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# "The Bellows / of Experience": The Modernist Love Poem and Its Legacy

Stephanie Spong

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Stephanie Diane Spong

*Candidate*

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English Language and Literatures

*Department*

---

This dissertation is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication:

*Approved by the Dissertation Committee:*

Matthew Hofer, Chairperson

---

Scarlett Higgins

---

Gary Harrison

---

Alan Golding

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**"THE BELLOWS / OF EXPERIENCE": THE MODERNIST LOVE POEM AND  
ITS LEGACY**

**by**

**STEPHANIE D. SPONG**

B.A., English and Women's Studies, College of William and  
Mary, 2006  
M.A., English, University of New Mexico, 2010

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy  
English**

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Albuquerque, New Mexico

**August, 2016**

**DEDICATION**

For Edith and Robert Spong, who believed in this project  
before it began, and for Sarah LeCates, whose grace  
reminded me why it was worth finishing.

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**ABSTRACT**

The vein of experimental love poetry examined in this project takes advantage of the friction generated by charging both form and content with innovation. The troubled relationship between sex and power is knit directly into the long and dynamic history of love poetry, but there has yet to be a published monograph on the modernist love poem and its implications for literary history. This dissertation fills a major gap in scholarship and speaks to the broader social concerns addressed by public discourse on sex, sexuality, and eros.

The body of modernist love poetry includes allusions to traditional love poetry—a tradition in lyric extending from the earliest written poems and culminating in nineteenth-century sentimentality—as well as explicit erotic content, satire, polemic, violence, and anxiety. It

is not neatly bounded by nation, gender, race, or aesthetic approach, but nonetheless, this project examines the consistent presence and achievement of experimental Anglophone poets working with the genre. My dissertation begins with a series of case studies examining the work of Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, Mina Loy, the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, and Langston Hughes to elucidate love poetry in its modernist form. The project establishes the place innovative modernist love poetry holds in literary history, and casts forward with two chapters, one on Anne Sexton and Robert Creeley, and another on Harryette Mullen and Bruce Andrews, to illustrate how mid-century and contemporary poets have continued to find new ways of re-imagining the genre.

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## Introduction

### The Love Song and the Love Call

Charles Darwin distinguishes between two types of bird calls in *The Descent of Man* (1871).<sup>1</sup> He catalogs as "love song" the sound of the preening male bird who performs as much for the possible competition for his beloved's affection as for his intended mate. However, a "love call," Darwin's term for a warning cry between mates, alerts the beloved to possible dangers or calls for help when dangers encroach. Because of its urgency, the love call affords a directness and intensity that the love song cannot duplicate.

While the naturalist can conveniently distinguish between these two modes of communication, modernist poets writing love poetry were forced to contend with the inflections of both the performative song and the warning cry. Modernist love poetry includes allusions to traditional Western love poetry—a lyric tradition including the personal poetry of Sappho, the courtly love poems of the troubadours, the wry wit of Shakespeare, and the earnest sentiment of John Keats—as well as explicit erotic content, satire, polemic, violence, and anxiety. It is not neatly bounded by nation, gender, race, or aesthetic

approach, but nonetheless, this project examines the consistent presence and achievement of experimental modernist poets working with the genre.

This project attends specifically to the work of experimental modernists because their efforts to make "new" from topoi that signaled what was often considered "traditional" poetry necessitated both new formal approaches to poetic language with free verse (line breaks, inconsistent rhyme, and repetition) and instantiated the love poem's flexibility as a genre. Memorable poetry often yokes form and content under a common rubric with either one or the other element functioning as the innovative variable. Roland Barthes describes this as the "erotic...seam" where "two edges are created: an obedient, conformist, plagiarizing edge...and *another edge*, mobile, blank (ready to assume any contours)."<sup>2</sup> The vein of modernist love poetry examined here takes advantage of the friction generated by charging both sides of the seam with innovation. In his description of the relationship of romance and political wars in the high middle-ages, Ezra Pound reasons that "the involved forms, and the veiled meanings in the 'trobar clus' [closed form]," grew out of living conditions, and that these songs played a very real part in love intrigue and the intrigue preceding warfare,

concluding that "If you wish to make love to women in public, and out loud, you must resort to subterfuge."<sup>3</sup> The theme of love features prominently in most of the literary output across history, but love poetry, as Pound's statement underscores, is tasked with the feat of expressing the ineffable realm of desire and love, licit or illicit, with particular attention to readerly affect.

Which is to say: love poetry is meant to do something.<sup>4</sup> In the Western world, personal poetry—poetry not tasked with recounting history, battles, death, or great men—dates back to the seventh-century B.C.E. Greece, and was meant to sway, excite, and entice the beloved. As the genre of personal poetry evolved, its aims expanded to include an audience of listeners excited and challenged by the poem and a wider range of affective possibilities including amusement, ambivalence, discomfort, and alarm. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, drawing on the work of Allen Grossman and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, observes a "triangulated situation" in traditional love lyric that extends Pound's statements on troubadours. In this situation, the "overtly male 'I'" speaks "as if overheard in front of an unseen but postulated, loosely male 'us'" about a female beloved. This structure, according to DuPlessis, "positions female figures in the feminine," and consequently "resists the

possibility of effeminacy" for lyric poetry, and love poetry more particularly.<sup>5</sup>

The Provençal tradition epitomized by poets like Arnaut Daniel and Guido Cavalcanti operates with similar aims to Darwin's appraisal of the preening birds' "love song": the purpose is to perform not only for the beloved, but also for the community of possible competitors, to prove how well you can sing the song.<sup>6</sup> While the poetry collected and examined in the following chapters invokes the tradition of the love song and lyric, it also necessitates the affective resources of Darwin's love call where fear, shock, and anger can portend the struggle to write love poetry in modernity. It is one thing to say politics or religion has gone wrong, but it is another to assert that the most intimate relationships of your life are being undermined and corrupted by "the pitiful clothes of old and sterile sentimentality."<sup>7</sup> Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky each translated Guido Cavalcanti's *Donna Me Prega* to address growing concerns with the demise of romantic love by returning readers to Cavalcanti's anatomy of love.<sup>8</sup> Langston Hughes's volume *Fine Clothes to the Jew* ignores the concerns of the "best" in African American society in order to voice the trying conditions that give rise to the blues among the "common element."<sup>9</sup> Mina Loy's "Songs to

Joannes," originally titled "Love Songs to Joannes," and Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven's "A Dozen Cocktails Please" also raise the alarm in their dissatisfaction with contemporary heterosexual love. These modernist poets, and others collected in this project, harness the rich affective possibility of love poetry in order to create some of their most powerful poems contending with the conditions of modernity.

### **The (Poetic Fate) of Modern Love**

Although the sanctioned love of a given historical moment was often narrowly defined, love poetry registers a broader praxis including illicit affairs, same-sex romances, miscegeny, pedophilia/pederasty, and the variety and pleasure of uncommon love acts. From Sappho's palpable jealousy in watching her beloved flirt with a man in fragment 31, through Shakespeare's "dark lady" sonnets, and the ecstatic "luxury" of Emily Dickinson's "Wild Nights—Wild Nights!" love poetry includes a long tradition of necessary experimentation and boundary pushing. Rebellious love poetry continued to figure prominently in the popular literature of the twentieth century as well. Two of the most widely read and published poets in the United States

at the beginning of the twentieth century, Dorothy Parker and Edna St. Vincent Millay, were known particularly for their love lyrics, offering individual subversions to what, at the time, had become conventional ideals of love and sharp critiques of the gendered expectations of modern love. Helen Dennis aptly points out the challenging situation facing women like Millay and Parker whose generation was "expected to maintain Victorian moral values" in compliance with "the manners dictated by late nineteenth century etiquette" while faced with "an explosion in sexual behavior."<sup>10</sup> The work of popular poets like Parker, Millay, and T. S. Eliot helps to contextualize the unique problems posed by modern love as an experience of heterosexual romance in Western cultures at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Parker's sharp wit enlivened the New York literary scene and provided a powerful voice for an urbane, sophisticated, New Woman sensibility. Similar to the humor she cultivated in her *Vanity Fair* "Hate Songs," many of Parker's most popular poems turn on the notion that the feminine speaker/lover is ultimately not that interested in the masculine beloved. From her best-selling first book of poems, *Enough Rope* (1926), poems like "Day-dreams," "Love Song," and the often-anthologized "One Perfect Rose," rely

on conventional readerly expectations as they call into question patriarchal gender norms in heterosexual romance. Both "Day-dreams" and "Love Song" play on the assumptions that women desire security, domesticity, and a strong man who will take charge of public sphere life so his wife can cook, clean, and find time to "join a little women's club."<sup>11</sup>

Parker's incisive and deeply funny poetic voice reverses the trope to mock domestic bliss and idealized heteronormative masculinity. In "Love Song," she eschews her lover's strength, good looks, and good fortune with the lines "And I wish I'd never met him," "And I wish he were in Asia," and "And I wish somebody'd shoot him," neatly wrapping up each of the three stanzas that initially seem to offer familiar praise (*DPCP*, 67). With her critique, the speaker treats the beloved more like a competitor and thereby assumes a gender parity clearly unmatched by the culture in which she lives. The lead up to each dismissal not only sets the joke, but also underscores the gender inequality shared by women like Parker at *Vanity Fair* or within the Algonquin Circle, working in a primarily masculine professional environment and taking on more visibility in the public sphere. For the uniquely blessed masculine beloved: "The ways are fair to his roaming feet,



/ And the skies are sunlit for him" (*ibid.*). Ambiguous enough to stand in for men more generally, this unnamed man enjoys an excess of advantages that would make him seem the excellent candidate for, as Parker puts it, "all my dreams" (*ibid.*). Instead, of course, his unacknowledged privilege excites only rancor well beyond his comprehension.

The speaker's dissatisfaction with what appears to be the ideal option reveals the paradox of modern love that began to turn away from the nineteenth-century ideals of companionate marriage to inaugurate an era of urbane dismissiveness and sadly comical misapprehension between heterosexual romantic partners. Nina Miller describes modern love as "a sophisticated response to a heterosexuality newly problematized by the growing presence of women in the previously male public space of campus, office, and street," which left love "intrinsically flawed" and "too comical and inevitable to bear much analysis or even emotional investment."<sup>12</sup> Parker's weariness of modern love exemplifies the "boredom" that Jessica Burstein finds integral to the urbanity that defines modernism.<sup>13</sup> Unlike sentimentality, which presumes a connectedness by blurring difference, the satire and wit Parker employs to critique modernity corroborates modernism's broader aims to recognize the "alien" by allowing it to remain

"distinctive."<sup>14</sup> Parker's work dismisses modern love with a sophisticated wit that makes it feel timelessly urbane, and demonstrates the lasting appeal of such a response to periods of shift in the social and cultural life.

Millay's work, even while critiquing the same paradigms and inequities as Parker, does not turn on the humor built by a shared joke between speaker and audience. While several of her poems are known for their sentimental approach to love and heartache, in others the seriousness better compares to poets most associated with a masculinized modernism: Pound and Eliot. The poem "Spring," from her book *Second April* (1921), anticipated Eliot's own reevaluation of spring and reveals an acerbic modern sensibility in the opening lines: "To what purpose, April, do you return again? / Beauty is not enough."<sup>15</sup> Here, the barb simultaneously addresses both the bucolic themes of spring and rebirth and the decadent roots of modernism that valued art for art's sake. She reverses the familiar poetic trope of a feminized depiction of nature by personifying April as an ineffectual Dionysian figure, an "idiot, babbling and strewing flowers" (*EMCP*, 53). The poem sexualizes spring but undercuts any notion of masculine virility or sublimity with lines like "little leaves opening stickily" and "I observe / The spikes of the crocus"

(*ibid.*). The speaker shrinks nature to its smallest functional parts, and overtakes the spikes of the crocus with clinical observation. The poem emphasizes April's functionality, like the processes of procreation or elimination rather than any sense of grandeur.

In "Only until this Cigarette Is Ended," Millay creates a similarly emasculated object. Within the constraints of the Italian sonnet she dismisses the beloved, explaining dryly, "Yours is a face of which I can forget / The color and the features, every one" (*ibid.*, 575). Jo Ellen Green Kaiser places Millay's poem in dialogue with Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," highlighting the difference between Prufrock, "who feels mesmerized by the sensuality of the women who surround him," and Millay's speaker, who "renders her lover impotent . . . because she has first lit him up, drawn him in, then smoked him out."<sup>16</sup> While Kaiser places Millay's sonnet within a broader tradition of sentimentality, the poem is better proof of the kind of anti-sentimental prowess that positions her, like Loy, Freytag-Loringhoven, and Marianne Moore, as a powerful oppositional perspective to the kind of masculine myopia demonstrated in a poem like "Prufrock."

While poems by Millay and Parker serve as important reminders that questions of gender were part of a popular

discourse reversing audience expectations long before second-wave feminism and identity politics became part of a mainstream debate in the 1960s, Eliot's "Prufrock" and his lesser known "Love Song of St. Sebastian" exemplify an anxiety for the traditional ideals of masculinity.

Published in 1915, "Prufrock" presents the insecurities of masculinity in decline: the refrain of the independent women moving without regard to the speaker, discussing art without consulting his expertise, as well as the speaker's age and dwindling virility. These observations culminate in his surrender to the fact that he has been pushed out of the social conversation, and his (and our) realization that he was never really in it. Even the siren mermaid song, treated in Homer's *The Odyssey* as a great temptation for all men—the song that tells men the deep secrets they long to know—is a song for others. Self-conscious and emasculated, Eliot's Prufrock cannot even be sure he is being ignored; instead he only guesses, "I do not think that they will sing to me."<sup>17</sup>

In contrast, "The Love Song of St. Sebastian," included in a 1914 letter to Conrad Aiken and posthumously published in *Inventions of the March Hare* (1996), reclaims the often homo-eroticized fin de siècle figure of St. Sebastian as an explicitly hetero-erotic and violent figure

in the course of the poem.<sup>18</sup> The poem is noticeably absent from much of Eliot criticism, and Laurie MacDiarmid argues that it actually confuses readers with polyvocal narration and a conclusion voicing the desires of a "carnally obsessed" sadist female lover.<sup>19</sup> The history of St. Sebastian, martyred for refusing to disavow Christianity and nursed to health by Irene of Rome after being shot through with arrows, lends itself to a polyvocal reading of the poem, but the violence of the speaker(s) seems at odds with the history of the subject.<sup>20</sup> In his letters to Aiken, Eliot seems unsure of the poem, asking his friend if it seemed "morbid, or forced" and going on to insist "I have studied S. Sebastians[sic]—why would anyone paint a beautiful youth and stick him full of pins . . . unless he felt a little as the hero of my verse? Only there's nothing homosexual about this—rather an important difference perhaps—but no one ever painted a female Sebastian, did they?"<sup>21</sup> Eliot's resistance to a homosexual depiction of St. Sebastian and insistence on the heterosexual content of his own poem records a version of the backlash against the homoerotics of the decadence era.<sup>22</sup> Yet the gendered fluidity with which he approaches the story of St. Sebastian also suggests an openness to evolving ideas about how the role of the lover can and has been portrayed in art.

Eliot's love songs as well as the work of Parker and Millay highlight the nuance and complexity of gender, sexuality, and love being performed in the larger canon of modernist poetry.

The poems by Parker, Millay, and Eliot all juxtapose the conventional expectations of a love poem—the love poem figured as celebratory love song—with the incompatibility and failure of modern love. The work of authors like Parker and Millay offer a version of the effort moderns made to reinvent eros for the twentieth century.<sup>23</sup> An interest in explicit content, exemplified by Eliot's "St. Sebastian," was also adopted by writers like James Joyce, Windham Lewis, and D. H. Lawrence. Joyce and Lawrence both risked obscenity trials to shed light on erotic human experience, and Lewis's "Cantleman's Spring Mate" was restricted by the United States Postal Service and could only be published in the British edition of *The Little Review*.<sup>24</sup> Even the historic theme of *liebestod* driving "St. Sebastian" unfolds in the context of explicit violence, with a "strangled" and "mangled" beloved.

While modern love often accompanies the humorous themes present in popular media like Anita Loos's novel *Gentleman Prefer Blondes* (1925), and has continued in more contemporary self-help guides like *Men Are from Mars, Women*

*Are from Venus* (1992) or *He's Just Not That Into You* (2004), it obstructs the possibility for artists to recover the affective potential of romantic love without recourse to the sentimental as a mark of authenticity. Eliot's poem carries this kind of dehumanizing segregation to its most violent extreme when the speaker declares that only at the end of the world could the lover and beloved understand one another, and even then the understanding only yields a dark possibility: "You should love me because I should have strangled you / and because of my infamy."<sup>25</sup> The understanding is that of an innately motivated violence without the possibility of resolution between the lover and beloved, between speaker and subject.

### **Project Boundaries**

Because love was such a major topic of the poetic output in the beginning of the twentieth century, my analysis proves most useful to both poetics and modernist studies, which is where it reveals the most surprising confluences. The modernist poems I study here attempt to move beyond the impossibility of modern love. These love poems resist an absorptive reading of the poem and the kind of unifying empathy often supposed to be a part of sentimental poetry. Instead, they treat the challenges of

modern love as challenges of form. Along with artists working in other media such as painting, music, photography, or sculpture, poets were able to provide new perspectives on romantic love by recognizing and addressing issues deeply entrenched in history and culture, and imbued with tradition through the very design of their language. My project is directly concerned with what DuPlessis calls the "two 'news'—the rhetorical/stylistic (modernism) and the ideological/political (modernity)"—as well as the lasting legacy of literary modernism. This means that it recognizes both Gertrude Stein's advances in the treatment of sentences and paragraphs as well as the medical community's advances in such things as preventing pregnancy and treating venereal disease; both are vitally important to the innovations of modernist love poetry.

Consequently, I have chosen love poems that exemplify the stylistic and thematic rupture with which modernism is most associated. Stein, Pound, Freytag-Loringhoven, and Loy were associated with the so-called historical avant-gardes of Cubism, Vorticism, Dadaism, and Italian Futurism, respectively. All of the poets chosen for this project exemplify the "avant-garde venture," defined by Elisabeth Frost as one that "unites formal innovation with political engagement" where the "avant-gardist assumes that a daring



new artistic practice has the potential to change the world by inciting a change of consciousness."<sup>26</sup> In *The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry*, Frost argues convincingly that influential women writers like Stein and Loy have been overlooked, or co-opted, by the "predominant models of identity politics on the one hand and 'feminine writing' on the other" (FA, xiii). The models she critiques as too limiting also contribute to the gaps in scholarship on love poetry.

Although much scholarship has been dedicated to modernism and gender, sex, and sexuality, only two extant literary monographs focus on twentieth-century love poetry: Eric Selinger's *What Is It Then Between Us?: Traditions of Love in American Poetry* (1998) and Barbara Estrin's *The American Love Lyric after Auschwitz and Hiroshima* (2001). Selinger's more direct emphasis upon modernist work poses compelling questions as to whether "love or language close" the gap between "me" and "you."<sup>27</sup> He contends that this "paradox of liberty and union" is particularly appealing for an American readership because of its political heritage, but paints a dire picture for poetry's ability to address such a paradox: "Marked by pity, regret, and a sense of having trespassed . . . love poetry after Dickinson will be more concerned with the ethics of the

imagination than any we have seen so far."<sup>28</sup> Estrin's comparatively conservative project also takes up this concern as primary. She argues that the "two-partied and fictional matters of the lyric . . . spill over into the larger realm of a socially dangerous norm" of isolating both the desirable and undesirable in any given political landscape.<sup>29</sup> Both of these works demonstrate a critical interest in the problems of love, and each offers a valuable map for the kinds of questions that love poetry asks, but neither emphasizes the formal innovations being made by modernist poets, or poetry generally, and what those innovations mean for the history, theory, and practice of the art.

The following chapters explicitly address experimental poetry as a direct means of understanding the lasting effect of "the avant-garde venture" as it relates to love poetry and larger conversations about sex, romance, and erotic love. Those effects counteract critiques of avant-garde efforts for supposed isolation from lived reality or elitist aestheticism, and support Frost's grounding of the avant-garde spirit in populist efforts aimed at shifting paradigms (*FA*, xiv-xv). In the preface to *The Futurist Moment* (1985), Marjorie Perloff's description of a poem by

Blaise Cendrars aptly illustrates this same spirit and registers its lasting appeal. She attests,

A poetry whose windows are wide open to the  
boulevards—here is a program that points the way to  
our own urge to break down the boundaries between  
“world” and “text,” between the reality out there and  
the art construct that re-presents it.<sup>30</sup>

Peter Quartermain’s monograph *Stubborn Poetries* (2013) extends this idea to point out that the world and text do join in the “event” of the poem, which is not “the *translation of experience into words*” meant only for the initiated sophisticate, but rather “an actual event of *language*.”<sup>31</sup> And, most importantly, that event is open, as William Carlos Williams put it, “To Him That Wants It.”<sup>32</sup> This dissertation builds on scholarship wrestling with the challenges present in a poem intended to take part in the avant-gardist effort, whether that poem addresses the anonymity of the bustling metropolis, or the suffocation of domestic married life.

The full stanza from the first of Mina Loy’s “Songs to Joannes,” which furnishes my title, illustrates this specific kind of pressure on both formal innovation and thematic exploration. The lines read:

I must live in my lantern

Trimming subliminal flicker

Virginal to the bellows

Of Experience.<sup>33</sup>

Despite the lack of punctuation and an absent article preceding "subliminal," the sentence is generally comprehensible. Where it lacks uniform rhythm and rhyme, it knits the lines with the consonance in "live," "lantern," "subliminal," and "flicker" that culminates in "Virginal" and "bellows." Loy sardonically recounts her domestic constraints, and personifies "Experience"—capitalizing the initial letter to make it a proper noun—as a booming force. The slender "I" grammatically balances the more spacious "Experience," and sets up a gendered struggle for value. Loy's juxtaposition of the feminized "I" and masculine "Experience" challenges both the feminine passivity prescribed for the speaker, as well as the dominant masculinity provided by the consequential "Experience." Because so much of literary modernism focused on a masculine public sphere or the public life of an individual (usually white and male), domestic life and domestic subjects were often deemed ill-suited for the weight of meaningful poetic attention.<sup>34</sup> Loy extends and complicates this conversation in her "Feminist Manifesto" where she calls for a "demolition" of the economic order and the

"surgical destruction of virginity through-out [sic] the female population at puberty" to prevent the trade of women as commodities on the marriage market.<sup>35</sup> Her passage capitalizes on and usefully encapsulates the play of traditional poetic devices and patriarchal notions of eros, with modernist revisions of signification and an avant-gardist's attention to the language's communicative possibilities at the level of the morpheme, phoneme, word, and line. Because of its attention to thematic and formal affordances, Loy's poetry, specifically—and the poetry collected here, more generally—reveal a set of outward limits by which readers can examine the tension created by charging both sides of the "seam," as Barthes put it, with innovation.

