, though, the title points to the ways in which the poem insists on the speaker as an individual, the sole creative force behind the poem. Whitman constructs a voice that is neither individualist nor communal but both. The voice of *Leaves of Grass*, that is, embodies the complex interrelation between the one and the many that defines a democracy; the poems become a crucible in which the problems and possibilities of American democracy are constantly refigured. But these problems and possibilities, while shifting focus perhaps, are never resolved: the tension between individualism and group allegiances are still at the heart of the American experience, making Whitman’s poetics as relevant as ever, a soundboard against which any reader voices his or her version of “America,” an always multiple and unresolved process. In fact, we might say that *Leaves of Grass* creates a perspective of America and democracy as process rather than a product or definition, a process that each act of reading engages anew.

Simultaneously individual and communal expression, solo and choral, Whitman’s voice at once reflects a fierce American individualism and opens itself to the democratic

masses, a radically new poetic structure that enacts the democratic ideal of equal access and representation. At the same time, this voice mirrors an American cultural exceptionalism and imperialism: the openness of *Leaves of Grass* is not only welcoming but also often subsuming. The voice in its increasing largeness inevitably overtakes difference and speaks *for*, which places the intersection between artistic and political representation at the forefront of Whitman's poetry. Whitman might speak *for* as a way to give voice to marginalized groups, but he also risks speaking in place of those groups, that is speaking for rather than allowing them to speak for themselves. In many respects, we may think of these tensions in Whitman's poetry as representing what Gary Gerstle has referred to as "civic nationalism" and "racial nationalism."¹ Within Whitman's poetry, the impulse to define America based on the promise of equality clashes with the need to define Americanness based on a model of racial heritage, or a melting pot in which the right of American identity is tied to the melting of difference into a white, Anglo identity. Whitman's poetry, then, represents a psychosocial struggle in which the individual and the communal voices merge and compete. Both political and psychological, the poems represent a complex narrative of emerging individual and national identities.

Whitman specifically engages with three radical new strategies of constructing a poetic voice that reveals these psychosocial tensions. First, Whitman challenges the contemporaneous expectations of the reader-text relationship or the reader-author contract. The authorial presence is seemingly no longer bound by the traditional confines of the text as reader, likewise, is explicitly brought into the text and made an agent in the

¹ Gerstle's *American Crucible* argues that these two distinct forms of nationalism have been defining forces in the shaping of an American identity.

construction of the voice and the production of meaning within the poem. Rather than presenting a finished product, Whitman suggested that his poetry must be completed by each reader anew. His investment in the reader reflects a changing cultural perspective in which each citizen is the source of authority rather than priests, monarchs and authors. Second, the “I” functions as a choral voice, a composite persona that attempts to give voice to all. By “giving voice” to the masses, Whitman’s poetics embody the ideal of a representative government in which all citizens will have a voice. Poetic representation then is equal to political representation. Likewise, the “I” is constructed in a way that reflects what later theorists such as Deleuze and Guattari would refer to as “rhizomatic.”² That is, the “I” has no single source, no discernible center; the center, rather, exists everywhere within the poem. By constructing an “I” without center, Whitman refuses the notions of margins in favor of a political state in which all voices are equal. Finally, Whitman’s “I” suggests the double nature of “choral.” As mentioned, the voice is not singular but a chorus of multitudes, but it is also choral as a reference to its musicality. *Song of Myself* for instance reflects Whitman’s interest in opera, a poetic structure in which a multitude of characters and voices all sing as “I”—what he refers to as the nature of his poetry as “ensemble.”³ It is also important to consider *Song of Myself* not just a song *about* the self but a singing of the self into being; the “I” of these poems is a perpetual becoming, enacted with each reading of the text. In this way, Whitman has constructed a poetics that allows each successive generation of readers to reconstruct the

² This image of the rhizome runs throughout Deleuze and Guattari’s work, but it is especially central to *A Thousand Plateaus*.

³ The phrase comes from a letter to William Douglas O’Connor from March 5, 1889 (*LG* xxvii).

“I” at the center of these poems, and, thus, to reconstruct its version of American democracy as well.

To a large extent, we can see these three strategies—the challenge to author-reader conventions, the dual nature of the lyric “I,” and the notion of poetic music as ensemble performance—reflect the merging of three different traditions: the classical, the romantic, and the “modern” (while certainly we cannot classify Whitman as a “High Modernist” writer, the periodization of such a term proves problematic with a writer such as Whitman). I will argue that the weaving of these three strands is what ultimately marks what I am defining as an American lyric tradition in which the lyric voice is able to embody the political tensions of American democracy.

It would be a naive reading of Whitman, though, to disregard the complex function of the “Other” within this seemingly democratic voice. The “Other” who is seemingly welcomed into the embrace of democracy serves just as often as a border to the identity being constructed and, likewise, serves a historical function to support the claims of cultural progress that Whitman supports. The “I” of these poems, then, is continuously at odds with itself as it both merges with these endless figures in a democratic embrace and uses them as the “Other” from which to construct its own identity.

Two sets of competing narratives play themselves out through Whitman’s poetics. First, we can read Whitman’s Americanness as an example of a postcolonial anxiety, revealing the need to break free from British and European cultural/intellectual/artistic control as Whitman envisions himself the new Adam giving voice to the New World. At the same time, though, Whitman’s ideas of “progress” (which affords America its increasing status as bearer of the “modern”) necessarily involve notions of cultural

evolution. To give credence to this narrative of progress, he must not break free from Europe but, rather, claim America as taking on the mantle of European control.⁴ Second, Whitman's poetics also attempt to construct a universal—ahistorical and acultural—democratic subject, allowing equal access and representation for all. Conversely, his belief in progress also means he must see figures as radically historical, identifying groups as signposts in a historical narrative of progress from which America has emerged as the “new” or the “modern.”⁵ Rather than particulars, then, groups often become identified as figures within a historical narrative; for instance, the Native American serves as the “child” that modernity has surpassed—both source and artifact.

This voice, then, embodies the fragmentation of the mid-19th century marked, as Eric Foner says, by “the interplay of race, class, and political ideology in a society undergoing both a sectional confrontation and an economic revolution” (9), a society in which the gaps between rich and poor, capital and labor, owner and slave, north and south threatened its own dissolution. At the same time, America was attempting to construct its own identity as separate, and exceptional, from the rest of the globe, forcing a division between increasingly native and global impulses. Most importantly, these tensions have never been resolved: the history of America has been an ongoing cyclic reconfiguration of these essential confrontations between the individual and the state, the one and the many, the nation and the globe, individualism and group allegiance. Whitman's poetics, then, remain as central as ever to understanding the American ethos.

⁴ For a useful discussion of the effects of the postcolonial experience on U.S. writers, see Buell (196-201).

⁵ For a thorough discussion of the manifestation of this narrative of progress that fixes figures as static representations in much 19th-century America literature, See Schueller, *U.S. Orientalisms*.

A Lyric for the New Democracy

The 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* did not bear a name or a signature, only an etching of Whitman himself standing confidently in workman's clothes. The effect of such a radical gesture was to suggest that the book did not represent a creation by a particular author but rather *was* the author himself. "Camerado, this is no book, / Who touches this touches a man," (LG 424) he says in "So Long," the poem that ended every version of *Leaves of Grass* since the 1860 edition. Again and again, throughout the collection, Whitman attempts to create the sense that the text is the actual life, not a representation. Many critics, then, reduce the poems to personal utterance, a phenomenological revelation of a pre-existing self. For instance, James Miller refers to Whitman as "ever the confessional" (*Leaves of Grass: America's Lyric-Epic* 113) and Robert Phillips suggests that "Whitman may have been America's first blatantly confessional poet" (3). Folsom similarly repeats Whitman's claim: "The book the reader holds *is* Whitman himself" (MS 24, emphasis mine). Such a critical approach comprises only a small part of Whitman criticism as a whole, but what is important is that Whitman promotes such a reading even as the work clearly goes beyond such claims. In his 1855 "Preface" he claimed, "I will not have in my writing any elegance or effect or originality to hang in the way between me and the rest like curtains" (LG 624), suggesting a new author-reader relationship, supposedly unmediated by artifice or convention. Throughout *Leaves of Grass*, curtains are undraped and clothes are pulled away to reveal the "real," Whitman, the "naked self."

Certainly the self-revelatory character of these poems is important but the figure of "I" is much more complex than Whitman's own claims might suggest. The question is not whether Whitman intends for the reader to equate the "I" with an individual

personality, but for what purpose. Even as astute a critic as Allen Grossman has suggested that Whitman's "poetic authority is J.S. Mill's 'overheard' soliloquy of feeling" (LG 881). But clearly, rather than working within this romantic model of the lyric, Whitman's poetry engages, if not assaults, the reader directly. In fact, if we use the traditional signposts of lyric poetry—overheard utterance and musicality—Whitman's poetry might not be considered lyric at all. Both music and speech, though, function in *Leaves of Grass* as a lyric performance in which the reader is drawn into relationship with the speaker: "You shall stand by my side and look in the mirror with me" (LG 624). Rather than a private, overheard utterance, Whitman is suggesting a communal act, focusing heavily on the oral quality of speech that, as Walter J. Ong has noted, creates a shared experience as opposed to the isolation of the printed page (115-135).

Whitman does hold certain poetic sensibilities in common with Wordsworth: poetry should be of everyday events, in a language of real "men."⁶ But rather than a poetic introspection, Whitman speaks directly to—and for—his audience, performing a particular version of selfhood for a contemporaneous audience and attempting, in fact, to create a new audience and thus a new cultural identity; the poems are not only a response to Emerson's call for a new poetic expression⁷ but are actually an effort to develop a new national identity. Literature for Whitman is not the reflection of an existing culture but the means of forming culture. His poetry attempts to both speak to, and for, America. The American ethos to which he is speaking is integrally grounded in notions of

⁶ These claims for poetry are developed in Wordsworth's "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" (Kaplan 256-275).

⁷ This call for a new form of distinctly "American" literature was the focus of Emerson's "The American Scholar" (51-71).

personality and individualism; to engage with such a culture, then, his poetics are likewise grounded.

“Music,” or poetic structure, for Whitman is not a case of an a priori formal quality as had been true for much European (and earlier American) poetry but an effect that suggests a spontaneous imaginative act. That is, Whitman insists on the individual imagination as the source of poetry and music. He, likewise, must speak as the master of his own creative pursuits, praising his originality over any sense of tradition. Especially in the 1855 version of *Song of Myself*, this sense of originality is created by the lack of structural definition; the poem has no numbered sections and moves freely from experience to experience all revolving around the “I”’s seeming definition of itself, progressing, as Betsy Erkkila notes, “by image association rather than by cause-and-effect” (90); the center of the poem exists equally everywhere, and “meaning” is generated not in a linear progression but as accumulation or, as he suggests within *Song of Myself*, centrifugally and centripetally.⁸ Whitman’s poetics, then, engage with a Jeffersonian model of individualism and self-sovereignty. This very notion of the creative personality that Whitman helped produce was concurrent with, and reflected, the evolution of an American national identity.⁹ Despite the body of critical work that expounds upon Whitman’s “mystical” or “transcendental” orientation as distinct from historical cultural/political formations,¹⁰ what poems like *Song of Myself* reveal are the

⁸ These terms come from the 1855 version of “Song of Myself,” line 1007 in which he refers to himself as “One of that centripetal and centrifugal gang” (LG 702).

⁹ See a thorough, parallel discussion of self-sovereignty, imperialism and the work of Herman Melville in Dimock, *Empire for Liberty*.

¹⁰ Allen, *The New Walt Whitman Handbook* and *Studies in Leaves of Grass*; Matthiesson, *The American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*; Miller, James E. Jr. *A Critical Guide to Walt Whitman*.

ways in which the poetic voice dramatizes a culture, a voice defined through notions of democratic individualism.

Alexis de Tocqueville seemed to be speaking prophetically of Whitman when he suggested that the literature of democracy “will never demonstrate the order, regularity, skill and art characteristic of aristocratic literature; formal qualities will be ignored or despised.” The poetry of a democracy, he continues, will be made of a “rough and untutored energy” (qtd Gray 14). The poetics of *Leaves of Grass* attempts to embody the unruly yet optimistic inclusiveness of the new democracy; his poetry *must* break free of tradition, especially European models that had dictated poetry until that point. In an 1866 letter to W.D. O’Connor discussing *Leaves of Grass*, Matthew Arnold expressed the conservative perspective against which Whitman’s verse was working:

While you think it is [Whitman’s] highest merit that he is so unlike anyone else, to me this seems to be his demerit [. . .] a great original literature America will never get in this way, and her intellect must inevitably consent to come, in a considerable measure, into the European movement. That she may do this and yet be an independent intellectual power, not merely as you say an intellectual colony of Europe, I cannot doubt; and it is on her doing this, and not on her displaying an eccentric and violent originality that wise Americans should in my opinion set their desires. (MS 82)

But, for Whitman, new ways of reading actually indicated new approaches to society, and, thus, new ways of writing were essential. The American character could not thrive under the cultural standards of Europe. The hierarchy of author-reader is broken down in an attempt to invite the reader into the process of making poetry, Whitman’s poems not so much vessels of meaning but the event from which meaning might be made. The poet must not serve as a figure like a king or priest who hands down meaning to the masses but should actually give voice to the multitude. In other words, Whitman believed that just as a new democratic society demanded a new citizenship, one in which the authority

becomes invested in the individual, so too literature demanded a new readership, one in which meaning stems from the reader. Not only must he distance himself from tradition in order to create such a poetry, he must disinvest himself of authority: “He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher” (*LG* 706). Similarly, Whitman attempts to help the reader become an active participant in the making of meaning:

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origins of all
poems,
[. . .]
You shall no longer take things at second or third hand . . . nor look
through the eyes of the dead . . . nor feed on the spectres in books,
You shall not look through my eyes either, or take things from me,
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself. (*LG* 663)

The reader here represents both the active reader and the new active democratic citizen. Knowledge is constructed by the reader (not second- or third-hand) and not stored in the static realm of books. Each reader, as each democratic citizen, must serve as his or her own filter—both source and judge of knowledge, an idea that embodies a Jeffersonian philosophy of an individualist democracy.

Likewise, in terms of subject matter, Tocqueville suggested that a democratic poetry must necessarily be about the poet himself, a singular embodiment of the democratic mass. Considering Tocqueville’s claims, Richard Gray goes on to argue that “the only way in which [Whitman] *could* participate in a common cultural effort, he believed, was by behaving as a supreme individualist” (20). One of the great tensions and innovations of Whitman’s poetics, then, is his attempt to be profoundly individualistic at the same time as he claims a national identity, the way in which these two interpenetrate, the one becoming the many.

Even the terms by which Whitman affirms his own individual nature become ambiguous: “Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos” (LG 680).¹¹ The terms by which he defines this individual move from the biographical name, the historical individual, to a national affiliation, followed by two more ambiguous adjectives, a rough and a kosmos, wrapped in a syntax that clouds the relationship between terms. For instance, the term “roughs” seems particularly multiple. On one hand, it surely represents a class marker, the rough representing the manual laborer. Whitman aligns himself with the nation’s workers rather than the elite. Likewise, in mid-19th century America, the term carries with it homosexual overtones. In both cases, Whitman positions himself at the margins of national identity. On the other hand, the term “roughs” can refer to a national character—that Americans are the roughs. So, the term can equally suggest a group identity within the nation—one of those roughs within America—and a national identity, suggesting that America itself is one of the rough, unpolished new countries, a national identity that Whitman positions against what he sees as the overly refined sensibilities of Europe. “A kosmos” presents a similar ambiguity. Is Whitman, the biographical figure, a kosmos within himself, or does his notion of self begin to transcend the physical, to reach into the kosmos? Or, is it actually America that becomes a kosmos? The syntax itself allows these multiple readings so that, even as the self is seemingly affirmed, it dissolves into ever-larger spheres.

Constructing a New Reader

This ambiguity allows Whitman to speak in multiple ways, but it also puts the reader in a new position within the text. Throughout *Leaves of Grass*, the reader

¹¹ The terms and syntax have become much less open-ended in later versions of the poem. For instance, the final version is “Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son” (LG 45).

becomes central to the construction of this poetic voice and of meaning itself—meaning not as a static entity, but an ongoing process of dialogue between text and reader. In some senses, the speaker of these poems reaches out beyond the confines of the page. For instance, in “Trickle Drops,” the speaker’s blood spills onto the page and beyond: “confession drops, / Stain every page, stain every song I sing, every word I say, bloody drops / Let them know your scarlet heat, let them glisten, / Saturate them with yourself all ashamed and wet” (*LG* 107). The physicality of the speaker actually drips from the page. In the context of the “Calamus” cluster of poems in which this poem resides, though, we might also consider this blood as a sexual fluid, so that the poem is a confession of one’s sexuality and a masturbatory image¹² projected toward the reader who responds “ashamed and wet.” These poems represent a new national identity marked by sexuality—a nation in which its puritan roots meet with a new model of openness and inclusion.

Throughout *Leaves of Grass*, the borders between personal and public are tested. James E. Miller Jr. refers to *Leaves of Grass* as a lyric-epic, the first half denoting (for Miller) the private, and the second denoting the public. But this binary is constantly undercut by the poems themselves as the “I” becomes the very ground on which the culture itself walks. By the end of *Song of Myself*, for instance, the speaker has become air, dusk and dirt, claiming finally that to find him we must look for him beneath our boot-soles. Is the “I” then public or private? Whitman’s poetics insist that it is both.

The poems are seemingly spoken directly to each reader, “Whoever you are holding me now in hand” (*LG* 99), at the same time that this reader seems to be an

¹² For a thorough discussion of the poem as masturbatory act, see Erkkila “Public Love: Whitman and Political Theory” (*EW* 113-144).

intimate, particular reader: “This hour I tell things in confidence, / I might not tell everybody, but I will tell you” (*LG* 676) which opens up the question of who this “you” is if not a democratic everybody. Likewise as the voice enacts a communal speech, it also stems from a more “personal” relationship and loss: “I loved a certain person ardently and my love was not return’d, / Yet out of that I have written these songs” (*LG* 115). At times, the speaker is on the periphery of the reader’s consciousness, almost as a stalker: “Passing stranger! you do not know how longingly I look upon you . . . All is recall’d as we flit by each other, fluid, affectionate, chaste, matured, / You grew up with me, were a boy with me or a girl with me . . . I am to see to it that I do not lose you” (*LG* 109). At other times, he is in a direct, sensual contact with the reader: “thrusting me beneath your cloth, / Where I may feel the throbs of your heart or rest upon your hip . . . For thus merely touching you is enough, is best” (*LG* 100). The speaker longs “to infuse myself among you till I see it common for you to walk hand in hand” (*LG* 113) as if he attempts to reach out to the reader in both sexual embrace and in democratic solidarity: “I will make divine magnetic lands, / With the love of comrades” (*LG* 100). The nature of this union is left open in way that, as Sherry Ceriza notes, allows readers to feel included rather than excluded. Ceriza argues that words such as “comrade” or “lover” “signify according to their context and to their reader” (*EW* 107) rather than designating a singular definition and, thus, allow the reader to construct the poetry for him or herself. The “amateness” or “adhesiveness”¹³ of these poems functions on multiple levels simultaneously, from an individual declaration of sexuality to a communal bonding indicative of democratic possibility, but all revolving around the notion of human contact.

¹³ The terms adhesive and amative are used quite frequently in Whitman’s prose to signify democracy.

Contact, in fact, is one of the prime drives of a poem like “Song of Myself:” “I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked, / I am mad for it to be in contact with me” (*LG* 662). At the same time that the speaker reaches out from the page for this contact, though, the reader is invited to enter into union with the text/speaker: “Touch me, touch the palm of your hand to my body as I pass, / Be not afraid of my body.” (*LG* 96). In the poem that would later become “Song for Occupations,” the speaker says

Come closer to me,
Push close my lovers and take the best I possess,
Yield close and closer and give me the best you possess

This is unfinished business with me. (*LG* 710)

The effect of this passage is to draw the reader into closer, and more intimate, contact—a give and take between author and reader that is “unfinished business.” Erkkila has noted that the “Calamus” poems, like the “Enfans” poems, suggest forms of affection that “are neither private nor always sexual and genital but public, erotic, and multiple¹⁴—a practice of everyday life that is visible and pervasive” (*EW* 131). At the same time, however, the “Calamus” poems enact a sexual covering, as the speaker engages with his own sexual uncertainties:

Sullen and suffering hours—(I am ashamed—but it is useless—I am
what I am;)
Hours of torment—I wonder if other men ever have the like,
out of the like feelings? (*LG* 755)

To some extent, we may see the desire to create a marginless poetics as a desire to allow an uncertain or unaccepted sexuality a place, or voice, in the new nation. Likewise, as

¹⁴ Though Emerson considered *Leaves of Grass* to be a work of American genius, he believed that Whitman should remove the “Calamus” section from the collection, pointing to the challenge these poems present to a reader. See Pease (162-163).

the speaker confesses his own homosexuality and uncertainty about it, in “A Woman Waits for Me,” the speaker also engages in a heterosexual union that becomes emblematic of both a creative and national force as well as a release of personal energy:

I pour the stuff to start sons and daughters fit for these States,
 I press with slow rude muscle,
 I brace myself effectually, I listen to no entreaties,
 I dare not withdraw till I deposit what has so long
 accumulated within me.
 Through you I drain the pent-up rivers of myself. (*LG* 88)

While not ignoring the problematic fact that this poem both enacts a violent sexuality and relegates the woman to the role of child-bearer,¹⁵ I would like to suggest that the body in these poems becomes the source of a democratic and creative energy. Sexuality, if these poems are viewed in the context of the others, also refuses an essentialized categorization and does not define the subject. Physical/sexual embrace becomes emblematic of an inclusive democratic embrace. It is this embrace that allows the divide between social and individual to become porous, to create what Michael Moon refers to as “the complex fluidity of identity,” (*LG* 856). This fluidity, this openness of expression, allows the voice to become profoundly communal while remaining its sense of individuality.

Toward the “Modern”

Whitman is the first major poet to radically open the lyric house, or lyric structure, so that the subject at the center of the poetics is literally opened to the world: “Unscrew the locks from the doors! / Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!” (*LG* 46) (a phrase that radically challenges any thinking of the poem as a self-contained unit). The poems enact an open exchange between self and other, or as Stephen Mack argues, blur

¹⁵ While beyond the scope of this dissertation, there is much excellent criticism of the problematic relation of Whitman to women. See, for instance, Vivian Pollak, “Whitman’s Visionary Feminism” (*BB* 92-111).

“the boundary between externally perceived objects and internally experienced emotions. He has erased the subject-object distinctions” (26). The lyric voice, through such association, merges with the external world and demands, then, a poetic structure large enough, and free enough, to likewise encompass the world. In a letter to William Douglas O’Connor in 1887, he claimed that the *Leaves* were like “a great city to modern civilization & a whole combined clustering paradoxical identity a man, a woman” (*LG* xxvii). Ransom’s poetic house then has been opened out into the vast, sprawling growth of the population. Whitman’s lyric is not a pre-determined structure but one that grows in accordance to changing needs and, like a city, the poems grew in relation to the demands of the nation.

As poem becomes city or community or nation, poetic liberation likewise becomes metonymic of national liberation. In the 1872 preface, Whitman says “I have in my mind to run through the chants of this volume (if ever completed) the thread-voice, more or less audible, of an aggregated, inseparable, unprecedented, vast, composite, electric Democratic Nationality” (*LG* 651). Likewise, in the previously mentioned letter to O’Connor, he refers to his revolutionary poetics not as an individual utterance but as an “ensemble” (*LG* xxvii). Even as Whitman engaged a culture increasingly founded on notions of individualism and personal liberty, then, the “I” works in multiple ways, speaking as self, nation, globe, and cosmos. Certainly the creation of a voice that functions simultaneously on such levels is one of Whitman’s great poetic achievements, but it is also what manifests the psychosocial tensions of both Whitman and an American culture.

Even as he proclaims that he celebrates himself, the speaker of *Leaves of Grass* asserts that “every atom belonging to me belongs to you” (LG 662) counteracting the notion of supreme individuality or difference. In a tangibly political reading, this latter claim is one of an egalitarian democratic society in which access to the nation’s bounties belongs to everyone, a socialist democracy. Yet in the discourse of mid-19th century America, such a democracy also reflected an imperialist tendency. The nature of democracy, that is, was naturally to expand. The nation was expanding its borders westward just as the voice of these poems, with its insistently inclusive structure, was gathering everything into its fold. Whitman clearly saw the nature of American democracy (and, in fact, he views the terms America and democracy as synonymous¹⁶) such that Cuba, Mexico, and Canada would happily fall into, and become part of, America. By the time of “A Passage to India,” we see that this vision has encompassed the whole globe. This reading certainly supports Whitman’s radically accumulative structure in which the poem reaches larger and larger areas of experience, as if the poem itself represents what Stephen Mack suggests is “the cosmic analogue of American imperialism, manifest destiny gone stellar” (46).

In the process of such radical accumulation, however, the “individual” is actually lost. The “I” of these poems can embrace everything in general but nothing *specifically*, claiming the central importance of the “I” even while showing the “I” to be without attribute. As Wai-Chee Dimock has argued, “Whitman’s democratic poetics, in short, can have no access to that chaotic world of special loves and hates [. . .] If nothing else, Whitman makes us long for what he does not and cannot offer: an ethics of preference”

¹⁶ In “Democratic Vistas,” Whitman says “I shall use the words America and democracy as convertible terms” (LG 758).

(BB 78). Even as Whitman insists upon individualism as the basis of his poetics and American democracy itself, he must also create a categoric, non-contingent self upon which the full rights of democracy can be conferred without qualification.