### **Methodology**

Modernists invested in formal innovation were both riffing on the tradition of lyric, extolling the pleasure of gratifying sexual relationships, and also raising warning cries at what they saw as some of the most pressing dangers of their time. Theirs is a tradition that deploys the resources of both the love song and the love call. My project recognizes the inevitable effects that history, a specific socio-political moment, geography, and biography

can have on a poem—especially for a genre as rooted in the performance of the personal as love poetry is—but extends those interpretations to better understand how poetry incorporates the complexities of those motivating factors. It does not treat the poem as simply a vehicle for these motivating factors, and heeds W. J. T. Mitchell's warning that form is not "an arbitrary assemblage of parts . . . the manner in which something is done, a way of getting from here to there, a spatial or temporal pattern that has value only in relation to the end it serves."<sup>36</sup> Instead, the chapters that follow consider form in light of Caroline Levine's assertions that forms afford distinct opportunities for "ordering, patterning, and shaping" that can constrain, differentiate, overlap with one another, maintain across space and time, and determine "what it is possible to think, say, and do in a given context."<sup>37</sup> My analysis further adopts what Jonathan Culler has called a preference for poetics, which asks "what are the conventions that enable this work to have the sorts of meanings and effects it does for readers," over hermeneutics, which "wants to find the meaning," and affirms the efficacy of his approach.<sup>38</sup> Culler's ideas are anticipated in earlier analyses focused on the poetics of lyric, including Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*

(1957) and Andrew Welsh's *Roots of Lyric* (1978). As experimental poetry moves more consciously in the direction of language-centered writing that actively resists language's ability to make concrete meaning, a focus on form seems most apt in registering the distinctions of historical conditions, while simultaneously providing inroads for appreciating and learning from one of the oldest poetic genres.

This capacious approach to recognizing and analyzing form allows me to discern and articulate the ways each of the poets in this project develops distinct and noteworthy approaches to love poetry, but also presents challenges for identifying "what counts" as a love poem. Because I am most interested in experimental poetry by poets associated with avant-garde traditions, many of the poems collected in this project do not, upon first reading, look like love poems. In focusing on form, and drawing from Levine's model, I identify what poetic elements constrained, differentiated, and maintained across space and time in the case of the love poem.

The figures of the lover, the beloved, and a precipitating occasion associated with sexual desire or the sex act are present in love poems consistently from the earliest Egyptian love poetry that inspired the biblical

psalm "Song of Songs," through to the poetry of Bruce Andrews and Harryette Mullen that concludes this project. I differentiate love poems from poems about love, or the kinds of philosophical treatises that intend to define love as an entity without regard to a lover, beloved, or precipitating event. For example, although Pound's canto XXXVI translates Cavalcanti's explanation of love's origins, structure, and maintenance and the poem serves to bolster my argument about Pound's love poetry in chapter two, it is not, for my purposes, a love poem. In Williams's "The Ogre" and "The Young Housewife," not often counted alongside his more popular love poems such as "Asphodel that Greeny Flower," I read a love poem heightened by the tension generated by a potentially dangerous lover addressing a vulnerable beloved—similar to Robert Browning's approach in "Porphyria's Lover." Certainly not all love is romantic or erotic, and the tradition of sacred love poetry that includes poets like John Donne, George Herbert, and John Milton goes further than the troubadour tradition or Petrarch to shift the pleasures, delights, and ecstasy of physical love to the divine.<sup>39</sup> As Levine reminds us, forms overlap and intersect.<sup>40</sup> Sacred love poetry, filial love poetry, or other non-romantic forms of love poetry are not aberrations of the form, but grafts and offshoots. The



figures of the lover, beloved, and precipitating event were not subsumed by sacred love poetry and have maintained across space and time, which provides readers with the constraining and differentiating elements necessary to recognize the form.

Such an approach to form also allows me to avoid a hermeneutics of suspicion that could treat the biographical, psychoanalytic, social, or historical as a means to unearth the secrets of a poem. Sedgwick, in *Touching Feeling*, elucidates how “the ease with which *beneath* and *beyond*”—which are cognitive models in a hermeneutics of suspicion—“turn from spatial descriptors into implicit narratives of respectively, origin and telos.”<sup>41</sup> This project recognizes and abides by the following two propositions simultaneously: (1) poetry is not immune from the social effects of a historical moment or the inherited history of that moment, and (2) poetry is not responsible for revealing a clear window into a unified subjectivity or the consequences of the poet’s lived reality, even if it does provide a dynamic processing system where the poet’s environment, interests, and subjectivity have been organized by creative will (*GRRC*, 4). DuPlessis’s “social philology” models a particular way of making connections between “text and context” in my project (*ibid.*, 7-8).

DuPlessis prefers the term philology, because it "begins, etymologically, in 'love of words' and their density," and she describes the method as driven by the assumption that "social meanings and debates, textual irruptions of subjectivities, contradictory or self-consistent, must be examined not just *in* poetry but *as* poetry" (*ibid.*, 11). Because love poetry so often teases at the edge of the personal, and literary modernists often favored a persona, a method that makes room for multiplicity, "contradictory or self-consistent," serves this project well. Social philology makes use of "culturalist interpretations that arc among the psychoanalytic and the biographical through to the social and historical without foregoing a sense of the irreducibility and quirkiness of the signifier" or the materiality and music of language (*ibid.*, 25).

Recruiting these approaches to literary analysis allows me usefully to engage with a tension many modernists themselves struggled to contend with. Williams simplifies the problem in his assertion: "Freud's influence has been the trigger to all this," explaining that,

Everything must be tapped into the subconscious, the unconscious—as if poetry had ever been different. But poetry has also been a construction in words—very strange news this is to the present day.<sup>42</sup>

Williams's attention to both the construction of language in poems, what he elsewhere lays out through his definition of a poem as "a small (or large) machine made out of words," and to the problem of the depth models being forced on poetry in the wake of psychoanalysis's prominence in popular culture spells out the concerns that shape this argument.<sup>43</sup>

An obsession with construction and the materiality of language makes modernist poetry a particularly rich subject for analysis with regard to love. Love, according to Stephen Kern, not only became more "authentic as men and women came to reflect more profoundly about what it [meant] to be in love" in the transition to modernism, but love also went from a subject for artistic consideration to an intrinsic quality of the creation, or "love as art."<sup>44</sup> Anne Ferry argues that,

the most radical phase of [poetic] history, the practice revealing the most fundamental transformation of attitudes toward the ordering of thought in the language of rhymed poetry, is the acceptance by poets in the twentieth century of rhymes like *love:of*.<sup>45</sup>

She goes on to quote Malcolm Bowie's 1978 book *Mallarmé and the Art of Being Difficult*, where he writes "Sound-system and sense-system are heterogeneous. . . . The relations

between them are now a source of intellectual tension and excitement."<sup>46</sup> Gaps and slippages, presence and absence, approach and withdrawal all excite the possibilities of erotic love. Barthes asks in *The Pleasure of the Text*, "Is not the most erotic portion of a body *where the garment gapes?* . . . It is intermittence . . . which is erotic."<sup>47</sup>

In a 1927 marriage manual reprinted forty-six times in its original edition, *Ideal Marriage: Its Physiology and Technique*, Dr. T. H. Van de Velde codifies intermittence as the proper initiation to an erotic encounter. According to Van de Velde the "erotic kiss" is the important first step in sexual contact with one's partner. In a circuitous fashion Van de Velde both uses poetry to describe the erotic kiss and describes the kiss in poetic terms when he acclaims,

It may "brush the bloom" like a butterfly's wing by a light stroking of lips with other pursed lips; be, as it were, an "effleurage," to use the technical term . . . or poetry for fleeting, hardly perceptible contacts.<sup>48</sup>

While scientists and doctors were attempting to understand and standardize form within erotic relationships, poets were seeking to discover what new forms erotic love could inspire in and through poetry. Thus, discussions of form

will primarily guide the following chapters, informed by a keen understanding of how historical, social, and personal contexts are deeply imbricated in the manifestation of those forms.

### **Historical Context**

Considered in a broad historical context, modernist notions of love are not as surprising or shocking as they appear to be when juxtaposed narrowly with nineteenth-century ideals that treated love as the "basis of marriage" and marriage as "the legitimate sphere of sex."<sup>49</sup> The emergence in the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century of scientification, or the written record and analysis, of love, sex, and human relationships often encodes a kind of trans-historicity to the norms established by those annals that is not supported by the historical record. Michel Foucault highlights this anomaly in *History of Sexuality* (1976) by beginning with the "tolerant familiarity with the illicit" he finds common in the beginning of the seventeenth century.<sup>50</sup> Thomas Laqueur notes that during the eighteenth century

the erasure of female pleasure from medical accounts of conception took place at the same time as the female body came to be understood no longer as a

lesser version of the male's . . . but as its  
incommensurable opposite.<sup>51</sup>

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, texts inspired by the empiricism of the enlightenment used clinical language to describe not only the physical, social, and psychological differences between sexes and races, but also procedures for lovemaking, hygiene, and proper marriage roles, as well as aberrations in these sanctioned habits. These documents, in turn, were used to justify laws and court decisions that responded to modern pressures for more freedom in terms of love and sex.

Historically aware thinkers have attempted to point out these confusions of history, but their logic has not always held mainstream attention. Alexandra Kollontai, writing to young revolutionaries about eros, explains that every age of history

has established norms defining when and under what conditions love is "legal" (i.e., corresponds to the interests of the given social collective), and when and under what conditions love is sinful and criminal (i.e., contradicts the tasks of the given society).<sup>52</sup>

As capitalism gained pace during the industrial revolution and love, sex, and marriage were ostensibly bound together to protect patrimony and foster the ideal of bourgeois

domesticity. This meant nineteenth-century love was virtually unrecognizable from the kinship loyalty practices of tribal cultures, the intellectual and homosocial/sexual love practiced in ancient Greece, the partnerships of economic convenience that spawned the earliest instantiations of marriage, or the platonic love celebrated by the troubadours. Culminating in marriage, sanctioned nineteenth-century love was private, heteronormative, and procreative. It was bounded within the lines of race and class. It was relegated to the private sphere of the home. With such restrictions, this version of love was a prime target for modernist critique and rupture.

### **Legal and Medical Contexts**

For moderns, legal advances for disenfranchised groups were often followed by reactionary politics and restrictions, with debates around love turning on three familiar and overlapping axes: gender, sexuality, and race. The rise of the "New Woman" on the back of New York's Married Women's Property Act in 1848, the suffragist campaigns for the right to vote in the United States and Great Britain, the racial fluidity of places like Harlem and Paris, divorce legislation, and the availability of birth control all exemplify the "new entitlements" of

modernity (*GRRC*, 30). On the other hand the show trial of Oscar Wilde in 1895, the effeminate legacy of nineteenth-century decadence traditions, women's colleges and settlement houses, and the shock of World War I resulted in a shoring up of traditional heteronormative masculinities and racial purity. Even "the era of sexology" was forced to couch sexual pleasure in terms of married love and spiritual or personal development.<sup>53</sup> Nina Miller maintains that "the New Woman of the 1920s had to be visibly and insistently heterosexual. But this imperative occurred in tension with the need to avoid the degradation of public sexual exposure."<sup>54</sup> Despite their new freedoms, then, moderns did not escape patriarchal expectations of heterosexuality or (women's) virginity.

Margaret Sanger's influential pamphlet series "What Every Girl Should Know" (1912-13) sought to make information on family planning as well as protection against and treatment of venereal disease available to all women. Although the articles on syphilis and gonorrhoea were censored by the United States Post Office, their content was well understood by the medical community—who had long controlled the availability of birth control.<sup>55</sup> After a veritable panic over the rise of syphilis across Europe and the United States during the late nineteenth century, with



experts estimating percentages as high as 20 percent for men in 1900, the medical community began to treat the disease as part of a larger program of social hygiene (SA, 188). By this point, much of the literature dealing with syphilis "made the foreign-born prostitute the alleged source of venereal contagion and the scapegoat for male sexual anxieties," and signaled the "sexist, xenophobic, and racist" rhetoric that represented the anxieties of imperial nations at the end of the nineteenth century (*ibid.*, 189). Elaine Showalter points out that during the fin-de-siècle "the frenzy over syphilis did not necessarily mean support for sex education or contraception," and "[w]hile the commercially manufactured condom had been available since the invention of the vulcanization of rubber in 1846" and the diaphragm had been invented in 1882, medical, religious, and political institutions were not eager to support the commercial availability of contraceptives (*ibid.*, 195).<sup>56</sup> The discovery of Salvarsan as a working treatment to prevent the transmission of syphilis in 1909 and works like Margaret Sanger's "What Every Girl Should Know" and Mary Stopes' *Married Love* (1918), then, were revolutionary in offering women and men some options for sexual activity without the repercussions of disease, impregnation, or both. However, even as Sanger's

impassioned writings rallied women around the call for an end to "sexual servitude" and a revision to the obscenity laws restricting mailed material, they maintained a eugenics-based goal of cultivating a "New Race" free from the unfitness, "feeblemindedness," and "racial handicaps" of poverty.<sup>57</sup> The back and forth struggle for marginalized subjects to gain social and political mobility came with corresponding demands for new understandings, definitions, and rules dictating human relationships.

The law restricting Sanger from circulating information on family planning and reproductive choice also presented problems for the editors of *The Little Review* when they began publishing James Joyce's *Ulysses*. The Comstock Act of 1873 restricted anyone from circulating obscene material through the mail—this included information about abortion or contraception. In 1921 the law was used to charge Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap, editors of *The Little Review*, with obscenity for publishing the "Nausicaa" episode of *Ulysses*. Heap highlights the gendered overtones of the prosecution's argument when she editorialized:

New York Society for the Suppression of Vice was founded to protect the public from corruption. When asked *what public?* Its defenders spring to the rock on which America was founded: the cream-puff of

sentimentality, and answer chivalrously: "Our young girls!" So the mind of the young girl rules this country? . . . If there is anything really to be feared it is the mind of a young girl.<sup>58</sup>

The basis for the charge dates back to an 1868 English case, *Regina vs. Hicklin*, that decided the "test for obscenity was whether a writing tended to deprave and corrupt the morals of young or immature persons."<sup>59</sup> The case made it difficult for literary magazines like *The Little Review* to continue publishing experimental and avant-garde literature for fear of the legal repercussions, in addition to the monetary loss at risk whenever mailed issues were confiscated by post office authorities.

### **(Social) Scientific Context**

Sexology, in particular, played a problematic role by normalizing certain sex acts and gendered characteristics, as well as diagnosing other sex acts and gender displays as indications of underlying neuroses. Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, published in 1905, presented "sexual perversion as common to all human beings at a certain stage in their ontogenetic development."<sup>60</sup> His

argument made the bold claims that children were also sexual creatures, that the pervert was somehow obstructed in her/his sexual development, and that all humans passed through some phase of sexual perversion, thereby universalizing perversion.<sup>61</sup> There was also significant interest in diagnosing and prescribing partner choices: Gertrude Stein recommended Otto Weininger's *Sex and Character* to close friends—a text which used characterology to calculate the masculine and feminine aspects of individuals in order to predict appropriate sexual object choices.<sup>62</sup> The interest in establishing “what went wrong” in non-normative sexual choices also reflected the modernist desire to establish clearer boundaries for femininity and masculinity as haircuts grew shorter, women became more visible in the public spaces of industry and commerce, and men began to see women exercise the same advantages of political leverage and freedom that they had long enjoyed.

Reminiscent of Loy's “Feminist Manifesto,” these scientific studies very often focused on the importance of difference between men and women and claimed that “equality” was a misguided aim. Remy de Gourmont's *Physique de l'Amour*, published in 1903 and translated into English by Pound in 1922, emphasized a clear and necessary distinction between the sexes of all species, explaining that

[t]here must be a difference, especially of strength, in order for there to be a true union, that is to say subordination. A couple of equal elements, like a society of equal elements, would be in a state of permanent anarchy.<sup>63</sup>

The dangerous results of "identical education" in humans, according to De Gourmont, is that "the couple is less easily formed and grows less stable: hence adultery, divorces, excess of prostitution" (*NPL*, 69-70). De Gourmont observes that when approached by the male, the female "desires to be taken, she wishes to fulfill her destiny" and that in the rare cases "where the male is feeble or timid, the female resigns herself to an aggression demanded by care for future generations" (*ibid.*, 114). Which is to say, de Gourmont proposes that aggression is not exclusively limited to the males of all species, but aggression in one of the sexes is invariable and necessary. By his estimation, the rise of the New Woman and feminism was not prompted by women's struggle for equal standing but a failure of heteronormative masculinity.

This notion of difference, best summarized in sociologist Georg Simmel's major thesis that "the woman represents being and man represents becoming," presented a major concern in the minds of moderns generally, and

certainly of the poets collected here. Simmel, writing in 1911, sympathizes with the plight of women asked to function in a world where "the relative value of the male and the female is decided on the basis of a male rather than a neutral value idea," but also supports a solution rooted in difference, postulating,

It follows that only a thoroughly radical dualism can help us here. The naive conflation of male values with values as such can give way only if the female existence as such is acknowledged as having a basis fundamentally different from the male and a stream of life flowing in a fundamentally different direction: two existential totalities, each structured according to completely autonomous rules.<sup>64</sup>

The implied prescriptions in these differences present high stakes in gendered expectations for men and women alike, and offered frustrating limitations to the human condition. In his introduction to de Gourmont's work, Pound connects the creative role of the male poet to the origin story of masculine conquering action. He claims that

[t]here are traces of it in the symbolism of phallic religions, man really the phallus or spermatozoide charging, head-on, the female chaos. Integration of the male in the male organ. Even oneself has felt it,

driving any new idea into the great passive vulva of London, a sensation analogous to the male feeling in copulation.<sup>65</sup>

Under these terms, Mina Loy must unironically restrict herself to the close quarters of her lantern, trimming the "subliminal flicker" of poetic genius, while Pound is responsible for "charging" a new idea into a giant, (feminized) literary metropolis.

The grand ambition of such an expectation enhances the tone of disappointment in Pound's 1920 poem, "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley," where the speaker proffers the lines "For three years, out of key with his time, / He strove to resuscitate the dead art" as the inscription for E.P.'s tomb.

Naturalist and critic Joseph Wood Krutch addresses these sentiments in his introduction to *The Modern Temper* (1929):

The universe revealed by science . . . is one in which the human spirit cannot find a comfortable home. . . . It needs to believe . . . that love is more than a biological function, that the human mind is capable of reason rather than merely rationalization.<sup>66</sup>

The sociological interpretations of masculine and feminine qualities reflect many of the gendered tropes of literary modernism, but the poems themselves better elucidate the tensions and complexities of such tropes.

## Chapter Summaries and Conclusion

"The Bellows / Of Experience," as evidenced from the title, primarily focuses on how modernist poetry advances the love poem for both the opportunities and demands of the twentieth century and why that matters for literary history. It uses a series of case studies on the work of Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, Mina Loy, William Carlos Williams, Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, and Langston Hughes to elucidate this genre in its modernist form and anticipate the creative possibilities love poetry engenders for late modern and postmodern poets. In my analysis, I take as a starting point that love poetry comprises three working parts: the lover, the beloved, and a precipitating event that anticipates, recounts, or gestures toward the spectacle of sex.

The chapters on Pound and Stein represent, in many ways, the most optimistic approach to these elements. I argue, for both Pound and Stein, that the love poem remains powerful because love remains powerful and that they are uninterested in resigning romance to the disappointments of modern love. My chapter on Stein demonstrates how *Tender Buttons*, "Pink Melon Joy," and *Lifting Belly* recast the affective potential of the traditional love poem as a tool



for animating poetic language more generally. The following chapter elucidates Pound's strategy in *Personae* and the *Cantos* for using the love poem as a container that could maintain disparate, and even opposing, entities within hypostasis.

The poems of Loy, Williams, Freytag-Loringhoven, and Hughes retain a more qualified relationship with love and the love poem as a genre and, as a result, these chapters address love poems that question, critique, and warn audiences about dangers facing modern lovers. My chapter on Loy argues for rereading her "Songs to Joannes" as a functional demonstration of negative feminine sentiment—an emotion that has gone largely unrecognized by critics from Pound onward. I give "The Young Housewife" and "The Ogre" extensive close readings in the proceeding chapter in order to nuance Williams's poetics of transgression, which cannot be reconciled with the very real threat transgression brings to bear on the body of a poetic beloved. The chapter on Freytag-Loringhoven articulates her queering of the love poem, sex, and love in her extant published and unpublished poems, made available in the recent collection *Body Sweats*. In the last of the chapters on modernist texts, I demonstrate how and why Hughes's *Fine Clothes to the Jew* presents love as a diseased affliction that he

characterizes as addiction. By framing addiction as a disease, Hughes is most prescient in asking—just as Theodor Adorno would of the lyric in “On Lyric Poetry and Society” after World War II—how the love poem can account for itself. Collectively, the work of these poets provides resistance to pressures of modernity—sometimes imposed by the authors themselves—that could have easily muffled love poetry.

My analysis extends into contemporary poetries with a chapter on the mid-century work of Robert Creeley and Anne Sexton and a conclusion that addresses the work of Bruce Andrews and Harriet Mullen. These last two chapters document both the legacy of high modernist love poetry, and the debt these innovative poets owe their literary predecessors. None of the poets included in this project are love poets exclusively (as indeed most poets historically do not submit to such narrow limits for their art), but they are all formally experimental and influential artists in a poetic lineage that traces from modernist attention to “the construction in words,” as Williams put it, through to language-centered writing and contemporary experimental poetries.<sup>67</sup> My conclusion will distill the analysis from these case studies to articulate a working definition of lyric for the twenty-first century,

ideally providing inroads for contemporary poets who continue to adapt the genre.

Anglophone modernism, although concentrated in the United States and Western Europe, does not settle easily into a national category and historic and generic boundaries (rather than geographic) govern this project. In many ways modernism was effectively global before "globalization" became modern. The modernist poets included wrote primarily in English, lived in various countries, knew multiple languages, and often navigated several national heritages. The poets included in the final two chapters are "United Statesers" (as Williams would have termed it) and represent the continued importance of literary modernism on U.S. poetry in particular.<sup>68</sup>

As for the major genre that lurks unaddressed behind this introduction, an analysis of twentieth-century love poetry requires serious consideration of the vibrant and ongoing discussion of lyric poetry, our use of the term lyric, and its place in contemporary criticism. The conclusion of the dissertation draws upon the above case studies to theorize the *lyric*: namely, it articulates what love poetry and love lyric have to contribute to the interest in lyric as a conflicted genre in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Not all lyrics are love poetry,

and not all love poems are necessarily lyric (as my chapter on Stein demonstrates), but the long tradition of love in verse as love-song and love-call inflects love poetry with lyrical implications that warrant attention in this large project. In a larger project Eliot and H.D. would deserve their own chapters, but my inclusions are motivated by coverage and surprise: which texts do I see students stare at, wide-eyed, when they realize the publication date; and which authors are least associated with a topic as personal and sentiment-ful as love. So, here begins an analysis of how love in modernity changed the kinds of poems written in its honor, and how modern poets used love to change the kinds of poems they were inspired to craft.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species and the Descent of Man*, The Modern Library (New York: Random House, 1871), 711.

<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1975), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Ezra Pound, "Troubadours—Their Sorts and Conditions," in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1954), 94.

<sup>4</sup> In their introduction to *The Philosophy of (Erotic) Love* (1991), Robert Solomon and Kathleen Higgins usefully address the shortcomings of philosophical treatises on love, such as Plato's *Symposium*, noting that "when we try philosophically to talk about love," we "turn it into philosophy, and in so doing lose touch with the reality everyone cherishes," asking "what hope for a philosophy of love when Love, to Plato's chagrin, has only ears for poetry?" Of course, poetry is not the only means of powerfully expressing the trappings of love; however, the art has roots in the affective qualities of image and sound that make it a persistent fit for the discourse of love and

also attractive to the strain of literary modernism invested in poetry's ability to discover and impact.

<sup>5</sup> Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Genders, Races, and Religious Cultures in Modern American Poetry, 1908-1934* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 29 (hereafter cited in text as *GRRC*).

<sup>6</sup> Other variations of love poetry, such as pastoral love poetry, also adopt this strategy.

<sup>7</sup> Valentine de Saint-Point, "Futurist Manifesto of Lust 1913," in *Futurist Manifestos*, ed. Umbro Apollonio, artWorks (Boston, MA: MFA Publications, 2001). 72.

<sup>8</sup> In a chapter titled "Dante and Early Italian Poetry," from Ira B. Nadel's edited volume *Pound in Context* (2010), Tim Redman describes as "Donna me prega" as "the most difficult" and "the most formally constrained" of any poem he knows. Pound's translation of the poem appears as Canto XXXVI in *Eleven New Cantos XXXI-XLI* (1934). Zukofsky's translation appears poem as "A"-9, using phrases from Marx's *Das Kapital*, was also first privately printed in 1934, and then included in "A" 1-12 in 1959.

<sup>9</sup> Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," in *Collected Works of Langston Hughes: Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and World Affairs*, ed. Christopher De Santis, vol. 9 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 34, 32.

<sup>10</sup> Helen M. Dennis, "Pound, Women and Gender," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 268.

<sup>11</sup> Dorothy Parker, *Complete Poems* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 54 (hereafter cited in text as *DPCP*).

<sup>12</sup> Nina Miller, "Making Love Modern: Dorothy Parker and Her Public," *American Literature* 64, no. 4 (December 1992): 764-65.

<sup>13</sup> Jessica Burstein, "A Few Words about Dubuque: Modernism, Sentimentalism, and the Blasé," *American Literary History* 14, no. 2 (2002): 228-9.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>15</sup> Edna St. Vincent Millay, *Collected Poems*, ed. Norma Millay (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), 53 (hereafter cited in text as *EMCP*). In 1922 Eliot follows a similar pattern of denouncing April with the opening lines to *The Waste Land*: "April is the cruelest month."

<sup>16</sup> Jo Ellen Green Kaiser, "Displaced Modernism: Millay and the Triumph of Sentimentality," in *Millay at 100: A Critical Reappraisal*, ed. Diane P. Freedman, Ad Feminam

(Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995), 33.

<sup>17</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1971), 3.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Kaye, "'A Splendid Readiness for Death': T. S. Eliot, the Homosexual Cult of St. Sebastian, and World War I," *Modernism/modernity* 6, no. 2 (1999): 110.

<sup>19</sup> Laurie MacDiarmid, "'Torture and Delight': T. S. Eliot's Love Song for St. Sebastian," *Arizona Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2001): 83.

<sup>20</sup> Kaye, "'A Splendid Readiness for Death,'" *Modernism/modernity* 6, no. 2 (1999): 114.

<sup>21</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Letters of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Valerie Eliot and Hugh Haughton, Revised, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Yale University Press, 2011), 48-49.

<sup>22</sup> "Sweeney Erect" and "Sweeney Agonistes" also exemplify Eliot's concern with the role of masculinity in the social experience of modernity. While "Love Song for St. Sebastian" implicates violence as part of a love plot, the Sweeney poems emphasize violence as a marker of masculinity and minimize the possibility of a love plot.

<sup>23</sup> For another version, see Suzanne Clark, *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991). Clark's book is a valuable resource for thinking about women writers resisting the anti-sentimental strains of modernism and recovering those writers who have been ignored by scholars for lack of such modernist tendencies.

<sup>24</sup> Wyndham Lewis, *Unlucky for Pringle: Unpublished and Other Stories*, ed. C. J. Fox and Robert T. Chapman (Plymouth, UK: Vision, 1973), 74.

<sup>25</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Inventions of the March Hare*, ed. Christopher Ricks (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1996), 78.

<sup>26</sup> Elisabeth Frost, *The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005), xiv-xv; hereafter abbreviated in text as *FA*.

<sup>27</sup> Eric Murphy Selinger, *What Is It Then Between Us?* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 2.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>29</sup> Barbara L. Estrin, *The American Love Lyric After Auschwitz and Hiroshima* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 4.

<sup>30</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), xxxv.

<sup>31</sup> Peter Quartermain, *Stubborn Poetries*, *Modern and Contemporary Poetics* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2013), 3, 8, 10.

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<sup>32</sup> William Carlos Williams, *I Wanted to Write a Poem*, ed. Edith Heal (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1958), 19.

<sup>33</sup> Mina Loy, *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1996), 53.

<sup>34</sup> Frequently considered "High Modernism," this trend includes poems like Charles Baudelaire's "To a Red-Haired Beggar Girl," which Peter Nicholls treats as the opening shot for literary modernism in *Modernisms* (1995), and runs through T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, likely the most well-known modernist poem. Some critics, like Suzanne Clark with *Sentimental Modernisms* (1991), aim to correct the historical record by revealing the prevalence of women authors writing directly against this aesthetic impulse.

<sup>35</sup> Loy, *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, 155.

<sup>36</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, "The Commitment to Form: Or, Still Crazy after All These Years," *PMLA* 118, no. 2 (2003): 322.

<sup>37</sup> Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 3-5.

<sup>38</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 5-6.

<sup>39</sup> For a closer study on the shift from secular to sacred love poetry in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries see Anthony Low, *The Reinvention of Love* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>40</sup> Levine, *Forms*, 3-5.

<sup>41</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 8.

<sup>42</sup> William Carlos Williams, *Selected Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1954), 219.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>44</sup> Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Love: Victorians to Moderns* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 1, 9.

<sup>45</sup> Anne Ferry, "Love Rhymes with Of.," *Modernism/modernity* 7, no. 3 (September 2000): 424.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 439.

<sup>47</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 9-10.

<sup>48</sup> T. H. Van de Velde, *Ideal Marriage: Its Physiology and Technique*, trans. Stella Browne (New York: Random House, 1927), 139.

<sup>49</sup> While Seidman fully acknowledges the failure of Puritan and Victorian ideals to restrict fornication (sex outside marriage) and erotic pursuits—a failure illustrated by the "elaborate" prostitution and pornography economies that existed in most major cities—his study of love in America details the explicit sexualization of love and eroticization of sex that occurs in the beginning of the

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twentieth century. Steven Seidman, *Romantic Longings: Love in America, 1830-1980* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 60.

<sup>50</sup> Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. I (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 3.

<sup>51</sup> Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), viii.

<sup>52</sup> Alexandra Kollontai, "Make Way for Winged Eros: A Letter to Working Youth," in *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai*, trans. Alix Holt (London: Allison and Busby, 1977), 279.

<sup>53</sup> Layne Parish Craig, *When Sex Changed: Birth Control Politics and Literature between the Wars* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 10, 15.

<sup>54</sup> Nina Miller, *Making Love Modern* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 8-9.

<sup>55</sup> Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Viking, 1990), 50 (hereafter cited in text as SA).

<sup>56</sup> Notably, Sanger pointed out the prohibitive costs of syphilis treatment in her censored installment of "What Every Girl Should Know" as a critique of the medical community who castigates the "quack" treatments made available at a lower cost without recognizing the barriers to access their own treatments maintain. Complete transcripts of Sanger's pamphlets are available online through New York University's *The Margaret Sanger Papers Project* < <http://www.nyu.edu/projects/sanger/>>.

<sup>57</sup> Margaret Sanger, *Woman and the New Race* (New York: Brentano's, 1920), 45, 186.

<sup>58</sup> Edward De Grazia, *Girls Lean Back Everywhere* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 11.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 12; Lauren Berlant makes a strikingly similar comment in the opening paragraph of her monograph *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (1997), where she demonstrates a similar fearfulness endemic to the late twentieth century. Her comments highlight the "strange" paradox between on the one hand, a confused logic that drags private material into the public gaze via news and legal proceedings that simultaneously demand those materials be kept private, and, on the other hand, an identity politics that demands private matters by subject to public consensus about what it means to be an upstanding citizen. She begins:

Something strange has happened to citizenship. During the rise of the Reaganite right, a familial politics



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of the national future came to define the urgencies of the present. Now everywhere in the United State intimate things flash in people's faces: pornography, abortion, sexuality and reproduction; marriage, personal morality, and family values. These issues do not arise as private concerns: they are key to debates about what "America" stands for, and are deemed vital to defining how citizens should act. In the process of collapsing the political and the personal into a world of public intimacy, a nation made of adult citizens has been replaced by one imagined for fetuses and children.

Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 1.

<sup>60</sup> Anna Katharina Schaffner and Shane Weller, eds., *Modernist Eroticisms: European Literature after Sexology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 2-3.

<sup>61</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (1915; New York: Basic Books, 1962).

<sup>62</sup> James R. Mellow, *Charmed Circle: Gertrude Stein and Company* (New York: Henry Holt, 1974), 121.

<sup>63</sup> Remy de Gourmont, *The Natural Philosophy of Love*, trans. Ezra Pound, (1903; New York: Liveright, 1942), 38, 68 (hereafter cited in text as *NPL*).

<sup>64</sup> Georg Simmel, *Georg Simmel: On Women, Sexuality, and Love*, trans. Oakes Guy (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 72.

<sup>65</sup> Ezra Pound, "Introduction" to *NPL*, 297.

<sup>66</sup> Joseph Wood Krutch, *The Modern Temper* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929), xi.

<sup>67</sup> Williams, *Selected Essays*, 219.

<sup>68</sup> "A United Stateser. Yes it's ugly, there is no word to say it better." William Carlos Williams, *Imaginations* (New York: New Directions, 1971), 175.

## Chapter 1

### "Butter all the beefsteak": Gertrude Stein's Diffusion of the Lyric Love Poem

So as I say poetry is essentially the discovery, the love, the passion for the name of anything. -Gertrude Stein

Gertrude Stein openly discussed love in reference to her writing, and she used the tropes of love to describe the passion that turns language into poetry. Scholars who frame Stein as a love poet, or link her poetry with love, often quote from "Poetry and Grammar" to underscore Stein's insistence that love makes poetry possible. In that essay Stein explains that the structural elements of poetry, such as repetition, rhyming, short lines, and connecting an ending to its beginning, would be "uninteresting" without the passionate treatment of nouns within a poem; the "using losing refusing and pleasing and betraying and caressing [of] nouns" provides the necessary energy to organize those formal features into poetry.<sup>1</sup> As illustrated by the epigraph, Stein prioritizes a passionate address regardless of the thing being addressed (*GSW2*, 329). This chapter argues that Stein, in making the passionate address primary to poetry, creates a modernist love poem that forgoes identity and

memory in favor of passion. With dramatically altered features of the lover, beloved, and precipitating event of the love poem, Stein's poetry makes room for relationships, and lyric imagination, beyond the heterosexual binary.

In her own writing practice, Stein cultivated the intensity of love by writing expressly to her lover and "wifey." Stein's drafting notebooks begin and are interspersed with short romantic dedications, poems, and sketches to Alice B. Toklas.<sup>2</sup> Instead of invoking a classical muse, Stein found inspiration in her notes to Toklas. The love notes, however, do not present Stein as an empty vessel waiting to be filled with inspiration; instead, Stein treated these notes as an erotic conception that gave birth to the "babies," or texts, she went on to produce throughout her evenings of work. Ulla Dydo describes these love notes as both "ritual" and "lovemaking" in language (*GS*, 28). Dydo's extensive examination of the available Stein archive underscores Stein's published proclamations about the importance of love in poetry, and highlights that love as explicitly romantic and erotic.<sup>3</sup> In the introduction to a published selection of the Stein-Toklas love notes from Stein's archive, Kay Turner observes that "Stein stole the crudely overdetermined cliché of the phallic pen and rewrote it as an instrument of lesbian-made love and art,"

marveling that there is "something really quite revolutionary, in the notion of this symbolic phallus being controlled by two women."<sup>4</sup> Turner cites an example from Stein to Toklas:

My dearest wife,  
 This little pen which  
 belongs to you loves to be  
 written by me for you, its [sic]  
 never in a stew nor are  
 you my sweet ecstasy [sic] (BP, 17)

Here, Stein inverts the patriarchal traditions of heteronormativity by manifesting creative fecundity within her own lesbian eroticism.

While Stein scholars do not ignore the role of love in her work, they tend to decode Stein's language as evidence for her relationship with Alice, her lesbian eroticism, or her belief in various sexology theories.<sup>5</sup> With Stein's often riddle-like syntax, this kind of strategy is not surprising. This decoding, however, can often slip into a kind of surveillance where criticism is used to police Stein's personal actions and relationships, rather than recognize the innovations of her poetry. Susan Holbrook aptly points out the risks in a work like Richard Bridgman's *Gertrude Stein in Pieces* (1970) that serves "heterosexist

politics . . . by replacing the clearly oppressive condemnation of an identity with the more subtle surveillance of that identity's visibility."<sup>6</sup> Holbrook also notes the political motivations that more sympathetic critics working to recover lesbian identities in literature might have in performing the same kind of vigilant readings based on an effort to decode lesbian eroticism. These readings, however, continue to position Stein and her work outside a literary genealogy—often masculinized and heterosexualized—that she clearly adapts and passes on to future poets. Laura Frost contends that “the coded and not so coded lesbian sexuality” in Stein’s work “seems so well established that it is the *least* queer thing about Stein.”<sup>7</sup> Despite the frequency with which Stein scholars recognize how her work treats love, and even call her a love poet, scholars have not discussed how her poems function as love poems.<sup>8</sup>

If our understanding of the love poem as a broad genre includes the figures of the lover and beloved and a precipitating event that instigates love, then it is easy to understand why so few scholars examine what makes a Steinian love poem: these features are drastically refashioned in much of her poetry because the figures of the lover and the beloved as well as a precipitating event

require identity and memory—concepts Stein specifically eschewed. In “What Are Master-Pieces and Why Are There So Few of Them” (1940), Stein points to identity and memory as two interrelated concepts that stymie creation. She insists that

[t]here are so few [master-pieces] because mostly people live in identity and memory that is when they think. They know they are they because their little dog knows them, and so they are not an entity but an identity. (*GSW2*, 359-360)

Whenever an artist recognizes herself as an identity in time, those features implicate the artwork in a necessary act of expression, and

[t]herefore a master-piece has essentially not to be necessary, it has to be that is it has to exist but it does not have to be necessary it is not in response to necessity as action is because the minute it is necessary it has in it no possibility of going on.

(*ibid.*, 357)<sup>9</sup>

Instead of identity and memory, Stein generated a composition from a “continuous present and using everything and beginning again.”<sup>10</sup> The “continuous present,” “using everything,” and “beginning again” prevent identity and memory from taking hold within a poem by challenging our

accustomed reading habits. This approach then broadens the horizons of how both the affect and the effect of love might be experienced within the love poem.

Three of Stein's early love poems, *Tender Buttons*, "Pink Melon Joy," and *Lifting Belly*, reveal that Stein's major contribution to the modernist love poem is her development of a non-lyric love poem.<sup>11</sup> These love poems do not just discuss erotic material, but they prepare readers for new relationships with language—a poetics that does not necessitate heterosexual, exclusively coupled love to achieve the affect and effect of a love poem. All three of these poems were written or published before and during World War I: *Tender Buttons* was published in 1914; "Pink Melon Joy" is dated 1915 in *Geography and Plays*, which was published in 1922; and *Lifting Belly* was written between 1915 and 1917, but not published until 1953 in *Bee Time Vine and Other Pieces*.<sup>12</sup> Taken together these three poems bring into focus Stein's ability to "put all that is disruptive and *illegitimate* (in the literal and psychoanalytic sense of being outside law and custom) about her method," according to Cyrena Pondrom, "in the service of all that is disruptive and *illegitimate* about her self: her assertion of the power to be a speaking female subject, her lesbian desire, her rejection of an economy of the

same."<sup>13</sup> To that end, Stein necessitates a new kind of love poem that moves readers past an obsession with identity, or who is loving whom, to an experience of how love materializes expression in language.

Marianne DeKoven's explanation of anti-patriarchal language provides a starting point to model how a non-lyric love poem can facilitate passion without establishing the identity of a lover and beloved, or using memory to recount an amorous moment enlarged through poetic comparison. DeKoven contextualizes her use of anti-patriarchal language as a theoretical term oriented by her understanding of French feminist writers Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous's "female language"; however, she distinguishes between "gender distinction for language—'male language,' 'female language'—and the idea of patriarchal and anti-patriarchal language."<sup>14</sup> She explains that "[c]onventional language is patriarchal not because it *is* male, but because it exaggerates, hypostatizes, exclusively valorizes male modes of signification" (*DL*, xix). This language silences "the female presymbolic, pluridimensional modes articulated by experimental writing" (*ibid.*). Anti-patriarchal language, then, resists the distortion caused by a "dominance" of the "signified over signifier," and asks for readers to account



for the very material presence of poems like Stein's  
(*ibid.*).

The non-lyric love poem provides an opportunity to dissolve the exclusionary features of the love poem—a special couple and a special moment—in order to make the poem truly available as an experience. In “Poetry and Grammar,” Stein explains, through the lens of love, poetry’s very distinctions as an art form:

Why are the lines of poetry short, so much shorter than prose, why do they rhyme, why in order to complete themselves do they have to end with what they began. . . . Think what you do when you do do that when you love the name of anything really love its name. Inevitably you express yourself in that way, in the way poetry expresses itself that is in short lines in repeating what you began in order to do it again.

(*GSW2*, 329)

Stein asks readers to understand poetry through the experience of love, and simultaneously resists the exclusionary elements common to love poetry in order to disrupt identity and memory. In the following sections I pay close attention to Stein’s selective use of pronouns, her approach to repetition, and her reframing of time within love poems to demonstrate how the formal

possibilities of a non-lyric love poem yield political possibilities for subjects that do not identify with heteronormative monogamy.

### **"Lifting belly is so": Stein's Beloved**

Stein's most important innovation on the lover and the beloved is her ability to diffuse the sense of a whole and complete identity. After spending a great deal of time trying to describe every kind of character in *The Making of Americans*, Stein turned away from the wholeness of a single character to recognize the porous qualities of character. Rachel Blau DuPlessis argues that "[l]ove, sex, and poetry are certainly hitched in Stein's theory," but the object of love is unclear because the "subjectivity speaking inside the work is twin: the caressing 'I' is sometimes a lover but sometimes 'Poetry' itself, loving nouns."<sup>15</sup> I want to extend DuPlessis's statement to assert that Stein is not just concerned with nouns but with the "loving" treatment of nouns: for Stein, the process of naming requires a passionate address. Describing her recognition of this process, Stein elaborates:

[S]omething happened and I began to discover the names of things, that is not discover the names but discover the things the things to see the things to look at and

in so doing I had of course to name them not to give them new names but to see that I could find out how to know that they were by their names or by replacing their names. And how was I to do so. They had their names and naturally I called them by the names they had and in doing so having begun looking at them I called them by their names with passion and that made poetry . . .

(*GSW2*, 329-330)

The passionate *treatment* of names, rather than a particularized figure, develops the poetry, and this focus on process required new versions of the lover and the beloved. Her love poetry begins by replacing whole figures from *Tender Buttons*—while dedicating a great deal of attention to the qualities of objects—and then transitions to a crowd of figures in “Pink Melon Joy” and *Lifting Belly*.

While the distinct absence of subject pronouns and proper nouns in *Tender Buttons* signals Stein’s fatigue with wholly articulated characters, the content of the poems continues to imply their presence. In response to the uneasy feeling of presence and absence in the collection, Juliana Spahr hypothesizes that *Tender Buttons* “might be a sort of novel of manners in reverse: one that shows the space of the novel of manners and not the niceties and aggressions and passions and conversations between humans

that are the novel of manners."<sup>16</sup> Indeed, instead of using characters—and their attendant pronouns—to carve out a domestic, occupied space, Stein employs imperative verbs to imply the figures of the poem. The imperative case can be developed with the simple use of an active verb, but Stein more often adds the peculiar connotations of the magic word "please" to create an imperative syntax that explicitly makes pleasure part of the address. Laura Frost links "please" with pleasure throughout Stein's texts, maintaining that "[p]leasure, pleasing, and pleas [sic] to please nudge one another . . . because of the possible passionate implied address of another" (*PP*, 72). As Frost explains, "please" combines the address of another with its etymological roots in pleasure. In "Roastbeef," Stein underscores this connection explicitly by bringing "please" into proximity with "pleasure" in the lines "Please be the beef, please beef, pleasure is not wailing" (*TB*, 39). These strategies in *Tender Buttons* resist a language bent on circumscribing the other as a coherent identity in favor of a language that merely implies or teases at another's presence. Rather than sublimating the beloved as an ideal, or imagining the lover and the beloved held in a unified identity, Stein asks readers to forgo their attachment to

identity in favor of the "love and passion" that generates the impulse to name and identify.

Stein teases by crafting moments that seem to refer to a human character, but move away from that reference before that character can be developed. The pronoun "I" shows up once in the entire book, as the first line of "Butter" in the "Food" section, where the complete sentence "I spy" stands out as a conspicuous gesture toward a first-person speaker (*TB*, 52). *Tender Buttons* also only uses "she" once in the entire text, a moment that repeats the familiar association with Toklas and digestion: "I hope she has her cow" (*BP*, 25). Stein tempts us to position the singular "I" and "she" as paired, but the fullness of the rest of the text directs us away from these two pronouns. Instead, the pronouns serve what Frost calls a "tickle" that "reconciles the hermetic, opaque, and tedious Stein" with the "sensual Stein" (*PP*, 66). The tickle might be provocative, but it is stimulation without resolution. The "I" and "she" of *Tender Buttons* are not fully realized figures in the text—they are crowded out by the "Blind Glass," the "hurt mended cup," "the abuse of cheese," "a loving tongue," and the many other sensing and sensual objects that populate Stein's poem (*TB*, 11, 44, 42, 43). We might just take Stein at her

word when she writes, "the teasing is tender and trying and thoughtful" (*ibid.*, 46).

When Toklas appears by the nickname "Aider" in the only direct address to a proper noun, in the closing of the "Objects" section, Stein produces another sensuous tickle that illustrates how overemphasizing this kind of tickle can be misleading. The short poem reads,

Aider, why aider why whow, whow stop touch, aider whow,  
aider stop the muncher, muncher munchers.

A jack in kill her, a jack in, makes a meadowed king,  
makes a to let. (*ibid.*, 31)

Neil Schmitz describes the lines as "wonderful cunnilingus," followed by "Gertrude royally reclining on her bed, Alice in the bathroom."<sup>17</sup> Although compelling, this reading has to ignore the "why aider why," "stop touch," "stop the muncher," and "kill her," which could read as violence or trauma by an author without Stein's very public biography. At the very least the lines demand an acknowledgement of the ambiguity of certain kinds of erotic language, when exclamations like "whow" can indicate pleasure or disappointment. As a figure, Aider/Toklas is present, but the poem quickly dissolves Aider through the syntax. Aider becomes the pronoun "her" as the object of the verb "kill." Perhaps in a tiny death through orgasm, the text quickly

destroys the figure of "Aider." Toklas is clearly present in the poems, but like the "I" and "she," she is not the beloved figure around which the poem can be built, despite a preoccupation with the domestic space in which Stein and Toklas spent their time together.

Where Stein resists articulating characters in *Tender Buttons*, she prefers a strategy of deluge in "Pink Melon Joy" and *Lifting Belly*. Both of these long poems are filled with pronouns and proper nouns referring to several different figures. There is no longer an implied presence in absence; instead, the room is crowded. The repetition of particular figures, the "I" in "Pink Melon Joy" and the phrase "lifting belly" in the eponymous poem, applies the passionate attention of love to poetic figures that become more dynamically complex through each iteration and arrangement. Repetition, in particular, is an iterative device that allows Stein to successfully gesture within and without her poems. It allows Stein to simultaneously root her lines to the moment of their experience and also to evoke other pleasurable experiences in language—to create excesses of language and pleasure.