Interestingly, the speaker makes a distinction between some internal self and the act of observation and contact. In what would become Section 4 of “Song of Myself,” the speaker notes that the many types of contact with the world, “Trippers and askers . . . People I meet . . . The latest news . . . My dinner . . .” are not the “essential” self: “They come to me days and nights and go from me again, / But they are not the Me myself” (LG 664). John Stephen Mack suggests that the self in Whitman’s poems is both subject and object, a subjective “I” and an objective “Me.” In this way, the “Poet may differentiate himself as an object available for introspection and translation” (26). This distinction also creates a “me” that Dimock suggests is the subject upon which we can /must confer democratic rights, while the “I” is the agent of such democratic considerations. While his poetics reflect this political egalitarianism throughout the many versions of *Leaves of Grass*, it is most true of his 1855 version in which any sense of an ordering, or hierarchical, principle is missing.¹⁷ The seemingly endless listing is clearly manifest in what would become section 16 of *Song of Myself* in which the speaker declares himself of old, young, foolish, wise, maternal, paternal, child, man, southerner, northerner:

A boatman over the lakes or bays or along coasts. . . . a Hoosier, a Badger,
a Buckeye,
A Louisianan or Georgian, a poke-easy from sandhills and pines,
At home on Canadian snowshoes or up in the bush, or with fisherman

¹⁷ The issue of arrangement and structure of the collection seems to be an issue with which Whitman struggled throughout its many versions. The 1860 version was the first to display any kind of ordering or structured arrangement. The emergence of the “Calamus” theme and, more importantly, the “Drum-taps” poems that struggled specifically with the nation at war, seem to have been the strongest impetus for his increasing sense of order to the poems and to the collection as a whole.

off Newfoundland,
 At home in the fleet of iceboats, sailing with the rest and tacking,
 At home on the hills of Vermont or in the woods of Maine or the Texan
 ranch,
 Comrade of Californians. . . . comrades of free northwesterners, loving
 their big proportions,
 Comrade of raftsmen and coalmen—comrade of all who shake hands
 and welcome to drink and meat;
 A learner with the simplest, a teacher of the thoughtfulest,
 A novice beginning experient of myriads of seasons,
 of every hue and trade and rank, of every caste and religion,
 Not merely of the New World but of Africa Europe or Asia. . . . a
 wandering savage
 A farmer, mechanic, or artist. . . .a gentleman, sailor, over or quaker,
 A prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician or priest. (*LG* 674)

A catalog such as this—what Walter Grunzweig refers to as a “census” or “an inventory of American (and world) culture” (*EW* 31)—defies us to know the particular Whitman; if the speaker responds to everything equally we may say that he responds to nothing in particular. And without such responses we can never actually know the individual. Even the insistent use of the indefinite article “a” instead of “the” suggests a detachment from particulars even with a list of specifics. In fact, we may see such listings as an affirmation of a laissez-faire economy and culture: the subject approves of everything equally, without discrimination; the universe is expanded and embraced infinitely and optimistically. Oddly, this equates to a passive speaker who claims no agency. Mack argues:

The idea of human agency seems strikingly absent from Whitman's democratic vision in 1855 and 1856. The self he represents in the first two editions seems either to observe events from a distance or only passively to participate in them. . . . Nowhere in the first two editions of *Leaves of Grass* do we find a poet who must grapple between alternatives and decide among them. (60-61)

The speaker, even in his optimism, refuses to distinguish himself from evil:

I am not the poet of goodness only, I do not decline to be the poet
 of wickedness also.
 What blurt is this about virtue and about vice?

Evil propels me and reform of evil propels me, I stand indifferent. (LG 44)

Even as the poet here embraces his whole world, he will (must?) stand indifferent to moral questions. In fact, the very notion of a democratically defensible subject for Whitman lends itself (or mirrors) an expansionist or imperialistic mindset: the view of American democracy as “the future” or “the modern” combined with a passive, laissez-faire approach of equal opportunity created what Dimock notes is a parallel between the American “narrative of human progress” and “the narrative of Jacksonian imperialism” (20). Just as Whitman’s speaker embraces everything and everyone equally, that voice attempts to *become* everyone equally: the slave, the woman, the native. Even as he espouses the rights of such individuals, the act of a composite persona appropriating their voices embodies the imperial mindset of the 19th century.

Whitman’s multiplicitous and open voice is, to a large extent, a response to Emerson’s call for a new, American literature: “We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe” (70) (even as Emerson’s own poetics still largely mirrored European traditions). In a catalog such as the one quoted above, Whitman is giving voice to the new continent, the experience of the new Adam. The continent itself becomes a beacon for a future global utopia in which all are welcome. The voice in section 24 of *Song of Myself* can be read as the poet speaking for the multitude, the voice of democracy itself serving as the channel through which all will have voice:

Through me many long dumb voices,
Voices of the interminable generations of prisoners and slaves,
Voices of the diseas’d and despairing of thieves and dwarfs,
Voices of cycles of preparation and accretion,
And of the threads that connect the stars, and of wombs and of the
father-stuff,
And of the rights of them the others are down upon,
Of the deform’d, trivial, flat, foolish, despised,

Fog in the air, beetles rolling balls of dung.

Through me forbidden voices
Voices of sexes and lusts, voices veil'd and I remove the veil,
Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigur'd. (LG 46)

Just as Whitman's poetry grants access to subjects normally cast out of poetic decorum, in Whitman's new world all will have a voice and all will be unashamedly present. This act of inclusion, of course, represents a linguistic challenge. Especially in *Song of Myself*, Whitman suggests that no language is large enough to contain the self¹⁸ (and, thus, the new democracy). As he suggests in the final section, "I too am untranslatable" (LG 77). The accumulative, expansive language responds to the first frustrated attempts to find a language for, or give voice to, the New World—an alien world to which the European languages could not respond. The poems draw from native languages, then, and create an inventory of the New World as he sees it.

More importantly, rather than "expressing" a pre-existing subject (self or nation), the poetic strategy is one of singing the subject into being: "My voice goes after what my eyes cannot reach, / With the twirl of my tongue I encompass worlds and volumes of worlds" (LG 48). *Song of Myself* becomes an operatic drama of a self woven and unwoven through the singing itself: "Now I will do nothing but listen, / To accrue what I hear into this song, to let sounds contribute toward it" (LG 48). Everything that this speaker experiences actually *becomes* the speaker in the process of the poem, so that when Whitman says "I sing myself," it is a literal action, and the song itself is woven out of the external world, just as the child in "There Was a Child Went Forth:" "There was a

¹⁸ Whitman referred to *Leaves of Grass* as primarily a "language experiment" in which the self (or the "body electric") is immersed in linguistic energies and syntactical streams. See Folsom, "Introduction, Recircuiting the American Past" (14).

child went forth every day / And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became" (LG 306). Listen to the repetitions of this theme throughout *Song of Myself*: "Absorbing all to myself and for this song" (LG 35), "And of these one and all I weave the song of myself" (LG 39), and "Now I will do nothing but listen / to accrue what I hear into this song" (LG 48). This process of becoming is not a static self-definition but a self in flux. Just as "agonies are one of my changes of garments" (LG 58), so too we can assume are his joys and ecstasies: "Is this then a touch? quivering me to a new identity" (LG 50). This voice, then, does not equate to a static identity, but suggests identity as eternally in flux, an identity that does not rely on a division between inner and outer, individual and social. More importantly, if the subject here is a dynamic interrelation between individual and social, or subject and object, it is never finished, never fully defined. In that way, Whitman has created a voice that continues to live, continues to be redefined in each successive reading, by each successive generation of readers, until at last Whitman himself vanishes from the text as he does at the end of "Song for Occupations" and "the psalm sings instead of the singer [. . .] the script preaches instead of the preacher" (LG 712). And as any new reading redefines Whitman, so, too, it redefines America.

It is important to remember, though, that since "America" and "Democracy" are synonymous terms for Whitman, this future global utopia is ultimately an expansion of the United States. In Whitman's global vision, all figures—racial, gendered, sexual, and religious—become subsumed in his master narrative of "democracy" (a term that Donald Pease notes is "more prescriptive than descriptive" (153) for Whitman). His vision of the nation and the globe is ultimately of the melting pot that figuratively melts away difference: to become the "new," the "modern," or the "democratic citizen," the

individual must assimilate to Whitman's version of the global, "American" dream (remembering that America is more a democratic ideal than a geographic or political entity). Once entered into this American dream, though, Whitman will grant that "every atom belonging to me as well belongs to you." These tensions, again, reveal the dual narratives of racial nationalism and civic nationalism; in the case of the latter, Whitman's America is ultimately a socialist democracy that runs contrary to the Jeffersonian individualist tradition. In the case of the former, America is constructed out of troubling relationships with a distinct sense of "otherness."

Whitman and the "Other"

This idea of becoming American is certainly complicated at the point in history that Whitman is writing, as racial, sexual, economic and class divisions of the mid-19th century began to tear at the fabric of the American people. As Erkkila notes, "The political union to which [Whitman] stakes his identity as the poet of democracy began to dissolve under the pressure of slavery and other contradictions in the body politic of the American republic" (*EW* 124). Slavery, the oppression of women, the destruction of native populations were all imprinted on the poetics. On one hand, Whitman's version of democracy certainly cannot bear the existence of slavery, slaughter, or oppression; his political claims depend on notions of equality and universal suffrage. On the other hand, he needs the image of these groups as primal source from which the modern democracy obtains its rights of power; Whitman's narrative of progress needs figures for the primitive past, images that point toward the movement of civilization. In the 1872 "Preface"¹⁹ Whitman notes the importance of the poetic image in developing cultural

¹⁹ Though the 1872 version did not specifically have a Preface, his published letter to Emerson was clearly meant to serve that function.

narratives: “I say the modern Image-Making creation is indispensable to fuse and express the modern Political and Scientific creation” (*LG* 649). Images of the native and the slave, then—while treated differently and serving a different function in Whitman’s narrative—share one important aspect: however problematic their contemporary situation may have been, it was unavoidable at best or, at worst, a necessary evil that served the growth of the Republic.

Even in Whitman’s welcoming embrace, groups are represented in troubling ways.

A prime example is his worldly lists in “Salut Au Monde!”:

You Hottentot with clicking palate! you wooly-hair’d hordes! [. . .]
 You human forms with the fathomless ever-impressive countenances
 of brutes! [. . .]
 You Austral negro, naked, red, sooty, with protrusive lip, groveling,
 seeking your food! [. . .]
 You plague-swarms in Madras, Nankin, Kaubul, Cairo!
 You haggard, uncouth, untutor’d Bedowee!
 You benighted roamers of Amazonia! you Patagonian! you
 feejeeman!
 I do not prefer others so very much before you either,
 I do not say one word against you away back where you stand,
 (You will come forward in due time to my side). (*LG* 125)

The primitive here is a “brute,” “red, sooty” and “groveling,” “uncouth,” and “untutor’d.”

There is a doubleness to the gesture as Whitman welcomes, “in due time,” all of these

figures into his fold even as they remain figures of the savage past. They must come

forward to be with the modern Whitman, to stand by his side, not the other way around.

Guiyou Huang argues, “Whitman upholds a more inclusive and receptive attitude toward

other races, but only under the condition of domination by the American race.” Huang

goes on to suggest that Whitman represents “a Darwinian streak—only the fittest of

individuals can qualify and survive to become members of the new American race” (*EW*

166). More importantly, though, these figures are represented in such a way to serve as a

border or defining limit to the American or “modern” identity he is constructing; that is, these figures become the borders for a new national identity. Such representations are at the complex heart of his contradictory democratic impulses.

These cultural images afford Whitman the narrative of progress in which America finds its birthright and out of which the “modern” democratic subject is born. At the same time, Whitman knew that his civic nationalism could not accommodate the contemporary treatment of natives and slaves. His representations, then, also provide the means to explain/justify such troubling aberrances and develop his racial nationalism.

One of the most visible tensions in Whitman’s body of poetry is his relationship with the Native American. The native serves for Whitman as the raw, authentic experience of the new world, a savage expression of the wilderness. Indians serve as a counter to the artificiality of civilization, serving instead as the representative of “nature”: “I see swarms of stalwart chieftains, medicine-men and warriors, / As flitting by like clouds of ghosts . . . (Race of the woods, the landscapes free, and the falls!)” (LG 440). At the same time he refuses them definition as “American.” America is not a place or a particular political entity for Whitman but an ideal to be enacted; America as landscape or location is much more metaphor for the ideal of democracy, and the native, thus, is capable of becoming an American but is not inherently granted that status through birthright.

In a late poem, “Yonnondio,”²⁰ Whitman shows the historical Indian to be in need of preservation: “No picture, poem, statement, passing them to the future:) / Yonnondio! Yonnondio!—unlimn’d they disappear” (LG 440) In other words, it is necessary to

²⁰ Whitman notes that the term is an Iroquois word meaning “*Lament for the Aborigines*” (LG 440).

portray these past, noble figures lest they disappear. The contemporary figure, however, is readily expunged. The disappearance of the Indian was regrettable but was also inevitable; like the black, there is no true means of coexistence in the new, white “democracy.” Of course U.S. treatment of the native casts a large shadow on the optimistic vision that Whitman attempted to portray, but Whitman portrays this as a necessary part of cultural progress. Democracy as the future is to be welcomed and the “savage” (while perhaps noble) is to be subsumed into the “modern.” Those natives who do not adapt to the emerging vision of “Americanness” remain an ahistorical figure, serving as a backdrop against which progress is played out rather than gaining any substantive access.

At the same time, however, Whitman turns to the Native as source of the nation. In this way, the native conflates with Whitman’s notion of woman, a figure that literally gives birth to the nation but is not granted a role in its development. Both the native and the woman serve as figures of a “natural” state, an unchanging source of a modern state. He says of “the friendly and flowing savage” that “Wherever he goes men and woman accept and desire him, / They desire he should like them and touch them and speak to them and stay with them.” Even as the world progresses past it, the Native offers “words simple as grass . . . uncombed head and laughter and naiveté [. . .] the common modes and emanations, / They descend in new forms from the tips of his fingers” (*LG* 697). In a very similar fashion, woman is an image of an unencumbered past:

The female contains all qualities and tempers them . . . she
 is in her place . . . she moves with perfect balance,
 She is all things duly veiled . . . she is both passive and active
 . . . she is to conceive daughters as well as sons and sons
 as well as daughters. (*LG* 734)

Her role as motherhood is both figurative of a national origin but also quite literally to populate the new country:

She is the bearer of them that shall grow and be mates to the mothers.

Her daughters or their daughters' daughters . . . who knows who
shall mate with them?
who knows through the centuries what heroes may come from
them? (*LG* 736)

In relation to the 19th-century “cult of domesticity,” Whitman relies on notions of “Good Motherhood” as a solution to the problem of modernity, a figure of origin and continuity in the shifting passages of modernity. Woman serves as the source of male energy that then constructs and expands the democracy. Women are represented as selfless, or as Vivian Pollak says, an “archetypally gratified and gratifying mother” (*BB* 99). Women, granted authority within the home but not within the public sphere, serve as a reassuringly continuous subjectivity that does not challenge social conventions in the way that he, as a man, is able to. Woman serves as a counterpoint to the muscular, manly new world; native and woman become historical figures lacking agency.

Whitman’s poetics manifest a more troubling relationship with slavery and African-Americans. Certainly his stance toward the abolitionist movement and the Free Soil party changed throughout his career,²¹ but whether blacks were to be accepted in the universal democratic suffrage always remained questionable. For instance, many critics point toward Whitman’s 1858 editorial concerning Oregon’s new constitution as a definitive statement of Whitman’s feelings about black citizenship:

²¹ When Whitman worked for *The Brooklyn Eagle* in the 1840’s, he endorsed the paper’s expansionist views. In 1848, though, Whitman had become a Free Soil Democrat. He was fired from the paper for an editorial that espoused his new political views. See Pease (150-51).

Who believes that the Whites and Blacks can ever amalgamate in America? Or who wishes it to happen? Nature has set an impassable seal against it. Besides, is not America for the Whites? And is it not better to be so? As long as the Blacks remain here how can they become anything like an independent and heroic race? There is no chance for it. (qtd. Klammer 16)

Is this the same individual that houses the runaway slave in section 10 of *Song of Myself*?

The same person that welcomes the slave to sit next him at the table? There are several important aspects to note in terms of this relationship. First, the presence of African-Americans in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* actually lessens with each progressive edition. His vision of democracy demanded more and more distance from the black experience. Secondly, as Jonathan Arac has argued, the role of the slave in section 10 remains oddly objective; that is, the slave becomes an object through which the speaker derives identity and moral authority. Every verb has “I” as its subject and the slave (or some part thereof) as its object; the slave is without agency even as he is granted safety (BB 46). In fact, the figure of the Black not only affords the speaker nobility but is also incorporated into his sense of identity: rather than the Black’s liberation serving as its own goal, it becomes metaphoric of the drive for a sovereign subjectivity. Whitman is willing not to merely speak for the slave but to appropriate his voice: “I myself become the wounded [slave].” (LG 692). In a paradoxical gesture, the figure of the other becomes both part of an emerging American identity at the same time as it is cast as a backdrop against which the new subject can define itself.

It is, of course, his own Anglo-American subjectivity that allowed Whitman to make the claims he did in the first place. We have seen the way that he grapples with notions of center and marginality by denying the very figure of center. His vision accepts or admits no outsider status. But how can we possibly align this utopian vision with the material realities of his world? Can the slave experience/envision America in the same

way that Whitman can? As Alicia Ostriker has argued, “High and low, rich and poor, the enslaved and the free are for him all actors in a pageant. Such a solution is *beautiful but useless* to one who is a slave. Happily independent of institutions [. . .] he has no sense of what it means to be crushed by them” (*MS 464* emphasis mine). A poetry lacking all hierarchy actually denies the reality of inequality that it attempts to speak against, denies the race conflict and radical difference that defined America in the mid-19th century. It is only from a certain social status that one can claim, as Whitman repeatedly did, the beauty in everything. Even evil is somehow beautiful in Whitman’s eyes, but this clearly points to his own position of privilege. As optimistic and egalitarian as his vision may seem to be, it is certainly sculpted out of his particular historical situation.

What these tensions suggest is that Whitman’s poetic voice itself embodies the tensions of America during his era—the contradiction between the belief in a egalitarian, democratic ideal and the inability to live up to such an ideal. This is not, however, to merely portray Whitman as a racist, imperialist poet. If Whitman attempts to configure his “T” as a national identity, that “T” necessarily embodies the contradictions at the heart of such an identity; the tensions between an absolutely individualist stance and a democratic, universal subjectivity inherently mean that the formation of the subject undergoes the same psychological stresses that the nation undergoes. We might productively view this process through a psychological lens and see that the subject is attempting to demarcate identity by a process of othering, marking what the self is not, the borders that will delineate identity. On the other hand, Whitman simultaneously attempts to erase subject/object distinctions so that the borders of self and nation are never stable and never complete.

The paradox of Whitman's (and America's) democracy is that one must be profoundly individual (locating sovereignty, as Jefferson believed, in the individual consciousness²²) and must destroy individual boundaries; the individual must stand as one *and* as the many. This, ultimately, is the heart of Whitman's genius: even though we can point clearly to the negative implications his work poses in terms of representation, such representation is never complete. Any form of identity defies closure, inviting rather the reader (and, most importantly, future readers) to define and redefine the subject at the heart of his poetry. The fluidity of self and other is profound in the way that it forces a reader to recreate Whitman or America with each reading. Even as Whitman attempts to define the self and a national identity, the poetry remains vital for such definition today.

The act of reading Whitman is always an open-ended conversation. As Folsom suggests, "To address Walt Whitman, after all, is to complete his poetic act, to create the other half of the dialogue he initiated" (*MS* 24). The way that poets have come to "talk back"²³ to Whitman suggests the complex and ongoing role he plays within America's cultural heritage. For many recent Native American writers, such as Simon Ortiz and Sherman Alexie, Whitman represents the voice of the white pioneer, an American poetry that "came at the expense of the 'multitudes' of still bodies of Indians, massacred in the name of American progress" (*MS* 69). For African American writers, though, the problems lie not so much with Whitman but with the white academy. Black poets from

²² Jeffersonian democracy hinges on the notion that morality must come from the individual consciousness, not from any state mandate. In other words, Jefferson's theory of democracy was founded on a humanist notion of self-sovereignty. As Dimock notes, "The best government for an 'empire,' according to Jefferson, was 'self-government: the government of the self by the self'" (*Empire for Liberty* 38).

²³ Folsom argues that much of 20th century American poetry constitutes an ongoing dialogue with Whitman ("Introduction," *MS* 21-74).

Langston Hughes to June Jordan have lamented the way that Whitman's poetry of egalitarianism and freedom was kept from view; for these poets, Whitman offers an important, liberatory vision and the academy kept such possibilities out of their lives. In 1946, Hughes was adamant about the necessity of Whitman to his political discourse:

Perhaps, too, because his all-embracing words lock arms with workers and farmers, Negroes and whites, Asiatics and Europeans, serfs and free men, beaming democracy to all, many academic-minded intellectual isolationists in America have had little use for Whitman, and so have impeded his handclasp with today by keeping him imprisoned in silence on library shelves. (*MS* 186-87)

Obviously, Whitman serves a different cultural/political role for Hughes than for Alexie.

To hold on to a specific view of Whitman denies the plurality of readings his work allows; it also risks silencing potential cultural positions. Whitman's democracy serves quite a different function for 20th-century Black Americans than it does for Jewish Americans such as Ginsberg or, more importantly, for the academics who determine his position within the canon. We might view his democratic vision as ultimately flawed, but does this make it invalid? If so, what groups of people are cut off from productive dialogue with that vision? In our academic efforts to see the imperialist realities of his vision, would we cut off the new wave of democratic challengers such as Hughes? Whitman himself claimed that he was not a poet but that poetry would be born out of dialogue with his work. We can also claim, then, that a poet such as Hughes is the fruit of Whitman's labors.

The point here, then, is not to condemn Whitman's poetic project but to remain aware of its complex and contradictory nature. The flawed representation and appropriation of other cultures and perspectives does not inherently deny his democratic vision. The tendency to read him as the prototypical prophet of the "liberal self" or the "universal" without also acknowledging his claims of cultural superiority and his

tendency toward imperialism points toward the ongoing conflict of identity within American culture. More importantly, without considering our own position within this cultural production we create a distorted view of both who he was and what the nation is. The way that writers have continued to respond to Whitman in varied ways points to the fact that we are still a nation defined by the promise of a socialist democracy in which all will have a voice and the inability of society to live up to that promise.

To suggest that the voice of *Leaves of Grass* was often racist or imperialist is not to deny its importance to American cultural history; in fact, I would argue that it makes it all the more important to us today. “Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes)” he says (*LG* 77). Indeed, this is a central truth of American history and identity. And the very difficulty of living as a multitude is the central challenge that Whitman poses for us, again and again—a challenge to which America has yet to successfully respond.

H.D. AND THE DIVIDED SUBJECT

It might seem curious to follow a discussion of Walt Whitman with a discussion of H.D. since, in general, criticism would suggest that H.D.'s modernist sensibilities oppose the romanticism of Whitman. Where Whitman was open and expansive, the latter was closed and elliptical; where Whitman was unabashedly nationalistic—if not jingoistic—H.D. was an expatriate, tentative at best in her relationship to America; where Whitman tended toward inclusive lists of the everyday, H.D. turned toward classic, if not rarefied, myth and image.

These two seemingly disconnected writers did share several important traits, however, that will help in my consideration of the lyric. Both writers invited the reader into the process in fundamentally new and innovative ways, implicating the reader in the process of making meaning. Both allied themselves with figures at the margins of national identity even as they attempted to reconfigure gender roles and sexual stereotypes, placing questions of gender and sexuality at the center of national narratives. Both blurred the boundaries between self and other, the individual and social, and—though admittedly far from the optimistic American that Whitman was—H.D. similarly attempted to construct new models of an American culture. And most importantly, both grounded these projects in a lyric voice that functioned simultaneously as individual and as a chorus. This is not to suggest that H.D. can merely be roped into the shadow of a Whitmanesque tradition; I do contend, though, that for both poets the lyric served as a flexible genre through which they could reimagine the possibilities of individual and

communal identities; the lyric, that is, served as a container in which they could forge radically new American possibilities.

In 1910, when H.D. was 24, the Washington legislature approved a referendum on women's suffrage. The referendum served as a national catalyst, energizing women who joined forces in the drive for the suffrage. After ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920, however, other issues beyond the vote disrupted this unity of the women's movement. As Lynn Dumenil argues, "Women's widely varying agendas made it difficult for them to translate political enfranchisement into political power" (111). This tension suggests the paradoxical nature of any group struggling to find a voice within a democracy: the necessity to act, and speak, as a group in order to gain representation at the same time as allowing diversity and individuality within the group. DuPlessis refers to this as a distinction between "female 'otherness' and female 'sameness' or perfect equality," going on to argue that "While H.D. . . . profited from 'rights' feminism, she was extremely drawn to the feminism of 'difference'" (Bloom *H.D.* 36). We might think of the "female sameness" or "rights feminism" as a form of civic nationalism, a society in which all are afforded the same rights and opportunities, while the "feminism of difference" envisions a national identity that counters an exclusive national identity—similar to a racial nationalism in which a national identity is granted only to particular groups. As Gary Gerstle has pointed out, though, women faced a problem quite different from race: women were granted an "American" identity, even as they were relegated to second-class citizens within that society.¹

¹ See Gerstle's discussion of the gendered character of American nationalism in *American Crucible* (178-180).

As a way of reimagining notions of national identity, H.D.'s poems conflate a Greek landscape with an American landscape as a way of returning to the very source of Democracy, and to reimagine the cultural landscape based solidly on notions of civic nationalism. "Cliff Temple" opens up with a fairly typical H.D. coastal image:

Great, bright portal,
shelf of rock,
rocks fitted in long ledges,
rocks fitted to dark, to silver granite,
to lighter rock—
clean cut, white against white.

High—high—and no hill-goat
tramples—no mountain-sheep
has set foot on your fine grass; (*CP* 26).

Susan Stanford Friedman suggests that these landscapes come from "her American childhood: in particular the harsh northern seacoasts of Cornwall and Maine" (*Psyche Reborn* 40) while a critic like Roger Mitchell sees her poems' landscapes as "purely Greek" (Myers 44). H.D. herself refers to the poems as "nostalgia for lost land. I call it Hellas. I might, psychologically just as well, have listed the Casco Islands off the coast of Maine" (qtd DuPlessis *H.D.* 14). While the supposed clarity of Imagist poetry would suggest we all respond to the same visuals, these poems actually create an open-ended visual landscape that the reader must complete, a lost land that is both personal and cultural, "Hellas" as a utopian, democratic vision.

It is also important to recognize how many of these landscapes are borderlands, particularly coastlines that serve as a demarcation of both self and national identity. These poems look at figures at the margins, figures that are either invaded (colonized) or cast out in the name of a national character. As a way of aligning with the marginal figure, H.D.'s poetics construct a choral structure in which multiple groups are given

voice and representation. We can certainly read her work as feminist in that they imagine a society in which women are active participants, but she doesn't necessarily want to bring women into the "center" of society. Her poems suggest, rather, that the margins are productive, arguing against any essentializing definition of "woman" (or any such group). She breaks, rather, any distinct binaries, allowing a national identity large enough to embrace differing sexualities, genders and races.

H.D.'s lyric voice enacts alternative models of "Americanness" and of "woman." As Rita Felski has argued, the struggle for modernization and modernity is integrally tied in to questions of gender, woman most often scripted as a figure of nostalgia or sentimentality. The maternal, likewise serves as source or origin, a figure of authentic harmony but remains tied to the past (*The Gender of Modernity* 35-60). As we saw with Whitman, woman serves most often as a figure of the pre-modern against which the modern is cast. Even as H.D. struggles to construct woman as an essential part of an American identity, she also attempts to break through this notion of woman as originary or authentic. For instance, in a poem such as "Night," the rose (that traditional romantic image for beauty) has its petals peeled away, leaving "the stark core / of the rose / to perish on the branch" (*CP* 33). The very search for essence, or "core," is actually an act of violence rather than a welcoming embrace. Again and again, even as the voice affirms a female identity, the images with which women have been traditionally associated become victimizing: she is choked by the beauty of flowers ("Sheltered Garden" *CP* 19-20) and flayed by fruit blossoms as she pleads "spare us the beauty / of fruit trees" ("Orchard" *CP* 28). As women are struggling for a voice within an American national

identity and a political voice, H.D. constructs a model of gender that is highly complex and contradictory.

The very lyric traditions and representations that H.D. works within, and against, are parallel to the ongoing struggles for democratic representation. Lyric representation, as I argue, is about the very nature of identity; aesthetic choices, then, reflect new social and linguistic possibilities, and innovative poetic forms represent alternative cultural forms. H.D.'s poetics are not only responses to ongoing artistic traditions but to the pressures of social circumstance, pressures manifest in the earlier poetics of Walt Whitman.

One of the paradoxes that Whitman's lyric unveiled was the role of the woman in the American democracy. Whitman saw women as central to the foundation of the new nation, but they then were reified as "source" or "mother": women serve as a creative or generative source but then are overtaken by the a male leadership—a democracy in which they might be "represented" or "spoken for" but not allowed their own voice. The woman may be inseminated and serve as source or mother of the democracy but not as an active constituent. In poetic terms, we can see this as the woman as muse but not poet, or as Cynthia Hogue says, "the object, but not the subject, of poetic contemplation" (xvii). As a method of countering these forms of poetic representation, H.D. carefully developed a poetry out of differing lyric traditions—the classical and the romantic—as a way of negotiating an increasingly misogynistic modernism. The lyric voice becomes a malleable construct, functioning at once as an individual and as a chorus, both promoting a new lyric subjectivity and refusing any reification of the subject. H.D.'s lyric voice is elusive and performative and, most importantly, is not meant to be reduced to any

singular reading, demanding that a reader maintain multiple contradictory readings at the same time. This demand on the reader also reflects H.D.'s lyric sensibility. Like Whitman's, H.D.'s poems engage a contemporary audience and involve them in the process of making meaning. This often occurs in her poems as she shifts from an "I" toward addresses of "You" and "We" in poems like "Helmsman" for instance: "We worshipped inland— / we stepped past wood-flowers, / we forgot your tang, / we brushed wood-grass" (*CP* 6). The poems themselves become shared rituals in which an audience speaks together.

This act of reader involvement, along with her use of multiple traditions, however, has had unfortunate effects on her place within the canon. Critics have never been too sure where, or how, to place her work within the canon and have, then, placed limiting terms (most notably the detrimental "Imagist" label) on her work, obscuring the innovative ways in which she forces us to read. In fact, the problematic reception of her work often becomes the subject of the poetry itself, the challenges with a poetic culture serving as a trope for "culture" in a larger sense. This chapter will focus on her early work because in these shorter, "imagist" poems she effectively challenges lyric and social conventions; likewise, her reputation now rests firmly on her later poems that receive the bulk of critical commentary. Even as ardent an admirer as Denise Levertov suggests that "The icily passionate precision of the early work, the 'Greek' vision, had not been an end, a closed achievement, but a preparation." In a now generally accepted critical move, Levertov emphatically labels H.D.'s later work the "most important" (Bloom *H.D.* 10). I would like to suggest that these early poems are not merely precursors to the later poems, or a developmental stage in her maturing process as has been often claimed, but visionary

works in their own rights. These poems show the lyric—with its dynamics of openness and closure—to be a metaphor, as Lesley Wheeler has suggested, of identity itself (70-1). This chapter will explore the early lyrics of H.D. as transgressions—poetic, sexual, social—that challenge conventional modes of representation and attempt to redefine notions of American identity.

H.D. and the Poetic “Tradition”

The romantic tradition as envisioned by Wordsworth, and expanded by Emerson, perpetuated a belief that the poet/speaker stands as representative of “universal” experience, a man speaking for all men.² Women’s experience, however, has never been granted the universality that a man’s experience has. As Joanne Feit Diehl has noted, the Emersonian sublime puts man at one with the cosmic law. The authority that such an equation offers is not available, though, to a poet on the outside of the tradition. Emerson’s poet presumably speaks for everyone, but woman has been, especially in the 19th century, relegated to the minor position of “Poetess” (1-25). Luce Irigaray’s notion that only woman is gendered supports this idea: since man is not gendered, he can speak as the “universal” while woman is limited to speaking only as woman. Likewise, as Friedman has noted, women in modernist poems rarely exist as authentic people; they are, rather, “feminized principles—both threatening and life-giving, and not particularized human beings” (Bloom *H.D.* 48). In this cultural context, women have served as minor poetic figures or, more often, as the midwife for male artists.

Whitman added another layer to this problem as he suggested that the poet should bare the self, to stand naked with as little as possible between poet and audience.

² See especially Emerson, “Nature” and “The American Scholar” (7-72).

Nakedness, however, tends to not mean the same thing to a woman writer as to a man. Woman is the possessed object, not naked but a “nude” on exhibition. We can vividly see this in a theory of poetry like Edgar Allen Poe’s in which he claims that female beauty (or more specifically the death thereof) is the essence of poetry: “The death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world” (756). Likewise, what is often cited as a strength in many male poets (especially with the advent of modernism)—emotional ambiguity—is most often seen as a weakness for women, pointing to their inability to stretch past “women’s” concerns into any “universal” poetry.³ American women poets in the 20th century, then, have necessarily struggled to find their place in a tradition to which they do not belong, inherently outsiders.

For a poet to merely disregard the tradition, however, is to concede the possibilities of audience engagement and cultural representation offered by those traditions. Aesthetic tradition is a means of cultural/political representation; to simply write outside of the tradition is to perpetuate models in which groups or individuals remain outside of a given culture. The question that women poets have faced is how to use the tradition without being defined by it, to use inherited meanings in order to shape a new subjectivity—to see lyric discourse, that is, as shaping the sayable without allowing it to limit the sayable. H.D., then, speaks from within certain traditions even as she maintains the position of outsider to the tradition, functioning subversively within lyric models that she also counters. In “Notes on Thoughts and Vision,” she aligns her creative source with the

³ I.A. Richards’s *Principles of Literary Criticism* offers a fine example as he praises Eliot’s ambiguity then goes on to argue that the problem with H.D.’s poetry is “The loss of so much formal structure leads otherwise to tenuousness and ambiguity” (206).

womb and the body, countering a male-dominated modernism with a “feminine” principle.⁴

H.D.’s early work weaves together two seemingly conflicted traditions, Greek Classicism and American Romanticism as a way to enter into dialogue with American Modernism. But it is important to remember that Raymond Williams has effectively shown that the classical and the romantic are opposed to naturalism rather than to each other (*Culture* 37-19). The tendency of modernist poets was to reject the romantic model of lyric in favor of a less “personal” or “self-expressive” poetics, or as Marjorie Perloff suggested, a yielding of romantic emotion to a Poundian esthetic of the mind (Wheeler 3) which is generally considered a response *against* lyric. By functioning in a lyric framework, H.D.’s poems always existed in a vexed relationship with modernism. But rather than considering whether the poems are or are not “modern,” I contend that they use both a classical and a romantic tradition to challenge the increasingly accepted orthodoxy of modernism. For instance, consider the opening of her poem “Mid-Day” from her first book *Sea Garden*:

The light beats upon me.
I am startled—
A split leaf crackles on the paved floor—
I am anguished—defeated. (*CP* 10)

Two impulses fuse here, the impersonal imagistic impulse of the split leaf image and the highly personal, “I am anguished—defeated.” This tension continues throughout the poem, moving from images like “the blackened stalks of mint” to thoughts such as “I am scattered in its whirl.” It would be easy to read the latter as an overly romantic or melodramatic sentimentality, even echoing Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind”—that now

⁴ For a useful discussion, see Laity, *H.D. and the Victorian Fin de Siecle* (ix-xiii).

classic model of romanticism—and its images of “winged seeds” in the swirl and chaos of the wind, the wind itself both “Destroyer and Preserver” (577-79). But in the middle of H.D.’s poem, we learn that it is in fact the speaker’s own thoughts that are tearing her apart, “My thoughts tear me, / I dread their fever.” The tension between the image and thought enact the split psyche that can in some ways be attributed to modernism’s impulses toward self-reflective thought, or a tension between a classical and a romantic sensibility. Neither the romantic nor the classical tradition will sustain her, and she accordingly attempts to create a new synthesis. Adelaide Morris has accurately noted that her poems “think *about* thinking and they think *toward* action: they are, that is, philosophical and ethical” (2). This observation suggests two important facets of H.D.’s work. First, even in a seemingly “emotional” poetics, she still reclaims philosophy as her subject that has generally been seen as the domain of a male poetics (counter to the supposedly appropriate work of the “Poetess”). Second, the intellect of the poems actually reflects Perloff’s “Poundian esthetic” even as the poems reclaim a romantic heritage to which it supposedly runs counter. That is, the poems exist in liminal states that challenge the boundaries of convention, pushing equally at the limits of classicism, romanticism, and modernism.

“Sea Rose,” the opening poem of *Sea Garden* functions as a similar kind of performance:

Rose, harsh rose,
 marred and with stint of petals,
 meagre flower, thin,
 sparse of leaf,

 more precious
 than a wet rose
 single on a stem--

you are caught in the drift.

Stunted, with small leaf,
you are flung on the sand,
you are lifted on the crisp sand
that drives in the wind.

Can the spice-rose
drip with such acrid fragrance
hardened in a leaf? (*CP* 5)

We might consider this poem a dramatic performance about H.D.'s poetry itself. The rose, of course, is a traditional symbol of love, beauty, poetry. But this particular rose is in the least promising, least nourishing, environment imaginable—an environment that is the equivalent of a woman's poetry in a male artistic tradition. Interestingly, the adjectives are words often used—as praise *and* condemnation—for her imagistic poetry: *harsh, meagre, sparse, stunted*. The poem is in fact a reflection on both her relationship as an outsider to the tradition, and of a woman in a society to which she exists as outsider, as “other.” We can also see that, even as the poem suggests alternative figures of beauty, this new self does not seem to be granted agency: *caught, flung, lifted*. The voice, then, is a complex embodiment of women's experience early in the 20th century.

A poem like this suggests, then, that H.D. is working in several different modes, on the one hand attempting to speak as an individual to a society that responds to the individual voice—forcing a reader to respond, or “finish” the poem—while, on the other hand, speaking as a group, or chorus. In this way, her voice is often like the chorus in a Greek tragedy singing the part of an individual. In “Sea Rose,” for example, the “you” is an undefined entity—her poetry, perhaps, or a part of herself—but it also becomes a readership with which she claims allegiance. “You who are cast out like me are the most beautiful” she seems to be saying. The “otherness” of “woman” is conflated with the

otherness of the artist, a space from which the subject, both individual and group, can speak.⁵

As already suggested, women poets hold a particularly vexed position within the romantic tradition. If a woman poet follows the modernist lead and writes a more impersonal poetry, she gives up the ability to speak *as* woman, to give voice to an experience that has already been shut out of artistic and social discourse. The romantic tradition, however, allows the space to speak in a seemingly personal manner, as a woman. To do so, though, puts a poet in the position of still being labeled a “Poetess,” a woman writer concerned only with women’s experience, not universal expression. And, as Eileen Gregory has noted, the early poems generally suffer for the same reason that they were once praised, as representations of the “Poetess” (Friedman and DuPlessis 130). The sensual, erotic persona of H.D.’s “romantic” tendencies is, on one hand, a subversive possibility in the context of modernism’s impersonality.⁶ On the other hand, such a persona is limiting and stifling. As Gregory notes, the Poetess has been “identified with the prolific, sentimental, ‘songbird’ of 19th-century romanticism . . . this woman appears as withdrawn, sensitive to the point of neuroses and hysteria, passionate, ecstatic and morbid” (129). The answer, for H.D., was to meld the tensions of classicism’s impersonality and discipline with romanticism’s spontaneous and emotional expression into a radical new poetics. While both of these impulses must be held in dialogue without resolution, criticism has tended to take one or the other approach to reading H.D., resulting in a series of misreadings and mislabelings, more often than not maintaining her

⁵ I am drawing here on ideas from DuPlessis (*H.D.: The Career* 31-69).

⁶ For a useful discussion of this idea, see Dickie “Women Poets” (233-259).

position as a disenfranchised poetess rather than the enfranchised poet she struggled to be.

Though accepted to varying degrees over the years, and fortunately now generally accepted as the innovator that she was, H.D.'s work has suffered by being falsely classified into an easily understood but limiting term originally thrust upon her by Pound: *H.D. Imagiste*.⁷ There are two general effects this has had on her work. First, many critics merely lump her in with other "Imagist" poets, seeing her work then as merely derivative of stronger, more importantly male influences such as Pound, Williams, and Lawrence. Recent scholarship, however, has clearly shown that this reading is not historically supportable;⁸ H.D. was clearly an innovator in the Imagist movement, actually writing poems that would spawn Pound's poetic credos rather than responding to them. Second, and more importantly, this reductive labeling has obscured the innovative ways in which her poetry forces us to read, limiting the ways in which we read the "image" itself. I.A. Richards offers a New Critical response to H.D.'s poem "The Pool" in *The Principles of Literary Criticism*:

The experience evoked in the reader is not sufficiently specific . . . The loss of so much formal structure leads otherwise to tenuousness and ambiguity . . . Had the poet said only 'I went and poked about for rocklings and caught the pool itself,' the reader, who converts what is printed above into a poem, would still have been able to construct an experience of equal value; for what results is almost independent of the author. (206)

⁷ Pound originally submitted H.D.'s poems to Harriet Monroe, editor of *Poetry*, in H.D.'s words, "scrawling 'H.D. Imagiste' at the bottom of the page" (Friedman and DuPlessis 87).

⁸ See especially Cyrena Pondrom, "H.D. and the Origins of Imagism" (Friedman and DuPlessis 85-105).

In other words, poetic control must be manifest by the author, not the reader. However, I would contend that it is precisely the ambiguity of the poem that allows a reader a variety of experiences; the poem is an invitation. Here is the poem:

Are you alive?
I touch you
You quiver like a sea-fish.
I cover you with my net.
What are you--banded one? (*CP* 56)

The second person pronoun shifts in a way that allows a merging of author and image, reader and text. Richards, however, defines the “you” simply as the pool, which statically defines the speaker and the other of the poem. I contend that the poem is a rejection of exactly such a notion of a singular self as defined by the traditional lyric. And as we saw with a poem such as “Sea rose,” tradition and reception point to the cultural problematics she faces in the context of her work; reception actually becomes a productive lens through which we can read her work.

Louis Untermeyer, arguably one of America’s most influential mid-20th century anthologists, offers a clear picture of this problematic reception of H.D. On one hand, Untermeyer does seem to think highly of her work. On the other hand, he limits her to a “true imagist” (355). In what seems to be admiration, Untermeyer clearly limits the scope of her work. In a typical reading, Untermeyer refers to the poem “Heat” as a poem where “one feels the weight and solidity of a midsummer afternoon” (355). This might be an accurate reading—and fits well with any notions of her as Imagist—but it is the less important aspect of the poem. In a typical anthologizing move, the poem was shortened—its first section missing—and entitled “Heat” instead of “Garden” as H.D.

had written it. Here is the first section, which opens us to the psychic drama to which the second section responds:

You are clear
O rose, cut in rock,
hard as the descent of hail.

I could scrape the colour
from the petals
like spilt dye from a rock.

If I could break you
I could break a tree.

If I could stir
I could break a tree—
I could break you. (*CP* 24)

Untermeyer's comments ignore the violence of image and verb—cut rock, hard as hail, spilt dye—and its engagement with the speaker's psyche: scraping, spilling, breaking, stirring. Without this emotional backdrop, it is impossible to fully comprehend the implications of the second stanza, especially its continuing thread of violent verbs: rend, cut, presses, blunts, cut, plough. Here is the section as it was anthologized:

O wind, rend open the heat,
cut apart the heat,
rend it to tatters.

Fruit cannot drop
through this thick air—
Fruit cannot fall into heat
that presses up and blunts
the points of pears
and rounds the grapes.

Cut the heat—
plough though it,
turning it on either side
of your path. (*CP* 25)

What the poem represents is a tension between a violent agency and an inability to move; the reading of this poem as the weight of a midsummer afternoon clearly ignores the struggle for growth in an oppressive climate. The voice here is fighting against the very notions of culture/poetics that keep her at the margins (a climate that we can see Untermeyer himself helping to perpetuate); likewise, since the “I” can be read as a communal voice, we can read the end of the first section as the potential violence lurking beneath a culture that denies a group agency. That is, the poem is reshaping self, cultural, and national narratives through the image. But the very foundation of the poem as image has made it easy to take the poem out of any nationalist context, a “safe” reading in which this violence and oppression can be reduced to sensory detail.

Even as writers (especially feminist critics) have offered productive new readings of H.D., the Imagist label continues to haunt her. For instance, consider Robert DiYanni's anthology in which the only comments about her actual work are stock responses: “She is best known for her compelling Imagist poems, characterized by short lines, free rhythmic cadences, and vivid images” (548). There is nothing to suggest the psychic power and complexity underlying the images; the image remains, rather, a static thing in itself.

Unfortunately, even feminist theories that have helped open up new possibilities for reading H.D. can also lend themselves to misreadings. For instance, Ostriker suggests that “When a woman poet today says ‘I,’ she is most likely to mean herself”(12). Such a statement denies the ways in which a poet such as H.D. constructs the “I” as both an individual and a choral voice. Certainly Ostriker points to the political importance of women being able to have their own voice in a society in which it is denied; her comment points to the particularly American version of feminism which hinges on notions of self-

representation and auto-biography.⁹ This theoretical bent, however, is one of the aspects that lends the lyric its critical edge in the first place. That is, because of the expectation of, or insistence on, auto-biography, a poet can function subversively within the context of self-representation, to function as critique of the very foundations of American individualism. I would argue that H.D.'s "I" represents an ever-shifting construction that investigates the stable ego at the center of an American identity and to engage in biographical connections distorts the work. Likewise, the "I" is a communal construction, giving voice to a group identity rather than a merely "personal" identity (or, more appropriately for H.D., investigating the tension between the communal and the personal).

"Sheltered Garden" begins with an emotional claim: "I have had enough / I grasp for breath" (*CP* 19). This can easily be read as a personally enervated "I," but can also be read as a repressed group, women in American society. Interestingly, in this poem the voice actually longs for a more troubled existence, to live in some "terrible / wind-tortured place" (*CP* 21). The "I" then takes on two different possibilities (at least): we might read the "I" as the artist who is stuck in the deadening romantic model of "border-pinks, clove-pinks, wax-lilies" (*CP* 20) or likewise we might read the "I" as a choral effect of women trapped inside a domestic role of womanhood, "beauty without strength" (*CP* 20). Certainly these poems argue against traditional models of woman, but they also resist any essentialization of identity, a resistance to unified meanings as much as to particular cultural circumstance. Gregory suggests, "The voice of these poems, then, is

⁹ Both the importance of autobiography and its political implications for women writers have been effectively developed in a variety of works by Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert, most notably *Shakespeare's Sister*.

hermaphroditic, collective and atemporal. The poem is, in a sense, a liminal state without ordinary determinations of gender, person, or tense” (*Signets* 139). In other words, identity in general, and gender in particular, are elusive and performative; there is no graspable speaker and to read it, then, as biographical entity forces closure on a subjectivity meant to be left undefined. Imagism, at least as H.D. conceived of it, was a means to push at poetic conventions and open up new possibilities, to construct a poem that exists at the border between inner and outer. The voice is an open-ended structure in which individual/social and inner/outer lose their boundaries, opening then new possibilities for self and national identities.

Modernism, Individualism, and the Freudian “I”

H.D. is most often read as a lyric poet in terms of her “ privateness.” Critics such as Janice Robinson and Susan Gubar, for instance, highlight the “personal” quality of the early poems. Gubar argues that she “hides her private meaning behind public words,” (Friedman and DuPlessis 299) suggesting that the poem is a puzzle that the reader must solve. Gubar’s suggestion that such hidden meaning is actually reflective of women’s experience is important but it perpetuates the notion of lyric as personal, which maintains a distinct social-individual binary that H.D. is actually attempting to investigate. Rather than hiding her meaning, H.D. actually confronts and implicates an audience in the conventions of representation.

One might actually argue that, if “lyric” is defined, as I do, by the presence of a speaking subject, H.D.’s poetry is not lyric at all since there is at times an almost palpable absence of a speaker. On the other hand, though, the poems in large part emanate from the “eye” more than “I.” For instance, here is the opening to her poem “Sea Poppies”:

Amber husk

fluted with gold,
 fruit on the sand
 marked with a rich grain,

 treasure
 spilled near the shrub-pines
 to bleach on the boulders. (CP 21)

It would seem that the speaker here is merely transparent, a window the reader sees *through*. If we consider, though, the rising popularity of Freudian thought at this point in time, though, we see a culture that is beginning to read the “eye” *as* “I.” With the popularization of Freudian thought, Lynn Dumenil notes, the subconscious became an important theme, the method to “realize *your true self*” (87 emphasis mine). In that way, the Freudian speaker at that point represents the “true” voice, the deepest revelation of self. Dumenil adds that early in the century, Freud became so familiar that “free association” became a parlor game; these new theories were liberatory in the battle against a repressive culture (87). In fact, Freudian thinking actually serves as a signifier for an entrance into the “modern.” Freudian innovation, then, reflects the modernist sensibilities of art as a way beyond the repressive nature of society (which also points toward the fact that H.D. is aligned with a “modernist” sensibility even as she is firmly rooted in classical and romantic models). I would contend that H.D. constructed a voice that fed into American’s sense of “personality” that would maintain the illusion of a tangible lyric speaker, and worked within a set of cultural expectations, seemingly embracing the modern while also returning to classical roots.

For Freud, the first goal of therapy was for the patient’s consciousness to become conceptual. That is, Freudian psychoanalysis was basically imagistic, to let things stand in consciousness “as they are.” In *Therapy and Technique*, Freud says, “So say whatever

goes through your mind. Act as if you were sitting at the window of a railway train and describing to someone behind you the changing views you see outside” (qtd. Friedman, 54). The “external” world becomes a window into the “internal” world. Friedman suggests that, once these associational images are within consciousness, “the analyst and analysand could collaborate on a translation of their significance” (54). She goes on to note that imagistic principles are even parallel to psychoanalytic principles: concision, condensation, displacement, and the melding of contradictory impulses (56-9). H.D. creates two poetic affects by reflecting these psychoanalytic experiences: First, she produces the illusion of a “self”-revealing speaker—which we should remember is important if she attempts to speak to, or for, a culture mired in individualism. Second, Friedman’s observation that the image is then collaboratively translated in the psychoanalytic situation reflects H.D.’s poetics in which meaning becomes collaboratively constructed. That is, in a similar fashion to Whitman’s poetics, the imagist principles are actually a way to draw a reader in and to involve them in the poetic process. H.D.’s Freudian thinking actually reflects a lyric that, as Wheeler has suggested is about forging new possibilities in process rather than retrieving something from the archive of one’s interiority (1-17).

The speaker of many of these poems, already ambiguous, is always on the cusp of union with a similarly ambiguous “you” even as it seems to be losing that “you.” In “Pursuit,” we experience a speaker on the trail of desire itself, following not another but signs themselves:

I can almost follow the note
 where it touched this slender tree
 and the next answered—
 and the next. (*CP* 11)

We can read this speaker as on both an erotic and a spiritual path where the signs themselves are both revealing and concealing. The “pursuit” then is for meaning itself, or understanding, in the same way that one digs into the unconscious for self-knowledge. What seems especially important, though, is the way that this pursuit on the path of signs does not lead to any understanding; the signs themselves are emptied: “I can find no trace of you” (*CP* 12). We might also consider this “note” as musical, reinforcing, of course, its sense of musical/lyrical performance. The note, however, reflects an almost opposite experience from what we saw with Whitman. Music here leads to an absence of self; to follow the note leads away from, not toward, any transcendence or self-discovery. This can actually reflect back to notions of the tradition: as lyric has been often defined by musicality, we find here that this tradition has left the speaker empty; she cannot find herself within this tradition. There is nothing in the pursuit of signs and events that will lead to a greater self-awareness. The poem suggests, then, the way in which she uses Freudian thought and imagery even as she counters and critiques it at the same time that she is productively able to critique notions of poetic tradition.

The problem with such a use of Freudian thought, is that it has also led to ongoing misreadings of her project. To an unfortunate extent, the reader becomes not a collaborator but the analyst, analyzing the poet’s neuroses and illnesses. Biographer Janice Robinson sees H.D.’s language as straightforwardly Freudian in that it holds a secret subtext that the reader is privileged to unveil: “The very act of writing became a form of concealed speech. If we have the keys, we can read the poem as message to a friend as well as an ‘objective’ statement” (xiv). The notion of reading the poem as between H.D. and a friend returns us to a lyric that is not concerned with its rhetorical

effects. More importantly, Robinson sees the “keys” to the poems as strictly biographical. For instance, both “Priapus” and “Hermes of the Ways” are strictly the “sublimation of her love for Pound into poetry” (57). Robinson, on one hand, suggests that the beauty of Imagism is that nothing stands in for anything else—everything exists on its own terms—at the same time that she claims H.D.’s poetry is writing about one thing under the guise of another. Interestingly, most critics consider Pound’s *Personae* poems, to be a productive use of a constructed mask while, as we see with Robinson’s comments, H.D.’s many persona poems are sublimations of unconscious and/or hidden desires, reflecting an ongoing double standard for women writers.

More problematic, though, are the many critics who use a strict Freudian perspective to analyze H.D. For instance, Friedman notes that critics such as Norman Holland and Joseph Riddel “dissect her with all the Freudian terminology they can muster—as if she were a neurotic woman, a ‘patient’ instead of the artist” (Bloom *H.D.* 49). Holland’s argument is that H.D.’s poems are generated out of a traditionally Freudian penis envy (Bloom *H.D.* 11-26) while Riddel argues that she needs to develop a masculine identity in order to develop as a poet (“H.D. and the Poetics” 447-73). This is a case of, as Gregory notes, the poems servicing as “evidence of her personal neurosis” (14). Such readings ignore the fact that she is *using* Freudian concepts in order to construct a self, and to implicate us in the making of that self as well as her self. Taken in that light, Holland’s and Riddel’s arguments say as much about themselves and their culture as it does about H.D.’s actual psychological state.