Specifically, Stein adopts an iterative approach to language as opposed to a reiterative approach. An iterative approach does not repeat to emphasize or clarify, like an

individual speaking the same phrase at successively increasing decibels until her interlocutor understands; rather, an iterative approach creates a new experience through each iteration, like the coding commands of a computer language. Admittedly, this distinction between iterative and reiterative is easier to explain in a technological age, where advances in mathematics and computation provide language for such a distinction, but Stein's approach is as old as the lover's declaration "I love you." Repeated verbatim the phrase is never meant as a supplement, but always an addition, a "beginning again," and another declaration unique to its own context.<sup>18</sup> Lisa Ruddick highlights Stein's own use of "loving repeating" from a passage in *The Making of Americans* to help identify the source of Stein's interest in non-linear devices. She explains,

The act of listening to repeating, [Stein] writes, gives her physical, almost sexual sensations. Repetition is a "pounding" in her; a person's repeating enters her, and "slowly it sounds louder and louder and louder inside me through my ears and eyes and feelings" (302, 300).<sup>19</sup>

The affective qualities of iteration allow Stein to develop the loving attention she deems necessary for successful



literature and the love poem, while diffusing identity and memory.

Although there are several proper nouns, the "I" directs most of the discussion in "Pink Melon Joy." The "I" is present throughout most of the poem and infuses the lines with self-description. Like the lines to "Aider" in *Tender Buttons*, here too, Stein invites a personal association with the "I" of the poem:

I meant to be closeted.

I should have been thin.

I was aching. ("PMJ," 349)

In the negative, the "I" resists a full articulation, but the poem goes on to provide examples of "I" in the positive: "I am determined" (351), "I am so repressed and I can state it" (354), "I am so pleased with all. . . . I am satisfied" (355), "I am learning" (358), "I am loving you with much more love" (366), "I am trying a new one" (371), "I am so pleased. . . . I am so pleased" (371), "I am willing" (374), "I am thinking" (376), "I am impatient" (376).<sup>20</sup> This "I" also diffuses into a wide array of pursuits and pleasures, wants, and abilities. The "I" is not consistently pleased or displeased, and is not one single thing. "I go on" best describes this "I" in its vastness: it spreads thin, affects the world around it, and

is in turn affected by its world (*ibid*, 348). Peter Quartermain, referencing Bob Perelman, observes that "'real history' refuses to place the 'I' in a privileged position, unaffected by the world, aloof from the reader."<sup>21</sup> Stein's "I" illustrates this point by being so incredibly unremarkable, precisely because it is not at all singular.

"I" and "you" frequently appear in *Lifting Belly*, but "lifting belly" takes on the role of the central figure in the poem, replacing any particularized character with a sometimes action- and sometimes subject-phrase that resists definition specifically through repetitive description. In the poem's prose-like introduction, Stein highlights the sonic qualities of "belly" with the shortest stand-alone line, "All belly belly well" (*GSW1*, 410). In English the double "l" sound essentially functions the same way as a single "l"—the dental sound in "lifting"—and yet it is represented differently because its position in the word "belly" is different than the position in "lifting," or in Stein's own words "the insistence is different" (*GSW2*, 288). "[N]o matter how often you tell the same story," or make the same sounds, Stein explains, "if there is anything alive in the telling the emphasis is different" (*ibid.*). Critics like Penelope Engelbrecht identify "lifting belly" with Toklas, or more broadly as "lesbian sex(uality)," but

the iterative repetition of "lifting belly" as a complete sentence, a subject, an object, or even an exclamation, hearkens more directly to Stein's description of the actions of poetry quoted in the epigraph to this chapter: "the discovery, the love, the passion for the name of anything."

"Lifting belly" is everything, and yet, the lines of the poem enact Stein's poetic process by alerting readers to a desire to know more about it. In the first actual instance of the phrase of "lifting belly," Stein creates a short dialogue that supposes a kind of specificity to "lifting belly" and then challenges access to its meaning. The lines work like dialogue, but the speakers do not seem to understand one another:

What was it.

I said lifting belly.

You didn't say it.

I said it I mean lifting belly.

Don't misunderstand me.

Do you. (*GSW1*, 410)

The truncated final line "Do you." explicitly encourages ambiguity as to who is asking the question and what question is being asked. Whether the two (or more) speakers presented here actually understand one another or not, the

lines alert the reader to a desire to understand "lifting belly." That desire develops and perpetuates through the multiple, and even oppositional, ways the text describes "lifting belly." The poem continues in the pleasure of describing "lifting belly" until it concludes that everything is worthy of such attention:

Lifting belly enormously and with song.

Can you sing about a cow.

Yes.

And about signs.

Yes.

And also about Aunt Pauline.

Yes.

Can you sing at your work.

Yes. (*ibid.*, 458)

The final line concludes, "In the midst of writing there is merriment" (*ibid.*). "Lifting belly" cannot be nailed down as a singular symbol for a person or act or idea. Stein replaces the bifurcated relationship of a lover and beloved, who find bliss in unity, with a larger scope of joy and pleasure within the poem's process.

Stein's strategies, of both evacuating the lover and beloved and of creating a crowd of figures who can stand in

for the lover and beloved, help to break open the exclusive realm of the love poem where two central figures, and maybe a celestial observer, create a sanctified space for love. There are moments that work like dialogue, where the pronouns seem to respond to one another, and other moments where the proper nouns refer to familiar figures, like "Aunt Pauline," but the referents do not quite accrete across the length of the poems (*ibid.*). Jamie Hilder recognizes this process as one that "subverts a syntactical hierarchy which would allow people to pick [what William James termed] 'substantive kernels' out of a sentence."<sup>22</sup> With her iterative repetition, Stein "gradually breaks the bond of word and reference," which "gives body to the word and assaults meaning" and sharpens "the physical compound of sound, tone, rhythm, length, weight, look, shape, thrust" so that "words can be used in new forms" (*GS*, 16). Dydo describes Stein's tendency in the editing process to "eliminate nouns or names, always heavy with reference, and [substitute] pronouns" in order to "focus on essence rather than on detail" (*ibid.*, 17-18). The state-sanctioned, companionate, monogamous, heterosexual couple is a relatively new concept that, according to Stephanie Coontz, stems from a "gigantic marital revolution . . . in Western Europe and North America during the Enlightenment," where

"people began to adopt the radical new idea that love should be the most fundamental reason for marriage" and the "sentimentalization of the love-based marriage in the nineteenth century and its sexualization in the twentieth each represented a logical step in the evolution" coupling love and marriage.<sup>23</sup> Stein's process of diffusing the sacred space of lover and beloved provides greater entrée into twentieth-century relationships that do not conform to that state-sanctioned heteronormative binary.

**"There was plenty of time in softening": Spreading Time  
Thin in Stein's Love Poems**

Similar to her treatment of the lover and beloved, Stein relies on a deluge of small events to divert the emphasis of the precipitating event of the love poem—for many love poems this event is a specter of or stand-in for the sex act itself.<sup>24</sup> In "Composition as Explanation" Stein explains, "there must be time that is distributed and equilibrated," but recognizes that this is "troubling every one" (*GSW1*, 529). Essentially, she argues that in composition, an organization of materials creates the "distribution and equilibration" of time. Although her prose is challenging, her logic provides an alternative to the kind of telescoping time that allows Virginia Woolf to

build in several episodes of memory in preparation for a single party scene in *Mrs. Dalloway*, or the way Ezra Pound dives into the moment of dawn in poems like "Alba." Stein does not want to concentrate materials—time being one of them—in her poems; instead, she wants to smooth out their uneven surfaces to create a continuous present.

By deemphasizing an event's singularity, and distributing time instead of concentrating it, Stein can create a poem that develops its own continuous present. In "A Transatlantic Interview 1946," Stein explains Cézanne's influence in helping her see the singularity of all the materials of a poem: "Up to this time composition had consisted of a central idea, to which everything else was an accompaniment and separate but was not an end in itself," but "Cézanne conceived the idea that in composition one thing was as important as another thing."<sup>25</sup> If every one thing is as important as another thing, or word, or image, or sound, in Stein's poetry, then heightened language is also necessarily flattened language. Julia Kristeva posits that "under [love's] sway" one "has the impression of speaking at last, for the first time, for real," but "not necessarily" with the intent to "say something."<sup>26</sup> Under love's sway, Stein can create the feel of authentic language, but without the unequal distribution of material

required in goal-oriented referential language that aims to "say something." To continue at such a pitch challenges readers, but for Stein this poetics sublimates the hierarchies—and patriarchies—of meaning through a radical democratization of attention. For Stein's love poem, then, (heterosexual) sex can no longer serve as the central or unifying event. Stein's poetics of love certainly does not evacuate the sex act, but instead recognizes that "[l]iterature—creative literature—unconnected with sex is inconceivable. But not literary sex, because sex is a part of something of which the other parts are not sex at all."<sup>27</sup> Stein diffuses all the events of a poem, including sex, in order to connect everything to the passion often reserved for love.

"Lifting Belly," the poem, demonstrates this distribution of emphasis by treating "lifting belly" as an event that is both singular and very obviously repeatable. There is no reservation about situating "lifting belly" as a sex act: in the first section, Stein writes, "Lifting belly is an occasion. An occasion to please me. Oh yes. Mention it" (*GSW1*, 416). She references its significance in the lines "Lifting belly is such an incident in one's life" (416), "Lifting belly is recognised to be the only spectacle present" (422), and "Lifting belly is a rare



instance. I am fond of it. I am attached to the accentuation" (423), but she *states* this significance within hundreds of repetitions. In addition to using repetition, she establishes its pervasiveness in lines that emphasize the continuous present: "Lifting belly is so consecutive" (418), "This is the best thing I have ever said. Lifting belly and it, it is not startling. Lifting belly until to-morrow. Lifting belly to-morrow" (423). If one is lifting belly until tomorrow and also tomorrow, one is lifting belly all of the time. The incident is not an incident, but part of the continuous present in which each and every singular moment is allowed to be as important as the next. Or as Stein expresses in her personal dedications to Toklas, "There is always the news that / baby is precious my precious all my precious / and that I am all hers . . ." (*BP*, 137). These lines reiterate her argument that repetition does not drain an event of its importance; when it is treated with the passion of love, it is always "news."

Stein develops a continuous present through the practice of "distribution and equilibration" in both *Tender Buttons* and "Pink Melon Joy" but without a central guiding phrase like "lifting belly." Instead, Stein structures the division of her lines, with titles, to invite the process

of beginning again. With neatly labeled titles, the poems tempt a logistical dance to understand how the content of the poems illustrate the title, or how the title signifies the poem. Beginning a new poem invites readers to believe they might know something about the poem from the title, and the resulting confusion only prompts rereading and another opportunity to begin again. "Pink Melon Joy" in particular takes advantage of page spacing and repetition to complicate the process of beginning again ("Come in" and "No" both title more than one poem, and while there is a "Pink Melon Joy. II." and "Pink Melon Joy. III.," there was never a "Pink Melon Joy. I.")

On the semantic level, all three poems rely heavily on "be" verbs rather than any other action word. *Tender Buttons*, alone, employs the present tense "is" and "are" 1,092 times combined.<sup>28</sup> Transitive verbs do appear over the course of these poems, but more often than not, things, people, and places either *are* or *are not* (like the simplicity of binary code). The "be" verb provides a different sense of action than transitive verbs, because it describes a state rather than an action. In other words, one is until one is not. DuPlessis observes,

Time then becomes not so much forward motion, but the sense of how materials are distributed over the

surface. . . . This is achieved by rejecting forward motion, anticipation, prolepsis, excitement, climax, revelation, unveiling, and conclusion."<sup>29</sup>

This flattening of time is how Stein resists the prioritization of a precipitating event in the love poem, but I disagree with DuPlessis that Stein's poetics rejects excitement. For Stein, poetic language necessitates the excitement and passion of loving. John Dewey's assertion that "[e]quilibrium comes about not mechanically and inertly but out of, and because of, tension" illustrates the kind of excitement Stein makes possible through her love poems.<sup>30</sup> According to Isobel Armstrong's reading of Lev Vygotsky, "A new perception actually ignites desire and creates the possibility of new perceptions."<sup>31</sup> Moving from the title "That is" to the single line "That is astonishing," Stein demonstrates how her "to be" equations are repetitions of the discovery, over and over, of what things can be and the limitlessness of that passionate process. Stein's flattening of time allows desire and passion free range without the limits that the sex act often initiates—whether that involves a policing of illicit sex acts or the biological rhythms of the sex act itself.

**"This is the light. I can not see plainly. I make a difference.": What Diffusion Makes Possible**

Stein's love poems are overwhelming because they embody enduring ideals about love, that it be all-encompassing and everlasting, and simultaneously reveal the discomfort with that experience. Reading *Tender Buttons*, "Pink Melon Joy," and *Lifting Belly* as love poems allows readers to experience the affective potential of those ideals without refuge in the limiting parameters of identity and memory. Because she does not shy away from questions of sex or sexuality, Stein's love poems tempt readings that celebrate decoding the presence of Stein and Toklas and lesbian sexuality within the poems. To mine these poems exclusively for references to Toklas and lesbian sexuality, or, conversely, to treat the language as completely referent-less, misses an opportunity to study how the complex experience of love has been realized within them. A testament to Stein's impact comes from a very critical T. S. Eliot, who remarks:

There is a something precisely *ominous* about Miss Stein. . . . Her work . . . is not good for one's mind. . . . If this is the future, then the future is, as it very likely is, of the barbarians.<sup>32</sup>

It is certainly ominous to think about the identities and memories celebrated by love poems as completely diffused through language into something that is "not sex [or love] at all." That gives language a kind of power often ignored in discussions of poetry. And yet, Stein's work frees the passionate address from the exclusive experiences often celebrated through the identities and memories in a lyric love poem: a heterosexual, able-bodied, binary couple, unified through love. Choosing to read these poems as love poems gives readers the opportunity to question what affordances a non-lyric love poem has, and how those affordances might help us to better understand what limits we have unknowingly placed on our discourse around love.

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<sup>1</sup> Gertrude Stein, "Poetry and Grammar," in *Writings 1932-1946*, Vol. 2 (1935; repr., New York: Library of America, 1998), 327-28; hereafter abbreviated in text as *GSW2*.

<sup>2</sup> Ulla Dydo, *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 27; hereafter abbreviated in text as *GS*.

<sup>3</sup> For more detail, see Dydo's chapter "Reading the Hand Writing," from *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises*.

<sup>4</sup> Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, *Baby Precious Always Shines: Selected Love Notes between Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas*, ed. Kay Turner (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 16-17; hereafter abbreviated in text as *BP*.

<sup>5</sup> See Richard Bridgman, *Gertrude Stein in Pieces* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); Catharine Stimpson, "The Mind, the Body, and Gertrude Stein," *Critical Inquiry* 3, no. 3 (1977): 489-507; Lisa Ruddick, *Reading Gertrude Stein: Body, Text, Gnosis*, Reading Women Writing (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990); Elizabeth Meese, *(Sem)Erotics: Theorizing Lesbian: Writing* (New York: New

York University Press, 1992); Elisabeth Frost, "Fetishism and Parody in Stein's *Tender Buttons*," *Genders* 19 (1994): 64-83; Susan McCabe, "'A Queer Lot' and the Lesbians of 1914: Amy Lowell, H. D., and Gertrude Stein," in *Challenging Boundaries: Gender and Periodization* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000); and Janet Boyd and Sharon Kirsch, eds., *Primary Stein: Returning to the Writing of Gertrude Stein* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Susan Holbrook, "Lifting Bellies, Filling Petunias, and Making Meanings through the Trans-Poetic," *American Literature* 71, no. 4 (1999): 751.

<sup>7</sup> Laura Frost, *The Problem with Pleasure: Modernism and Its Discontents* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 65; hereafter abbreviated in text as *PP*.

<sup>8</sup> Jody Cardinal explicitly labels Stein a "love poet" in her chapter "'Come Too': 1920s Erotic Rights Discourse and Gertrude Stein's 'Patriarchal Poetry,'" in *Primary Stein: Returning to the Writing of Gertrude Stein* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 57-75. Here, Cardinal argues that "Patriarchal Poetry" serves to "bolster [Stein's] self-definitional project." Like similar critics interested in the content-driven intersections of Stein's poetry and Stein as a personality, Cardinal's research does not tell readers how Stein's love poems work as love poems.

<sup>9</sup> In typical Stein fashion, there is a caveat. According to Stein, "master-pieces" can be about identity and memory even while they do not have memory or identity: "Think about how you create if you do create you do not remember yourself as you do create. And yet time and identity is what you tell about as you create only while you create they do not exist" (*GSW2*, 361).

<sup>10</sup> Gertrude Stein, "Composition as Explanation" in *Writings, 1903-1932, Vol. 1* (1926; repr., New York: Library of America, 1998), 524; hereafter abbreviated in text as *GSW1*.

<sup>11</sup> I choose "non" over "anti" here to de-emphasize the personified antagonisms often heaped on choosing something other than hegemony, which can, at times, enlarge the power of the choice not taken by positioning it as a force to be battled.

<sup>12</sup> Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons: The Corrected Centennial Edition*, ed. Seth Perlow (1914; repr., San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 2014), hereafter abbreviated in text as *TB*; "Pink Melon Joy," in *Geography and Plays* (1922; repr., Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), hereafter

abbreviated in text as "PMJ"; "Lifting Belly," in *Writings, 1903-1932*, vol. 1, 410-58, abbreviated in text as *GSW1*.

<sup>13</sup> Cyrena Pondrom, "Introduction," in *Geography and Plays* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), xlii-xliii.

<sup>14</sup> Marianne DeKoven, *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein's Experimental Writing* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), xix; hereafter abbreviated in text as *DL*.

<sup>15</sup> Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Genders, Races, and Religious Cultures in Modern American Poetry, 1908-1934* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 37.

<sup>16</sup> Juliana Spahr, "Afterward," in *Tender Buttons: The Corrected Centennial Edition* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 2014), 111.

<sup>17</sup> Neil Schmitz, "Tender Buttons, 'notwithstanding'" in *Primary Stein: Returning to the Writing of Gertrude Stein* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 101-2.

<sup>18</sup> In "Poetry and Grammar," Stein explains, "After all the natural way to count is not that one and one make two but to go on counting by one and one as chinamen do as anybody does as Spaniards do as my little aunts did," 324.

<sup>19</sup> Ruddick, *Reading Gertrude Stein*, 74.

<sup>20</sup> See also: "I am solemn" (359), "I am intending" (359), "I am hearing accents" (361), "I am beginning to separate expenses" (370), "I am just gradually beginning to get to look around" (370), "I am really surprised" (371), "I am beautifully rich" (372).

<sup>21</sup> Peter Quartermain, *Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe*, Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 6.

<sup>22</sup> Jamie Hilder, "'After All One Must Know More than One Sees and One Does Not See a Cube in Its Entirety': Gertrude Stein and Picasso and Cubism," *Critical Survey* 17, no. 3 (2005): 74.

<sup>23</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 4.

<sup>24</sup> This is variously coded in many kinds of Anglophone love poetry. In one definition, critic Earl Miner describes love poetry "as an imaginative construction, [which] invites detached contemplation of the spectacle of sex." See Earl Miner, "Love Poetry," in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 706.

<sup>25</sup> Gertrude Stein, *Primer for the Gradual Understanding of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Robert Bartlett Haas (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1975), 15.

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<sup>26</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 3.

<sup>27</sup> John Preston, "A Conversation," *Atlantic Monthly* CLVI, August (1935): 191.

<sup>28</sup> "Suppose" is another noticeable verb in *Tender Buttons*, but only has 26 occurrences. Counts were made using the searchable online versions from Project Gutenberg (*Tender Buttons* <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15396/15396-h/15396-h.htm> and *Geography and Plays* <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/33403/33403-h/33403-h.htm>).

<sup>29</sup> Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "Woolfenstein, the Sequel," in *Primary Stein: Returning to the Writing of Gertrude Stein* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 42-43.

<sup>30</sup> John Dewey, *Art As Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch & Company, 1934), 14.

<sup>31</sup> Isobel Armstrong, *Radical Aesthetic* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 39.

<sup>32</sup> T. S. Eliot, "Charelston, Hey! Hey!" *Nation and Athenaeum* 40 (29 January 1927): 595.



## Chapter 2

### "Ubi amor, ibi oculus": Hypostasis in Ezra Pound's Love Poems

It may not be surprising to categorize Pound as a love poet, given his sustained interest in historically groundbreaking love poetry by writers such as Sappho, Catullus, Propertius, and the troubadours. His first publication, *Hilda's Book* (1905-1907), was a hand-sewn volume of love poems presented to Hilda Dolittle that anticipates the years and volumes he later dedicated to the writing and criticism of love poetry. The last published material of the cantos, *Drafts and Fragments* (1968), returns to the love poem with an envoi to Olga Rudge on the final page. In a long career comprising an array of interests, influences across centuries and continents, the love poem remains as one of Pound's greatest and most consistent resources across his oeuvre.

In fact, many scholars study Ezra Pound's philosophy of love, but their arguments tend to neglect the full scope of his love poetry in favor of his idealization of the female beloved or themes of transcendence represented through the female divine. This may very well be due to a noticeable divide in the body of Pound's love poems—namely,

when the lover is idealizing the beloved, the poems can be quite compelling; however, when a "love" poem serves as a satire to mock its subject, it can be biting or petty. Hugh Witemeyer, summarizing Hugh Kenner, more generously explains

that the women in Pound's poetry tend to merge into two basic archetypes: the goddess, radiant with a *virtú* which organizes the world about her; and the fragmented woman, lacking identity and organized by her environment.<sup>1</sup>

Despite both Kenner's and Witemeyer's contributions to Pound scholarship, this particular explanation oversimplifies Pound's interest in the love poem as a genre. Recent scholarship takes a more nuanced approach in terms of historicizing Pound's idealization of the beloved, and the influence of courtly love on his poems, but limits the scope to either the mystical love in Pound's cantos or his poems' portrayal of transcendent love.<sup>2</sup>

These readings are useful in pointing out Pound's practice of idealizing what Helen M. Dennis refers to as the "archetypal feminine" that has been a tradition throughout much of the history of Western love poetry.<sup>3</sup> While Egyptian love poems and early Greek and Roman poetry often focused on earthly desire, Plato's *Phaedrus* and

*Symposium* theorize that the transformational power of love allowed one to transcend human experience to "fuse with the divine."<sup>4</sup> This demand for transcendence culminates in the eleventh-century troubadour tradition of courtly love, which transfers the possibility of transcendence from love, more generally, to the beloved specifically. According to Peter Makin, courtly love instantiates an "attitude of man towards woman" in which he believes her "existence is on a higher plane than his own" and "that she can give him something like a key to his existence."<sup>5</sup> As a result, readings of Pound's love poetry that focus specifically on transcendence, albeit useful, fail to capture the ambition of Pound's love poems, which endeavor to hold idealization, eros, and the grittier lived realities of day-to-day living in a modern, urban environment within the poetic imaginary of the love poem. That effort forms a "hypostasis" in which multiple states can be achieved in a single experience, and a single source can achieve multiple manifestations.<sup>6</sup> His ambition attests to an underlying assumption that the grosser materials of the physical world and the finer materials of the spiritual world are intrinsically connected: they are the same material translated into different forms. In this sense, the goddess and the fragmented woman are made of the same stuff. In order to

make these translations apparent, Pound's best love poems hold polarities in coherence within the moment of the poem.

Pound manipulates and revitalizes the forms and understanding he develops through translating pre-modern love poems in order to establish a concentrated attention on love and the love poem as a unifying force across his oeuvre. This chapter will first outline the mechanisms of Pound's love poetry, then examine its early instantiations from *Personae*, and close with an examination of his final work in *Drafts and Fragments*. An attention to Pound's treatment of subjects pertaining to romantic love, such as sex and emotion, as well as his formal approach to love poems reveals Pound's understanding that love poems were always a powerful force of cohesion.

**"Who heareth, seeth not form / But is led by its emanation": Understanding Hypostasis through Prose and Canto 36**

First, I want to constellate a few of the source texts that are important for understanding Pound's approach to cohesion and love poetry. Love poems allow Pound to highlight polarities and to articulate the ways in which polarities are inextricably connected. That articulation relies on Pound's particular brand of translation; while

"transparency" and "fluency" are valued in many pre- and post-modern translations, the "experimentation that characterized" modernist literature provided "new translation strategies that avoided fluency by cultivating extremely heterogeneous discourses."<sup>7</sup> Lawrence Venuti credits Pound with creating a "foreignizing" strategy that allows a translation to present itself as a foreign text. I would like to extend Venuti's argument to Pound's love poems, specifically, where Pound's strategy makes it clear that difference does not preclude relationship. His love poems rely on a poetic articulation of the hypostasis of polarities in the same way that his translations rely on holding the foreignizing experience of language together with a domestication of a foreign-language text.

Pound's publication *The Spirit of Romance* (1910) provides an early insight into his interest in polarities. Here he explains,

when we do get into the contemplation of the flowing [universe of fluid force] we find sex, or some correspondence to it, "positive and negative," "North and South," "sun and moon," or whatever terms of whatever cult or science you prefer.<sup>8</sup>

This understanding of the way polarities organize the universe will be seconded six years later in a letter to

Harriet Monroe, in which he glossed *The Cantos* as having "roughly the theme of *Takasago*," a Japanese Noh play about two ancient coupled pines.<sup>9</sup> Andrew Houwen argues that *Takasago* provides Pound with an example of what has come to be called "Poundian superposition," where the artwork achieves "in Pound's words, 'a sense of the past in the present.'" <sup>10</sup> Pound's interest in *Takasago* explicitly links the superposition of entities separated by time and space with love and sex. For Pound, heterosexual sex serves as a physical manifestation of the point at which polarities connect. The *Takasago* pines would have made a useful organizing framework for the cantos, then, as the married pines overcome the boundaries of time and space.

Pound's essay "Cavalcanti," labeled with the extended date 1910/1931, reveals an interest in medieval natural philosophy that helps to unpack this relationship between polarity and hypostasis. In the beginning of the essay, Pound situates Cavalcanti's own philosophy by explaining that "Donna Mi Prega" "is easier to understand if we suppose . . . that [Cavalcanti] had read Grosseteste on the Generation of Light."<sup>11</sup> At the end of the essay, he turns to Grosseteste circumspectly by telling readers,

A mediaeval "natural philosopher" would find this modern world full of enchantments, not only the light

in the electric bulb, but the thought of the current hidden in the air and in wire would give him a mind full of forms.<sup>12</sup>

Grosseteste was an early English philosopher and scientist who believed that light was the simplest form of matter, and that all matter originated from a single point of pure light.<sup>13</sup> Essentially, he argued that matter and light were but translations in form of the same substance, and Pound's reference to the "enchantments" of modern electricity makes Grosseteste's early inductions seem more modern than medieval.<sup>14</sup> I point to the medieval philosopher here not to argue that Pound bought his theories wholesale, but, as we will see in the forthcoming analysis of canto 36, Pound had a ready model in Grosseteste's Neoplatonic light philosophy to recognize how the grosser forms of lived reality and the more subtle forms of spirit and light could be translations of a single substance in Cavalcanti's love poetry.

Describing Pound's translation of "Vedut' ho la lucente stella diana" from *The Spirit of Romance*, Stuart Y.

McDougal observes that "It is as though this radiant virtue were seeking embodiment, and indeed the poem does fulfill this function."<sup>15</sup> His commentary registers the fact that any translation of either the gross or subtle form necessitated a recognition of both. Pound's connections are not simply a

thrust toward transcendence, but rather the manifestation of coherence. His understanding of Cavalcanti's "Donna Mi Prega" is predicated on an understanding of this connection.

From *The Spirit of Romance* to his essay on Cavalcanti two decades later, then, Pound maintains an interest in oppositional forms as well as an appreciation for the difficulties in finding coherence. According to Pound, when art successfully captures the moment of coherence between polarities, as in *Takasago*, then it also captures the "permanent human elements"; in "A Retrospect" (1918) he states this even more forcefully by declaring, "Only emotion endures."<sup>16</sup> To illustrate his point, he outlines a comparison between Henry James, Thomas Hardy, and William Butler Yeats, on the one hand, and Remy de Gourmont, on the other, in "De Gourmont: A Distinction" (1920). According to Pound, the former allowed their subjects to be bounded by time and space, while de Gourmont "is concerned with [his subjects'] modality and resonance in emotion" (*LE*, 340). In the same essay Pound explains that "[s]ex, in so far as it is not a purely physiological mechanism lies in the domain of aesthetics, the junction of tactile and magnetic senses" (*ibid.*, 341). Here, "the aesthetic receptivity of tactile and magnetic values, of the perception of beauty in these



relationships" is the motivating cause for creating art with a focus on sex (*ibid.*, 343).

His combination of enduring emotions and the aesthetics of sex helps to explain his preoccupation with translating the love poems of Provençal troubadours, and provides an alternative view of the transcendent goddess or transcendent love often associated with the cantos. Coherence and connection are powerful organizing forces, but they are not meant to remove one from lived experience. In canto I (as in Homer), Odysseus goes to the underworld to better understand his own world, not to leave it behind. Pound's early love poems help recast our understanding of the cantos to better understand how elements of light and the divine goddess, which are often associated with transcendence, are also elemental parts of the lived reality defining the modern love experience.<sup>17</sup>

In his translation of Guido Cavalcanti's "Donna Mi Prega," Pound exhibits this interest in "the perception of beauty in these relationships," and his translation choices give readers a clearer account of the basis for cohesion in Pound's early love poems. The canto sits in the middle of the first seventy-one cantos, and also seemingly out of place in the middle of the eleven cantos known as "Jefferson-Nuevo Mundo," published in 1934. This version

applies a more literal translation to the poem than Pound's earlier versions in *Personae* and his essay on Cavalcanti, and George Dekker describes it as an original poem "developing and emphasizing certain ideas quite clearly," even while it "succeeds in communicating one primary quality of the original—its impenetrability."<sup>18</sup> Even with its difficulty, Daniel Albright is correct in pointing out that the "eleven Cantos [of 'Jefferson-Nuevo Mundo'] pivot around canto 36, the middle canto, which has a texture far different from the five before and the five after it."<sup>19</sup>

Pound's thematic treatment of love in this canto extends this structural consideration. The canto personifies love as a masculine force prompted into existence by beauty, residing "[w]here memory liveth," but capable of outlasting memory by "Holding his power even though / Memory hath him no more."<sup>20</sup> Notably, the relationship between gross and subtle materials also receives attention in the section where Pound explains the source of love. He asserts:

Cometh from a seen form which being understood  
 Taketh locus and remaining in the intellect possible  
 Wherein hath he neither weight nor still-standing,  
 Descendeth not by quality but shineth out  
 Himself his own effect unendingly

Not in delight but in the being aware  
 Nor can he leave his true likeness elsewhere. (*C*,  
 177)

Love begins in a "seen form," and the transformation into love is an action that causes that form's finer substance to "shineth-out." Pound continues to emphasize the recognizable aspects of love in the lines: "Who heareth, seeth not form / But is led by its emanation" (*ibid.*, 179). In Pound's translation love arises in recognition of the finer qualities discernable in the grosser material. Through love, the lover sees in the beloved the hypostasis of mortal and divine elements.

The finer qualities create the powerful impression that allows love to maintain power above both intellect and memory. Line Henriksen points out that Pound's translation knowingly differentiates from Cavalcanti's original poem in the former lines to privilege love over the "intellect possible."<sup>21</sup> Henriksen's careful reading of Pound's translation choices helps to clarify this issue: "Pound seems to be implying that love is stronger than memory; the 'seen form' that gave birth to love in the first place may be forgotten, but love still shines out" ("*C*," 47). Canto 80 provides more support for love's cohesive power. Here, we find the Latin phrases "Amo ergo sum," or "I love

therefore I am," and then "Ubi amor ibi oculus est," which Nicolas Ambrus translates as "Where there is love, there is understanding and recognition."<sup>22</sup> In canto 81, these ideas resurface in the twice-repeated line "What thou lov'st well shall not be reft from thee / What thou lov'st well is thy true heritage."<sup>23</sup> These two later Pisan cantos extend the initial relationships Pound begins in canto 36 to instantiate love's hold on the world of experience. Love, then, is more powerful for Pound than the intellect or memory and is rooted in the physical forms.

When "ubi amor, ibi oculus" appears again in canto 114, Pound re-affirms the lasting power of love by choosing to hold it up to criticism. The beginning of the canto sets up this test by quoting the lines "You respect a good book, contradicting it- / the rest aren't worth the powder" (C., 811). Then he parodies canto 36 in the lines

Falls white *bianco c(h)ade*

yet sentient

sees not.

Their dichotomies (feminine) present in heaven and hell. (*ibid.*)

The coherence of love is presented here as dichotomy and love does not provide perception. "Armes et blasons! / me foot!!" puns on the French for weapons and shields, but

invokes the blazon that lists the beauty of the beloved through a piece by piece account of the beloved's (body) parts. "Weapons and love poems!" supplies a different rallying cry for this post-1945, post-Pisa, post-St. Elizabeths canto. Arcing back around to the power of love, the canto closes with the lines

The kindness, infinite, of her hands.

Sea, blue under cliffs, or

William murmuring: "Sligo in heaven" when the mist came

To Tigullio. And that the truth is in kindness.

(*ibid.*, 813)

Pound never stops testing his theories about love, even in his final *Drafts and Fragments*, and he continues to find them sound.

These cantos help us to understand the powerful force of love for Pound's poetry. If love provides both understanding (joining the known with the unknown) and history (joining the past with the present), then it also provides a powerful force for cohesion. These ideas are more fully articulated in the cantos, and this is where scholars have spent more time examining Pound's ideas on love, but now I want to turn back to Pound's earlier love

poems to see how he made use of the genre as a form to work out this philosophy.

**"God am I for the time": Bringing Together the Finite and Infinite in the Love Poems of *Personae***

When Pound was editing his choices for the collection *Personae*, he was already committed to the ideas in de Gourmont that he advocated in 1920. In a letter to his father in November 1925, Pound describes the importance of *Personae* as a volume shaped by his growth as a poet:

The things I'm throwing out are the "soft" stuff, and the metrical exercises. At least what I once bluffed myself into believing were something more than exercises but which no longer convince me that I had anything to say when I wrote 'em . . .<sup>24</sup>

Consequently, *Personae* provides an excellent source text for understanding not only Pound's early efforts as a poet, but the poems he saw as the best achievements of his aims. For Pound, poetry could no longer serve to simply document a particular experience; rather, it had to capture some enduring aspect. This effort makes the love poem a valuable choice for Pound: love and sex are enduring subjects for a range of art, but the facts of love and sex are not. Julia Reinhard Lupton emphasizes this fact by pointing out that

while "funeral flowers often remain attached to a living plant, the flowers of romance are almost always cut flowers," which underscores "that element of cultural refashioning which signals the frustration that gives sexual desire its special structure and urgency."<sup>25</sup> Medieval poetic traditions like *ubi sunt* and theories like *mememto mori*, or classical themes like *carpe diem* also capitalize on this attention to the transitory nature of human experience. Love poems, in particular, must do the work of connecting the limited experience of the physical world and the enduring finer qualities of love. The following section will show how those love poems of *Personae* that could easily be considered idealizations of the beloved can be better understood through the connections they make between the finite and the infinite.

In *Personae*, "Erat Hora" details an encounter with these ephemeral materials. The deictic of the Latin "Erat" or "That" in the title phrase delineates the particularity and boundedness of the experience. The poem takes formal and discursive opportunities to counter that boundedness with expansion. In the beloved's absence the lover recalls his first beloved with a simile capturing her action and then expands the moment into a larger poetic image. The short verse reads:

"Thank you, whatever comes." And then she turned  
 And, as the ray of sun on hanging flowers  
 Fades when the wind hath lifted them aside,  
 Went swiftly from me. Nay, whatever comes  
 One hour was sunlit and the most high gods  
 May not make boast of any better thing  
 Than to have watched that hour as it passed.<sup>26</sup>

Uncertainty dictates the speaker's relationship with the woman, the events of "that hour," and the woman's reasons for leaving "swiftly," but it is balanced by the certainty the speaker places in the moment's value. First, the lover is just "as the light" and then she expands to a force capable of lighting the entire hour. Lines two and five—the lines where the speaker highlights the light of the moment—each have one more syllable than the rest of the lines of the poem (eleven, as opposed to ten). The occurrence may seem minor, but the additional "And" in line two, when its absence would preserve the simile and the semantic sense of the line, suggests the syllabic differences are motivated choices to highlight the emanating qualities of the beloved in the lover's mind. According to the lover, even those with the widest scope, the "most high gods," cannot deny his assertions about the moment. And yet, the view of the gods and the dance of light only seem broad in scope in



comparison to the concrete time limits placed on the event and the quoted speech from the beloved. The meeting place of these finite and infinite elements illuminates the coherence between polarities Pound will later articulate in his prose and cantos.

Whereas several scholars focus on Pound's idealization of the beloved or the intellectually stimulating features of desire, few recognize the markers of satisfaction also present in his poem. While unrequited love frequently plays a part in love poems that document time away from the beloved, Pound chooses to revise several versions of the Provençal *alba* (or *aubade*, translated as "dawn"), a poem set in the dawn after lovers have spent the night together. Many of Pound's dawn poems inflect the Provençal *alba* for particularly modern contexts, and privilege a clarity of language and image—unlike the "involved forms, and the veiled meanings in the 'trobar clus' [sic]" or closed forms of Provençal poetry (SR, 94). In his chapter "The Phantom Dawn" in *The Spirit of Romance*, Pound claims that all of "Romance literature" originated from the tenth-century Provençal *alba* and records the refrain of the song as

Dawn appeareth upon the sea,  
 from behind the hill,  
 The watch passeth, it shineth

Clear amid the shadows. (*ibid.*, 12)

Although there is scholarly debate on what exactly constitutes an *alba*, the major features include the lover, the beloved, an adulterous or illicit affair, a jealous husband, the watchman who stands guard and warns them of dawn, the dawn as an entity, and the repetition of the word *alba* in the refrain at the end of each stanza.<sup>27</sup> Similar to features of the love poem considered broadly, these features shift in importance and span across both formal and thematic concerns.

Unlike several of Pound's love poems that associate the beloved with light, the *albas* treat dawn, and the light of dawn, as separate from the beloved. For example, in "Cino" the speaker sings variations on the opening refrain:

Bah! I have sung women in three cities,

But it is all the same;

And now I will sing of the sun. (*P*, 6)

Then, in "Lang d'Oc" the lovers must flee at the first sign of dawn:

When the nightingale to his mate

Sings day-long and night late

My love and I keep state

In bower,

In flower,

'Till the watchman on the tower

Cry:

"Up! Thou rascal, Rise,

I see the white

Light

And the night

Flies." (*ibid.*, 169)

Lovers meet peacefully during the night, but the light of dawn reveals their tryst. For Cino, singing the sun, foreswearing women in favor of the dawn allows him to poke fun at these trysts. As one of the earliest known versions of the love poem, the *alba* gives Pound the structure of a concrete form to work around in developing his philosophies on love, love poems, and cohesion.

Pound's "Alba" is one of his most achieved variations on this ancient form. In this short poem he reshapes the precision of the "one-image poem," the romance of the Provençal *alba*, and the poignancy of the elegy in order to connect the finite and the infinite in the space of three lines. Collected in "The Poems of Lustra: 1913-1915" in *Personae*, "Alba" reads,

As cool as the pale wet leaves

of lily-of-the-valley

She lay beside me in the dawn. (*ibid.*, 112)

Printed directly after "In a Station of the Metro," "Alba" replaces the "Petals on a wet, black bough" with the coolness of the "wet leaves." While the first poem is largely visual, "Alba" underscores the feeling of the speaker lying next to his beloved. Describing "In a Station . . ." in his essay "Vorticism," Pound explains, "In a poem of this sort one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective."<sup>28</sup> "Alba" captures that same instant, but in the reverse order. Here the speaker begins in the subjective and then pans out to the objective; the move follows the trajectory of the love poem in its ability to move from the personal to the public. The poem begins by inviting an intimacy with the speaker's sensations before revealing the facts of the scene.

"Alba" varies from the traditional *albas* by absencing the tension-causing features of the Provençal *albas*—discussion of a jealous husband, the watchman, or even of dawn as an end to the night are conspicuously missing. Instead, the poem captures a moment of satiety and contentedness. Pound's short poem also manages to deepen the moment of the poem by placing the lovers *inside* a moment, as opposed to *at* a moment. "She lay beside me *in*

the dawn" reimagines linear time as a synchronic moment without bounds (my emphasis). Unlike the traditional *alba* that variously laments the arrival of dawn or yearns for dawn so that the lovers can be in public spaces, Pound's "Alba" holds the lovers within an expansive moment without pressures from time or space for the moment's alteration.

Similar to many poems of *The Cantos*, the tension the poem does cultivate relies on a historic sense of poetry in English more broadly. Even without the thematically tension-causing elements of the traditional *alba*, the poem manages to maintain tension through a possible threat to the lovers' peacefulness by invoking Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard."<sup>29</sup> Pound's invocation of Gray's elegy serves as a *momento mori* heightening the consequences of linear time—a feature of the *alba* usually marked by a dawn that merely ends the lovers' tryst. The central simile that takes up two-thirds of Pound's poem compares the lover to the temperature of "pale wet leaves / of lily-of-the-valley." She retains neither the flush of arousal nor the white purity of the lily-of-the-valley's blooms, which are both common tropes for love poetry. Instead, the image invokes Gray's stanza highlighting the simplicity and isolation of country life:

Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,

Their sober wishes never learned to stray;

Along the cool sequestered vale of life

They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

The sweet-smelling lily-of-the-valley has a musical name that does not reveal its highly poisonous composition. By rewriting "the vale of life" into "lily-of-the-valley" while maintaining the central feeling of coolness, "Alba" both invokes and buries the specter of death central to Gray's elegy. The poem maintains tension through an alternate literary allusion.

By the time Pound translates "Homage to Sextus Propertius" in 1917, he is clearly engaged with the productive poetic tension between the finite and infinite. The third section of his translation maps two possible poetic responses love makes to death. After a summons from the beloved the speaker initially declares that he can claim immunity to death. He maintains, "Nor is there anyone to whom lovers are not sacred at midnight," because an entourage of helpers colludes to guide safe passage to lovers at night. In the same verse paragraph, the speaker begins to doubt that safety, but quickly recovers his motivation. Even if death follows his journey, the beloved's devoted mourning ritual will enshrine him as a lover. Here, Pound translates two ways in which limits

provide poetic tension. The songs of love passed allow us to celebrate lovers in their pursuits (licit and illicit), and the death of lovers provides additional occasions to memorialize lovers. Celebration and memorialization, ostensibly limitless, depend on the limits of human experience.

The central section of "Homage to Sextus Propertius" treats love as the force that connects the bounded human experience to the boundless experience of the gods. Positioned similarly to canto 36, section seven (out of the total thirteen) also privileges the centrality of love. Here the speaker details the lovers' erotic play before begging, "Let the gods lay chains upon us / so that no day shall unbind them." Like the *alba*, the coming dawn heralds the end of the lovers' delight. The speaker then refuses the restraints often placed on love:

Fool who would set a term to love's madness,

For the sun shall drive with black horses,

Earth shall bring wheat from barley,

The flood shall move toward the fountain

Ere love know moderations,

The fish shall swim in dry streams.

No, now while it may be, let not the fruit of life  
cease. (*P*, 216)

Referencing "love's madness," the poem anticipates a similar sentiment in canto 36, where the speaker declares, "Deeming intention to be reason's peer and mate, / Poor in discernment, being thus weakness' friend" (C, 178). In both poems, the speaker recognizes the constraints on love, but also refuses to acknowledge that those constraints actually overpower love. Instead, in "Homage to Sextus Propertius" those constraints only reproduce a kind of power where

If she confer such nights upon me,

Long is my life, long in years,

If she give me many,

God I am for the time. (P, 216)

At first the speaker addresses the "gods" who are able to hold back the dawn. These gods are multiple and indicated with a lowercase "g," but the speaker is made "God" by the beloved—a distinction that privileges love as a powerful force beyond the gods. While the initial "gods" may be one and the same with those who took pleasure in the "sunlit" "Erat Hora," but had no power to make it last, the singular, omnipotent "God" is empowered by the lovers' play and is both unbounded by time or place and also bound to the moment of love.

"Speech for Psyche in the Golden Book of Apuleius" anticipates Pound's personification in canto 36 of love as



masculine, by combining love as a force with a masculinized beloved. Psyche's experience illuminates the connection between the finite and infinite, which is present in the previously analyzed poems. Here, Psyche experiences her divine mate as the wind, and even closer than the wind. The speaker remembers,

All night, and as the wind lieth among  
 The cypress trees, he lay,  
 Nor held me save as air that brusheth by one  
 Close, and as the petals of flowers in falling  
 Waver and seem not drawn to earth, so he  
 Seemed over me to hover light as leaves  
 And closer to me than air,  
 And music flowing through me seemed to open  
 Mine eyes upon new colours.

O winds, what wind can match the weight of him!  
 Cupid is distanced from her, outside of her, but is also closer than her skin. To be closer to her than her skin is, the love god must be within her, and the resulting synesthesia mirrors orgasm. As the short lyric moves Cupid from an experience of the wind to an experience within the speaker's body, the beloved simultaneously expands to a force that is greater than the zephyrs. The experience of

the lover prompts her final claim that no wind could be quite like this god.

Unlike John Keats's "Ode to Psyche" (1819), Pound's poem adopts the voice of Psyche to articulate the impact of eros as a masculine persona. In Cavalcanti's "Donna Mi Prega," love is not a figure but a force. Henriksen draws attention to "Pound's use of the personal pronoun 'he' in 'he hath Love for a name,'" because it "actually contradicts Cavalcanti's definition of love as a passion, and not as a being or god that may be personified" ("C," 37). This hypostasis of figure and force comes back again in a more quotidian form at the end of *The Cantos* in "Fragment (1966)" where Pound affirms:

That her acts  
                   Olga's acts  
                           of beauty  
                                   be remembered.

Her name was Courage  
                   & is written Olga

These lines are for the  
                   ultimate CANTO

whatever I may write

in the interim. (C, 824)

Pound mobilizes Olga Rudge, his long time lover and confidant, as both a persona and the abstracted force of "Courage." In yoking Olga with her "acts / of beauty," Pound makes plain that the kind of hypostasis available to Eros in "Speech for Psyche . . ." is, in fact, very much a part of our daily lives. Like the love poem, the force of individual action both originates in the personal and transient, and also expands toward the public and infinite.<sup>30</sup>

**"i.e. it coheres all right": Enduring Legacy of Pound's Love Poems**

*Drafts & Fragments of Cantos CX-CXVII* (1968) are not necessarily the end of the Pound's cantos, but they do offer insight into how Pound wanted to close *The Cantos*. They elucidate both the perseverance of love as a poetic theme and the continual challenges—poetic and personal—facing the efficacy of coherence in Pound's poetry; they also make explicit reference back to Pound's early love poems in a gesture that validates the importance I have placed on *Personae* in this chapter. *Drafts & Fragments* is a culmination of Pound's study of the love poem, and conclude

by arguing that an inclusion of the physical and sensual is a necessary part of any study on Pound's love poetry. When Pound's love poetry is only considered in light of transcendence, critics overly value a totalitarian force that proved Pound mistaken in his values and ideals. Although the "Totalitarianism" Pound refers to in *Guide to Kulchur* is about "more than politics," I agree with Donald Davie that the synthesis it purports is "overtly Fascist."<sup>31</sup> A hypostasis of polarities resists that synthesis, because it maintains difference even in the midst of coherence. A criticism that side-steps this achievement in Pound's love poetry, misses an opportunity to examine his "little rightness" in seeking to find elements of the divine in the sensual, daily experience.