Toward an Open Voice

Rather than reading these poems as a closed system as such Freudian readings do, we should see that the poems are generative and open-ended. For instance, consider the way she implicates the reader at the end of her poem “Epitaph”:

So I may say
 “I died of living,
 having lived one hour”;

 so they may say,
 “she died soliciting
 illicit fervour”;

 so you may say,
 “Greek flower; Greek ecstasy
 reclaims for ever

 one who died
 following
 intricate songs’ lost measure.” (*CP* 299-300)

The reader gets a seemingly personal statement, followed by a critical statement in which poetic excess is rendered as a sexual solicitation and, thus, an ultimate rejection of her work. Finally, the poem opens toward the reader who must either agree with or reject the statement being made. The speaker’s statement actually pushes the reader too far. On one hand, the “Greekness” is a way for the voice to reclaim its classical *and* democratic roots; on the other hand, it is a caricature of a “Greekness” being imposed on her by the imagist label. The reader, then, must position him or herself in relation to the critical condemnation of her “excess.” Gregory has argued, “She has an amazing ability to name accurately the terms in which her work is criticized and dismissed” (Camboni 27-8). H.D., that is, is not only implicating the reader but also pushing against the boundaries of poetic decorum and critical response. But note also that the poem points again to the fact that the speaker dies attempting to find the measure of song, or the musicality of the lyric

tradition. Even as she challenges poetic decorum, she is able to interrogate the tradition by which she has been defined and limited.

At other times, H.D.'s voice revolves as much around a "We" as an "I." As noted earlier, a poem like "Helmsman," constructs a "we" as a collective invocation:

We forgot—we worshipped,
 we parted green from green,
 we sought further thickets,
 we dipped our ankles
 through leaf-mould and earth,
 and wood and wood-bank enchanted us. (*CP* 6)

The voice here is united in a communal ritual, speaking, worshipping *and* acting as one, so that, even as this "we" becomes comfortable and "enchanted with the fields, the tufts of coarse grass" (6), they are called as one into the more dangerous world of the sea:

But now, our boat climbs—hesitates—drops—
 Climbs—hesitates—crawls back—
 Climbs—hesitates—
 O be swift—
 We have always known you wanted us. (7)

The "we" responds to a calling, to live a treacherous existence, but as her next poem in the collection "The Shrine" suggests that they are blessed by this very "you" that called to them, the "spirit between the headlands and the further rocks":

Though oak beams split,
 Though boats and sea-men flounder,
 And the strait grind sand with sand
 And cut boulders to sand and drift—

 Your eyes have pardoned our faults,
 Your hands have touched us—
 You have leaned forward a little
 And the waves can never thrust us back
 From the splendour of your ragged coast. (9-10)

At other times, the poems become dramatic monologues as the voice merges with mythic figures such as Circe, Demeter, or Eurydice or, more importantly, the artist who serves as a foundation for H.D.'s work: Sappho. As DuPlessis has noted, the conflation of her voice with Sappho's serves as a trope representing three ideas: the incomplete text (as Sappho's only exist as partial fragments¹⁰), the absence of women in the tradition, and the cultural denial of lesbian experience (*H.D.* 23-26). H.D.'s ties to Sappho show an ambivalent approach to sexuality in these poems. On one hand, the poems' constricted form can lead some critics, like Wheeler, to suggest that the lyric functions as a type of closet for H.D.'s bisexuality (69). On the other hand, the poems contain an extravagant sensuality that leads other critics, like Laity, to see the poems as a "coming out," naming the lesbian aspect of her own sexuality (1-28). This sexual uncertainty is critically important at the time H.D. was writing, as Victorian moral codes and images of female sexuality—a culture in which women did not admit to sexual appetites, let alone a "transgressive" identity of bisexuality or lesbianism—were being challenged. The voice aligns itself with the "New Woman" in questions of sexuality that is tied to feminism in its questions of agency and representation.

We should not say, though, that the poems merely represent a new version of "woman" since they just as often complicate gender. Alternately considered as spare and extravagant, the poems lead understandably to mixed reactions. The sparseness led to an image of H.D. as icy or frigid,¹¹ while the extravagance constructed a sense of a

¹⁰ Sappho's lyrics now only exist as partial texts. Some publishers have attempted to "fill in" the texts, but most have opted to let the fragments stand on their own.

¹¹ Though this perspective fortunately did not last, we can see ways in which it still affects the terminology of H.D. criticism. Even as ardent an admirer as Denise Levertov still can refer to her "icy" precision (Bloom *H.D.* 10).

transgressive sexuality (and it is worth noting that “extravagance” etymologically stems from the notion of “walking out of bounds”). I mention these critical responses, though, not to suggest they are accurate but to show how the poems complicate such critical conventions and challenge the modes by which we read and/or identify. We might also note that the very traditions she uses in these poems have traditionally been gendered, a “damp,” “soft,” “vague” and “female” romanticism versus a “dry,” “hard,” “virile” and “male” classicism. By combining these two strands, then, the voice takes on a quality of what Laity calls the “Androgyne” (3). Even as she seems to speak for the New Woman, then, she counters that voice.

The complexity of what is happening within these poems, and the voice in which the poems are spoken, is clearly undercut by a label like Imagism—and, is implicitly countered by suggesting that the poems are “personal” meanings. We might productively think about these poems in terms of a dialogue rather than any singular “I.” There is always a multitude of voices, perspectives and discourses that clash within these seemingly “direct” and “personal” poems.

Voices from the Margins

The timing of H.D.’s poetic project is important as print technology and economic changes were reshaping the publishing industry—and the nature of the “intellectual.” Between roughly 1890 and 1920, the American economy moved from what Marin Sklar has termed “the dominance of proprietary capitalism to corporate capitalism” (Hutchinson 8). Because the economy now freed a great number of individuals from production-based labor, more and more individuals were able to function in society as intellectuals: teachers, professors, writers and publishers. These changes allowed the emergence of the “little magazine,” opening up new publishing avenues and alternatives.

H.D. took advantage of these new publishing opportunities to construct new models of gender and sexuality that, as they intersected with changing notions of the “intellectual,” helped reconfigure paradigms of national culture and identity, an identity based on communal ideals and social openness.

The polyvalent voices, the multiplicity of desire and concealment, suggest the ways in which H.D. is negotiating the possibilities of a new lyric subjectivity. The voice is multiple, fluid, and contradictory, challenging traditional romantic models of a unified, knowable/expressible self. In opposition to Wordsworth’s palpable, sincere poetic presence, H.D.’s speaker *defies* the reader to define her. A constructed self—both singular *and* plural, literal and figurative—is placed in problematic landscapes that refuse any ultimate self-definition. Her imagery, rather than representative or mimetic, actually invokes a paradox-ridden interior psychic drama, a landscape of borders and margins of an uncertain existence: cliffs, tides, and shifting edges, a landscape like that in “Hermes of the Ways” where “sea grass tangles with shore grass”(CP 39). The poems’ subjectivity and landscape become fused, inseparable; that is, the distinction between inner and outer becomes blurred, porous. The speaker’s melding into landscape actually counters what has become known as “The Greater Romantic Lyric” in which the speaker looks out on the landscape for lessons that will be absorbed into the self; in that way, the self/other distinction maintains its pre-eminence. H.D.’s poems rather break down these barriers, revealing a multiple and complex self at the center, or “vortex,”¹² of the poem.

Louis Martz notes that H.D. was destined to live “at the juncture of such forces, inner and

¹² In an effort to create a more complex poetics, Pound moved from Imagism to “Vorticism.” This move was also preceded by H.D.’s complex usage of the image showing her to be a forerunner of this movement as well, not a follower as is more traditionally thought to be the case. See Cyrena Pondrom, “H.D. and the Origins of Imagism” (Friedman and DuPlessis, 85-105).

outer, to inhabit constantly the borderline” (*CP* xiv). What is important, though, is that these borderlines are impermanent, shifting. H.D.’s poetics actually stand against the enlightenment model of the fixed, sovereign self by breaking down the clear divide between inner/outer, social/individual. I would argue that these borderlands also reflect national sensibilities. As the boundaries become more porous, so does any definition of what exists on the “inside.”

As Judith Butler comments, “Inner and outer only make sense in reference to a mediating boundary that strives for stability—stabilizes and consolidates a coherent subject” (170). H.D. herself is not clear about what constitutes an inner experience or outer perception, as she notes in a discussion about her visions at Corfu in *Tribute to Freud*: “Whether that hand or person is myself, projecting the images as a sign, a warning or a guiding sign-post from my own subconscious mind or whether they are projected from outside—they are at least clear enough” (46). H.D.’s transgression of boundaries, redefining the self as fluid practice and troubling any clear distinctions between “self” and “other,” then, is a radical approach to identity, a model of selfhood in which the certainty of an enlightenment sovereignty and an American individualism dissolve into transformative communal experience.

In terms of this issue of sovereignty, it is also important to note that H.D. left America early in her life, going to Europe—England mostly—in search of a culture that would sustain her. To a large extent she rejects her Americanness. But her poetry actually becomes a re-envisioning of American democracy as she turns toward the very source of democracy—Greece—for her inspiration; the borders she inhabits are both “personal” and national—the self and nation becoming conflated. Likewise, as Ong has

noted, ancient Greece is the point in which an interiorized alphabetic writing first clashes with an oral consciousness and, thus, when the oral, communal mindset collides with a newly emergent individualist mentality (24). H.D.'s poems push an ancient sensibility against the modern, an oral language against print, as a way to re-envision an American culture not based strictly on individualism.

One of the most important ways in which she engages with a communal sensibility is to construct the voice in a complex, ambiguous psychological state. Landscape, image, and emotion are fused into an amorphous uncertainty. To see this, we might look at her poem "Oread," the poem that destined her to be labeled "Imagist" forever:

Whirl up, sea—
whirl your pointed pines,
splash your great pines
on our rocks,
hurl your green over us,
cover us with your pools of fir. (*CP* 55)

Though certainly vivid in image and language, what is important in this poem is the way emotion is displaced onto this landscape of sea meeting shore. The poem breaks open the relation between signified and signifier, allowing the image to shift like a foreground/background illusion with either the waves/sea as the foregrounded image or the pines. With the focus placed on the signifier, though, the ultimate image is left unresolved, enacting the back and forth motion of what Martz calls her favorite image, "the cresting wave" (*CP* xxii). More importantly, the voice here is double as well, both an individual prayer *for* a group and an actual collective voice. The agency or desire of the poem is also double, an invocation to sexual ecstasy or rapture at the same time as a desire for suicidal annihilation, to be lost in the violence of the image. There is a strong

tension, then, between the desire for agency and to be acted on. The notion of “individual” in this context becomes unsustainable and undesirable.

This tension is similarly evident in “Helmsman” where the “we” is an active agent—wandering, worshipping, seeking—at the same time as surrendering to a vague otherness. A poem like “Cliff Temple” also suggests such doubled desires. The poem combines a sexual, erotic bliss with the sense that such desire is a dangerous surrender: “Shall I hurl myself from here” (*CP* 27). “Evening” similarly suggests that desire also equals a loss of selfhood, a dissolution and passivity: “shadow seeks shadow, / then both leaf / and leaf-shadow are lost” (*CP* 19). What we experience in these poems is a divided self that is consistently resistant to unified meanings, positing rather plastic and contradictory notions of selfhood and other; the lines between are blurred.

Even as critics such as Robinson and Friedman suggest the poems are a kind of “rosetta stone” that the reader must decipher,¹³ it is important to remember that any meaning is always marked by erasures and re-visions. One of H.D.’s central images (as was true with Whitman as well) is the palimpsest. Every text is an endless series of re-visions on top of older texts. The notion of the poem as “secret” or a hidden “personal” meaning, though, suggests the notion of one’s archival formation that can be rescued. H.D.’s palimpsest is not to suggest an original text, though, but rather to suggest the plurality of reading and meaning. The reader cannot discover some truth at the core of the poems but must become a part of the poetic process itself.

The self as traditionally conceived in the romantic and/or enlightenment model becomes self-referential and closed in the same way that the garden in its stasis of beauty

¹³ Robinson, ““Orion Dead”: The Logic of Imagism” (*H.D.: The Life and Work* 70-77).

becomes a sensuous trap. The voice in these poems, then, is preoccupied with disrupting the stasis, the singular self, the static image, the psychic and sexual paralysis represented in the “sheltered garden” of traditional romanticism. “Sea Garden” for instance, shows the speaker seeking out an alternative tradition and an alternative site for identity:

O to blot out this garden
to forget, to find a new beauty
in some terrible
wind-tortured place. (*CP* 21)

Rather than define the self in terms of binary oppositions that are juxtaposed in the poems, we should see these oppositions as existing on the fluid borders embodied in the poems. As DuPlessis notes, the poems in *Sea Garden* are defined by sets of repeating opposites: male/female; spiritual/erotic; wild/sheltered; land/sea; salt/sweet; stunted/lush; torn/whole; rose/rock--and even the title “suggests vast containment or uncontained cultivation” (*H.D.* 125). I would argue, though, that by placing the poems at the juncture of these opposites, H.D. actually suggests that neither side of these binaries is stable, but inherently shifting and changeable. This voice is contradictory as a form of resistance, but a resistance never “satisfied with a confrontative or purely oppositional stance” (DuPlessis *H.D.* 28). These poems can be classified as what Gregory refers to as “heterodox,” the body of opinion that is “other than the orthodox” (Camboni 21). The poems resist the conventions of representation but defy any oppositional representation.

This sense of Otherness, of being at the margins, is what defines the voice, existing as it does in between two landscapes, the garden and the precarious mountainsides and cliffs. The garden, representative of the romantic lyric, is in its autumnal decay, cloyingly sweet and choking: “I have had enough. / I gasp for breath . . . / no taste of bark, of course weeds, / aromatic, astringent— / only border on border of scented pinks”

(CP 19). Likewise, the garden suggests the trap of traditional images of the feminine. The speaker longs, then, to venture into an alternative, stormy landscape, what I would suggest is a classical rigidity or “impersonality.” Gregory notes that T.S. Eliot claimed that “There are at least two attitudes toward literature and toward everything . . .and you cannot hold both.” Gregory goes on to suggest that “One attitude (classicism) is founded on an obedience to outer authority; another (romanticism) is founded on adherence to the Inner voice” (18). Since, as has often been suggested, modernism’s version of classicism was distinctly male, H.D.’s working between these poles was actually a disruption of gender codes in general as well as the “outer” and “inner” that Eliot suggests are incompatible. In H.D.’s poems, none of these terms or traditions are stable or definable; situated as a marginal figure, H.D. actually challenges emerging notions of modernity itself.

As women early in the century struggled for political and economic change, H.D. was aware that such changes first demanded a change in representation. Hogue argues that certain poets “de-scribed” woman, or, in other words, changed the conventional images and modes of representation of the “feminine” (1-35). H.D. certainly de-scribes “woman” but also refuses to in-scribe new modes of definition; the writer, reader, culture must use her poetics as a way to define the self on their own terms. We cannot locate the subject within any traditional understanding of the lyric; we must, rather, see her as a highly constructed self that is as multiple and contradictory as the landscapes she inhabits. She constantly breaks and reforms the terms and traditions in which she is working to suggest not only new poetic possibilities, but new possibilities of self, and the right and the freedom to give voice to one’s own version of self. While H.D. did leave

American and moved to London in 1911, her poetics return repeatedly to questions of democracy and individualism. The right to define and represent one's self mirror, as Whitman's work did, a Jeffersonian sensibility. H.D.'s poetry promotes both a new version of culture as well as an egalitarian view of meaning, knowledge and representation within that culture.

LANGSTON HUGHES AND THE MASKS OF AUTHENTICITY

It would be easy to see H.D.'s and Langston Hughes's approaches to the lyric as directly opposed to each other's. In fact, Hughes fits more naturally in line with Whitman, a figure to whom he turned as inspiration. Both H.D. and Hughes were concerned, nonetheless, with conceptions of group and individual identity. The primary difference, though, was that while H.D. attempted to break through any reified images of gender Hughes seemingly attempted to construct an essentialized racial identity as a locus of political power. While H.D.'s work problematized any notions of inner-outer, Hughes seems to create an identity out of solidified boundaries, individual—"I am a Negro" (*LH* 24)—and cultural—"I speak in the name of the black millions" (*LH* 170).

The two poets are bound together, though, by the fact that both were, of necessity, concerned with the intersection between the individual voice and the communal. More importantly, the clearly defined identity markers that Hughes constructs in his poetry serve a political purpose that is often undercut or countered by a more multiple project than he, or his critics, often acknowledge. As was true with H.D., mixed reception of Hughes's work actually represents the struggle over cultural representation that Hughes was addressing in his work. Hughes's construction of an essentialized identity and voice (without acknowledging a broader, more complex vision) stems in large part from his need to develop an audience and a community. Similarly to H.D., the timing of this poetic project also stemmed from the opportunities presented by new publishing venues. For Hughes, the ability to develop a poetic voice (and to find an audience for this voice)

presented a way to give voice to the black community as a whole, to reshape an inclusive national identity that allowed a voice for all.

Following in the footsteps of W.E.B. DuBois, Hughes was concerned with black nation building, developing the voice, or “soul,”¹ of a black “folk” as a source of communal identity and pride. In the first few decades of the 20th century—an era of increasingly fluid borders, of vast emigrations and immigrations, and shifting national identities and allegiances—the project of developing a national identity/culture was paramount. Likewise, as the black population streamed from the rural south into the industrial centers of the north, gaining for the first time the promise of economic and cultural advancement, the need for a black national identity became central to the black community. This project unlike the late-1960's nationalism, however, was double-sided: this emerging national consciousness ran counter to an “American” identity, standing strongly as an independent black culture (as was the case with 1960s black nationalism²) but this new identity was simultaneously staunchly American, a demand for equal access to democratic rights, and stressing their “Americanism.” In fact, many social critics (Franz Boas and John Dewey, for example³) have argued that, because of the stripping of any pre-existing black culture through slavery and its dehumanizing, deculturalizing effects, black culture reflects the first truly “American” culture, an originary culture as opposed to a European culture that was simply transferred onto American soil.

¹ W.E.B. DuBois's work focused on developing a sense of the “Soul” of Black Americans as a way of developing a communal identity, a cultural form of nationalism based on racial identity and allegiance.

² Gary Gerstle notes that there have been several opposed strands of Black nationalism, ranging from those who argue a metaphorical nation built on culture and ethnicity to those who see the need for a physical nation with its own government and laws (“Civil Rights, White Resistance, and Black Nationalism” *American Crucible* 268-310).

³ See Hutchinson (*The Harlem Renaissance* 1-28).

Faced with this two-sided project, Hughes, like Whitman, worked within competing narratives. On one hand, he needed to claim a Negro exceptionalism/nationalism, marking a clear and essential black identity—a precursor to what would become the concept of *negritude* in the 1960s. On the other hand, he attempted to dissolve such boundaries, constructing a black humanism, marking a universal democratic figure whose race had no bearing on the entitlement to the rights of democratic citizenship and an American identity. While much has been made of Hughes's attempt to construct, and speak from/as, a black identity, less has been made of his equally prominent American identity. His first book of poems was structured such that the opening and closing lines conveyed these equally important facets of his identity: "I am a Negro" (*LH* 24) and "I, too, am America" (*LH* 46). With both phrases, though, it is important to see the emphasis placed on this poetic "I" and its embodiment of both individual and communal identity. Hughes's lyric voice struggles to negotiate what DuBois referred to as the inherent "double consciousness" of the black American.⁴

His poem "America" in which he says "I am America. / America—the dream. / America—the vision. / America—the star-seeking I." merges the "I" with a "you" that is defined as "Little dark baby, / Little Jew baby, / Little outcast" (*LH* 52). The "I" then works in multiple ways, as an individual, as a distinctly black voice (as it takes on the persona of Crispus Attucks, Jimmy Jones, and Sojourner Truth), and as a voice of all of America's marginalized peoples. By the end, he has constructed a remarkably inclusive and diverse voice:

⁴ In an oft-quoted passage, DuBois points to the doubleness of the African-American experience: "One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (207).

Who am I?
 I am the ghetto child,
 I am the dark baby,
 I am you
 And the blond tomorrow
 And yet
 I am my one sole self,
 America seeking the stars. (*LH* 53)

The penultimate line, of course, plays back into notions of American individualism, yet the syntax of the line also shows the individual to *be* the nation. What is often considered to be a “straightforward” poetics, or a poetics of statement or message, is actually highly complex. The subtle syntactical and pronominal ambiguities make the “I” and the “you” both uncertain and inclusive.

This chapter will explore the ways in which Hughes constructed a deceptively simple voice that is able to shift from individual to various groups, often working on a variety of levels at once and to different rhetorical/political ends. He combines the three main lyric traditions I have been discussing: the poems represent a musical performance (the poems often of the poet on stage) reflecting a classical sensibility of the lyric, a romantic individualism based on the artifice of spontaneity, and a contradictory dialogism reflecting a modernist disposition. Hughes adds another tradition to this mix by using what might be called a “folk” tradition as he bases many of his poems on Blues rhythms and patterns.⁵ As was true with H.D. and Whitman, however, the tendency to read his work through one of these traditions rather than seeing them in conjunction forces misreadings onto his work. Rather than the uncomplicated voice most critics point to, Hughes actually constructed a quite complex voice that allowed him to speak to different

⁵ In “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Hughes proclaims his affinity with Black theater, “folk music” and especially blues and jazz: “Jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America” (David Levering Lewis 94).

audience simultaneously, and allowed different readers to read the work individually. The poems can claim their Americanness at the same time that they confront and condemn American capitalist values; they can stand as staunchly black even as they construct an allegiance based as much on class as race. But even as Hughes constructs this black identity, his poetry moves toward versions of America that are far more hybrid, heterogeneous, and international than the ubiquitous claims of an essentialized Blackness will allow. By the time Hughes writes *Montage of a Dream Deferred* in 1951, this undercurrent of cultural hybridity has created a vision of America in which black and white culture mingle inseparably—and blackness can occupy positions within the center rather than at the margins. As much as it is correct to examine the ways in which Hughes redefines blackness and racial pride, it is more often neglected that his oeuvre ultimately redefines America.

Art and Representation in the Harlem Renaissance

Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri in 1902—a year before W.E.B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, a seminal work in the definition of black American identity that is often used as a marker for the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance. At that point in history, 9 out of 10 blacks lived in the south, predominantly in rural settings. Economic opportunities, however, soon created an exodus to the urban centers of the north, most notably Chicago and New York. At this same time, the black community fought to declare its worth even as both the government and mainstream “American” arts denied it. Art, then, began to play an increasingly important function in the development of new black communities—communities that were arising throughout urban centers of the North but became referred to metonymically as “Harlem” and eventually “The Harlem Renaissance.” Art was a medium through which perceptions could be changed,

white perceptions of blacks and blacks' perceptions of themselves. With the advent of new publishing opportunities—most notably the growth of the “little magazine” revolution noted with H.D. as well—the opportunity to change perceptions expanded exponentially. Toward this end, in the first two decades of the 20th century new publications channeled this new drive toward community building. In 1920, W.E.B. DuBois founded *Crisis* as the magazine of the NAACP. In 1923, the National Urban League began *Opportunity*. 1922 (often noted as the height of “modernism” with its publication of *Ulysses* and *The Wasteland* among others) saw the publication of both Claude McKay's *Harlem Shadows* and James Weldon Johnson's *Book of American Negro Poetry*. And in 1925, the year before Hughes's first book *The Weary Blues*, Alain Locke published *The New Negro*. The bulk of the collection is grouped under the heading “The Negro Youth Speaks,” that, as Locke suggests in an essay by the same name, signifies a new mode in which the black artist was becoming freed of the burdens of group representation: “Our poets have now stopped speaking for the Negro—they speak as Negroes” (47). Locke goes on to suggest, “The newer motive, then, in being racial is to be so purely for the sake of art” (51). Interestingly, though, much of Hughes's work functions in both ways, *for* the Negro and *as* the Negro.

Hughes's poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” his earliest published poem, seems central to Locke's anthology:

I've known rivers . . .
 I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow
 Of human blood in human veins.
 My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young,
 I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep,
 I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when
 Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans,
 And I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:
 Ancient, dusky rivers,
 My soul has grown deep like rivers. (Locke 141)

Even though the poem is centered in a speaking “I,” even the title points to the fact that this is not a particular individual but *the* Negro. Most importantly, the speaker associates the Negro with the sources of humanity, rivers from those areas where civilization are thought to have arisen, Mesopotamia and, more importantly, Egypt and Ethiopia. During the Renaissance, there was a push to reconceive of the earliest humans as arising from Africa and people increasingly turned to Egypt and Ethiopia as sources of ancient wisdom. The speaker, of course, also turns to the important American river and the city that served as the nexus for the slave trade, but doesn't point to that issue but to Lincoln, a central figure in terms of American democracy and a civic nationalism. While Locke's notion of writers speaking as Negroes is certainly important, it is likewise important to see how a poet like Hughes worked in multiple ways. In this poem he reconceives notions of the history of civilization so that the black is at the center not at the margins.

Locke's anthology points to the complex aesthetic debates at the time Hughes was writing and the multiple uses to which art was to serve. As is most often noted, writers were driven to be accepted as equally intelligent and culturally literate by a white audience. While this is certainly true, what is less-often noted is the increasingly important use of art at the time to construct community. Art, that is, was often used as a call to solidarity within the black community. Critics often suggest that the period “failed” because it lacked aesthetic standards. As George Hutchinson correctly notes,

though, the problem was not a lack of standards but a general disagreement over vehemently different standards—and the political implications of such standards (20-24). In the black community at this time the relationship between the “political” and the “aesthetic” was more accepted than in other communities. It is impossible, then, to read Hughes’s work without considering its place within the aesthetic debates of the time.

On one side of the debate were writers such as Countee Cullen who wanted to write a “universal” poetry, one not marked by his blackness, not defined by his alterity to the American mainstream. Cullen’s poems, like Claude McKay’s, made great use of standard European forms, most notably the Shakespearean sonnet. On the other side were writers like Hughes who defined his work almost singularly as black expression. In a thinly-veiled commentary on Countee Cullen, Hughes’s “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” suggests that any desire to “be a poet--not a negro poet” is actually a veiled desire to be white, a poet that is ultimately “afraid of being himself” (David Levering Lewis 91). In the essay, Hughes clearly lays out his aesthetic principles:

But then there are the low-down folks, the so-called common element, and they are the majority—may the Lord be praised! The people who have their hip of gin on Saturday nights and are not too important to themselves or the community, or too well fed, or too learned to watch the lazy world go round. They live on Seventh Street in Washington or State Street in Chicago and they do not particularly care whether they are like white folks or anybody else. Their joy runs, bang! into ecstasy. Their religion soars to a shout. Work maybe a little today, rest a little tomorrow [. . .] they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations. And perhaps these common people will give to the world its truly great Negro artist, *the one who is not afraid to be himself*. (92, emphasis mine)

Many critics of the time saw his views of blacks as playing, singing, dancing, with a pint of gin as merely perpetuating primitive, derogatory stereotypes of the black and feeding, therefore, notions of Negro inferiority. Hughes, however, claimed that any denial of this

side of black culture was a denial of the culture itself. Hughes puts this argument forcefully into his poem “Liar”:

It is we who are liars:
The Pretenders-to-be who are not
And the Pretenders-not-to-be who are.
It is we who use words
As screens for thoughts
And weave dark garments
To cover the naked body
Of the too white Truth.
It is we with the civilized souls
Who are liars. (*LH* 44)

The claim here seems to be that any individual in such denial is actually denying his or her “true” self and turning one’s back on his or her own identity and the community. Certainly there were political reasons for such notions of self-affirmation but it also posits an extremely essentialized version of identity and race. The tension between Booker Washington’s best-foot-forward philosophy and W.E.B. DuBois’s black identity⁶ are being played out in the aesthetic realm here. Onwuchekwa Jemie refers to it as the tension between “the scylla of stereotyped portraits of blacks...and the charybdis of idealized and compensatory portraits...the polar extremes of *resignation*, or the impulse towards assimilation; and *revolt*, or the impulse towards nationalism.” (11-12)

Interestingly, even Jemie who notes these poles in terms of self-representation falls back into an essentialized version of identity when considering a poet like Cullen:

He wanted to be a ‘poet, not a Negro poet.’ Accordingly, he chose English Romantic poet John Keats as his prime model....weak and effeminate in the worst

⁶ Booker T. Washington and W.E.B DuBois were arguably the two most important Black figures in early 20th century America. The two stood on opposite sides of an ideological spectrum, though. Washington believed that cooperation with whites in would eventually lead to a solution in race relations, even at times placating white supremacists. DuBois, meanwhile, argued for a more militant approach to the problem of racism, supporting a new form of cultural nationalism that countered the scientific bases of racism and exposing the connection of economics, racism, and politics.

Keatsian tradition. Not unlike Toomer, Cullen wrestled his racial identity all his life and, judging from his poetry, never quite came to terms with it. (158)

Interestingly, the Romantic tradition here is defined in the same “feminized” way that the high modernists conceived it, so that we see masculinity and racial acceptance intersecting in problematic ways. What Jemie suggests, then, is any form of happy self-acceptance is equated with personal “authenticity,” while a struggle with race or identity is automatically a form of “self-rejection.” One might ask if there is ever a place for an “authentic” struggle with one’s race. The argument is that Cullen offers the reader no stable sense of black identity or black pride, but the question is always whether or not race *should* offer a stable identity, and whether the self can be equated with a racial self as Hughes did. It is important to remember as well that this “stable” identity is as much an effect of artifice as of “authenticity.”

In this context, we might productively ask if Hughes’s avoidance of sexuality is in any way a denial of self. As we saw with Whitman and H.D., sexuality is a central issue of both self and national identities, but even Hughes’s earlier blues-inflected poems stay away from some of the direct sexual innuendo and imagery of the original musical versions. Though his sexuality is in the end not clear there is certainly support of his bisexual experiences. As Arnold Rampersad has suggested, his sexuality remains “ambiguous or androgynous” (*The Life* 45). Carl Van Vechten who knew Hughes most of his life suggested that he “never had any indication if he was homosexual or heterosexual” (qtd Rampersad *The Life* 137). My point here is not to debate one way or another but to point out that the very uncertainty in even those close to him suggests the extent to which sexuality was submerged within his persona. Sexuality in no way figures into Hughes’s identity in the way that race does—although it is worth noting that Hughes

clearly pushes against traditional gender constructions, most notably by taking on women's voices such as the "Madam" poems or the "Negro Mother" and showing them to be of central importance to the Black community.⁷ But, in general, the "honest" expression of Hughes actually depends upon an elision of sexuality in favor of racial character.

Likewise, we may note that the commentary about Hughes being "straightforward" and "spontaneous" ignores the fact that he actually censored himself, not placing many of his more politically radical works in his *Selected Poems* after being called before the Joseph McCarthy hearings.⁸ None of this is meant to cast aspersions on Hughes's aesthetic claims but rather to suggest that there are complex political questions at stake behind the claims, and forms, of self/community-representation. To know the "true" Hughes is more difficult than his work might suggest, and it would do the reader well to not merely accept anything as "given," or any claims as purely "authentic." The point is not to call into question Hughes's sincerity when he claims in "The Negro Artist" "I am as sincere as I know how to be in these poems" (David Levering Lewis 94) but to suggest that the claims of sincerity themselves have a definite political goal in shaping the ways that we read and react to his poetry.

⁷ Joyce A. Joyce argues that Hughes's "artistic sensibility is more feminine—though not necessarily gay—than masculine" (Tracy 119-140).

⁸ Hughes was consistently harassed by right-wing forces about his ties to the Left. Though he had never joined the Communist party, in 1953 he was forced by Senator Joseph McCarthy to appear in Washington, D.C. and testify officially about his politics. Hughes denied that he had ever been a party member but conceded that some of his radical verse had been ill-advised. McCarthy was discredited soon afterward, but the episode had shaped his philosophy of publication nonetheless.

The “Lyric” Label as Rhetorical

There is a clear divide in the way critics approach his “lyric” poetry and his “social” work. This is undoubtedly due in large part to Hughes himself who made the distinction in his essay “My Adventures as a Social Poet,” casting the lyric side as “mostly about love, roses, and moonlight, sunsets and snow” (*Good Morning Revolution* 135). Hughes is actually perpetuating the same problematic divide that I have been discussing, and this dichotomy has become set in stone in critical responses to his work. For instance, Jemie refers to his “lyric, apolitical poems” as opposed to “his social work”(xvi). Jemie pushes this distinction even further suggesting that roughly half of *The Weary Blues* is “lyric poetry with no immediate social or political content” (131). But this notion of the lyric refers to the *content* of poems, beauty versus political struggle while lyric as I am defining it is about a mode of presentation, and Hughes, even in his most staunchly political work, stands out as a lyricist of the first order, a speaker speaking both *to* and *for* a contemporary audience. The simple acceptance of Hughes’s distinction ignores the rhetorical importance of Hughes’s claims: at the time, his comments actually served as a way to engage with, or more appropriately distance himself from, modernist, New Critical aesthetics.⁹ I would suggest that, rather than clearly defining a lyric sensibility, he is using the term to equate with “art,” an art that is disengaged with political concerns in favor of a “universalist” position as the New Critics fashioned it. Hughes, then, argues against lyric (in this New Critical sense) while, nonetheless, almost single-handedly developing a new lyric tradition in which the poet

⁹ As many critics have noted, the post-World War I era represented an emotionally bleak time for many modernist writers while it actually represented a time of optimism for Harlem writers as they embraced the possibilities of change.

actually becomes a musical performer on stage singing both a singular and collective song. In other words, Hughes most clearly returns lyric to its classical conceptions.

His poem "Negro" (*LH* 24) begins with a strong sense of individual identity and Black affirmation:

I am a Negro:
 Black as the night is black,
 Black like the depths of my Africa.

The poem's lens quickly zooms outward, though, toward a larger historical, communal sensibility:

I've been a slave:
 Caesar told me to keep his door-steps clean.
 I brushed the boots of Washington.

Clearly, the "I" here is an historical amalgam in a way that the first stanza's is not (the first *may* be an amalgam but it is just as easy to read it as a "personal" statement of experience). The poem then moves through a rapid series of successive views of the black community while maintaining a speakerly/authorial presence. The opening lines of each following stanza can be read as a statement about Hughes himself or as the voice of the community: "I've been a worker," "I've been a singer," "I've been a victim," and "I am a Negro." In Hughes's terminology, this would most likely be considered "social" poetry, although its political content is about representation and identity rather than aimed at contemporary social circumstance. But the poem is clearly a constructed voice meant to speak as an individual and communal voice at the same time, a series of essentialized subjectivities. For criticism to simply follow the Hughes divide is to miss the point: his social poems are lyric and his need to define these terms is actually a crafty rhetorical move on his part that forces readers to read in certain ways, opening up gaps in

which the reader must reconsider the self within the poem's context. The poems actually construct an individual-social divide that the poem cannot sustain. The reader is forced to reconsider the nature of both individual and group identity. It also allows Hughes to step outside of traditional poetic expectations even while using them.

To understand why genre is important to Hughes, it helps to consider the two poles between which a black artist was working at the time. On one hand, there were those who believed there was no such thing as Negro verse, only diverse black poets (expounded by poets like Cullen). Others believed in an essential and inherently Negro verse. DuPlessis notes that the social position of the "new" Negro creates an omnipresent tension between duty and political realism and pleasure or aesthetic realism; "between... group identity and individualist separation; between allegiance and resistance to category"(Genders, *Races* 5). For Hughes black art is a powerful space of emerging collective identity *and* individual power. Yet how does one write a community without homogenizing and stereotyping? I would argue that one needs to work within the framework of an individual *voice*. For instance, consider how "Dream Variations" creates the effect of an individual reveling in his dreams:

To fling my arms wide
In some place of the sun
To whirl and to dance
Till the white day is done. (*LH* 40)

But as the poem accumulates and we see "Night coming tenderly / Black like me," we can sense this is as much a communal dream as a personal faith or happiness. Similarly, when Hughes says "I, too, sing America," (*LH* 46) certainly we can read that as Hughes's personal claim to Americanness, but we can also hear the voice as a community staking its claim to a national identity as well.

The Rhetoric of “Authenticity”

Three concepts are nearly ubiquitous in criticism of Hughes: “simplicity,” “spontaneity,” and “authenticity.” Yet terms such as simplicity (as well as dramatic and lyric that are similarly used) remain largely undefined and vaguely used to support particular political uses of Hughes’s poetry. Likewise, a term like simplicity has been used to both valorize and revile his poetry. Here are a variety of critical comments to show this nearly unquestioned assumption of Hughes’s “authenticity”:

Arthur P. Davis says that “above all else, he had the gift of simplicity” (O’Daniel 20), while Jemie argues that “what he wanted to do was to record and interpret the lives of the common black folk” (1) [. . .] “the characteristic quality of Hughes’s poetry is simplicity” (24) Countee Cullen referred to the poems’ “utter spontaneity and expression of a unique personality [. . .] peculiarly Mr. Hughes’s and no one else’s [. . .] To him it is essential that he be himself” (Mullen 37), and Lewis Alexander has said that “his work has that fine sincerity which is the essence of all true poetry” (55) A poem such as “My People” might point to what such critics are responding to:

The night is beautiful,
So the faces of my people.

The stars are beautiful,
So the eyes of my people.

Beautiful, also, is the sun.
Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people. (*LH* 36)

There is nothing obscure about the poem; the speaker is showing a love of his people and making comparisons that verge on the cliché: stars as eyes, sun as soul. Most critics would suggest that this represents a “sincere” and “authentic” personal expression. In his

book *Langston Hughes, Black Genius*, Therman B. O'Daniel wraps all these critical elements together:

Langston Hughes never wrote in any other way but as he sincerely and honestly wanted to write...Langston Hughes always spoke his mind... honest Langston Hughes, who made it a lifelong practice, not only in his poetry but in his prose as well, always to speak his mind and to *tell things as they were*. (16-17, emphasis mine)

Again, I do not intend to necessarily disagree with these readings; the poems do seem to want to be read with such straightforwardness. Likewise, the apparent sincerity of Hughes's work is politically important; part of his project is to develop pride and community, and a "straightforward" poetics can be effective to this end. It is also important to note that such criticism is really a rejection of certain artistic models (such as that of the New Critics and the "High Modernists") that effectively removes such an art from the domain of "high art." But it is also important to not merely accept that there *is* a black voice that can be accurately rendered in the first place, or that there is a particular *things as they are*. We might note that this "straightforward" poetics is, to a large extent, an embodiment of American democratic egalitarianism, a poetry that is accessible to all, but to simply accept such ideas as "straightforwardness" or "simplicity" is to ignore the very complicated political project that Langston Hughes is engaged in and the rhetorical tools used in that project.

As many critics have argued, texts construct a reader's subject position¹⁰—a position from which they read. In Hughes's case, the reader easily functions from a humanist subject position, a knowable individual who likewise is reading the work of an individual and can know without fail what that author "means." The reader seemingly

¹⁰ For a particularly useful distillation of these arguments, see Belsey "Addressing the Subject" (*Critical Practice* 52-77).

can enter into the text with no uncertainty, no split between signifier and signified as we saw with H.D. The poem becomes an unproblematical, sincere rendering of the author's mind and world—and, more importantly, supposedly of his race's experience. The condition of supposed simplicity has caused readers to either see his poems as brilliant reflections of, and for, the "people" or as poetic doggerel. To be sure, we can find poems to make either case. To a large extent, we might attribute this to the fact that Hughes was so prolific and tended toward writing poems for and about specific events that tend not to hold up as well in the long run. (Some critics, such as George Kent, suggest that it is because of his social commitment that the poems—or the art—do not stand the pressures of time, but this merely returns us to the problematic equation that social commitment and art cannot live together (O'Daniel 183-210)). But again, it is important to see that Hughes, himself, plays into such readings. I would contend that his construction of an "authentic" voice, of "telling it like it is," actually allows the construction of far more complex, multi-valent masks that function in a variety of different reading communities.

His poem "I, Too" is a case in point:

I, too, sing America.
 I am the darker brother.
 They send me to eat in the kitchen
 When company comes,
 But I laugh,
 And eat well,
 And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
 I'll be at the table
 When company comes.
 Nobody'll dare
 Say to me,
 "Eat in the kitchen,"
 Then.

Besides,
 They'll see how beautiful I am
 And be ashamed—

I, too, am America. (*LH* 46)

The poem begins with the Whitmanesque gesture of singing America—and, like Whitman's work, the voice sounds in multiple registers. On one hand, the poem contains a basic diction and syntax, evocative of an uncomplicated—but strong—voice that utters the words. On the other hand, as DuPlessis notes, the straightforward diction that seems to “superficially concede childishness of the ‘darker brother’” also seems to enact this brother's continued growth (*Genders, Races* 106). The poem itself becomes stronger, ending with a very pointed use and emphasis of the syllable “am”: “They'll see how beautiful I *am* / And be ashamed-- / I, too *am* America”(46). As DuPlessis points out, the syllable “am” is repeated, proclaiming a newfound strength in identity and another that is embedded within “ashamed,” transforming the syllable into an “aim,” an explicit intention to be noticed and accepted (107). I would add that the syllable similarly is echoed in the opening syllable of “America,” reinforcing this sense of American identity. The speaker has moved from singing *of* America (or singing it into being if we consider how Whitman sang the self and the nation into being) to actually *becoming* the nation.

Likewise, the poem offers a pointed metaphor of the darker brother. Certainly, we can see the metaphor of nationhood as family, wherein some members of that nation will be darker. On another level, though, we need to see the poem as pointing toward the troubled genealogical histories of America; the black (or the “troubled mulatto” that is at the center of much of Hughes's verse) is quite literally the darker brother and must be seen on these terms. But it is also important to see how he has used the “I” here as a

doubled figure. Clearly the “I” is meant to stand as a collective, but the fact of writing first person instead of as “we” works in two ways. First, this “I” allows this collective voice to escape the risk of an essentialized identity, allowing an individual character to stand out. More importantly, the poem’s unstated “we” can speak to a black community sharing in the voice while it becomes less threatening to a white community, less threatening than a sense of a “we” growing stronger and refusing to be denied.

This last idea points toward sly maneuvering on Hughes’s part as he positions himself to make use of both—as Houston Baker calls them—“the mastery of form and the deformation of mastery.”¹¹ Mastery of form is the use of expected sounds of blackness, those stereotyped (most notably the minstrel stereotypes) sounds that a white audience will expect and accept, allowing a writer access to the means of publication and audience. The deformation of mastery is an in-your-face blackness that makes use of tribal discourse and African ritual sound. “*Deformation* is a go(uer)illa action in the face of acknowledged adversaries” (Baker 50). Baker concedes that these two positions are not simple binaries, however, and I would argue that Hughes actually constructs a poetic voice that can function as both.

In “I, Too,” for instance, we can hear the mastery of form with lines like “But I laugh, / And eat well, / And grow strong,” lines of affirmation that also sound fairly simplistic or naive and, thus, non-threatening. On the other hand, behind those same lines is the implicit knowledge that as the speaker “grows strong” he will no longer have to accept his social position. Notice the weight placed on the word “then,” as it is given its own line. By placing it by itself, Hughes allows it to work as a qualifier, suggesting a

¹¹ These terms are at the center of Baker’s argument that, because of the use of these strategies, Harlem Renaissance should be classified as distinctly “Modernist” in *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*.

future time in which change will occur, while it also takes on the threatening tone of an “or else.” By the end of the poem we can sense this speaker emerge: he has matured and *become* America and will not be denied. Either America will change or it will face repercussions; either America will realize the speaker’s worth and beauty (the goal of the “best-foot-forward” camp as they strove to make their intellectual and cultural worth known) or the speaker will have grown strong and can take matters into his own hands (the go(ue)rilla tactics of deformation).

At stake in these terms (and the debates from which they emerge) is the use and representation of the “primitive.” Patti Cappell Swartz suggests that the notion of deformation is defined by its use of the primitive. “For the African-American a return to the primitive was a search for or a return to roots. For the white audience the primitive implied exoticism and the African-American artist embodied an ‘exotic other,’ an escape from civilization” (50). In the 1920s, questions of the primitive were at the center of American cultural life: white writers were trying to write as blacks and/or drawing black music into their work, the cubists were drawing from African art as an exotic influence, attempting to tap what were considered “pre-modern” energies as a way of responding to what many saw as the dangers of modernity. At the same time clubs such as the Cotton Club flourished as white society flocked to see black artists as the embodiment of the primitive or id-driven experience, re-energizing their own psyches even as they restricted Blacks from the same experience. In this way, primitivism and deformation relate to Henry Louis Gates’s notion of the signifying monkey, the trickster figure who changes circumstances (and meanings) on an unknowing oppressor: “Signifying implies speaking

from behind a mask to those who will not understand, and implies a complicity understanding of the wearing of the mask from those who do understand” (Swartz 51).

We can see this duality through the lens of criticism concerning many of the Harlem Renaissance writers. For instance, a poem like Countee Cullen’s “Heritage” allowed for critical responses that split evenly along a racial border. The poem, published in Locke’s *The New Negro*, represents a black American’s struggle with the past—especially in the context of an “African” heritage. White critics responded to the poem as beyond racial questions. The poem ends “Lord, forgive me if my need / Sometimes shapes a human creed” (Locke 253), and critics such as Babette Deutsch saw this as promoting the “human” over the racial, claiming that the “real virtue of his work lies in his personal response to an experience that , however conditioned by his race, is not so much racial as profoundly human” (qtd Lomax 240). Black critics, though, responded to him as the first real spokesman for sensitive and educated blacks. In the poem he desires to give his new Christian/European God features like himself:

Lord, I fashion dark gods, too,
Daring even to give to You
Dark Despairing features where
Crowned with dark rebellious hair,
Patience wavers (Locke 252)

Jessie Fauset writes, “Here I am convinced is Mr. Cullen’s forte; he has the feelings and the gift to express colored-ness in a world of whiteness” (qtd Lomax 240). As much as the poem is a revelation of self, then, we must see this poem as a carefully crafted performance that allows his audience multiple points of entry. At the same time, though, many Black critics argued that Cullen’s use of European forms—the poem is written in rhymed couplets of a truncated iambic tetrameter that echoes William Blake’s “The

Tyger”—was tantamount to “selling out.” What this suggests is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to read *any* Renaissance poem outside of the lens of the political/cultural uses to which the poetry was put.

In relation to Hughes’s work, we can see that the “primitive” can be seen as a negative by the community it was meant to reach. Hughes was often criticized for his stereotypical portraits of the black community and his second book *Fine Clothes to the Jew* was generally disregarded by black critics (and most notably attacked by the black middle class) while highly praised by white critics. Hughes was often caught in the middle of debates over the nature and use of the primitive, as he unashamedly allowed the so-called “baser elements” of black life into his poetry, but did not see himself as a primitivist. In fact, his reluctance to include the highly-charged sexual innuendo and imagery of traditional blues into his work (he is, of course, highly sensual but you won’t hear phrases in Hughes like Wynonie Harris’s “Keep on churnin’ til the butter come”)¹² is possibly a way of countering some of the expectations of black exoticism—or the common association of the times of blacks with the liberated id. But when he veered away from so-called primitive or exotic concerns and wrote in an outrightly political way—such as his poem “Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria” (*LH* 143-46) written as a response to the building of a luxury hotel in the face of massive hunger and evictions—his white patron Charlotte Mason dropped her support. The poem is a sarcastic advertisement/invitation for displaced citizens:

Say, you colored folks, hungry a long time in 135th Street—
they got swell music at the Waldorf-Astoria. It sure is a
mighty nice place to shake hips in, too. There’s dancing

¹² For a thorough discussion of this issue, see Tracy, “Langston Hughes and Afro-American Vernacular Music” (*A Historical Guide to Langston Hughes* 3-22).

after supper in a big warm room. It's cold as hell
on Lenox Avenue. All you've had all day is a cup of
coffee. Your pawnshop overcoat's a ragged banner on
your hungry frame. (145)

We can also see here that, even as it addresses “colored folks,” the poem clearly shows Hughes’s alliance with America’s lower class. Although he never officially joined the Communist party, the poetic voice certainly embodies a Communist perspective in which race and class intersect in the name of a true civic nationalism. Mason would have continued her support for Hughes, but only if he stopped writing “political” work. R. Baxter Miller notes that “Mason believed that the expression of political opinions should be left to white people like herself, and that black artists should be a cultural exoticism in the United States—in other words, link whites to the primitive life” (24). It is interesting, then, to see that Mason did not see his earlier work as social commentary, a fact that shows his double-natured voice was actually quite effective.

A poem like “Lament for Dark Peoples” offers a good example of his dual approach, effectively fusing a mastery and deformation together. The speaker allies himself with different groups “I was a red man one time” and “I was a black man, too” (*LH* 39) as the white man drives both groups from the forests and jungles:

They drove me out of the forest.
They took me from the jungles.
I lost my trees.
I lost my silver moons. (*LH* 39)

The stereotypical primitive is driven toward civilization that in itself can be read two ways: for the white man this is the task of bringing the primitives into the “modern,” the white-man’s burden of the early 20th century; for the black, though, this can be read as being stripped of one’s ancestral past. They lose their trees and their “silver moons”—a

phrase that, in itself, points toward an accepted image or sound of the primitive. A reader can react to the last stanza in two distinct ways:

Now they've caged me
 In the circus of civilization.
 Now I herd with the many—
 Caged in the circus of civilization. (*LH* 39)

On one hand, the stanza suggests defeat, the black man now herding scared and powerless behind the bars of civilization. On the other hand, the passage also contains a stronger message about a caged condition that cannot last. The poem is signifying to an audience that will hear what it wants to/needs to hear.

Dialect and Identity

Perhaps the most important aspect of Hughes's work is the way in which he attempts to construct a community through a shared sense of language. Hughes's early poem "Mother to Son" is a prime example of his use of dialect in order to function on multiple levels. The poem is most often cited as a classic rendering of the "authentic" black voice and/or experience:

Well, son, I'll tell you:
 Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
 It's had tacks in it,
 And splinters,
 And boards torn up,
 And places with no carpet on the floor—
 Bare.
 But all the time
 I've been a-climbin' on,
 And reachin' landin's,
 And turnin' corners,
 And sometimes goin' in the dark
 Where there ain't been no light.
 So boy, don't you turn back.
 Don't you set down on the steps
 'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
 Don't you fall now—
 For I've still goin' home,

I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair. (*LH* 30)

As is so often remarked of Hughes in general, this poem, too, might seem to fit what critics call Hughes's "simplicity." So much so, that most critics don't seem to even give a second thought to the "obvious" readings they give to the poem: the poem "authentically" renders black speech, the poem shows the oppressive nature of a white society, the poem shows the black ability to persevere. I certainly do not want to disagree with these readings; the poem *does* seem to capture all of these elements, and Hughes as was always true was first and foremost concerned with the black experience. But if we simply accept these readings—most notably that the speech is authentically black—we miss other ideas he is working with, most notably a critique of American capitalism and its assumption of the individual's ability to get ahead, or "climb" toward success.

If a poem such as "Mother to Son" can authentically capture a black voice, as critics seem to believe, certainly we would expect a poem such as "The Negro Mother" to carry the same inflections, yet we find that "The Negro Mother" is far closer to standard English and makes use of more traditional European prosody most notably end-rhymed couplets:

I am the dark girl who crossed the wide sea
Carrying in my body the seed of the free.
I am the woman who worked in the field
Bringing the cotton and the corn to yield.
I am the one who labored as a slaved,
Beaten and mistreated for the work I gave— (*LH* 155)

While the poem is not in a traditional meter, it does often reveal a tendency toward alternating iambs and anapests:

But Gód put a sóg and a práyer in my móuth.
Gód put a dréam like stéel in my soul. (155)

The poem also often utilizes a more formalized, or archaic, syntax: “Look ever upward at the sun and the stars” (156). Which of these voices then suggests the “authentic” black voice? Is there anything we can really call an “authentic” voice? Part of this question is the nature of acceptable discourse at the time. Baker notes that the minstrel dialect (a performance rather than an “authentic” dialect)—or the “minstrel mask” (22) was what an African-American had to use if they were going to be articulate (or heard) in a white-dominated society. As Paul Laurence Dunbar said, “I’ve got to write dialect poetry; it’s the only way I can get them to listen to me” (Baker 38). “Listening,” of course, is important, but it is how they needed to write if they were going to be published in the first place—and, thus, heard even within their own community. In an 1848 letter to Walter Hines, Charles Chesnutt had also examined the nature of dialect:

The fact is, of course, that there is no such thing as a negro dialect; that what we call by that name is the attempt to express, without such a degree of phonetic correctness as to suggest the sound, English pronounced as an ignorant old Southern Negro would be supposed to speak it. (Baker 42)

Of course the question is irrelevant—both voices can be authentic—yet criticism tends to refer to authenticity as if there were *an* authentic voice rather than voices (Henry Louis Gates, for instance, often discusses Black writing as a counter to “Western” writing as if there is such a clear binary rather than an endless interplay between languages¹³) and Hughes makes great use of this fact.