Pound's struggle to make sense of his "rightness" and his mistakes is manifest in canto 116, where facing pages argue about the possibility and impossibility of bringing the cantos into order. On the left-side:

Tho' my errors and wrecks lie about me.

And I am not a demigod,

I cannot make it cohere.

If love be not in the house there is nothing. (C, 816)

In these lines, love continues to be the element that could make it all cohere. The phrasing echoes the lover's

declaration "God I am for the time," in response to his beloved's favor, in "Homage to Sextus Propertius" (*P*, 216). The lines prompt the question: with love would the speaker be a demigod? Or is the assumption of demigod status the thing that has created the chaos? On the facing page the following lines capitulate:

    i.e. it coheres all right

                            even if my notes do not cohere.

Many errors,

        a little rightness,

to excuse his hell

                            and my paradiso.

And as to why they go wrong,

                            thinking of rightness

And as to who will copy this palimpsest? (*C*, 817)

Here, Pound asks us to recognize what does cohere and to acknowledge the "gold thread" within the larger pattern. For Pound, this gold thread is love, the hypostasizing element that can hold polarity within a single state and, also, reveal the underlying connections between several different forms.

The references to "Speech for Psyche in the Golden Book of Apuleius" make the final pages of the *Drafts and Fragments* seem more like a conclusion to Pound's poetic

work as a whole, than simply drafts of a conclusion to the cantos. In canto 117 he returns to the image of love as a hypostasis of figure and force when he asks: "M'amour, m'amour / what do I love and / where are you?" (*ibid.*, 822). The only answer in reply to this plea is an invocation of Eros: "Do not move / Let the wind speak / that is paradise" (*ibid.*). The speaker appeals to the Gods and to those he loves for forgiveness, but he distinguishes specifically between asking the Gods "to forgive" and asking humans to "try to forgive." The force of effort, or "acts / of beauty" are enough from those the speaker loves.

An emphasis on transcendence allows scholars to ignore the gross and manifest of Pound's love poems, and interpret his positive love poems as a movement above and beyond the beloved. However, Pound was and remained more interested in how enduring emotions can be located in lived experience than he is in leaving that lived experience behind. For Pound, a poet who spent much of his life outside the borders of his nation of birth, a sensitivity to what Peter Nicholls called "questions of exile and displacement" allowed him to "imaginatively" construct a "discontinuous cultural memory conceived as the very matrix of the new modernism."<sup>32</sup> His matrix of history, which reinterpreted the troubadour tradition of courtly romance, allowed him to

recover in the love poem the possibility to address the human and the divine as one. The number of poems he addressed to the topic of love are not surprising in a poet as prolific as Pound, but the time and attention he devoted to the love poem as a genre is surprising for this sometime pariah, sometime patron of transatlantic modernism. Pound's early poems are marked by their extensive attention to the love poem as a genre, and Pound's careful attention to the "beauty" present or absent in love's various relationships provided the formal and thematic catalyst for a body of work that aspired to maintain that "golden" thread throughout and prove that "only emotion endures" (*LE*, 14). How does Pound reconcile his ethos of discovery—"Make it new!"—with the notion that emotion not only lasts, but outlasts the rest of experience?<sup>33</sup> In the love poem, he finds and renovates a form that has already been making that reconciliation for centuries.

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh Witemeyer, *The Poetry of Ezra Pound: Forms and Renewal, 1908-1920* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969), 111.

<sup>2</sup> See Akiko Miyake, *Ezra Pound and the Mysteries of Love: A Plan for The Cantos* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991) and Kevin Oderman, *Ezra Pound and the Erotic Medium* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1986).

<sup>3</sup> Helen M. Dennis, "Pound, Women and Gender," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 264.

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<sup>4</sup> S. L. Bermann, "Love Poetry," *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 815.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Makin, *Provence and Pound* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 99.

<sup>6</sup> Although "to hypostasize" is often associated with Wittgenstein, my use of "hypostasis" derives from both the theological uses of the term and S. T. Coleridge's use in the *Biographia Literaria*. In the first sense of the word, hypostasis is used to describe the "unity of Christ: the God-man is one hypostasis," and in the second sense of the word the "Persons of the Trinity" are treated as distinct hypostases of what is common to all three. Coleridge adopts the second definition and likens the term to common "property or attribute" held by unrelated objects. *Cambridge Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. "hypostasis"; OED Online, s.v. "hypostasis," accessed October 2015, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/90562?redirectedFrom=hypostas> is

<sup>7</sup> Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 187.

<sup>8</sup> Ezra Pound, *The Spirit of Romance* (1910; repr., New York: New Directions, 1968), 93; hereafter abbreviated in text as SR.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Houwen, "Ezra Pound's Early Cantos and His Translation of *Takasago*," *The Review of English Studies* 65, no. 269 (2013): 321.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 330.

<sup>11</sup> Pound, Ezra, "Cavalcanti--1910/1931," in *Make It New: Essays by Ezra Pound* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1935), 345.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 352.

<sup>13</sup> James McEvoy, *Robert Grosseteste* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 88.

<sup>14</sup> While Robert Grosseteste appears to be of early interest to Pound, his lasting interest in light—a thread tying together much of Hugh Kenner's analysis in *The Pound Era*—was more substantially influenced by Scotus Erigena, whose work he did not acquire until January 1940. For more on the relationship "rhyme" between Grosseteste and Erigena that Pound extended in *The Cantos*, see Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 450–452. For more on Pound and Erigena, see Peter Makin, "Ezra Pound and Scotus Erigena," *Comparative Literature Studies* 10, no. 1 (1973): 60–83.



<sup>15</sup> Stuart Y. McDougal, *Ezra Pound and the Troubadour Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), 74.

<sup>16</sup> Ezra Pound, "Remy De Gourmont: A Distinction," and "A Retrospect," in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1954), 340, 14; hereafter abbreviated in text as *LE*.

<sup>17</sup> Pound also suggests these connections in canto 116 where he asks: "I have brought the great ball of crystal; / who can lift it? / Can you enter the great acorn of light?" *The Cantos*, 815.

<sup>18</sup> George Dekker, *Sailing after Knowledge: The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), 124; Despite this impenetrability, Louis Zukofsky chose to translate the poem twice in his long collection *A* using the language of Marx, Spinoza, and a smattering of Brooklynese. In his introduction to Zukofsky's *Selected Poems* (New York: Library of America, 2006), Charles Bernstein calls Zukofsky's translations the crux of *A* and "a supreme realization of what Zukofsky called a 'rested totality,'" xxii-iii.

<sup>19</sup> Daniel Albright, "Early Cantos I-XLI," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound*, ed. Ira Nadel (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 86.

<sup>20</sup> Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1993), 177-78; hereafter abbreviated in text as *C*.

<sup>21</sup> Line Henriksen, "Chiaroscuro: Canto 36 and Donna Mi Prega," *Paideuma* 29, no. 3 (2000): 44-45; hereafter abbreviated in text as "C."

<sup>22</sup> Nicolas Ambrus, "The White Light That Is Allness: Ezra Pound's Cantos on Love," *Paideuma* 29, no. 3 (2000): 207.

<sup>23</sup> *C*, 541. In the second iteration the lines are inverted.

<sup>24</sup> Lea Beachler and A. Walton Litz, "A Note on the Text," in *Personae* (New York: New Directions, 1990), 272.

<sup>25</sup> Julia Reinhard Lupton, "Sex and the Shorter Poem," in *Approaches to Teaching Shorter Elizabethan Poetry* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2000), 106.

<sup>26</sup> Ezra Pound, *Personae* (New York: New Directions, 1926), 38; hereafter abbreviated in text as *P*.

<sup>27</sup> See Elizabeth Wilson Poe, "New Light on the Alba: A Genre Redefined," *Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 15 (1984): 139-50.

<sup>28</sup> Ezra Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska* (New York: New Directions, 1970), 89.

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<sup>29</sup> Thomas Gray, *Select Poems of Thomas Gray*, ed. Robert Carruthers (Harper & Brothers, 1876), 23. The stanza in question also inspired the title of Thomas Hardy's 1874 novel *Far from the Madding Crowd*.

<sup>30</sup> This is the same quality Pound valued in Sigismundo Malatesta, who had the "light of a personality cleaving to act or artifact" according to Donald Davie, *Studies in Ezra Pound*, (Manchester, UK: Carcanet, 1991), 113.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>32</sup> Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995), 166, 165.

<sup>33</sup> T. S. Eliot argues in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) that "[t]he business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all."

### Chapter 3

#### "Knocking Sparks": The Functional Love Poems of Mina Loy

At present most of what we know, or think we know, of women has been found out by men. We have yet to hear what woman will tell of herself, and where can she tell more intimately than in poetry? If only she is able to be sincere enough; and rather brave! -Helen Hoyt<sup>1</sup>

The influential little magazine *Others* included in its very first issue (1915) Mina Loy's "Love Songs I-IV," poems that featured uncommonly frank lines and an acerbic treatment of the traditionally tender love poem. Loy was not unknown to the American avant-garde: the year before, *Trend* had published her poem on childbirth, "Parturition," and *Camera Work* had published "Aphorisms on Futurism"; earlier in 1915 *Rogue* published "Three Moments in Paris" and "Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots." "Love Songs," however, was her most notable work to date, due to the "stir of public outrage" caused by the overtly intimate, decidedly unromantic, and formally innovative poems.<sup>2</sup>

Loy's precise approach to language and the disappointments of romantic love creates a uniquely functional love poem that amplifies the voice of a woman speaking subject. Her love poems are functional in their resistance to ornament and their insistence on Loy's lived experience of love and sex. "I know nothing about anything

but life," Loy wrote to Carl Van Vechten in 1915, "and that is generally reducible to sex" (*PF*, 50). As Jessica Burstein explains, "Loy's use of the quotidian, even its detritus, bespeaks a sensibility in which the most banal is recuperated as fodder for the new."<sup>3</sup> As her poetry attests, however, Loy did not find "the new" unambiguously valuable. Instead, she "recuperated as fodder" those experiences and emotions that functionally revealed the disappointments of love.

The frank treatment of coitus in "Love Songs" would have been enough to cause a stir, but readers found the anti-sentimental love poems distinctly jarring from a woman poet. Linda Kinnahan contends that the editorial choice to inaugurate the publication with poems

written by a woman whose poetry was well known in New York avant-garde circles as radically feminist in voice, subject matter, and perspective, suggests that the magazine's innovative principles—the principles marking its otherness—could be manifested directly through the poetry most effectively marginalized by tradition: the poetry of the female erotic. (*PF*, 51)

The radical choice inspired a mixed response. It led the more conservative modernist Amy Lowell "to pronounce the poems as 'pornographic' and sever her association with

*Others.*"<sup>4</sup> William Carlos Williams, both supportive of Loy and influenced by her work, noted that the publication brought about "wild enthusiasm among free-verse writers, slightly less enthusiasm among Sunday Magazine Section reporters, and really quite a stir in the country at large."<sup>5</sup> As Carolyn Burke has argued, the public perception of Loy as a modernist was deeply entangled with the view of her as a "New Woman" ("NP," 37). Burke notes that Loy's subject matter as well as her disregard for traditional poetic style rankled the public, and quotes Arthur Keymborg's recollection that readers "shuddered at Mina Loy's subject matter and derided her elimination of punctuation marks and the audacious spacing of her lines" ("NP," 44).

If Loy's contemporaries felt the need to pull away from her subject matter and poetic form, her contemporary critics—while generally supportive—have perpetuated this distant reading by arguing that Loy's work is unemotional. This chapter will, therefore, argue that casting Loy's poems as unemotional obfuscates a woman writer's access to negative emotions, like irritation, disgust, indignation, and disappointment. Her poems register the disappointment of "sexual exploitation, inequality, thralldom, and the ambiguities of serial monogamy in relation to jealousy"

that Nancy Cott and Rachel Blau DuPlessis record as alternatives to the sense of possibility and gendered freedom typically assigned to modern love as a result of new forms of birth control, free love movements, and the advancement of women's civil rights.<sup>6</sup> Loy's love poems treat these emotions with such precision that the love poem becomes a mechanism for effectively illustrating the limited and limiting experiences of modern love.

Loy expanded the *Others* poems and they were subsequently published as "Love Songs to Joannes, I-XXXIV" (*Others* 1917), *Love Songs 1915-1917* (Carcenet 1982), and they are now listed as *Songs to Joannes* in Roger Conover's *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* (1996). The variation in the title over the course of the poems' publication history highlights Loy's uneasy association with both sentimental and anti-sentimental modernist writing and draws that dichotomy into question. Her poems are deeply personal, a trait often associated with sentimental women's literature, and yet sharply critical of a literary and poetic tradition that tends to euphemize the sexual experience. Virginia Koudis aptly commends Loy with her declaration that "[f]ew, if any, of the other female poets of the era speak so honestly about the quotidian life of a woman."<sup>7</sup> However, Suzanne Clarke neglects Loy in *Sentimental Modernism*—a work meant

to recover and reclaim female modernists and their use of the sentimental. If, as Tim Hancock claims, writing the personal broke the "rule" of modernist impersonality, then Loy should have been similarly dismissed by her modernist peers, but anti-sentimental modernists such as Williams, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot praised her.<sup>8</sup> Pound specifically lauded Loy as exemplary of his concept of logopoeia, or "a dance of the intelligence among words and ideas" and declares "in [the verse] of Mina Loy I detect no emotion whatever."<sup>9</sup>

If, as Clarke has argued, critics were wont to believe "women writers were entangled in sensibility, were romantic and sentimental by nature, and so even the best might not altogether escape this romantic indulgence," then it is understandable why so many advocates of Loy's work wanted (and want) to turn a blind eye to the emotion in her poems.<sup>10</sup> While her work eschews appeals to sympathy—traits most often highlighted in critiques of sentimental literature—Loy directly confronts emotions like disappointment and frustration. Treating Loy as impassive about deeply personal subject matter, or wounded beyond speech, perpetuates the gendered bias that expects a woman poet to treat personal matters with a limited range of emotions, such as wistfulness, longing, or excitement—or,

what has largely come to be understood as sentimentality. Paul Peppis theorizes that at a "time when male writers defined literary modernism as a realm of antisentimental, masculine impersonality," Loy's attention to materials often associated with the personal and, by extension, the sentimental affirms "the continuing relevance of sentimentality to modernism's efforts to reform gender by rewriting sex."<sup>11</sup> In her "Feminist Manifesto" (1914), Loy disregards the gendered limitations impressed upon women and declares, "Nature has endowed the complete woman with a faculty for expressing herself through all her functions—there are NO RESTRICTIONS."<sup>12</sup> For Loy, modern love demands an array of emotions beyond the spectrum of accepted feminine feeling—the sentimental or the impersonal—and her poetry makes those emotions legible for readers only newly initiated to the notion of feminism.

### **"Braying Brassily": Loy's Formal Choices**

Critical conversations that pay careful attention to Loy's formal choices while glossing over tonal choices, which express or appeal to emotion, prevent a fully engaged reading of her love poems. These readings often portray Loy as somehow lost in her romantic disappointment. For example, Eric Selinger claims that "Loy's deliberate exploration of



aesthetic failure," which includes, "jarring switches in diction, failed attempts at dialogic union, aborted gestures of literary or mythic allusion," reveal that she "cannot or will not be rescued by language when she has not been rescued by love."<sup>13</sup> The interpretation of Loy's negative emotions as an "exploration of aesthetic failure" essentially bars those emotions from the realm of the aesthetic. Peter Quartermain, moreover, calls *Songs to Joannes* "deliberately graceless": in its "circling, regressing" style, "[i]t refuses to privilege any of the poem's given vocabularies or syntactic patterns, [and] it works to neutralize the sense of a unifying central voice"; in so doing, "her poetry constitutes a critique of the very demand that lyric expression be viewed apart from the social world."<sup>14</sup> Although Loy's poetic does move lyric expression back into the social world, it is difficult to imagine that the speaker of *Songs to Joannes* lacks a unifying central voice. Hers is the voice of the new woman, disappointed.

As the inventor of The Alphabet Game, Loy understood language's ability to be shaped and reshaped from raw and simple materials.<sup>15</sup> The childhood game comprised plastic pieces that could be arranged into the twenty-six letters of the alphabet, and the materials were constructed such

that parts of one letter could be re-arranged to form another letter. According to Burke, who quotes from Loy's instruction manual, "The child was won over as soon as the teacher revealed the 'magic' that could be performed as one letter turned into another" (*BM*, 391). The magic of Loy's invention was not in creating something new with the materials, but in revealing the full capacity the original had for various articulations.

Like her game, her poems draw from daily life to make legible alternate articulations of familiar scenes. In song XXIX, she overemphasizes the sonic quality of words through alliteration to address sarcastically the silliness of romantic ornament that prevents men and women from realizing their sexual satisfaction through one another. The speaker explains,

Give them some way of braying brassily  
 For caressive calling  
 Or to homophonous hiccoughs  
 Transpose the laugh  
 Let them suppose that tears  
 Are snowdrops or molasses  
 Or anything  
 Than human insufficiencies  
 Begging dorsal vertebrae

Let meeting be the turning  
 To the antipodean  
 And Form a blurr  
 Anything  
 Than seduce them  
 To the one  
 As simple satisfaction  
 For the other<sup>16</sup>

Loy suggests that form should not be used to "blurr" the realities of simple sexual satisfaction in (heterosexual) romance, and that the overwrought qualities of romance can be another way to mislead the interactions between men and women. Both the genteel tradition of metaphorizing sex and bodies and the avant-garde tradition of disorienting syntax distract from the disenchanted experience that Loy's poems aim to crystallize. I share Marianne Moore's estimation of Loy's style as "sliced and cylindrical, complicated yet simple."<sup>17</sup> Her poems are complicated in their distortion of narrative, but simple in the alternatives they provide to a traditional notion of "happily ever after." Loy's complicated spacing, lack of punctuation, and varied diction represent choices in articulating negative emotions, not the failure of language to serve as an expressive tool.

Like an arrangement in her alphabet game, Loy amplifies the possibilities for language rather than destroying or creating anew.

**"Shedding our petty pruderies": Loy on the Body**

Loy recognized that neither femininity nor masculinity, as prescribed for white women at the beginning of the century, could serve her poetic persona. Burstein is right to conclude that while "Loy's modernism operates in terms directly having to do with invention, originality, and reproducibility," her relationship with the new was mitigated by the way that virginity, as "one category of the new . . . impacted the traffic of women in the marketplace" (*CM*, 152, 156). In other words, because of virginity's association with newness, "the new" as a modernist concept would have to be reconsidered in Loy's work. As a result, Loy had to articulate an alternative subject position that could communicate her dismissal of the marriage marketplace and her disappointment in modern love. She needed a subject position that resisted sublimation into early twentieth-century ideas about masculinity or femininity, one that included "shedding our petty pruderies" and allowed her to recuperate "unfeminine" feelings for a speaking woman subject (*SJ*, 63). DuPlessis

points out that Loy's manifesto "is in dialogue both with general ideology and with . . . the Social Purity movement," a movement that substantiated women's moral superiority with a "denial of female sexuality" ("SO," 52). Wise to the games of guilt that such a paternalist feminism maintains, Loy disregards the restrictions she recognizes as serving "Somebody who was never / a virgin."<sup>18</sup>

In her "Feminist Manifesto," Loy entreats women to "be brave and deny at the outset—that pathetic clap-trap war cry WOMAN IS THE EQUAL OF MAN— / for / She is NOT!" ("FM," 154). She goes on to redefine the working terms of her argument for her readers:

The man who lives a life in which his activities conform to a social code which is a protectorate of the feminine element—is no longer MASCULINE

The women who adapt themselves to a theoretical valuation of their sex as a RELATIVE IMPERSONALITY, are not yet FEMININE. ("FM," 154)

Loy is prescient in realizing that if masculinity is the standard of good, then man cannot be the aspiration of woman because the genders are defined in opposition to each other. With this aspiration a woman can be masculinized, but can never be a man and thus cannot be equal. The female

futurist Valentine de Saint-Point makes this mistake in her "Futurist Manifesto of Lust 1913," where she pushes women to adopt a masculine version of lust as a means of power.<sup>19</sup> Her war and pillaging imagery are masculine appropriations presenting female ascendancy only through masculine garb. Loy instead wants to redefine masculinity and femininity on their own terms, demanding that women "[l]eave off looking to men to find out what you are NOT—and seek within yourselves to find out what you ARE" ("FM," 154). Otherwise women are left to choose among parasitism, prostitution, or negation ("FM," 153). *Songs to Joannes*, which she instructed her literary agent to dedicate "TO YOU," heralds Loy's poetic effort to avoid all three—especially negation (*BM*, 190).

Loy's ability to demonstrate the inefficacy of the feminized modern subject, especially with regard to heterosexual intimacy, pushed—and continues to push—readers' conceptions of gender. For Loy, the modern woman subject is forced to perform a set of societally imposed roles and rituals and yet is punished implicitly or explicitly because of that performance. Loy's "Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots" and her "Feminist Manifesto," although not love poems as defined by this project, illustrate how even women

who display traditionally feminine virtue suffer precisely because they are women. The speaker of "Virgins" explains:

See the men pass  
 Their hats are not ours  
 We                    take a walk  
 They are going somewhere  
 And they            may look everywhere  
 Men's eyes                    look into things  
 Our eyes                    look out ("V," 21)

Loy uses a collective first-person "we" to invite identification, even sympathy, with the subjects she describes. Attempting to up the ante on Pound's description of Loy as unemotional, Hugh Kenner contests, "No, not absence of feeling; refusal, rather, to cozen her readers by appeal to feeling. 'Don't you feel like this? I do too.'"<sup>20</sup> As these lines illustrate, Loy does make a direct appeal to the feelings of her readers; Kenner's comment misses the appeal that resonates with readers who have the experience of looking "out" as opposed to looking "into things."

From personal property to intellectual pursuits, according to Loy, women are denied access to the markers of success and prestige afforded to men. In her manifesto she attests,

The value of man is assessed entirely according to his use or interest to the community, the value of woman, depends entirely on chance, her success or insuccess in manoeuvring [*sic*] a man into taking the life-long responsibility of her. ("FM," 155)

Her prose explanation in the manifesto explicates the disappointments of the collective we in "Virgins." These subjects must stay inside and fret about their lack of a dowry, and even when they are able to leave their enclosures they are not allowed to have goals or aims beyond their desirability, which contributes to their success in the marriage market. When the virgins speak, they "squeak" and Loy characterizes them as "[w]asting our giggles" ("V," 22). Burstein reasons that "the more women talk about sex—in this particular way: breathy squeaky—the more they partake of, even contribute to, the repressive economy, writ here as typographical negation" (CM, 169). The results of that ineffectual femininity contribute to the false belief in the "god" of love, a belief that keeps virgins complicit in the economy trading on their flesh.