Returning to “Mother to Son,” we find that nowhere in the poem does the speaker mention blackness or identify herself at all except as a mother. As I have suggested,

¹³ Gates’s system of black literary criticism is based on an essentialized version of a black aesthetic. For a discussion of how this aesthetic operates as a binary opposition to “western” literature see “Introduction” (*The Signifying Monkey* ix-xxvii).

though, most critics accept it as a given that the voice represents black speech. Only R. Baxter Miller attempts to show how the poem achieves this, arguing “the meter of the poem depends more on the noted simulation of black rhetoric, the actual cadences of folk speech, than a metric form” (*The Art and Imagination* 36). Miller goes on to note, however, that rather than any objective way to determine such cadences he reads the “cadences per my ear” (36). The question this honest notion raises is if one hears a Black cadence because one expects (or wants) it, or if the cadences first suggest the speech of a group to which it is then attributed. I would suggest that the former is the more likely and that it would be hard not to read the poem as black speech given the context of Hughes’s comments about his own work;¹⁴ without this context, however, we might well hear the poem as a rural or Southern voice. That is, the voice of “Mother to Son” could be just as easily the voice of a poor Southern farmer in a Faulkner story.

But, because Hughes has told his audience elsewhere that the voice *should* be read as black,¹⁵ we immediately read it as a black speaker and the poem, then, has effectively conflated race and class which causes the poem to engage with the debate of his time of whether solutions to racial inequality are first and foremost economic solutions or not.¹⁶ Critics such as Miller and Jemie argue that the poem suggests a spiritual climbing, the

¹⁴ Hughes’s “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” for example, specifies the ways in which his work is strictly about black experience. “Most of my own poems are racial in theme and treatment, derived from the life I know” he says, considering it the “duty of the Negro artist [. . .] to change through the force of his art that old whispering ‘I want to be white,’ hidden in the aspirations of his people, to ‘Why should I want to be white? I am Negro—and beautiful?’” (David Levering Lewis 91-95).

¹⁵ “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” suggests that Hughes was unconcerned with the reception of his work except as it represents a Black identity (David Levering Lewis 95).

¹⁶ The debates between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois were to a large extent economic as Washington believed that the Black community needed to develop economic self-sufficiency (and, thus, needed to play into White expectations in order to enter into the economic system and develop a financial base) while DuBois argued for a Black identity as path toward a cultural self-sufficiency.

crystal stair serving as a transcendental ascent. Such a reading, while certainly plausible, ignores the fact that the mother remains in the same oppressive life circumstances and is, nonetheless, pushing these same values and circumstances on the son. The speaker is functioning under the capitalist illusions of the crystal stair and ascent afforded to hard work, the ubiquitous American ladder of success rather than a spiritual ladder of transcendence.

In this way, the poem can function dually: it obviously affords its contemporaneous black audience to identify itself through the use of dialect. The poem, as most of Hughes's, does serve as sustenance to an emerging African-American identity, or, as Huston Baker refers to it, "A mode of *sounding* reality that is identifiably and self-consciously black and empowering" (71). At the same time, it serves as a condemnation of American capitalist ideology. The use of dialect also served a quite practical end for Hughes: his work fed a white fascination with black experience in the 1920s (as Hughes himself referred to it in *The Big Sea*, the Negro was in vogue) and served publishers' and editors' desires to publish "authentic" black literature. So the poem was accepted in the way a more direct attack on capitalism might not have; the poem found an audience who willingly accepted its claims to blackness while, at the same time, critiquing issues of capitalism and class.

Personae and the Multiple Voice

The blurring of mastery and deformation is frequently manifest as a multiple voice (and multiple reading). This is quite evident in a poem like "Mulatto" (*LH* 100-01). The poem—as "I, Too," did also—explores questions of nationhood and genealogy as the figure is *both* black and white. But more importantly, the poem is constructed as a multi-voiced, multi-layered dialogism defined by both radical self-affirmation: "*I am your son,*

white man!” and of a tentative ambiguity: “A nigger night, / A nigger joy, / A little yellow / Bastard boy.” The speaker of these last lines is unclear at best and, thus, we can either read the white father as rejecting/condemning the mulatto son or we can read it as a self-condemnation by the mulatto. Since the number of voices that exist within this poem remains undetermined (clearly the son, the father, and a sibling all speak, but there are questions and “lyrical” interjections that can be read in multiple voicings: “The moon over the turpentine woods. / The Southern night / Full of stars” juxtaposed against lines such as “*Niggers ain’t my brother. / Not ever.*”), much of the “statement” of the poem remains ambiguous. The poem, then, is experimental at the same time as it is radically social, both a mastery of form and a deformation of mastery. On one hand, the poem clearly indicates an effort of the son to confront the oppressive society in which he finds himself, to stand up and be counted as the son with his birthright (which by implication is the birthright of the democratic citizen). On the other hand, these mediating voices and their concomitant uncertainty put doubts into the poem. The son is clearly also investigating an identity he is unsure of, how to relate to a culture to which he does not belong—does he want to belong or not? We might read these seemingly lyric interjections (“The bright stars scatter everywhere. / Pine wood scent in the evening air.”) as Hughes’s own probing of the poetic tradition. Does he belong to the American culture and its New Critical sensibilities? Or is he the aesthetic bastard boy? The poem ultimately remains unsure. In this way, the poem confronts the aesthetic culture of his time in the same way that his comments on “lyric” versus “social” poetry challenged the modernist aesthetic. Criticism, of course, has focused on the first reading, a narrative of a self-affirming black identity and culture while Hughes’s questioning of identity and

culture remains submerged if not completely ignored. But it is a sign that Hughes was much more involved in the cultural debates and implications marked by writers such as Countee Cullen than is normally accepted.

One of the difficulties this multiple voice poses, is determining the speaker of his poems. We might see the work as “dramatic,” as Hughes works through a variety of voices—the black mother, Alberta K. the Colored Soldier, etc.; conversely, we have the clear sense that Hughes himself is speaking. As Countee Cullen said of the voice, it was “peculiarly Mr. Hughes’s and no one else’s” (Mullen 37). I would contend that Hughes’s poems serve as a poetic sequence functioning much as the variety of voices in Whitman’s *Song of Myself*. Where Whitman’s voices all accumulated into one larger voice of “Whitman himself,” Hughes works through a variety of personae but the voice itself shows remarkably little stylistic variety. The poems present a consistent persona working throughout, a persona that seemingly agrees with Hughes’s own voice. In this way, he simultaneously speaks as “self” and “other.” Hughes creates the effect of himself as a singer on stage improvising other voices but always lurking behind them so that the reader always maintains some sense of Hughes the individual.

His poem “The Weary Blues,” while set as a poem about a musician playing before the speaker, also stands as a sort of “Ars Poetica” for Hughes himself: the speaker describes the musician as a lens to describing the black aesthetic and experience of the blues and the weariness accompanying a lifetime of oppression: “He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool” (*LH* 50). The poem embodies the melancholiness of a blues tune on the piano: “Droning a drowsy syncopated tune, / Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon, / I heard a Negro play.” (50). As Steven C. Tracy has noted, the syntax

is such that “the ‘droning’ and ‘rocking’ can refer either to the ‘I’ or to the ‘Negro,’ immediately suggesting that the music invites, even requires, the participation of the speaker” (Nelson, Cary, ed. *Modern American Poetry*. 04 April 2005.

http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/g_l/hughes/weary.htm). The speaker here becomes the musician; the Weary Blues are, in fact, Hughes’s poems. The syncopation and blues-inflected line become the hallmarks of his poetry as opposed to any European standard. Here, Hughes announces a new poetics, emerging from black speech, black music and a “black man’s soul.”¹⁷ What he offers is a new musical/poetic idiom, unrelated to European/American standards; here is the cultural significance of the black community. More importantly, though, this is likewise Hughes’s poetic idiom. Again and again, the reader will witness Hughes as the musician on stage, improvising and riffing on standard black musical idioms. This effect of spontaneity, of improvisation, lends itself likewise to the effect of Hughes presenting the “real” self, the individual personality as opposed to the self confined, and conforming, to standard poetic idioms.

This persona, though, also becomes equated with a choral voice, so it is Hughes *and* it is the black community as a whole. The “I,” as we have already seen with both Whitman and H.D., shifts like a background/foreground illusion—individual or communal depending upon the reader’s perspective. So, for instance, the voice of Alberta K. Johnson in his “Madam” poems sounds on one hand remarkably like Langston Hughes. On the other hand, she sounds also like a figure that speaks as all blacks. In “Madam’s ‘Calling Cards’” we see Alberta struggling to maintain her Americanness. When the printer asks her “Shall I use Old English / Or a Roman letter?” she responds

¹⁷ The phrase, of course, echoes DuBois’s “Souls of Black Folk,” constructing then a voice that is both individual and communal.

quickly “Use American. / American’s better.” Alberta understands the centrality of American identity in the way the printer does not; in the same way, the black community can hold an American identity more dear than the white community.

This blurring of personae and voices becomes more complicated in Hughes’s later work, pointing toward a version of America as a hybrid culture. His work continued to be central to the black community as the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum, but interestingly his work serves in many ways as a counterpoint to the essentialist claims of many black nationalists. For example, “Theme for English B” (LH 409-10) (often considered one of his most “autobiographical” works¹⁸) counters his earlier sense of a writer “telling it like it is.” When his teacher suggests that all one needs to do is “let that page come out of you— / Then, it will be true,” he responds: “I wonder if it’s that simple?” The poem goes on to say “It’s not easy to know what is true for you or me.” He likewise counters his own sense of an essential racial character:

I guess being colored doesn’t make me *not* like
the same things other folks like who are other races.
So will my page be colored that I write?
Being me, it will not be white.
But it will be
a part of you, instructor.
You are white--
yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.
That’s American. (LH 410)

He maintains here that whatever he writes cannot be “white,” but the poem works toward a more hybrid notion of identity and culture “a part of me, as I am a part of you.” The poem is part of his *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. The term montage is generally read as a comment on the technique as Hughes attempts to incorporate Bop Jazz into literary

¹⁸ See, for example, Jemie (*Langston Hughes: An Introduction* 73).

structure—the book jumps back and forth between themes and riffs—but we might read montage as a new vision for American culture, made up of quite distinct entities that also are inseparable. The dream deferred is certainly the black dream—as is often noted—but is also the American dream. Hughes is beginning to reimagine America itself.

Language, as Michael North has noted, is “the cornerstone of national identity and an index of cultural health” (11). By reconfiguring and poetic language as he has, Hughes has redefined the cultural center of America in terms of both race and class, and the African-American has been firmly located in the center of American narratives rather than on its margins. When sociologist Melville Herskovits visited Harlem in the 1920’s, he came away thinking “what I was seeing was a community just like any other community. The same pattern, only a different shade [. . .] In Harlem we have to-day, essentially, a typical American community” (Locke 354). This, it seems, what Hughes had been attempting to show all along: America should be able to function as a whole community while also maintaining its pluralist bent. He believed he could be, that is, both black *and* American.

JOHN BERRYMAN: AMERICA IN FRAGMENTS

Langston Hughes's sense of an increasingly hybrid American culture points toward what would eventually be considered a postmodern poetics.¹ This connection is especially relevant when we consider the work of John Berryman whose work was increasingly fragmented and multivalent even as he shared many of Hughes's concerns in terms of racial, cultural, and national authenticity. But Berryman, as a middle-class, white male in mid-century America, wrote from the privileged position of the very center of national identity at that time. It would be difficult to see his poetry as harkening back to an oral poetry form as we saw in previous chapters—his work is highly literary and almost refuses to “sound” an identity in the ways we have discussed. Nor is it easy to claim that Berryman attempts to speak as any collective identity to which he is aligned. His seeming refusal to “sound” an identity could be argued to be a denial of any common identity—his poetry seems to staunchly stand as the voice of an individual above all else. In fact, the work of John Berryman would be the easiest to categorize as “autobiographical.” His lyric poetry, then, seems to run the risk of lapsing into a mere romantic self-expressionism against which I have been arguing. So it would be disingenuous at best to simply proclaim Berryman in the same lyric line with poets already discussed.

¹ Though the problem of distinguishing between “modern” and “postmodern” is beyond the scope of this dissertation, it does seem important to note that Berryman straddles this line and points forward in the same way that Whitman pointed forward toward the modern. I would argue that this shows how poetry can be visionary, prefiguring social constructs instead of merely reacting or expressing contemporaneous social models.

Earlier chapters have noted ways in which writers use the *appearance* of autobiography or self-revelation toward differing rhetorical ends, but it is very difficult to claim that Berryman's poems—like many of his peers in the 1950's and 1960's—are not filled with *actual* autobiography. It would be easy, then, to read Berryman through the lens of autobiography—as it would for so many post-World War II poets.² But while I do not want to suggest that Berryman works in the same way I have already discussed, I do want to argue that it is perhaps all the more important to examine to what rhetorical end he is possibly using autobiography, to question how this “personal” poetry might also be some kind of cultural performance.

Part of the challenge is that Berryman can be seen as creating the critical problem his own poetry faces: because he uses and highlights autobiographical detail, he is prone to being read through such a lens. The so-called “middle generation” of post-war poets, in a gesture against modernist impersonality, harkens back to certain romantic tendencies and, in so doing, return the romantic fallacy to the limelight: the difference between life and art became seemingly indistinguishable. And thus was born the troubling critical term “confessional poetry.”³ But I would argue that, in a culture that is increasingly invested in a sense of individualism and disclosure, Berryman's commentary becomes part of the cultural performance of his poetry. He attempts to construct a context and an audience to work against within the poems.

² This group of poets—most often consisting of Berryman, Lowell, Sexton, Plath, and Snodgrass—is especially read through an autobiographical lens.

³ The original label was developed and used by M.L. Rosenthal and Robert Phillips. See Phillips *The Confessional Poets* and Rosenthal *New Poets: American and British Poetry since World War II*. For a useful reconsideration of the term see Travisano “The Confessional Paradigm Revisited” (*Midcentury Quartet* 32-70).

It is this sense of the poem as performance that puts Berryman squarely in line with the classical tradition we have seen in the other poets. He likewise constructs the poem in a racialized minstrel tradition, which also creates the effect of the poem enacted on stage, poems that he refers to as “songs” to reinforce this sensibility. At the same time, though, he also makes use of the romantic tradition by the very nature of confession, the effect of a particular, individual consciousness behind the poem. Finally, he also works within a modernist framework (the term postmodern might equally apply as he certainly writes on the cusp, looking equally back and pointing forward—but for the sake of this discussion it is more important to consider the tradition out of which he emerges⁴) as his work, even as it attempts to construct an individual sensibility, is a multi-voiced dialogue. In this way, even as his poetry arises from a distinctly white, male (or “racial” in Gerstle’s sense) version of American nationalism, the voice at the center of *The Dream Songs* is much more ambiguous. At the very center of the complex structure that is *The Dream Songs*, there is a struggle for representation that we have seen played out in each of the poets discussed so far. Even as he seems to stand outside of the tradition that I have been exploring, we can see that he creates a lyric out of the same dynamics of tradition and voice, individual and choral.

But Berryman clearly plays into emerging cultural sensibilities about confession and disclosure, a post-McCarthy fascination with what lurks beneath or behind the surface of the “individual.” Even as he staunchly denies being a “confessional” poet, he plays into the debates (and inviting such a reading) by gestures such as titling a poem

⁴ Mariani notes especially the influence of New Critics Allen Tate and R.P. Blackmur: “Blackmur and the New Criticism had done its work on him. He struggled to draw a mask over his poems and render them as opaque as he could” (54).

“Henry’s Confession” (Dream Song 76) Interestingly, if we examine “Henry’s Confession” we will see that it is difficult at best to determine what is being confessed:

Nothin very bad happen to me lately.
 How you explain that? –I explain that, Mr Bones,
 terms o’ your bafflin odd sobriety.
 Sober as man can get, no girls, no telephones,
 what could happen bad to Mr Bones?
 —*If* life is a handkerchief sandwich,

in a modesty of death I join my father
 who dared so long agone leave me.
 A bullet on a concrete stoop
 close by a smothering southern sea
 spreadeagled on an island, by my knee.
 —You is from hunger, Mr Bones,

I offers you this handkerchief, now set
 your left foot by my right foot,
 shoulder to shoulder, all that jazz,
 arm in arm, by the beautiful sea,
 hum a little, Mr Bones.
 —I saw nobody coming, so I went instead. (*DS* 83)

It is an odd gesture to start a “confession” with the observation that nothing bad has been happening (which, in itself, raises the question of convention: do we naturally think “confession” must involve spectacle or trauma?). There is a tension in the first two stanzas between a minstrel/Negro dialect of the first stanza and the much more “poetic” language of the second, as well as a tension between the comedic tone of the first and the tragic, somber tone of the second. Is the “confession” actually in the second stanza, as Henry contemplates joining his father who has committed suicide?⁵ This is certainly a possibility, but the poem seems much more about this tension of language and tone. And, as the poem considers questions of mortality and isolation, I would suggest that these

⁵ Berryman’s family moved often, finally settling in Tampa, Florida. In 1926, while living in Tampa, Berryman’s father committed suicide, shooting himself in front of the family house.

tensions actually represent the character's drive for life in the face of sorrow, his composition of "hunger" in the midst of sorrow. To read this as "confessional" poetry forces this emotional complexity to the background in favor of reading the "events" as those in Berryman's life. Nonetheless, it is disingenuous to think that Berryman is not forcing the issue to the forefront by a) referring to it as a confession and b) using the issue of a father's suicide. But much of what seems dramatic in this poem and others is what is absent, the heart of the confession in any sense that we have defined the word.

More important, then, than any confession of self is this tension between the blackface dialect and the "poetic," and the way that they engage in a struggle of poetic/cultural representation. Especially in terms of the blackface character, we will find that these poems question notions of "authentic" identity in a similar way to that which Hughes's later work did. Who has the right/ability to represent whom? Most often (because of the confessional slant), these poems are read through a Freudian lens, the "Dream" in the title being read as Freudian landscape to be investigated in order to understand the individual unconscious. I would suggest, though, that the "Dream" is actually the American dream. These poems play out the tensions inherent in 1950s and 1960s America and parody middle-class American values.

In Berryman's sense, the so-called confessional poem is actually a response to a growing sense of American individualism, personal celebrity and sensationalism, racial conflict and cold war isolationism. As critics have noted, in an increasing age of group therapy, total explicitness becomes the expectation; privacy and reticence begin to lose their artistic value.⁶ As culture demands that everything is paraded in the public square,

⁶ For a useful discussion of privacy and disclosure in relation to shifting poetics in America see Nelson, "Reinventing Privacy" (*Pursuing Privacy* 1-41).

the shape of democracy and aesthetics take extreme new shapes. At the same time, Cold War mentality and racial struggles demanded new forms of privacy, new notions of authenticity, and new models of nationalism. This chapter will examine the way that Berryman's *Dream Songs* embodied the complex issues of an increasingly "confessional" and "individualist" culture that clashed with these new social demands. Berryman uses the sense of self as a way to explore the nature of the individual in mid-century America, not as mere self-expression. In doing so, he confronts a variety of issues such as the increasing loss of privacy, the growing civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, and, most importantly, a general decline in what Berryman sees as American "culture." Berryman's lyric voice harkens back to Whitman in which the self becomes a model of the nation, and as was true with Whitman, this self struggles with both a racial and a civic nationalism.

The Problem of "Confession"

John Berryman was born in 1914, as the world was thrown into its first world war and the climate of Modernism was emerging from a Victorian sensibility. Berryman's sense of the world was marked early by war and loss and his aesthetic developed in dialogue with modernism and the New Criticism.⁷ He is often noted as the harbinger of a postmodern culture, but it would be more accurate to see Berryman's work resulting from an equally centrifugal and centripetal response to high modernism, spinning away from it at the same time as being pulled into it. Though he struggled with both influences, it is important to remember that he never completely abandoned them. Even as he did depart

⁷ Mariani notes how influential Berryman's struggle with the New Criticism was to his work: "Something had to be done to get away from the academic New Criticism [. . .] the sort of things Ransom and Tate and Warren and Winters and Blackmur did so well but that was 'stifling talent.' It was time for new standards 'of life or form or power,' though he had to admit he did not yet know where to turn for such standards" (183).

from such influences, he held true to certain cultural models that emanated from modernists such as Eliot and Pound—most notably the idea that a “high” art is the distinction of a vital culture. Nonetheless, in the face of a changing, mid-century world—marked as Berryman saw it, by rampant consumerism, militarism/imperialism, and racism—Berryman attempted to push beyond modernism. As he says in one of his essays, he was “Waiting for the End, Boys,”⁸ waiting for the impersonal poetics of Eliot, Tate, and Blackmur to be replaced. By the time he began writing his masterpiece, *The Dream Songs*, this tension between modernism and the new was not only a formal question but a question of the nature of American culture.

The poems that emerged from these tensions were complex, highly wrought, highly artificial works. Nonetheless, they construct an intimacy that pushes against the modernist aesthetic, reflecting much more of a romantic sensibility. This fact has led the poems to be read as highly confessional, a term that Berryman never failed to dismiss. Yet the dialogue with this emerging “school” of poetry actually creates much of the torque within his poems and points toward his ultimate aims. The first Dream Song offers both a thematic opening to the collection and a methodological primer. Here is the poem in its entirety:

Huffy Henry hid the day,
 unappeasable Henry sulked.
 I see his point,—a trying to put things over.
 It was the thought they thought
 they could *do* it made Henry wicked & away.
 But he should have come out and talked.

All the world like a woolen lover

⁸ This was originally published as a review of ten books of poems in *The Partisan Review*, vol. 25, February 1948 and then posthumously as part of his collection of essays *The Freedom of the Poet* (297-309).

once did seem on Henry's side.
 Then came a departure.
 Thereafter nothing fell out as it might or ought.
 I don't see how Henry, pried
 open for all the world to see, survived.

What he has now to say is a long
 wonder the world can bear & be.
 Once in a sycamore I was glad
 all at the top, and I sang.
 Hard on the land wears the strong sea
 and empty grows every bed. (*DS* 3)

Much critical attention has been paid to the fact of loss to which the poem points, the “departure” that Henry suffers is considered to be (solely?) Berryman’s father’s suicide. Much less attention, though, is paid to that undefined “they” and to what, exactly, they thought they could do. Certainly the loss represents the moment when things change for Henry, but there is this superior group that the poem suggests somehow makes Henry wicked. Even more important is his response: the first stanza suggests that Henry should have talked, that the people’s need to know (and this is a multi-faceted proposition as we will see) should be responded to. The second stanza suggests, though, that whatever form this “talking” or disclosure takes, revelation is dangerous. How can Henry even survive? This tension, then, between revelation and concealment will inform *The Dream Songs* as a whole; this is not the unabashed “naked” confession of a writer like Walt Whitman—or Berryman’s contemporary Allen Ginsberg—rather this is a persona that questions the risk to the psyche to reveal one’s inner self—as well as questioning the ever-increasing need of a society to know, from the political confessions of the Joseph McCarthy hearings to the increasingly memoir-driven publishing industry (and thus the cultural risk as well as “personal” risk). *If* (and this is a large if, since the poem leaves it undefined) we can equate the “departure” to that of Berryman’s father, might the poem

pose the very question of how much we can expect to know of an author? Rather than seeing this as self-display, that is, might we consider it a commentary on a society that is asking for self-display, whose individualism is leading further and further toward a sensationalistic culture?

This tension, though, leads us to the final stanza that sets up the method and tone of the sequence as a whole. I would read the stanza as embodying three distinct voices, a couplet each. The first is seemingly an objective, third-person commentary on the figure of Henry. Although we have to consider that the syntax makes this objective statement ambiguous at best. Does it mean that it is a wonder that the world even exists? Or is it a question that the world can bear what he has to say? The second voice is a “personal” experience, a first person recounting of happiness before, we are left to think, the tragic departure. And finally we have a mythic, or apocalyptic, voice making a statement not about Henry but about a universal condition, the loss inherent in “every bed.” These last two voices, then, pit the particular against the universal, the fate of one man against the fate of the world, happiness against loss. But it is also important to note that the last lines echo a standard blues line such as Bessie Smith’s “Empty Bed Blues.” The second couplet’s ending with Henry singing followed by the blues can be read in several ways. Does the “singing” of the last lines suggest Henry’s song? Or is the blues cast against Henry’s song? Thematically, the stanza suggests that the poem will cast the universal and particular against each other; as well as casting different cultural experiences against each other, the Shakespearean and the Blues, for example. Technically, the stanza also shows us that the poems do not represent a singular lyric “I” but a fragmented consciousness.

As has been true with each of the writers examined so far, Henry as a subject must be completed by the reader. Throughout the sequence, convoluted and broken syntax, rapid shifts in point-of-view, dialogue within and between characters, diction and tense shifts, and fragmented narratives all create a surreal dreamscape in which there is no privileged center, no graspable identity. To consider the poems “confessions” is to ignore their radically deconstructive tendencies. But certainly a problem arises in terms of even defining confession. For instance, Robert Phillips—one of the first critics to examine the “confessional” mode⁹ claims “That these poems are confessional is undeniable” (92). To support this claim he suggests “Henry is a professor and so is Berryman; when Henry went to Ireland, Berryman was on the boat” (92). Thus, for Phillips, autobiography *is* confession. What is missing is any sort of intent to distinguish the form as a separate entity. My intention is not to argue that Berryman is not present in the character of Henry; of course, he is. The question missing from the equation, though, is why? To what end does Berryman make a character out of himself? Perhaps we can take Berryman’s own words as a starting point for viewing Henry as character (noting especially that the context that he sets up for the poems become part of the poems’ performance):

The poem, then, whatever its wide cast of characters, is essentially about an imaginary character (not the poet, not me) named Henry, a white American in early middle age sometimes in blackface, who has suffered an irreversible loss and talks about himself sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third, sometimes even in the second; he has a friend, never named, who addresses him as Mr. Bones and variants thereof. Requiescant in pace. (*DS* vi)

⁹ The term was coined by M.L. Rosenthal as a way to describe the poems in Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* but Phillips’s book *The Confessional Poets* was the first extended study of the “genre.”