Virginity does not serve Loy's poetic or her personal ethos. Rather than support the separation of men and women to protect against the exploitation of women, Loy held that "the only point at which the interests of the sexes merge



is the sexual embrace," which meant that sex had to be recovered from charges of sinfulness as well as the idealizations of "Love" ("FM," 154). She wrote in her manifesto, "there is nothing impure in sex—except in the mental attitude to it" and held that the understanding of that fact "will constitute an incalculable & wider social regeneration than it is possible for our generation to imagine" ("FM," 156). Loy also understands, as demonstrated by "Virgins," that wrapping sex in the cloak of an idealized love does a disservice to women promised this falsehood. To avoid the dangers of shaming and glorifying, Loy recuperates sex by treating the subject frankly, even humorously, to unveil its triviality and disappointments. For Loy, love is not a god; it is a barnyard animal that needs to be fed and cleaned up after. She recovers sex by drawing attention to its banality.

Loy's transgression of traditional feminine propriety engenders an alternative "feminine" speaker, who requires no partner in the creative act of the poem. In *Songs to Joannes*, Loy wrote her way out of negation by countering "institutionalized forms of feminism" emanating from what she considered the "Parasitism" of British Suffragettes and the "Prostitution" of birth control advocates Marie Stopes and Margaret Sanger.<sup>21</sup> If the love lyric has traditionally

been a way for a male lover to define, in language, his female beloved, Loy undermines this trope and draws attention to the messy corporeality of sex with her description of the speaker's beloved. In his autobiography, Williams remembered, "Never shall I forget our fascination with Mina's 'Pig Cupid, his rosy snout rooting erotic garbage.'"<sup>22</sup>

In song I the speaker's parody of her beloved's phallus serves as a metonym for the beloved during a sloppy and unsatisfying bout of coitus (ll. 3-4). As the poem later reveals, the beloved becomes reducible to the phallus because he conserves himself during sex and thus prevents complete connection or conception. The speaker also reduces her own genitalia to "erotic garbage." Without creative potential of either conception or connection the lover's and beloved's bodies become demeaned and worthless. Tellingly, the speaker does not open the poem with "Once upon a time," but recalls the line as a distracted thought during intercourse as recognition of the fantasy surrounding sex and love (*SJ*, 53). In a single bold line after a diminished climax, the speaker states, "These are suspect places," and readers are left to wonder what fills the gap between "these" and "are" (*ibid.*). The demonstrative pronoun without referent is complicated by

"suspect," which means "deserving suspicion or mistrust" and also derives from the Latin *susplicere*, which means "to look up to, admire, esteem."<sup>23</sup> The poem maintains the sex act as both grand and ethereal and, simultaneously, a trivial function of the body.

Loy emphasizes the ordinariness of sex and bodies by throwing them into stark comparison with broader images of eternity and spiritual life. In the second stanza of song I, she compares,

Constellations in an ocean  
Whose rivers run no fresher  
Than a trickle of saliva

(SJ, 53)

The excerpt is reminiscent of Pound's single-image poems, but with a sharpness developed through a comparison meant to diminish rather than aggrandize. The speaker undercuts a poetic description of climax in order to lay bare the excretion, often ignored or deemed unclean, of fluids during the sex act. DuPlessis maintains that Loy's "excessive, or exaggerated attention to the one act hidden in the *carpe diem* convention, although its constant point" allows her to

override the poetic convention of romance both by a sense of aggression (*Carpe diem!* You don't even have to

ask!) where she represents herself continuously as a sexual woman, and by a sense of judgment, where she represents her skeptical, damaging analysis of what can happen after the 'achievement' of bliss of completion promised in the convention of romance (*Carpe diem/dies irae*). ("SO," 66)

Instead of amplifying the splendor of the act left unnamed and unnamable in a major version of love poetry, Loy chooses instead to make the experience explicitly comprehensible. Uninterested in negating the experience of the body, the feminine persona of *Songs to Joannes* draws on evocative physical imagery to clarify the sexual experience.

Loy skillfully reorients the expansiveness of the oceans and rivers to draw attention back to the smallness of the body and the reality of bodily experiences. Kinnahan explains that Loy "demystifies romantic love while retaining a central focus upon the relationship between the sexes," and that her poems revel "in the body's functions, dwelling upon its skin and tissue and fluids as ways of figuring love" in an "attempt to render desire fully incarnate" (*PF*, 55, 56). In song IX, Loy repeats her formula of comparison by beginning with an expansive image only to figure the core of that vastness as inchoate and unsubstantiated:

When we lifted  
 Our eye-lids on Love  
 A cosmos  
 Of coloured voices  
 And laughing honey

And spermatozoa  
 At the core of Nothing  
 In the milk of the Moon (*SJ*, 56)

The first stanza drips with sentimentality, and does not have any pretense toward logic. The synesthesia of colorful voices and sentient honey all sound ridiculous in Loy's arch tone, and the short lines mock the breathless "squeak" she derides in "Virgins." Loy's lines predate Pound's comparison of spermatozoic particles to the "form-comparing and form-combining" powers of thought in the introduction to Remy de Gourmont's *Natural Philosophy of Love*, but her words are farsighted in mocking an imaginary universe predicated on masculine modes of expression.<sup>24</sup> Instead, they serve as an incisive critique of the actual universe she inhabits.

**"One little whining beast": Reinstating Maternity as Part of the Sexual Progression**

While Loy sympathized with the need to strip sexuality of its idealizing baggage, she did not choose to divorce heterosexual intercourse from conception. Burke quotes a correspondence between a friend of Loy's who wrote, "There are those of us over here who won't believe 'That's' all Love is" and Loy's commentary to Mabel Dodge Luhan that her friend was experiencing "virginal hysterics. . . . Of course 'Thats' [sic] all nothing and yet 'Thats' all it is—the *more* is spiritual effervescence" ("NP," 41). Essentially, sex is just another bodily function and yet it affects much of human life, just as most bodily functions do. By extension, then, maternity is the bodily function unique to women as a consequence of sex and Loy appreciated that "women's ignorance of sexual realities stood in the way of their self-fulfillment" ("NP," 41). In 1909 Loy wrote, "My conceptions of life evolved while . . . stirring baby food on spirit lamps—and my best drawings behind a stove to the accompaniment of a line of children's clothes hanging round it to dry."<sup>25</sup> Rather than treating maternity as separate from sexuality, Loy insists on recognizing the fraught relationship between the two functions in *Songs to Joannes* and "Human Cylinders." While she recognized a woman's right to maternity regardless of marital status in the "Feminist Manifesto," she did not escape a eugenics

narrative, also present in the work of birth control advocates Marie Stopes and Margaret Sanger, that led her to affirm: "Every woman of superior intelligence should realize her race-responsibility, in producing children in adequate proportion to the unfit or degenerate members of her sex—" ("FM," 155). Her love poems highlight the frustrations of unsuccessful or aborted maternity as an additional disappointment to a failed romance experienced as a failed sexual relationship.

Song XIII utilizes the direct address common to the love lyric, and draws on the power play of lover/subject and beloved/object to explore the impossibility of union between man and woman through a failed conception. Typical of a love lyric, the lover calls to the beloved at the beginning of the poem—"Come to me"—but then the beloved is quickly slated as secondary to the "Something" preoccupying the lover (*SJ*, 57). The first "something" is not capitalized, but the remaining eight iterations of the word are, while "you" is never capitalized. Although "something" is a noun, its unknown but predetermined referent allows it to work like a pronoun, placing it on a grammatically equal footing with "you" and "I." "Something" noticeably disappears from the poem, however, once the speaker's subjectivity is joined to the beloved's with the plural

pronouns "us" and "we," both lowercased (*SJ*, 58). The speaker's tone dissipates at this point, indicating loss, while the poem ends with a struggle between the subject and object:

Oh that's right  
 Keep away from me      Please give me a push  
 Don't let me understand you      Don't realise me  
 Or we might tumble together  
 Depersonalized  
 Identical  
 Into the terrific Nirvana  
 Me you-you-me (*ibid.*)

The tone is derisive and biting, but the beloved's power over the speaker is made clear by the speaker's inability to act. The beloved himself will decide to stay away or push her away: he will "let" her understand him, and choose whether or not to "realise" her. Lines beginning with capital "I"—"Identical" and "Into the terrific Nirvana"—attempt to reinsert the subject pronoun, but to no avail. Instead the final line offers only the direct object pronoun "me," not an actor, but something acted upon. The double iteration of "you" in the same line mirrors the beloved's power for separation: in a kind of palindrome formation, "you" comes between "me" and "you," as well as



"me" and "me." Not only has the beloved somehow erased the speaker's "Something," but he prevents her realization of herself, as part of a couple or as an independent entity. The creative power of maternity made possible by the beloved is also stifled by the beloved.

The song's use of "I" and "you," pronouns common to the love lyric, simultaneously structures the struggle between the lover and beloved and draws the poem into a world of lived experience. The poem begins with a separate "I" and "you," and a "Something taking shape"—perhaps not an actual conception, but the idea of creating a child (*SJ*, 57). As the lover and the beloved join as "we" and "us," the speaker seems familiar with the disappointing sexual act, but evinces hope that their intercourse could be different:

Let us be very jealous

Very suspicious

Very conservative

Very cruel

Or we might make an end of the jostling of aspirations

Disorb inviolate egos

Where two or three are welded together

They shall become god

— — — — — (*SJ*, 58)

Despite their pronominal joining, these lines indicate a barrier between the couple. If they are both acting "jealous," "suspicious," "conservative," and "cruel," their guardedness serves as prophylactic. The beloved is keeping something from the lover, which could be realized if he were to "disorb inviolate egos." Visually and phonically, "disorb" is reminiscent of disrobing, and also indicates the removal of an orb as a sign of sovereignty. The "orb" of *Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose: 1923-1925* stands in for the "lucent" moment when ideas and sounds crystalize into language for young Ova, the childhood representation of Loy. In *Songs to Joannes*, however, this crystallization is impossible because the barrier between the lovers is impenetrable. The beloved maintains separation, and sovereignty, throughout the course of the sex act, yet denies his partner the opportunity for the equality she could realize through conception.

Critics often turn to Loy's "Parturition" to explicate her treatment of childbirth, but for including childbirth in a love poem, "Human Cylinders" better exemplifies Loy's insistence that maternity be part of any conversation about sex. Specifically, the three-stanza poem grapples with the dangers of excluding maternity, and reveals it to be a facet of the conversation that requires more care and

attention. Singular pronouns are sublimated into "us," or abstracted into the "simplifications of men," or another metonymic phallus that "Serves me the core of the kernel of you."<sup>26</sup> The first two stanzas contend directly with the easy availability of intercourse even when an emotional or intellectual connection is absent:

And at least two of us  
 Loved a very little  
 Without seeking  
 To know if our two miseries  
 In the lucid rush-together of automatons  
 Could form one opulent well-being ("HC," 40)

Loy's speaker understands that their consummation will yield "One little whining beast" whether or not the two recognize the

Absence of corresponding between the verbal sensory  
 and reciprocity  
 Of conception  
 And expression (*ibid.*, 41, 40)

The poem juxtaposes the simplicity of "human cylinders" with their powerful ability to create life. The child is not described in mechanical terms, like the parents, but in prehistoric terms in its "longing" for the "antediluvian burrow" (*ibid.*, 41). If male modernists like W. B. Yeats

and T. S. Eliot asked readers to imagine what progress had wrought in "The Second Coming" (1920) and *The Waste Land* (1922), respectively, Loy asks readers to imagine that kind of consciousness for the most personal of decisions involved in love and sex, lest we "Destroy the Universe / With a solution" (*ibid.*).

### **Love's Failure and Loy's Success**

*Songs to Joannes* is a set of love poems that effectively constellates the emotions resulting from the Loy's confrontation with masculinity, femininity, sex, love, and maternity as a modern woman. In response to her literary agent asking for "something without a sex undercurrent" after "Love Songs" had been published in *Others*, Loy responded: "I think the anglo saxon [*sic*] covered up-ness goes hand in hand with a reduction of the spontaneous creative quality—there's *nothing* covered up in Italy" (*BM*, 191). Reduction, a kind of negation in process, could not serve Loy's functional aesthetics. Instead, she maintains that poetry should make legible and comprehensible that which so often goes ignored. Despite her own shocking material, she maintains that this is not about shock alone: "English men write about prostitutes and it's found daring—but we all know there are prostitutes—but

nobody tries to find out how or rather express what they react to things" (*ibid.*).

Loy recognized that although the love poem regularly gestured to sex, the feminine (heterosexual) experience had been largely conscripted by breathless anticipation or shuddering ecstasy that reinforced masculine sexual prowess. The advancements of sexology and institutional feminism had not solved this problem. A portrayal of heterosexual romance in terms of the body's functions, the gendered power struggle therein, and a woman speaker voicing her dissatisfaction with both, however, was a new concept for moderns. The resistance to Loy's articulated disappointment demonstrates a continued resistance to the range of human feeling available to women as speaking subjects. Loy attests that "life can only evolve something more ample for us—if we help it by getting right into our emotions" (*ibid.*). Her functional love poems provide just the amplifying mechanism for such an evolution.

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<sup>1</sup> Helen Hoyt, "A Retort," *Others* 3, no. 3 (1916): n.p.

<sup>2</sup> Linda A. Kinnahan, *Poetics of the Feminine: Authority and Literary Tradition in William Carlos Williams, Mina Loy, Denise Levertov, and Kathleen Fraser* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 49; hereafter abbreviated in text as *PF*.

<sup>3</sup> Jessica Burstein, *Cold Modernism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 196; hereafter abbreviated in text as *CM*.

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- <sup>4</sup> Suzanne W. Churchill, *The Little Magazine Others and the Renovation of Modernist American Poetry* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 191.
- <sup>5</sup> As quoted in Carolyn Burke, "The New Poetry and the New Woman: Mina Loy," in *Coming to Light: American Women Poets in the Twentieth Century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), 44 (hereafter cited in text as "NP").
- <sup>6</sup> Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "'Seismic Orgasm': Sexual Intercourse and Narrative Meaning in Mina Loy," in *Mina Loy: Woman and Poet* (Orono, ME: National Poetry Foundation, 1998), 50; hereafter abbreviated in text as "SO."
- <sup>7</sup> Virginia Kouidis, *Mina Loy: Woman and Poet* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 47.
- <sup>8</sup> Tim Hancock, "'Unworthy of a Serious Song'? Modern Love Poetry and Its Critics," *Cambridge Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (2003): 4.
- <sup>9</sup> Ezra Pound, "How to Read," in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1954), 25; "List of Books," *The Little Review* 4, no. 11 (1918): 57-58.
- <sup>10</sup> Suzanne Clark, *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 2.
- <sup>11</sup> Paul Peppis, "Rewriting Sex: Mina Loy, Marie Stopes, and Sexology," *Modernism/modernity* 9, no. 4 (2002): 576.
- <sup>12</sup> Mina Loy, "Feminist Manifesto," in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, ed. Roger L. Conover (New York: Farrar, 1996), 154 (hereafter cited in text as "FM"). Loy's use of enlarged font size will be represented with all caps.
- <sup>13</sup> Eric Murphy Selinger, "Love in the Time of Melancholia," in *Mina Loy: Woman and Poet* (Orono, ME: National Poetry Foundation, 1998), 22.
- <sup>14</sup> Quartermain, "'The Tattle of Tongueplay,'" 85, 87.
- <sup>15</sup> Carolyn Burke explains:  
 The first, 'Build Your Own Alphabet,' was housed in a box containing the pieces with which the twenty-six letters were formed: made of inexpensive plastic, these pieces were to be laid on a board 'during the process of Alphabet Construction.' The accompanying script for the teacher or 'older playfellow' in charge might seem repetitive, but 'it is this repetition,' she explained, 'that, I found in my own experience, fixes the letters so easily and firmly in the budding mentality.' The child was won over as soon as the teacher revealed the 'magic' that could be performed as one letter turned into another."

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Carolyn Burke, *Becoming Modern: The Life of Mina Loy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 391; hereafter abbreviated in text as *BM*.

<sup>16</sup> Mina Loy, *Songs to Joannes*, in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1996), 65-66; hereafter abbreviated in text as *SJ*.

<sup>17</sup> Marianne Moore, "New Poetry Since 1912," in *Modernism: An Anthology of Source Documents*, ed. Vassiliki Kolocotroni, Jane Goldman, and Olga Taxidou (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1998), 430.

<sup>18</sup> Loy, "Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots," 22; hereafter abbreviated in text as "V."

<sup>19</sup> Valentine de Saint-Point "Futurist Manifesto of Lust 1913" in *Futurist Manifestos*, ed. Umbro Apollonio (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), 70-74.

<sup>20</sup> Hugh Kenner, "To Be the Brancusi of Poetry," *New York Times*, 1982, sec. Books.

<sup>21</sup> Matthew Hofer, "Outlaw Politics and 'Common Housewives': Mina Loy and Her Silent Years" (unpublished manuscript, January 21, 2016), Word file, 200.

<sup>22</sup> William Carlos Williams, *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1967), 147.

<sup>23</sup> OED Online, s.v. "suspect," accessed December 2015, <http://www.oed.com.libproxy.unm.edu/view/Entry/195138>.

<sup>24</sup> Remy de Gourmont, *The Natural Philosophy of Love*, trans. Ezra Pound, Black & Gold (New York: Liveright, 1942), 301.

<sup>25</sup> Loy, *The Last Lunar Baedeker*, ed. Roger L. Conover (Manchester, UK: Carcanet, 1985), lxvi.

<sup>26</sup> Loy, "Human Cylinders," in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, 40; hereafter abbreviated as "HC" in text.

## Chapter 4

### **"This is all beyond you": Transgression and Creative Force in the Early Love Poems of William Carlos Williams**

Art is the sole release for both man or woman but a woman is more vulnerable in the world's eye.  
-William Carlos Williams

Known for his radical break from poetic tradition, it is little surprise William Carlos Williams's work engages with traditional forms entrenched in restrictive cultural convention. In a letter to Mary Ellen Solt, quoted in the epigraph, Williams celebrates the poet for being "wonderfully sexual" despite the restrictions placed on her by current society and a long history, dating from at least Sappho on, of sexual repression for women.<sup>1</sup> Two of Williams's early poems, "The Young Housewife" (1916) and "The Ogre" (1917), both contend with and subvert "the world's eye" as it has often been represented in love poetry. Their conscientious recasting of tradition prepares the way for Williams's interest in the problems of love poetry throughout his career.

The history of love poetry that Williams critiques tends to valorize sex by eliding it with love and to devalue experience as a fall from grace rather than a pathway to knowledge. The nineteenth-century "Cult of the



Child" or "La Fillete" endorsed "a love of girl-children that was emphatically anti-sexual," and that "maintained a division between the adored girl-child and the sexual girl, and displayed a desperate wish to preserve the sexless 'innocent.'"<sup>2</sup> Poetry by girl-child lovers such as Ernest Dowson, a member of the Edwardian Rhymer's Club, highlights a wish to see girls remain innocent and disconnect them from the sexuality associated with womanhood. The transformation, or fall, from girlhood to womanhood hinges on sexual experience and knowledge. It necessitates disgrace. Masculine subjects maintain authority because they can have access to sexual knowledge without disgrace. The love poem, which "as an imaginative construction, invites detached contemplation of the spectacle of sex," consequently embodies a particularly dangerous risk for the feminine imagination and is relegated to the safe keeping of a masculine poet who cannot be ruined by sexual knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

Williams's use of poetic transgression, not always violent, often yields a particularly modern ambiguity in forcing the mind of the reader to hold multiple ostensibly contradictory images at once. Transgression in the modern love poem prevents stability with and in the poem, and creates tension through the constant possibility of

transgressive contact—violent or otherwise. In his analysis of Hegel, Steve McCafferey explains that “transgression is compelled to enact itself across a permanent barrier that separates the two terms that remain impervious and inviolable to any appropriation.”<sup>4</sup> His concept of a “general economy,” one that allows for excess and works through shifts and destabilizations of meaning, treats a barrier “as an actual target for dissolution” and elucidates this kind of tension.<sup>5</sup> Utilizing poetic transgression, in form or content, thereby creates an energy toward and across boundaries, which makes it particularly useful in highlighting and critiquing social boundaries as Williams so often does.

Throughout his career, Williams champions a poetics of contact, often explained through transgression. In his first essay on Marianne Moore, he asserts:

that special things and special places are reserved  
for art. . . . This is unbearable. Poetry is not  
limited in that way. It need not say either

Bound without.

Boundless within.<sup>6</sup>

For Williams, poetry is neither restricted by social constructions nor romantically vast and sublime; it is, instead, something local, sensual, and real. Poetry is

"important only as evidence, in its structure, of a new world which it has been created to affirm. . . . a new world that is always 'real'" (*SE*, 196). Williams's method for achieving this kind of understanding is through direct contact, but this presents challenges for a version of American culture antithetical to his project:

The characteristic of American life is that it holds off from embraces, from impacts, gaining by fear, safety and time in which to fortify its prolific carcass. . . . Delay, all through youth, halt and cessation, not of effort, but of touch, all through life as it is learned: no end save accumulation, always upon the way to BIGGER opportunity; we keep realization from the mind with a purpose till men are trained never to possess fully but just to SEE.<sup>7</sup>

Lack of touch prevents understanding and disconnects the individual from reality, specifically, through fear. I am not seeking to exonerate Williams or account for actions in his personal life, but this chapter will expand the realm of possible interpretations and point to ways "The Ogre," and "The Young Housewife" specifically anticipate later conversations about gender and transgression before reinterpretations based upon Freudian analysis or second and third wave feminist criticism become readily available.

No poet always accomplishes his or her aims, but Williams's influence on field poetics<sup>8</sup>, contemporary American poetry, and the accomplishments of later poets such as Robert Creeley, are better understood in terms of his project rather than an easy demonization of his more provocative verse or speculative neuroses.<sup>9</sup>

The speakers in Williams's poem "The Young Housewife" and poem "The Ogre" represent a twentieth-century response to limitations in access to sexual knowledge. Williams highlights both the threat of and actual occurrences of trespassing to question the efficacy of early twentieth-century sexual morality and, more specifically, the gendered traditions in love poetry that have implicitly complied with such morality.<sup>10</sup> The speakers' intimate knowledge of and thoughts about the women in these two poems illustrate masculine power and the constant danger for women restricted from sexual knowledge. These self-reflexive speakers demonstrate the repercussions and possibilities of pushing on and through boundaries by enacting transgression.

My analysis the affective recognition of distance and proximity in these poems. Transgression can indicate a movement across boundaries or into a space that is off-limits. Examining the absorptive and anti-absorptive

aspects of these texts will highlight Williams's use of transgression as an affective technique. I contend that these iterations of the modernist love poem probe the limits of intimacy and eros in and through literary art in order to call for new and more balanced relationships between men and women. In pushing subjects together (sex and young women or girls) that twentieth-century society restrict from contact and moving beyond frontiers of traditional poetic forms, Williams puts pressure on the boundaries of what the speaking subject can say about sex and how he or she can say it.

**"In negligee": Ambiguity and "The Young Housewife"**

"The Young Housewife" uses poetic transgression to make the familiar appear unfamiliar and draw attention to a potentially or imagined violent fate for the young housewife. The speaker's account of a young housewife whom he knows, or fantasizes that he knows, intimately, is complicated by his seemingly illogical descriptions and the imminent violence of the crushed leaves at the end of the poem. His commentary on the housewife and his action in the car bring the two into dangerous proximity:

and I compare her  
to a fallen leaf.