Critics tend to focus on the parenthetical “not the poet, not me” as the important claim and thus focus on showing the claim to be a lie—or as Joel Conarroe suggests:

I say Henry and mean Berryman. I think that anyone who reads the songs carefully will reject the assertion that they are about an imaginary character—some details, of course, are invented, but the sequence adheres closely to the facts of the poet’s life and mind. (94)

But the larger question seems to be what is at stake for the writer to make such a claim even as he is clearly naming names, as it were, within the poem. The easy answer would be that he does so to avoid culpability. For instance, Luke Spencer suggests that “He has surrendered his moral will to a reified image of his own inexorable biography: the poem-as-life is also the life-as poem writing itself with no intervening hand” (76). Certainly a poet may well distance him or her self from the guilt associated with his or her life by saying that the poem is about an imaginary character (the “I have a friend” syndrome) but these poems present anything *but* a reified image of biography. The poems clearly point to the ways in which any textual character necessarily exceeds the autobiographical. Even an autobiographical character will move beyond the bounds of the life supposedly being translated.¹⁰ Ignoring this fact leads to reductive readings of the author-text-reader relationships and to a view of “meaning” as a static object rather than a dynamic process.

Even if we do accept the term, what precisely does it signify? Is it a religious confession? A confession of guilt? Is it the increasingly popular cultural sense of sharing one’s darkest secrets? Or, can we think of it in its more archaic usage of a profession of one’s beliefs? Likewise, we might ask what the goal of confession is: forgiveness? cleansing? catharsis? shock? We might consider the term confessional to be a distillation

¹⁰ This notion of autobiography is central to the works of Paul de Man who consistently shows the inescapable contradictions between autobiography and “life.” See especially “Autobiography as De-Facement” (*The Rhetoric of Romanticism* 67-82).

of the problematic notion of lyric that I have been confronting all along: the very idea of confession seems to reinforce the romantic version of lyric as self-representation or self-expression. As is true with lyric in general, the confessional model suggests that the poem can serve as an accurate representation not only of the “real story” but also of the “whole story.”¹¹

Since the term has stood as one of the critical paradigms of poetry in the second half of the 20th century, it is worth asking what purpose the paradigm serves. In his book *Midcentury Quartet*, Thomas Travisano has suggested 5 important ways in which the confessional model alters the process of reading a text: 1) it prejudices the process of evaluation, standing most often as a pejorative term that carries its connotations to the text, 2) it slights the complexity of human morality, 3) it slights a poem’s complexity, 4) it fosters an arrogance in the reader, putting the reader in the position of priest and/or judge and 5) it assumes that the author is a passive conduit of experience, lending itself to the notion of art as therapy (32-70). Travisano suggests, then, “Even those, such as Lowell and Berryman, most commonly labeled ‘confessional poets,’ are not primarily engaged in a process of revealing the self. Rather they are engaged in a process of exploring the self” (12). Certainly this is a more productive way of thinking about the confessional project (although, even such a term is misleading in that the group most commonly associated with such a “project” staunchly denied any such guiding principle), but it still lends itself to reading first and foremost through the lens of autobiography. For instance, the main point of Travisano’s book, seems to be to reconsider the work of

¹¹ It is possible to view the problems of “confession” as similar to the contemporary debates over the genre of “Creative non-fiction” and the uncertainty as to what a reader can/should expect in terms of “factual” writing.

Elizabeth Bishop and Randall Jarrell in dialogue with their contemporaries, Lowell and Berryman—the way to achieve this is by showing certain similar biographical events such as childhood loss or trauma and similar approaches to “exploring” those events. I would contend that what is needed is a way to read this self-exploration as part of a larger cultural exploration.

As helpful as Travisano’s claims are, it is actually helpful to consider that perhaps Berryman *is* revealing the self, even as he engages in a larger performative context of claiming that he is *not* to be read through Henry. Such a conflict between text and context puts the reader in the position of a) having to consider what the reader-audience contract is, or should be, and b) coming to terms with if, and why, we might expect self-revelation within a poem. As we have seen with each poet so far, Berryman is challenging the conventions of author-audience or text-audience relationships in crucial ways. That is, Berryman puts the reader in the position of confronting the very romantic tradition that has dominated poetic concerns for over two hundred years, and thus obliquely confronts the very foundations of American individualism. In his acceptance speech for the National Book Award in 1969, Berryman said “I set up *The Dream Songs* as hostile to every visible tendency in both American and English poetry” (Haffenden 6). The poems challenge the very foundation of aesthetic and cultural practices in the mid-20th century. Going back to the five problematics, we might consider that the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th actually play into Berryman’s confrontational stance: he puts the reader in the position of *having* to judge Henry; in so doing, the reader must face the nature of American moral arrogance.

“Dream Song 29” is an excellent example of a poem that forces the reader to judge the speaker:

There sat down, once, a thing on Henry’s heart
 só heavy, if he had a hundred years
 & more, & weeping, sleepless in all them time
 Henry could not make good.
 Starts again always in Henry’s ears
 the little cough somewhere, an odour, a chime. (*DS* 33)

The poem inverts a traditional narrative or, perhaps, confession. That is, we begin with the assumption of Henry’s guilt, so heavy that any sound or odor will reawaken that guilt within him. But the poem dramatically undercuts this guilt as we move forward: Henry, we learn, has not killed anyone. In fact, he has done nothing (as was also true in “Henry’s Confession”):

But never did Henry, as he thought he did,
 end anyone and hacks her body up
 and hide the pieces, where they may be found.
 He knows: he went over everyone, & nobody’s missing.
 Often he reckons, in the dawn, them up.
 Nobody is ever missing. (*DS* 33)

Or we might say that he has done nothing that he can remember. The poem can be reasonably read as a post-blackout episode in which he desperately tries to imagine what has happened but in the end can confirm nothing. The twisted syntax and changes of point-of-view construct the effect of a mind lost in its own processes but getting nowhere.

Berryman has said that it is up to the reader to read that last line as tragic or humorous. Of course, we might add another option which is that the last line is sad, a horrific, misogynistic self-realization by a character who will not be able to act upon that revelation. But the point is however we read that line is that the poem represents a psychic drama that is unfinished without the reader—in much the same way that

Whitman implicated the reader in the act of making meaning, an act that reveals as much about how the reader views human nature as it does about Berryman.

The Freudian Voice

Many critics have suggested that the structure of the poems enacts the process of Freudian psychoanalysis with Henry the analysand and his unnamed interlocutor the analyst.¹² Others have suggested they represent the Freudian “dream” to be interpreted in much the same way. And it has also been suggested that we read Henry and his interlocutor as the voices of the id and the superego respectively.¹³ In this way, the unnamed friend becomes Henry’s conscience or, as Joel Conarroe refers to him, a “Job’s Comforter” (93). The problem of reading in such terms (especially when the influences of Freudian thinking are combined with a “confessional” paradigm) is that we are stuck with reading Berryman’s life. His alcoholism and his tragic suicide in 1972 at the age of 67 add other difficulties to the texts as we read through the lens of celebrity and spectacle, a macabre irony to the very question Berryman had been raising: *how* do we read a life through the text without reducing one to the other? Even if we do allow a Freudian or subconscious reading to the Songs, we need to also maintain the possibility that he is commenting on—and parodying—an increasingly Freudian, individualist culture as the poems search almost endlessly for the source of Henry’s behavior, an archivable past that is always eluding him (and, as was true when H.D. was writing her supposedly Freudian poems, the influence of Freud on American culture at the point Berryman is writing is vast).

¹² Gray, *American Poetry of the 20th Century*; Travisano, *The Midcentury Quartet*; Vendler, *The Given and the Made*.

¹³ Conarroe, *John Berryman: An Introduction to the Poetry*; Vendler, *The Given and the Made*.

Certainly it is difficult to draw the line between a poem that *represents* a failed self-examination and one that *comments on* the process of self-examination. The latter assumes an authorial intention that we cannot fully attribute, but it is just as dangerous to say that, because Berryman may well have “failed” at his own recovery,¹⁴ clearly the poem merely enacts his “failure” within the text. The risk is the same that we saw with H.D.—the poems become merely “evidence of a personal neurosis”(Gregory 14). The reading of the poems as id and superego or as therapy sessions still reduces the poems to readings of Berryman’s psyche. But I would argue that the multiple voices actually register the many voices of *social* conflict. This is not to suggest that we reduce the voices to specific social figures but to see how the voices raise social tensions rather than merely “individual.”

As I have said elsewhere, the notion of confession (as well as American notions of individualism) relies on notions of a confessable archive, an uncoverable moment. In this context, *The Dream Songs* echo Jacques Derrida’s notions of the Freudian archive:

It accumulates so many sedimented archives, some of which are written right on the epidermis of a body proper, others on the substrate of an ‘exterior’ body. Each layer [. . .] seems to gape slightly, as the lips of a wound, permitting glimpses of the abyssal possibility of another depth. (*Archive Fever* 20)

Derrida goes on to suggest, “The question of the archive is always what comes first” (39). Rather than some Freudian notion of root causalities (even as they play on Freudian themes), Berryman’s poems suggest that there is always one more layer beneath, the

¹⁴ Criticism often, shockingly, views his poems as failures by reading through the lens of his suicide.

possibilities of closure ever elusive. Berryman highlights what Derrida and De Man¹⁵ both point to as the ultimate impossibility of autobiography.

In 1957, Berryman visited the gardens of Ryoan-Ji in Japan. The garden was “so constructed that from no viewpoint would the observer see the entire pattern of the fifteen stones at once” (Mariani 316), an image that offered him an apt metaphor for this lack of closure. “Dream Song 73” uses the garden’s image as an aesthetic cornerstone:

—from nowhere can one see *all* the stones—
 but helicopters or a Brooklyn reproduction
 will fix that—

 and the fifteen changeless stones in their five worlds
 with a shelving of moving moss
 stand me the thought of the ancient maker priest. (*DS* 80)

We might well read the book itself as a sequence of fragments, all of which are meant to add up to a greater whole but which must be viewed from a variety of perspectives; or, as Paul Mariani suggests, the poems can only be held together, if at all, “in the one place that could contain them: the imagination” (316). The fragments, connected stylistically through the convoluted, elliptical syntax and torques of diction and shifting tense, suggest that Henry blurs and dissolves in the same breath as declaring himself distinct.

In Dream Song 327, Henry comments directly on Freud:

Freud was some wrong about dreams, or almost all;
 besides his insights grand, he thought that dreams were a transcript
 of childhood & the day before,
 censored of course: *a* transcript:
 even his lesser insight were misunderstood & became a bore
 except for the knowing & troubled by the Fall. (*DS* 349).

¹⁵ This issue of autobiography runs throughout both Derrida’s and de Man’s work. See especially Bennington and Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, and de Man, “Autobiography as De-Facement” (*The Rhetoric of Romanticism* 67-82).

The italicized *a* seems directly relevant to the Songs: they are *a* possible version, not *the* version. In fact, *the* version can never be uncovered here. The end of the poem offers another way of reading:

you have misled us: a dream is a panorama
of the whole mental life,
I took one once to forty-three structures, that
accounted in each for each word: I did not yell ‘mama’
nor did I take it out on my wife. (DS 349)

The Songs are a panorama rather than a transcript; no matter how deep into the structure of dream or song the speaker or reader goes, it will not come out in the direct causality that Freudian thought implies. Yet especially at the point he is writing, Freudian thinking is becoming increasingly popular in America. Likewise, public, forced confession is becoming a model in the Joseph McCarthy hearings. We might attribute the very drive (or need?) to label poetry as confessional as the same drive of a Freudian culture that is looking for the root cause of aberrant behavior. Yet the behavior that Berryman investigates is not necessarily of Henry but of the American ethos of individualism: Where does the “individual” begin? How does the individual interact with his or her surrounding culture? Is a culture of individualism productive or ultimately self-destructive? How much privacy can the individual in a democracy expect? All are questions that the reader is forced to confront. As was true with Whitman, self and nation are conflated so that ultimately what we confront in *The Dream Songs* is a nation in fragments.

Berryman’s multiple voices and tortured syntax allowed him to construct an increasingly fragmented American sensibility; the psyche that is at stake within the dream songs is not Berryman but America itself; the Dream of *The Dream Songs* is the

American Dream as it runs headlong into the age of rampant consumerism, advertising and materialism, civil rights struggles, and global cold war tensions. As Robert Pinsky has correctly noted, the range of dialects allow Berryman a range of emotion, allowing access to different emotional registers that one language would not allow (*The Situation of Poetry* 26-9), but this range also expands his national sensibility; especially as Henry leaves America and looks back at it from multiple perspectives around the globe, the scope of *The Dream Songs* allows a portrait of the dysfunction of the American ethos of individualism. What, after all, in postmodern America, is an individual?

Voice, Vernacular, and Blackface

What *The Dream Songs* most notably construct is a *voice*, a voice large enough to contain the multiple and contradictory impulses of 20th century American individualism. While Berryman was developing this voice in the mid 1950's, America was in the midst of the Eisenhower years—what Robert Lowell referred to as “the tranquilized fifties” (*Life Studies* 85). Media images of the era suggest a whitewashed world of an increasingly suburban and peaceful society. These images, though, were counteracted by racial intolerance and violence and an increasingly aggressive military. Notions of “American,” then, were demarcated by distinct boundaries between a conformist “us” and “them.” The voice of *The Dream Songs* exists on this border of self and other, the “individual” self that is threatened with collapse and loss into the other is metonymic of a national figure. Adrienne Rich has said, “Blackface is the supreme dialect and posture of this country, going straight to the roots of our madness” (Cary Nelson, ed. “On Negro Minstrelsy in *The Dream Songs*.” *Modern American Poetry*. 13 April 2005 http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/berryman/minstrel.htm). What Berryman is looking for is a voice that is expansive enough to *sound* the American madness and that

will allow him the shifts and turns of voice that will embody the split, divisive nature of American culture. As already mentioned, we might productively view the poems as a dialogue in which different voices within the text come to represent conflicting social groups. These voices in Berryman, though, are never stable or reified, but shifting and reconstructed through distorted perceptions and representations.

It is toward this end of investigating these relationships of inner/outer, self/other, that Berryman employs a minstrel dialect. Berryman noted his early interest in the Blues (especially Bessie Smith) and Negro dialect; later he became interested in minstrelsy and was influenced by reading Carl Wittke's thorough account of minstrel history, *Tambo and Bones* (from which his epigraph for the Dream Songs came: "GO IN, BRACK MAN, DE DAY'S YO' OWN.'). As Berryman says in his preface, his unnamed figure is "sometimes in blackface" (vi), and the two figures, Henry and his "interlocutor" often take on the roles of Tambo and Bones—minstrel figures named for the tambourine and castanets they played. What's left uncertain, though, is whether we are to read this as black (meaning, thus, a white preconception of black authenticity) or as a white in blackface (meaning, as Gubar points out, a much more hybrid conception of race and racial mimicry (134-168)). In either instance, what is important is to realize that the voice is not meant to represent an "authentic" voice—it is concerned with perception and stereotype, of white misreadings as much as a "real" dialect. And certainly Berryman was aware that the word vernacular comes from Verna—a slave born in the master's house; the use of dialect and minstrelsy, rather than simply an appropriation, highlights the use of language as a form of control and colonization. His highlighting of the fact

that the voice is a *minstrel* voice directs the reader toward its own artifice and inauthenticity.

Derrida again offers a helpful view of the borders of self and other that exist in *The Dream Songs*:

The other is in me before me: the ego (even the collective ego) implies alterity as its own condition. There is no 'I' that ethically makes room for the other, but rather an 'I' that is structured by the alterity within it, an 'I' that is itself in a state of self-deconstruction or of dislocation." (*A Taste for the Secret* 84)

In other words, what we think of as the Other is already a part of the self. In *The Dream Songs*, what often gets pitted as a dual of ego and id, or as end men on a vaudeville stage¹⁶ misses the scope of how Berryman is attempting to create this ever-enlarging web of self *as* other (echoes of Whitman's self as well), self as inseparable from multitude.

Joel Conarroe attempts to deal with the paradox of the minstrel voice. His ideas distill much of the duality of critical readings of Berryman's blackface so it is worth reading an extended passage:

There is a certain naiveté in Berryman's assumption that he could casually employ language that is inflammatory . . . without provoking criticism simply because as a man of troubles and griefs he identifies with the black race, glibly taking on its history as his own. Berryman wrote his songs in Minneapolis, where blacks are nearly invisible. His sense of the black experience is clearly derivative, based not on first-hand exposure but on literature. He had, thus, little real understanding of black life, and never, so far as I can determine, encountered black rage [. . .]

Yet as one reads the songs as objectively as possible it becomes clear that Berryman's feelings of kinship actually are sincere, touchingly so, expressing the self-mockery of a victim, and that if his diction is at times exploitative his motives were nevertheless sound. Convinced that his identification with an oppressed people justified both the disguise and the use of stage dialect, he was, I think, operating in the dark, but his views were clearly well-intended. (104)

¹⁶ This idea of the two figures serving as "end men" does come directly from the characters of Tambo and Bones to which Berryman explicitly refers. Therefore, the notion of end men are prevalent throughout commentary of *The Dream Songs*. For thorough discussion of this idea, see especially Conarroe, *John Berryman: An Introduction to the Poetry*, and Vendler, *The Given and the Made*.

While Conarroe struggles here to be fair about Berryman's intentions, his reading of these intentions as an attempt to "identify" with the black experience misses the point in a way that many critics have. Berryman is not attempting to show his kinship, or suggest that he has felt the pain and outrage of the black race. Rather he is pointing toward what Conarroe notes: all such cultural "authenticity" is derivative, based on literature or media or preconceptions, not on "understanding." The poems, to a large extent, become parodies of the racial binaries through which Americans define the "Other," challenging any notions of cultural authenticity. As Gubar suggests, "Burnt cork draws attention to its own artifice" (79), suggesting that rather than any form of authentic expression, blackface is a way of Berryman's highlighting precisely his inability to forge an authentic expression—or as Gubar notes elsewhere, "Throughout *The Dream Songs*, racial impersonation flaunts itself as an ersatz, campy form of drag" (165). We might also remember that, if we accept Vendler's claim that the unnamed friend represents the conscience, then the stereotype of the black primitive has been reversed. I would suggest this is an important *possibility*, but not that it is definitive. In the end, any racial categories are blurred with distorted perception until no authenticity, and no clear understanding of identity is present.

The question of the minstrel voice is not, as some critics have claimed, a desire to empathize with the African-American; Henry is not equating himself with blackness (although mimicry and hybridity are certainly important considerations) but examining questions of authenticity and cultural expectations. That is, he does not mean to sound like an authentic African-American, but to explore the perceptions of "Blackness" by a white audience or a white culture:

Arrive a time when all coons lose dere grip
 But is he come? Le's do a hoedown, gal,
 one blue, one shuffle,
 if them is all you seem to require. Strip,
 ol banger, skip us we, sugar; so hang on
 one chaste evening.

—Sir Bones, or Galahad: astonishin
 yo legal & yo good. Is you feel well?
 Honey dusk do sprawl.
 —Hit's hard. Kinged or thinged, though, fling & wing.
 Poll-cats are coming, hurrah, hurray.
 I votes in my hole. (“Big Buttons, Cornets: the Advance” *DS* 4)

Notice the rapid change of voice here between “yo legal & yo good. Is you feel well?” juxtaposed against “Honey dusk do sprawl,” the first being a street voice while the latter is nearly Shakespearean in its syntax and tone. The poem becomes almost meaningless, merely voices struggling for some form of discourse but failing. The tension between such voices raises the question of where Henry fits between these cultural experiences. For instance, in Song 68, Henry imagines himself going on stage with Bessie Smith: “I heard, could be, a Hey there from the wing, / and I went on: Miss Bessie soundin good” (*DS* 75). At the end of the poem, though, Bessie collapses on stage and Henry realizes that she cannot go to the whites’ hospital: “sick-house’s white birds’, / black to the birds instead.” He has seemingly aligned himself with a black community but, in the end, the social distinction still keeps them separate.

Song 60 is Berryman’s most direct commentary on race relations as he explores the failure of America to live up to 1954’s Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling school segregation unconstitutional: “After eight years, be less dan eight percent, / distinguishin’ friend, of coloured wif de whites / in de School, in de Souf” (*DS* 67). As his friend argues, pointing to advances in the military, Henry calls him an Uncle Tom

(raising the question, of course, who or what the “authentic” black is in this dialogue, or as Marlon T. Riggs has asked, “What is the marker of blackness in our pop culture” (qtd Gubar xxi)). The poem ends, though, with both men lamenting that “mos peoples gonna *lose*” then joining in a blues-based riff: “I never saw no pinkie wifout no hand. / O my, without no hand.” Notice in those last lines how the same word is pronounced two ways, wifout and without, suggesting that the voices are blurring into one. The almost slapstick, or cartoonish, presentation of the voices’ artifice is a constant reminder to the reader to not read anything as “real” but always a construction. Song 143 opens with the rejoinder to “Honour the burnt cork, be a vaudeville man” (*DS* 160). The poem then moves toward a recounting of love for the lost father and the question of mortality. The poem then is an invitation to welcome the mask, to honour the fact that we live behind endless masks and illusions, but such masks may well serve as the avenue to some real human emotion beneath.

Certainly Berryman uses autobiography, but it is a tool in a much more ambitious project. Laurence Lerner has correctly noted that “the poems would not be better if the speaker were a simple ‘I,’ they would be less challenging, less exploratory”(56). Berryman is, as William Wasserstrom argues, diving into “public sources of primitive American imagination in search of a tradition which represents long immersion in and mastery of disjunction and disorder” (12). The songs unfold on multiple levels: the disintegration of the self, the mask as a source of identity (which minstrelsy also allows him to trope on), and the problematics of American identity and culture. Berryman is painting a portrait of both a contemporary chaos and the self-destructiveness of our imperialist cultural history.

In Search of an American Culture

To some extent we can also view the use of minstrel dialect and the blues as a technique to reinvigorate American poetic language. In the same way we might consider Berryman's use of form. The poems seem to enact a sonnet, but rely on a tripartite construction rather than a binary, and counter the resolution that is part of the "logic" of traditional sonnets; be they Petrarchan or Shakespearean, traditionally a situation or a question that is responded to or resolved in the final sextet or couplet respectively; *The Dream Songs*, however, virulently deny any resolution. The poems are highly literary at the same time as they parody the literary.

All of this ultimately goes to question the role of art and aesthetics in relation to larger cultural issues. As we have seen with the other writers discussed, Berryman is attempting to counter or redefine American culture through the aesthetic. This project is especially important at this point in history as America is playing that role toward the rest of the world. As America emerged from the darkness of World War II as a military and economic superpower, there was an equal sense that America was, or should be, a cultural power. As has been more than adequately shown in recent critical theory, any form of military or political colonialism is ineffective without a form of cultural colonialism; any power must be supported, that is, with a sense of cultural superiority.¹⁷ As Richard Gray notes, in the mid-20th century, "The business of America was also, perhaps, to dictate the terms of modern culture, at least to its Western allies, and to other parts of the globe where it claimed a right of intervention and control" (215). *The Dream Songs* are not so much investigating a "personal" madness, but a cultural madness,

¹⁷ Though this idea is now prevalent in postcolonial theories, Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* remains the foundational study to which I am most indebted.

defined by an increasing consumerism, militarism, and racism. Dream Song 280 lambastes America for its “perpetual self-laud / as if everything in America had wings, / the world else a crawling scene,” (*DS* 302) as if America sees itself as the cultural center or standard-bearer for the rest of the world (which also reinforces its ability to dictate terms to other countries). Interestingly, Henry does not escape this fate; he too is indelibly American: “the large work largely done, / over the years, the prizes mostly won” he knows that he can work “in ways not to be denied.” We can see in Henry a metonymy of American self-importance. In Dream Song 216, we see this “Land of Plenty, maybe about to sigh. / Why should they terrify / with hegemony” and questions why others don’t simply join us “as Texas did” (*DS* 235). As was true in Whitman’s vision, it was only a matter of time before America became global, a return of Jefferson’s empire of liberty.

One of the manifestations of this mentality was the Viet Nam war, with which Berryman was becoming increasingly frustrated. In Dream Song 66, the government seems unmoved by the actions of Buddhists who burned themselves in the streets in protest of the war. In response, Berryman’s fictional character the Secretary of State for War winks and screws a whore while Monsignor Capovilla mourns. Henry, meantime, “hardly knew his selving [. . .] / Henry grew hot, got laid, felt bad, survived.” (*DS* 73) His actions, for which he should “reproach himself” at the end, are somehow interlinked with the haughtiness of American military culture. In Dream Song 162 “Vietnam,” the possibility of ending the war has taken on the character of Alice and Wonderland’s adventures: “a war which was no war, / the enemy was not our enemy [. . .] and the treaty-end that might conclude it more / unimaginable than *Alice’s* third volume-eee.”

(*DS* 181). But the war is clearly linked to capitalist consumerism: “an end to aggression will open up new markets / and other quarter-lies.”

Dream Song 22, “Of 1826,” is a particularly bitter and vicious harangue against American anti-intellectualism—“I am the enemy of the mind”—and an increasingly television-oriented culture—“I am two eyes screwed to my set.” (*DS* 24). But the “I” here that stands as a denigrated American culture is, in fact, Henry as he says at the end, “I am Henry Pussy-cat! My whiskers fly.” We need to see Henry as a figure in relation to, and as figure for, American history and culture. As a penultimate gesture, the poem recounts the Fourth of July in 1826:

Collect: while the dying man,
forgone by you creator, who forgives,
is gasping ‘Thomas Jefferson still lives’
in vain, in vain, in vain.

In 1967, Berryman shows his disdain for Americans’ lack of historical knowledge when he said, “no national memory but ours could forget the fact that John Adams and Thomas Jefferson both died on the same day [July the 4th, 1826]” (qtd Linebarger 88). Berryman, through Henry, is commenting on a cultural arrogance and ignorance, a society that can barely remember the Korean War or the battle of Cold Harbor (*DS* 217). A society run by Eisenhower’s military-industrial complex (Eisenhower in particular takes on much of the blame of the country’s direction in *The Dream Songs*) and the fear tactics of Joseph McCarthy.

Like Pound’s *Cantos*, we may read these poems as a cultural primer, a web of references that will point a reader to important facts and cultural high points that he or she should be aware of to be culturally literate. Here is just a short list of references: political figures such as Eisenhower, McCarthy, Jefferson, Adams, Johnson, Kennedy,

Kruschey; artistic figures such as Mozart, Bach, Schubert; literary figures such as Hart Crane, William Faulkner, Stephen Crane, Robert Frost, William Butler Yeats, Dante, Keats, Rilke, Eliot, Roethke; and finally figures as diverse as Al Jolson, Bessie Smith, Davy Crockett, Thomas Dartmouth Rice, Achilles, Odysseus, and Aeneas. *The Dream Songs* are enacting a search for an American Culture that can (or should?) endure.

Mariani has noted that Berryman's response to Geoffrey Gorer's essay, "The American Character" focused on the economic insecurity of artists and intellectuals in America:

What did America do to her writers that made some—like Vachel Lindsay, Sara Teasdale, and Hart Crane—take their lives, and others—like Pound—go crazy? And why did Americans profess a passion for education, yet disdain those with educations? It was a strange sort of egalitarianism Americans practiced, insisting that they were as good as the next person, yet servile before the rich." (223)

Berryman was fiercely invested in the construction of an American literature, and the promotion of such literature in a global context. Yet, he always faced the conundrum that America was increasingly less interested in its own artistic potential as the 20th century went on. We may well view some of his artistic beliefs as elitist. He believed, for instance, that a society needed to support its poets and artists who represented the epitome of any given culture. He endlessly lamented a culture in which history and aesthetics were forgotten or misunderstood. But this is not to suggest, as a confessional reading of his poems would imply, that his response was a solipsistic descent into his own mind. Rather, he searched tirelessly for an art that would challenge his society out of its self-destructive, chaotic state. As Berryman said at a University of Minnesota convocation, "The truth was that poetry was 'too primitive & too realistic' for most Americans, who actually felt nervous before its nakedness. The best poetry made use of

basic rhythms of human life, so that it was a counterforce, a rebuke to those forces that threatened to dehumanize people” (339).

In the face of a society defined by its increasingly mass-market, corporate consumerism, the effort against society’s dehumanizing effects was a nearly Herculean task—one that, indeed, drove Berryman over the edge.

CONCLUSION: WHITMAN ON THE RESERVATION

Introduction: Lyric Nationalism

In all the poets discussed in this dissertation, the most obvious tension being played out in the lyric voice is the tension between the promise of American democracy and the failure of that democracy to live up to its promise, the hope of an egalitarian, inclusive society and the reality of a gendered and racist exclusivity. The poets, each in his or her own way, attempted to re-envision an American identity based on its promise, to re-draw the boundaries around such an identity. They strove to construct a voice large enough to contain the American multitudes, or at least segments that have not been granted voice.

Certainly we can point to progress in American society throughout the 20th century: women's suffrage and increasing social mobility, civil rights legislation and affirmative action, more liberal immigration policies, etc. At the turn of the new Millennium with its concomitant sense of promise, though, we find that the national identity is still circumscribed in much the same way that it always has been. Whether it chooses to admit it to itself or not, America still defines itself in terms of its white, male, European heritage. Likewise, it is dictated by a class system in which the rich are the powerful and upward mobility is far too often restricted to those who already have access to begin with. As the country headed into its post-9/11 "War on Terror" and the Iraq War, those boundaries have become even more definitive. As George W. Bush put it in the wake of 9/11: "You are either with us, or you are with the terrorists" ("Speech to the Joint Session of Congress." *White House News Archives*. 04 April 2002. 01 Feb. 2005.

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/05/>).⁹³ This statement was geared toward other nations, but it captures the sense of America's feelings about its citizenry as well; such a statement captures the increasing tenor of an American identity founded on exclusive terms. Not only is the notion of being "with" or "for" the country defined in increasingly black-and-white terms, so is this sense of "us." Either one accepts a certain American identity or one is cast out.

Especially since the turn of the century, we can see increasing activity that attempts to define the country in quite exclusive and dangerous ways: the Patriot Act, the continued re-emergence of legislation geared toward English as a national language, the predominance of a Neo-Conservative agenda for a "Defense of Marriage" amendment to the constitution, the push for the privatization of Social Security that will effectively put the "have-nots" at greater risk, just to name a few. Even as much of American civic nationalist discourse strives to prove America to be an inclusive nation in which opportunities are equally afforded to all, I would argue we are witnessing a re-strengthening of an American racial or exclusive nationalism.

To a large extent, the premise of this dissertation has been that lyric poetry can, and should, serve as a vital counterpoint to such social trends. In 1992, the publication of Dana Gioia's *Can Poetry Matter?* opened a heated debate about the role of poetry within American culture. Though Gioia is frequently misguided, (arguing, for instance, that it is a return to formalism that will save American poetry), I have here taken his main premise

⁹³ While this speech was admittedly given in the emotional heat following the events of 9/11, this notion of an either-or binary, against or for, is increasingly representative of an "Americanness" that is defined in a hegemonic manner. In an April 4, 2002 speech, Bush expanded this mentality to suggest that one is "either on the side of civilization or on the side of the terrorists" (White House News Archive. 04 April 2002. 01 Feb. 2005. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/04/#>) leaving little room for debate about the meaning of "civilization" or "America" which become conflated in this equation in much the same way that Whitman conflated American and democracy.

as one of my central tenets: poetry can, and should, occupy a central position within the intellectual and cultural field of any society. While Gioia, perhaps, had a valid point that poetry had become strictly the domain of the University, a subculture of poets writing solely for other poets, it can be argued that much of his desire for poetry to break out of the stranglehold of academia has, in fact, taken place: slam poetry, poetry performances, poetry in newspapers and other non-scholarly publications, poetry on buses and subways, and, most recently, poetry as a response to the events of 9/11 and the Iraqi war. Poetry, as we turn toward the new millennium is, indeed, showing itself to be of value to American, and global, cultures at large.

It is interesting to note, however, that in the midst of Gioia's argument, he suggests that "verse—which had previously been a popular medium for narrative, satire, drama, even history and scientific speculation—retreated into lyric, prose usurped much of its cultural territory" (4). While the comment points to an accurate assessment of the shift of poetry's cultural importance (or lack thereof), his use of the term "lyric" is directly to the point of this dissertation. As he notes elsewhere, "most contemporary poets, knowing that they are virtually invisible in the larger culture, focus on the more intimate forms of lyric and meditative verse" (10). Lyric, seen as a mode of "verse," apparently is "intimate" and is not the domain of narrative, drama or history. My interest, like Gioia's, has been to return lyric poetry to its place of cultural importance, to suggest the ways in which poetry engages with, rather than denies, political and social concerns and tries to re-envision the possibilities of American culture. But as I have shown, part of this project involves distinguishing a particular poetic medium that we can productively designate as "lyric" beyond the simplistic notions of "private" or "intimate."

Perloff, who would agree with Gioia on many counts, also designates the “interior, meditative” poetry as the problem with contemporary lyric, labeling it “Laureate poetry.”

In her push for a more experimental poetry, she claims:

Those who denigrate Language poetry and related avant-garde practices invariably claim that these are aberrations from the true lyric impulse as it has come down from the Romantics to such figures as the most recent Poetry Laureates—Rita Dove, Robert Pinsky, and Stanley Kunitz. But laureate poetry—intimate, anecdotal, and broadly accessible as it must be in order to attract what is posited by its proponents as a potential reading audience—has evidently failed to kindle any real excitement on the part of the public and so decline-and-fall stories have set in with a vengeance. Great poets, we read again and again, are a thing of the past: a “post-humanist” era has no room for their elitist and difficult practices. (*21st Century Modernisms* 4)

Interestingly, the “decline-and-fall” stories are most associated with work like Gioia’s in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s. As we head into the 21st century, I would argue that there is much more agreement that poetry is entering a new, vital period. But part of the problem seems to be a too-easy distinction between “experimental” and “traditional” verse that Perloff and others rely upon, which maintains poetry’s marginal position in American culture. The two need not be seen as a binary. It does, however, if we define “poetry” as Gioia does (its formal properties) or as Perloff does (sound over sense). What Gioia and Perloff have done, in effect, is returned us to a New Critical model in which we can examine certain properties of language as if they were universally “poetic.”

As Perloff would have it, any use of the tradition is merely a recapitulation of that tradition/culture; but the poets we have read have clearly shown that within a poetic tradition there is room for quite radical reinventions of that tradition. Perloff returns to the New Critical stance that “poetry” is something that can be viewed independently of “content.” Whatever political motivation or message is within a poem can be said just as well in another form unless one defines poetry and what distinguishes it that would make

it worth studying in the first place.⁹⁴ The problem here is that whatever definition we use for poetry becomes an elitist form of cultural capital.

Reinventions of “tradition” or “culture” hinge in America on notions of the individual. I would argue that notions of experimental “poetry” actually reflect a very conservative notion of “culture” that one either is part of or not—that is, we either have the cultural capital to understand the term “poetry” or we do not. Perloff’s supposedly radical conception of poetry is in fact quite conservative; to teach poetry that is not based on the notion of poetry as she sees it would supposedly deprive students of the heritage of western aesthetics and would take “poetry” out of the curriculum. Thus, we return to the problems of the New Criticism: what we mean by “culture” is at stake, and by extension what we mean by “American.”

Lyric and Ways of “Sounding”

The lyric’s revolutionary attitude is in its relation to the materiality of the tradition, or to “culture.” Rather than merely accepting tradition, the poets I have examined all push against the boundaries of the poetic tradition and, thus, push at the boundaries of the larger “culture,” the artistic capital that defines that culture. Not the mere statement or manifesto of one’s identity as many critics would claim about today’s “identity politics,” these poets have tested, pushed, confronted and examined their identity—as individual and community. In other words, what the writers in this discussion do, in different ways and to different degrees, is to focus the lyric on the voice as an oral performance.

⁹⁴ Since I am drawing these ideas from her debate about Oxford’s *Anthology of American Poetry*, her comments seem to have serious implications for how one defines American culture. See “Janus-Faced Blockbuster” and “Response to Marsha Bryant.”

Ong notes that print as technology made the act of reading into a solitary act, creating the sense of an individual reader. For oral cultures, though, language was a way of embodying a shared, communal voice (115-135). Certainly none of these poets ignore the fact that their poetry is a *print* medium, a material art, but by focusing poetry on voice, they seek ways to *sound* their identity. As mentioned earlier, I take this term from the work of Houston Baker, but it is used here in quite different ways. Baker developed this term as a way of specifically describing the work of African-American poets and their way of sounding a specifically black identity. I am using the term here, rather, to suggest the ways that poets sound identity in all its complexity, to capture the problems and porousness of whatever we think of as an American identity—and to sound this identity in both individual and collective terms.

My intention has not been to suggest that American lyric is merely an expression of a multicultural sensibility, yet as America continues to struggle with its multicultural identity lyric forms likewise grapple with such issues. In this way, Native American poets productively distill these problematic tensions in an American identity. For instance, Sherman Alexie has developed an amazing lyric voice that questions both his native-ness and his American-ness. Just as Alexie turns to native traditions, he turns to Whitman, a figure that becomes metaphoric of his contradictory relationship with America. For example, his poem “Defending Walt Whitman” (14-15)—a comedic portrait of basketball on the reservation—can be read as both standing in defense of Whitman and defending against him. The young men shooting hoops are caught in the eddies of the 20th century, beautiful and lost:

Basketball is like this for young Indian boys, all arms and legs
and serious stomach muscles. Every body is brown!

These are the twentieth-century warriors who will never kill,
 although a few sat quietly in the deserts of Kuwait,
 waiting for orders to do something, do something. (14)

Among the veterans, and military haircuts, and boys that braid their hair “into wild patterns that do not measure anything,” those “with too much time on their hands,” the speaker observes the beauty of perfect jump shot, so beautiful even that it makes Whitman “weep because it is so perfect.” Whitman, on one hand, knows the beauty of the Indian bodies, and the energetic game, but he is not *of* this world. “He is a small man and his beard / is ludicrous on the reservation, absolutely insane.” The players all laugh at Whitman and his beard, yet he is in the midst of the game, shaking “because he believes in God.” The final parodic stanza captures the doubleness to Whitman:

God, there is beauty in every body. Walt Whitman stands
 at center court while the Indian boys run from basket to basket.
 Walt Whitman cannot tell the difference between
 offense and defense. He does not care if he touches the ball.
 Half of the Indian boys wear T-shirts damp with sweat
 and the other half are bareback, skin slick and shiny.
 There is no place like this. Walt Whitman smiles.
 Walt Whitman shakes. This game belongs to him. (15)

Whitman is portrayed as the center of this experience even as he is not of it, not caring if he touches the ball, not knowing the difference between offense and defense. This last point especially comments on a Whitmanesque democracy that can easily become colonial and/or imperial. What is the difference between defending one’s country and expanding its reach? Finally, the speaker acknowledges Whitman’s sheer pleasure at the game, smiling and shaking at the beauty of it, while also acknowledging that the game belongs to this outsider. It is his for the appropriation and exploitation. The poem functions not because of a formal sensibility in which the language is foregrounded but

because of this individual sensibility that grounds the language in the paradox of contemporary experience.

His poem “The Native American Broadcast System” seems to reinforce a more specifically native identity:

I am the essence of powwow, I am
toilets without paper, I am frybread
in sawdust, I am bull dung
on rodeo grounds at the All-Indian
Rodeo and Horse Show, I am

the essence of powwow, I am
video games with braids, I am spit
from toothless mouths, I am turquoise
and bootleg whiskey, both selling
for twenty bucks a swallow, I am

the essence of powwow, I am
fancydancers in flannel, I am host drum
amplified, I am *Fuck you*
don't come back and Leave me

the last hard drink. I am
the essence of powwow, I am the dream
you lace your shoes with, I am
the lust between your toes, I am
the memory you feel across the bottom
of your feet whenever you walk too close.

(Nelson, *Oxford Anthology* 1218)

The most obvious strategy here is the insistence on its individualist claims, the repeated “I am.” He adds weight to the phrase by placing it at the end of lines, which works in two ways: it carries the syntax toward the next lines creating a rhythm that continues past the break even as it creates a pause and makes the words stand on their own, outside of the syntactical movement. The repetitions also embody the sense of a native chanting as it is understood or perceived by a mainstream, white audience. As the voice insists on the “I,” it clearly functions in much more of a choral way than individual: the “I” *is* the native

community. But this is not an all-is-good definition of the native. “I am spit from toothless mouths,” paints a less-than-glamorous, or less-than-Hollywood-ready, version of the native. But notice, too, that the very tone of this “I” is complex and contradictory. If we read the lines as units, we learn in line 13 that “amplified,” this “I” becomes a voice of rage, a “Fuck you.” But the “I” also is the dream and the lust of our lives. More importantly, this portrait is even larger: “I am bull dung,” or “I am video games” hint that the portrait is as much “American” as it is “Native,” something both elemental *and* pop-culture transience. So, by the last lines—which echo Whitman’s own claims, in “Song of Myself,” of being the ground upon which we walk—the “I” has become the foundation of America, not an outsider—the “I” here haunts the reader’s very walking.

One of Alexie’s native inspirations, Adrian Louis, likewise constructs a hybrid voice that struggles to belong in any version of national identity, a remarkable lyric poetry that negotiates the boundaries between “native” and “American”—an angry, hard-bitten poetry that seeks some form of culture that will support him, a tension between a gritty realism and a visionary lyricism. His poem “Petroglyphs of Serena” from *Ceremonies of the Damned* questions the very notion of the “poetic” as a means of a larger questioning of “culture.”

While the poem is in free verse, it does make use of traditional Euro/Anglo poetic devices. For instance, here is the opening of the poem:

In Yellowbird’s Store, the tart tinge
of something sour boggles my nose.
Overpriced cans of Spaghetti-Os
and Spam on the sad shelves
are powdered with Great Plains dust.
In Yellowbird’s Store, winter people
are hooked up to video poker
machines for brief transfusions. (3)

These lines make use of heavy alliteration—tart tinge, and an almost parodic alliteration of S sounds—a strong internal rhyming, cans, Spam, sad, as well as an end-rhyme with nose, Os, and the long O of poker. In other words, the poem displays the web of internal effects that signify the writing as “poetic” even as the subject seems to counter it, especially if we consider the emphasis this structure places on words such as cans, spam, sad. In fact, we might think especially of those three words as being emphasized to stand as a statement of their own, a cartoonish statement of life on the reservation. The second section begins with an extended simile: “These Dakota stars / are as blanched as dead minnows floating / on a garish pink and blue sea of daybreak.” This passage, too, challenges our sense of the “poetic.” Stars being as blanched as dead minnows might seem to be an inventive or surprising juxtaposition in the vein of Eliot’s “The sky is spread out / like a patient etherized on the table.” And, in terms of the lifelessness of the image, it is, but rather than pointing toward something like Prufrock’s individual paralysis, the image leads to a deadened sense of landscape; this character lives in a deadened world where even the sky cannot hold beauty. Yet this is in the traditional genre of “beauty,” so that the speaker is examining the very nature of poetic conventions. There is a relation between this character’s search for a poetry that will speak for him and a denial of it: an “American” culture in which he does not see himself.

The speaker also turns at times to more traditional “native” forms of expression. For instance, notice the way the phrase “In Yellowbird’s Store” anchored the first passage in a rhythmic repetition. Similarly, the speaker later repeats full lines: “Must never offend the spirits, Thalia said. / Must *never* offend the spirits, Thalia said” that echoes the ritualistic prayer of many Native-American poems. (As a parallel, in his

lengthy meditation on his wife's crippling disease, "Earth Bone Connected to the Spirit Bone," the speaker mingles a free verse speech with the repetition of Native prayer chants: "*Grandfather, who is the Great Spirit-- . . . Grandmother Earth . . . Oh Spirits of the West Wind— . . .*" (29-30) in a search for something that will sustain him. (And note that the poem here echoes Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," a turn to the romantic tradition in the same way that we saw H.D. use Shelley). The poem mixes languages and forms. In a poem that struggles with the realities of reservation life, he can blame American culture: "Here, the white traders made a fortune / taking savage souls in payment / for pints of whisky and wine." At the same time he can accuse his own culture: "We're reaping the womb's reward of mutant generations who stumbled toward dismembering / the long and sometimes senile span between you, / Great Spirit, and your artwork, man." So the fact that the "form" of the poem sometimes rings hollow actually seems quite appropriate here; this is the description of a man in the midst of a hollowed-out culture. The poem is about ghosts, personal ghosts, ghosts within his community, and his community as ghosts within the larger American culture.

Louis is caught between an American tradition and a Native tradition and his poems enact this double consciousness. His poem "Pabst Blue Ribbon at Wounded Knee" struggles with the same question:

Between the sensual
and the visionary
how can our spirits extinguished by spirits
discern the dancing of ghosts? (*Fire Water World* 3)

Between the worldly and the spiritual, the Native and the American, the speaker is lost. And while he situates himself firmly at Wounded Knee (and often in other poems in *White Clay*), the center of Native solidarity, he also reflects on why "we sit in our cars

drinking Pabst Blue Ribbon” (3). Louis is driving at the heart of an American dystopia, (and his commentary on the seeming lack of disregard for the history of Wounded Knee echoes Berryman’s commentary on a society that barely remembers the Korean War only years after it occurred). Just as he challenges the lyric tradition to include him, he searches for an America that can include him as *American* and *native*. Can America be envisioned in a fluid enough manner to include him as both?

It is important to note, then, the way he is often excluded from notions of American poetry (and, therefore, culture). For instance, Perloff adamantly denies the Louis even writes poetry. She examines “Petroglyphs of Serena,” writes it out without line breaks, then goes on to ask “What makes the first version ‘poetry’?” (“Janus-Faced” 207). The question seems once again to reduce our sense of “poetry” to a strictly formalist question (and even “formal” concerns seem to be reduced to a question of lineation in this case), but I would reverse the question and ask why the non-lineated version is *not* poetry? The question becomes a strictly formal question as opposed to ways of *sounding*.

Perloff’s suggestion as to why such “poems” would be included in a canon of American poetry⁹⁵ is that “the above poems (including Louis’s) are included, not as poems but as exemplars of specific racial, ethnic, and political groupings and generally function as proponents of a radical politics” (27). I would not disagree with her except to say that a radical politics may well be poetry, and that these poems are *exemplars* of a radical poetics, a poetics that engages its revolutionary possibilities. The issue, as Marsha Bryant has noted, seems to be how to shift the emphasis from how we classify or

⁹⁵ This argument stems from Perloff’s review of Cary Nelson’s *Oxford Anthology of American Poetry*. The stakes for inclusion or exclusion—and the model such decisions are based on—to this work seem particularly important.

define poems toward thinking about what a poem can *do* (178). Alexie notes that he turns to the poems of Louis and remembers them in the way that many academics memorize the work of Keats—or, in other words, it serves as the same important marker of culture that has been traditionally relegated to European writers such as Keats. Do we deny the right of Alexie—and his peers who have likewise responded to Louis—to consider this important “poetry,” based on a formalist model—and, thus, refuse a form of cultural capital? As Native-Americans struggle to have a political voice in America, the same struggle is enacted in the doubled voices of their poetry.

The problem is that any attempt at a definitive determination of what constitutes “poetry” will be an exclusive, or elitist, proposition. This stubborn New Critical perspective reflects the ways that print medium has altered consciousness; not to deny that we live inextricably in a print culture, it is important to remember that the origins of lyric are oral and suggest other options for how and why we read. As Ong has noted, an understanding of oral cultures is essential to our understanding of written text:

The orality-to-literacy shift throws clear light on the meaning of New Criticism as a prime example of text-bound thinking. The New Criticism insisted on the autonomy of the individual work of textual art. Writing, it will be remembered, has been called ‘autonomous discourse’ by contrast with oral utterance, which is never autonomous but always embedded in non-verbal existence (157).

Poets like Louis return us to an oral poetry even as he engages with the consciousness of print culture; that is, the poetry of the communal “I,” a performative poetry that voices a culture to, and for, itself.

Because the Native-American community still retains conscious ties to its oral storytelling roots, and because of its vexed relationship to an “American” identity, I would contend that the community actually provides a productive lens through which we might view the possibilities present in the 21st century American lyric. Poets like Louis

and Alexie, are showing the poetic means to voice their identity in all its complexity, and to reimagine that identity in process.

Perhaps it would be helpful to consider the difference between lyric and “Language” or experimental poetry (although I do not want to reinscribe the false binary between traditional and experimental poetry) as the difference between an oral, or speech-based, poetry versus a poetry that is dominated by its textual concerns. What Perloff and others want is to reduce our sense of poetry to one, the textual; what I am suggesting is that we need to maintain a sense of poetry as changing conventions, as large enough to contain both. Any poet inherits, and must speak within, a poetic discourse; but the poet is then free to push at the constraints of that convention, to reimagine what it is—and, thus, begin to reimagine what a culture is. Lyric poetry, then, embodies the search for common identity even in the midst of difference—for a universality *and* a plurality.

Multiculturalism, Lyric, and the Academy

One of the main issues at stake here is the relationship between aesthetics and a liberal arts education. The problem is that a specifically designated “poetics” denies an increasingly diverse American population that would hardly agree on any definition of poetics. The very idea of poetry—especially if it is defined in any “universal” way—becomes a form of cultural capital. And it is *this*, not the fact that much poetry does not show the formal qualities that critics such as Perloff would point to, which has precipitated the “death-of-poetry” arguments. Such notions set up a resistance to poetry rather than a curiosity. Fortunately, as I’ve said, poetry is larger than such institutional constraints. But as Perloff has said, “Why—finally—study poetry at all, why produce great big poetry anthologies, unless poetry is the primary discourse to be studied?”

(“Response” 187). Perhaps we can simply take the question at face value and say that we shouldn’t, that we should go ahead and name our project something else, cultural studies, or linguistics or drama, or American studies.

On one hand, this solution would be acceptable. The label “poetry” can, in fact, be oppositional to the nature of the art that I am describing. On the other hand, just as a text does, the institution constructs subject positions for its readers/students. If we are going to have any “literary” category at all that designates formal, poetic language, then it needs to remain as open as possible to a multitude of cultural versions of form—otherwise, the form that a culture takes remains hegemonic and exclusive. What are cast as representative objects of knowledge (the “poem” as an extra-cultural object that can be studied universally) become representative objects of culture. Thus, we risk enforcing a monolithic view of cultural expression.

The fear, of course, to critics such as Perloff is that opening the study of poetic texts will, in the long run, deprive students of what is considered to be the heritage of western culture. What we mean by “culture” and more specifically “America” is at stake in such debates. As a signifier of cultural heritage, the conservative view of genre aims to prevent the loss of a common cultural identity. As Alice Kessler-Harris has correctly noted, the debate is between culture as a tradition to be preserved and as an ongoing process. The question, then, becomes “how do we preserve cultural unity and still do justice to the multiplicity of American cultures? To accomplish this, we must redefine what we mean by identity” (339). To this end, lyric as I am defining it is particularly well suited to be at the center of such a program. This is not to say that we should read

and write poetry with that intention in mind but that it inherently serves such a goal within the institutional paradigm.

As has been noted throughout this text, such ideas as individualism, pragmatism, and ambition have served as markers for “Americanness.” Such principles, however, as Cathy Davidson notes, are “too readily turned into a weapon of discrimination. It creates bad history by minimizing or even erasing that which does not conform to the line drawing of the nation” (Maddox 349). As such labels have been interrogated and disavowed in favor of a more pluralistic view of America in the latter-half of the 20th century, though, the void of such common markers of identity has been lamented. But the very notions of national identity and multiculturalism need not be opposed; the issue is rather one of changing our sense of national identity, moving from one of individualism to one of inclusion and difference. Such a change does not necessitate losing our long tradition of individualism, but seeing this individualism in its larger context of dynamics with otherness. We become individuals by seeking what is different, but in the process we risk losing whatever common character we may share. If distinctiveness is seen, though, as a marker that designates us all as “other,” then a new narrative might develop out of relationships between the universal and the plural. As Charles Bernstein has noted, “A people invents itself and sustains itself through its shared language” (116). In this way, the lyric can serve as the very heart of a new national narrative, a narrative in which, as we have seen with the lyric poets discussed, the individual *is* the communal.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Glenn Freeman was born and raised in Frederick, Maryland. After years of trying out several different colleges around the country, he ended up at Goddard College, a wonderfully quirky alternative school in Northern Vermont. His plans at that point were to become certified to teach High School English. While at Goddard, however, he discovered his love of writing. Rather than continue in an education program, he shifted to study Poetry and Creative Writing. After completing his degree at Goddard, he attended Vermont College where he received an MFA in Poetry.

With MFA in hand, Glenn spent years away from academia, working as a chef in a variety of restaurants in Minnesota and writing poetry. He won several awards with his writing, including two Minnesota State Arts Board fellowships and a Loft-McKnight award. Friends urged him to teach writing at The Loft, a thriving literary center in Minneapolis. After following their advice and teaching several workshops, he realized that he truly loved teaching; he decided, then, to go back to school and entered the PhD program in English at the University of Florida.

He is now assistant professor of English and Creative Writing at Cornell College in Mount Vernon, IA. He lives in Cedar Rapids with his wife Mary Beth and their two cats, Dizzy and Otis. After completing his dissertation, he will be happy to return to a life of creative writing.