The noiseless wheels of my car  
rush with a crackling sound over  
dried leaves as I bow and pass smiling.<sup>11</sup>

The poem juxtaposes an echo of Shakespeare's sonnet 18 that begins "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day," a sonnet foretelling of the beloved's eternal life in art, with lines that seem to note the young housewife's decline and imminent destruction. Both Shakespeare's lines and Williams's, however, note the power of the speaker/poet to determine the fate of objects within the poem.

It is unclear what is "fallen" about the young housewife despite the image of the fallen woman being a popular trope in literature—especially literature about love and sex. Fallen women are often deemed so because of their sexual experience or knowledge, whether they gained that knowledge by volition or force. The tradition of the fallen woman, popularized through eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels, stands in direct contradiction to the budding modernist notion that women could be sexually educated and should be in control of their sexuality. The speaker's comparison could highlight a disappointment in the young housewife's sexual knowledge because of her marriage or an illicit interaction with the speaker himself, but the common trope seems unsatisfying

considering Williams's disdain for symbolism. Marjorie Perloff calls the speaker's identification of the housewife an "absurd comparison since surely the young housewife—she is constantly doing things, moving about, calling the ice-man or fish-man, tucking in stray ends of hair—is the very opposite of a fallen leaf," and asks "how do noiseless wheels crackle?"<sup>12</sup> Her analysis underlines the uselessness of finding symbolic meaning in the comparison, but misses the opportunity to recognize how the noiselessness of the tires provides the very opportunity to hear the crackling of the leaves, a violence that would otherwise go unnoticed. Williams's Shakespearian invocation and the direct object phrasing, "I compare her," knowingly provoke such a reading. By the end of the poem, the question of whether she is fallen because of her married state, her age, or some inappropriate intimacy with the speaker is unimportant as compared to her fate: she, by virtue of his comparison, is crushed. The violence, an act of transgression on her body via the crushing contact of the car with the leaves, is the lasting and unambiguous impact of her fallenness. In this instance, and later in the "The Ogre," Williams manipulates poetic transgression to show the inadequacy of direct and paraphrasable meaning, especially when defining the other or beloved with poetic language.

The juxtaposition of *young* and *housewife* highlights the housewife's dual position in youth and marriage that does not appear contradictory in the title, but the poem develops both ideas in a way that prevents either from subsuming the other, emphasizing her liminal and restricted state. Her youth suggests a lack of experience like the girl-child adored by "The Cult of the Child," while her status as a housewife assumes both expertise in running a household as well as sexual experience and knowledge. The speaker's description of her allows these two seemingly dissonant states to coexist: "in negligee" and "shy, uncorseted, tucking in / stray ends of hair" (CP1, 57). The mention of a negligee, without any clarity as to how the speaker might know this to be true, hints at the provocative attire of a woman who is conscious of being seen by her sexual partner. The clothing item is generally thin, semi-transparent, and serves to ornament the body rather than cover it. Williams's peculiar syntax, "in negligee," lacks an article to distinguish the term as a specific garment. It more closely resembles the French adjectival construction, *négligé*, which describes one who is "negligently attired" or in a "state of being utterly unprepared."<sup>13</sup> The lack of corset could describe a girl child not yet initiated into womanhood and who does not



need a corset, a modern woman disdainful of such nineteenth-century relics, or mirror this state of unpreparedness. Her shyness would then project a lack of experience in the world, especially when forced to interact with several adult men who may or may not be strangers. However, the self-consciousness that causes her to tuck in her stray hairs, another possible cause of her shyness, indicates that she understands the societal expectations for women to maintain their appearance and, thus, their respectability. Young or not, Williams recognizes that women at every age are subject to societal expectations for composure: they are constantly being shaped to fit an elusive ideal.

The young housewife, through the speaker's paradoxical descriptions, exemplifies the modern multi-valenced subject who seems necessarily understood only through ambiguity. As a woman in her husband's home, or a "shy" and "uncorseted" girl outside the home, she remains subject to the speaker's calculating observations. As either girl or housewife, she is off-limits to the speaker, and yet through poetic transgression the lines increase the poem's memorable tension. The speaker begins by sharing intimate knowledge of the housewife, "At ten A.M. the young housewife / moves about in negligee behind / the wooden walls of her

husband's house," but his familiarity seems all the more strange since their interaction is as formal as a "bow" (CP1, 57.) The "wooden walls of her husband's house," his enclosure within his vehicle, and the curb which marks her boundary with the outside world all point to the distances and barriers between the speaker and the housewife (*ibid.*). Despite all these barriers—social, literal, and poetic—the speaker knows the housewife's routine intimately and his descriptive comparison of the "fallen leaf" forces the speaker and the young housewife into destructive proximity by the end of the poem.

The description of the "young housewife" exposes her liminal state, as she seems neither wholly a woman nor wholly a child, but ambiguously both. Such diverse poet-critics as William Empson and McCaffery provide useful frameworks for this kind of ambiguity. Empson accounts for the dissatisfaction felt by the reader when resisting ambiguity, demonstrating the incommensurable yet simultaneously possible existence of the young housewife as initiated and uninitiated to the feminine experience:

the only way of forcing the reader to grasp your total meaning is to arrange that he can only feel satisfied if he is bearing all the elements in mind at the moment of conviction; the only way of not giving

something heterogeneous is to give something which is at every point a compound.<sup>14</sup>

For the purposes of this analysis, "compound" is not meant as a way to muddle meaning, but a way of understanding distinct, concurrent options equally necessary "to grasp" the "total meaning." For Williams's poems, the constant shaping of women, from childhood to adulthood, means that they are a compound form of girls and women, both naïve and accountable to a world of gendered expectations.

Ambiguous also describes the legal status of young women during Williams's lifetime, and the shift in legal language as well as the media campaigns that drove such shifts contribute to a fuller understanding of what it could have meant to be a "young housewife" at the beginning of the twentieth century. Carolyn Cocca explains that during "the 1890s, statutory rape laws were changed in virtually every state," and raised the age of consent from 10 or 12 to 16 or 18.<sup>15</sup> These laws were gender specific, and maintained an exception if the male perpetrator married his female victim. The 1910 Mann Act, also known as the White Slave Traffic Act, was another example of Progressive Era reform and hysteria aimed at protecting working-class white women newly exposed to the freedoms of urban life and economic independence. The Mann Act prosecuted the

transportation of (white) women across state lines "for the purpose of prostitution or debauchery, or for any other immoral purpose."<sup>16</sup> In 1912 it was used to prosecute Jack Johnson, the reigning heavyweight champion boxer and a black man, for charges of abduction when he traveled with his white girlfriend across state lines.<sup>17</sup> Because of its vague language—"any other immoral purpose"—the law was enforced inconsistently and allowed lawmakers to "define, however unscientifically, the elements of the genus of sexual immorality."<sup>18</sup> In 1916, then, a young housewife could legitimately illustrate the troubling ambiguity of both woman and girl. The sanctioned sexuality of a woman could just as easily be prosecuted as the rape of a girl depending on her marital status, with little regard for the personal agency of that individual.

### **Reading Closely with "The Ogre"**

A poet like Williams, whose project revolves around the cleanness of his language and the precision of his line, demands and repays careful attention: his poems offer understanding while challenging the conventional primacy of meaning. Much like *Spring and All*, "The Ogre" is an early effort to create through annihilation. It destabilizes conventional understandings of meaning and subjectivity

through its complicated relationship between form and content to create an understanding of how transgression can function in poetry. Thus, it reveals through affect a non-semantic understanding. Charles Bernstein proposes that

[c]reating an absorptive text may or may not be the object of a poem. But the dynamic of absorption is central to all reading and writing.<sup>19</sup>

While absorptive reading was not the aim of innovative modernists, the absorptive aspects present in "The Ogre," such as unstylized diction or syntax and the first-person speaker, generally allow for a more traditionally realistic experience. Paired with the anti-absorptive aspects of the transgressive content, moments of enjambment, the sudden change in address, or ornamental language, these aspects maintain the tension in a poem that poses questions about limitations in language.

Despite critical silence or disapproval, the transgressive aspects of "The Ogre" create the contact Williams will seek and articulate over the next two decades. Notable as two of the few scholars to directly engage with "The Ogre," Carl Eby and Julio Marzán mistakenly psychoanalyze Williams rather than analyzing the poem and consequently assume that Williams must have experienced

these feelings himself in order to write about them. Eby claims that Williams's "overt avoidance of symbolism suggest[s] that his penchant for resolving dualism is in fact but the flip side of a preoccupation with dualism itself, the logical hallmark of the narcissistic Lacanian Imaginary."<sup>20</sup> Marzán presumes that the poem is a "dark confession of Williams's urges."<sup>21</sup> In Stephen Burt's work on youth and lyric, "The Ogre" is relegated to a note where Burt determines that the poem either "invites us to condemn Williams for his lecherous feelings or . . . to praise his surprising frankness."<sup>22</sup> The former does not offer us any new understanding of the poem, and the latter naturalizes the feelings Williams expresses without exploring his complex articulation of a culturally and legally off-limits erotic engagement.

I contend that "The Ogre" is actively transgressive in both content and form in order to articulate evolving conditions of modernity. Attention to the poetic accomplishments of "The Ogre" situates the poem as an important source for understanding Williams's engagement with the problems of sex, gender, love, and power throughout his career. "The Ogre" emphasizes etiology, or causality, rather than consequences. The plainness of the language and the first-person speaker suggests an openness

out of keeping with the evasiveness of his thoughts; information is provided clearly, but important links are consistently missing. The process forces readers to question their understanding of the situation. The eeriness of the poem, despite a lack of any physical violence, highlights the assumptions readers make when faced with this kind of interaction. Veronica Forrest-Thomson's concept of the "image-complex" can help readers respond to such contradictions. The image-complex "is the node where we can discover which of the multitude of thematic, semantic, rhythmical, and formal patterns is important and how it is to be related to the others."<sup>23</sup> Forrest-Thomson explains that because an image-complex operates and accounts for all these registers of interpretation, it is the only way to understand what a poem accomplishes. With Forrest-Thomson's image-complex in mind, the following portion of my analysis offers a series of close-readings elucidating the absorptive and anti-absorptive strategies Williams exercises to put pressure on boundaries between men and women, appropriate and inappropriate contact.

Williams's use of "petals," one of the only tropes in the poem, illustrates the limitations of traditionally poetic language in creating understanding: the synecdoche could have many meanings, but none of them affect the

action of the poem. The full line, "Your petals would be quite curled up," contains one of the more ornamental moments of the poem, but the classic image appears to offer meaning while frustrating it. The floral imagery combined with the reactive retraction imagined by the speaker may play on traditional connections between women, flowers, sexuality, and fears of violation, but Williams disconnects and rearticulates this symbol several times throughout his career.<sup>24</sup> With *In The American Grain* he reshapes the trope to assert something specific about the life or vivacity of female sexuality:

But the American girl who can run free must be protected in some other way so she is *frightened*—if possible. She is a low thing (they tell her). . . . It really doesn't do anything save alter the color of her deed, make it unprofitable, it scrapes off the bloom of the gift. (*IAG*, 183)

Williams is directly concerned with what flowers actually do; as the reproductive organ of a plant the bloom, or flower, is the point of productivity and possibility. In direct reference to *Al Que Quiere!*, he declares, "When I spoke of flowers, I was a *flower*, with all the prerogatives of flowers, especially the right to come alive in the Spring."<sup>25</sup> In what is arguably Williams's most famous love



poem, "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," flowers take on a variety of imaginative constructions that allow Williams to understand the growth of his work and the shifts in his relationships. At every stage, his understanding is local and connected to the reality of the flowers themselves. Understanding in the "The Ogre" is most possible if the images in the poem are considered in contact with local and real experience as opposed to diffused through traditional metaphoric or symbolic meaning, which Williams actively avoided.

In the lines of greatest proximity between the speaker and child, the meaning of the poetic language breaks down while emphasizing questions of agency. The second verse paragraph brings together aspects highlighting the poem's artifice with its sense of proximity—the danger of violence—and torques the affective tension of the poem:

yet you do feel the brushings  
of the fine needles;  
the tentative lines of your whole body  
prove it to me;  
so does your fear of me,  
your shyness;  
likewise the toy baby cart  
that you are pushing—

and besides, mother has begun  
to dress your hair in a knot.

These are my excuses. (*CP1*, 95)

The poetic language contradicts itself and evacuates meaning where it initially seems available creating tension specifically through dangerous ambiguity. Brushing is an action meant to smooth or touch lightly, but needles are objects meant for piercing: both function with regard to a sense of touch, but to very different ends. A similar complication occurs in the phrase "tentative lines," where the suggestion of experimentation, by virtue of the adjective, indicates some sort of agency. If the child were to achieve agency as the owner of her lines it would challenge her status as the object of the poem, the gaze, and "the brushings." The subject of the clause, however, is "the lines," which could be literal lines of the body or lines of a poem, a body of readable text. The confusion of what the lines actually are and, consequently, what they can actually tell, illustrates the poem's focus on etiology. The speaker is noticing symptoms of communication, but they shift in consequence from proving the girl's contact with the speaker's thoughts to being excuses for those thoughts, significantly troubling what at first appears to be an access to understanding the speaker's "excuses."

For a poet known for moving away from punctuation and end-stopped lines throughout his career, the use of end-stopped lines in "The Ogre" is striking and allows the poem to insist on a thoughtful or meditative pace. End-stopped lines feel independent and balanced as they move toward stanzaic forms and traditional verse. Like Williams's plain diction, drawn primarily from what Marianne Moore called "plain American which cats and dogs can read," the end-stopped lines give the appearance of clarity.<sup>26</sup> The strategy tempers the pace—providing the distance necessary for contemplation—while the speaker's words and thoughts force readers to engage directly and self-consciously with the transgressive content of the poem. The pause gives measure to the speaker's voice, whereas a largely enjambed poem might indicate a rush of emotion, hasty expression, or instability. The speaker's words are not meant to sound thoughtless or uncontrolled, which might otherwise excuse his direct engagement with the subject matter. Enjambment allows meaning to accrete across lines as the eye continues to move. It forces lines to make contact with one another in the mental processing of the reader, but "The Ogre" recasts and resists meaning as the lines continue and the tension of the poem is predicated on the fear of violence, not the violence itself.

The result of the speaker's confession is unclear by design, but the direct language and slow pace clearly outline the action: a male speaker looks at a girl child, has inappropriate thoughts, and, as his own accuser, attempts to justify those thoughts. The poem offers causality, but without a clear outcome. The end-stopped lines do not signal clear and complete thoughts; rather, the phrases distance themselves from one another even as the speaker's words bring him dangerously close to the child. His thoughts openly admit transgression, but the lines themselves remain in check, rarely overstepping their bounds to spill into the next. The ambiguity demonstrated by complicating content with form illustrates the complex affective tension maintained in the poem: the poem evokes discomfort, but without offering the kind of violent consequence that would cause that reaction.

The rare moment of enjambment also works like the end-stopped lines to structurally impose distance where the poem forces readers to contemplate the possibility of violent contact. Lines five and six work to achieve this kind of tension: "This is fortunate for they would / burn you to an ash otherwise" (*CP1*, 95). Splitting up the verbal complex "would burn" both withholds the violence of the immaterial thoughts and further separates the speaker from

the act of violence. The speaker will not burn her, but his thoughts, qualified by the modal verb, will somehow gain the materiality necessary to complete such an act. The choice of "would" instead of "will," uses the subtle nuance of the past tense to assume the inevitability of such transgression, without elucidating the circumstances in which such a conditional applies. The enjambment, like the end-stopped lines, holds the reader, the speaker, and child in an uneasy balance, anticipating but eluding violence.

The affect of transgression Williams creates with dangerous proximity through syntax and wordplay displays the power of poetic imagination. The poem actively resists comfortable understanding or interpretation and I judge this to be the reason it has received so little critical attention compared to the equally problematic poem, "The Young Housewife." Several of Williams's poems explore the dangerous situation or fate of young women, but this poem approaches a kind of directness and force that makes engagement uncomfortable. Its reference to flower petals, and their possible destruction, foregrounds one of the most critiqued gendered tropes of traditional western love poetry, but does not clearly rectify them. The precision with which it brings the child into the realm of danger, but holds danger at bay, creates a suspense unresolved by

the speaker's excuses. The poem ends, but the fear of violence remains present.

Evoking and reshaping the tropes of love poetry, such as the male lover and female beloved or the first-person speaker, Williams creates multi-valenced relationships between subjects and objects to observe problems in the dynamics and rigidity of traditional roles. In "The Ogre" these relationships hypostasize gendered power dynamics for examination and challenge available interpretations of those dynamics. The love poem provides an apt stage for Williams's explorations as it often relies on a subject (lover) and object (beloved) dichotomy. "The Ogre," in particular, utilizes the lyric trope of the first-person speaker as the lover, which encourages intimacy because his thoughts come unmediated by an outside narrator. The speaker in "The Ogre," however, very conscientiously moderates his immoderate thoughts. The poem itself is an act of mediation: a cover layer for a transgression that is "beyond" the beloved's realm of knowledge, and the reader's, but close enough to know the "lines" of the beloved's body (*ibid.*). Unlike the traditional lover, who might extol the beauties of his beloved or the pain at her loss, this poem specifically participates in a tradition where destruction

or violence results from contact between the lover and the beloved.

"The Ogre" complicates a clear subject and object relationship by shifting agency from the speaker to the child in the second verse paragraph, recasting and questioning the more traditional power dynamics of the first verse paragraph. The speaker addresses the child in both verse paragraphs, but in the first verse paragraph the action originates with the speaker and the child is conspicuously inactive:

Sweet Child,

Little girl with well-shaped legs

You cannot touch the thoughts

I put over and under and around you. (*ibid.*)

Unlike the "young housewife," whose actual age and experience are obscured, the addressee in the "Ogre" is definitively not an adult woman. The speaker addresses her both as "Sweet child," and "Little girl" to doubly emphasize her status. The child is the subject of the address, the sentence, and begins the first three lines of the poem and, yet, her sole action is her inaction, an inability to "touch" the speaker's thoughts. Like the connotations of young or childish, the syntax of the poem emphasizes her lack of experience. Her conspicuous presence

in the beginning of the poem seems odd paired with her inaction—the poem calls the beloved into existence as a sort of tableau, something only to be looked at while the speaker develops his narrative.

The speaker, on the other hand, is characterized not only by action but an encompassing action. He has agency over his thoughts and “puts” them around her, actually filling the space around her body. In the second verse paragraph, the lines are checkered with the girl’s action: “yet you do feel the brushings”; “the tentative lines of your whole body / prove it to me”; “likewise the toy baby cart / that you are pushing—” (*ibid.*). The shift from inaction to action on the part of the girl develops her presence in the poem. At first she is only feeling, an action but a passive one. Then her body is proving, but the body is not necessarily an active agent despite the verb being more active. Finally, the girl is pushing her cart: she, the agent, is moving something physically, a degree of activity unachieved by the speaker in the poem. Moreover, unlike the speaker’s actions throughout the poem, which are dependent on the presence of the child and her actions, the child’s final action is in no way contingent on the speaker. In the closing lines of the poem, the child acquires not



only agency, but also an independence from the speaker that he does not equal.

The poem begins with complete clauses, but finishes with two clauses missing action verbs. The reader is left to wonder what these aspects of the child actually do. While the speaker seems to have control over his dangerous thoughts in the first verse paragraph, he has only excuses in the second and the consequences of his thoughts are absent. The poem itself, not the speaker, withholds the action and the unrealized touch he claims will burn the child seems to be beyond his agency by the closing lines. His self-consciousness exposes a concern for a lack of agency; in the very need to create excuses for his actions, the speaker becomes an object of judgment. The agency in the poem lies in the workings of the text itself. Lack of touch inhibits the violence of the poem, but the withheld action also cultivates the sense of fear and danger that make the poem uncomfortably remarkable.

By allowing both the speaker and the child to occupy the roles of subject and object, actor and acted upon, the verse paragraphs bring the child and speaker close to equality, but the speaker's role as speaker and child's lack of a voice maintains inequality. The speaker's presence in the world of the poem is affirmed by her action

of feeling, a sort of extra-sensory awareness to thoughts. The child's presence is affirmed by, and the cause of, those thoughts. They are interdependent entities. As Susan Stewart points out,

The cliché of the blind poet is one we must take seriously—for the poet beholds the other at the same time creates the conditions for beholding, seeing without needing to see. The poet is summoned by another and in turn summons another into presence.<sup>27</sup>

Subjectivity and objectivity shift and connect as the economy of the poem (re)distributes positions of power and agency. Although the speaker is not equated with the poet, as in Stewart's analysis, "The Ogre" illustrates her point in a very different context. Despite the demonstrated ambivalence in the subject/object relationship, "The Ogre" restricts the subversive capability of the child by framing the poem with the speaker's thoughts and words. The second verse paragraph gives her more agency and at the same time offers more excuses for the speaker's actions, thereby changing her from victim to perpetrator as the speaker blames her for his thoughts. As the lines themselves pile up, so do the reasons the speaker gives for his transgression, in form and content locking her beneath his thoughts.

### Contact and Complications

The child's agency positively correlates with the speaker's blame and exemplifies Williams's broader concerns for women in modern society, one that centers on gendered separations of sexual knowledge. In a specific engagement with women's sexuality, he explains:

[S]he said that no one could *imagine* what it meant to a girl to lose her virginity. But yes, I could imagine it, better than she. It means *everything* in America. . . . It means that she gets such a violent jolt from her past teaching and such a sense of the hatred of the world (as she conceives it must be) against her that she is ready to commit suicide. . . . That it might be the opening of wonders . . . never occurs to her. (*IAG*, 184).

According to Williams, a woman's sexual knowledge brings on condemnation, and this fact is frighteningly well known to her. Similarly, in "The Ogre" the speaker can "imagine," better than the child, his destructive potential for touch. The poem holds this irony alongside a reality where restricted knowledge often keeps women submissive to the very social mores that oppress them. For Williams, restrictions in contact and knowledge force restrictions in

language and he seeks rupture. He commends Stein for "smashing every connotation that words ever had," and Moore for breaking "through all preconception of poetic form and mood and pace" (*SE* 163; 121). His project for himself and others was based on constant attention to knowing and making contact with the real—whether that was an acceptable version of reality or not.

His address to young women in both the poems examined here taps into a fear in the collective imagination of modernists and contemporary readers. Similar to Mina Loy's call for the "surgical destruction of virginity," Williams's poems shock.<sup>28</sup> Although shock and discomfort are common strategies for innovative art, these two poems reveal a calculated understanding of how the ostensible protection of young women and girls could prove detrimental to modernism's innovative artistic aims. A few years after *Al Que Quiere!* was published, Jane Heap would publicly castigate the secretary of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, John Sumner, for claiming that the corruptibility of young girls was the consideration by which society should determine its moral policing. Her rhetorical response, "So the mind of the young girl rules this country?" was frighteningly accurate.<sup>29</sup> Young girls were—and often continue to be—asked to stand in for our

supposed collective goodness, morality, and virtue. The fierce protections, or verbal gestures toward protection, both silence agency and stifle experience. Young girls were too vulnerable to protect their own minds from corruption. And, although the New York Society for Suppression of Vice has long since closed up shop, "The Young Housewife" and "The Ogre" continue to disturb because young girls remain a touchstone for innocence and vulnerability.

These poems assert an early iteration of Williams's efforts to force contact between subject and object in order to create understanding through the imagination. His emphasis on touch and contact sets him apart from many high modernists, often accused of desiring to be removed from the real world.<sup>30</sup> Williams wants contact with the world and individuals in it: "What I said was that I go back to people. They are the origin of every bit of life that can possibly inhabit any structure, house, poem or novel of conceivable human interest" (*SE*, 178). The "social mask" or "egoistic world" has no place for Williams as he croons to his readers, "In the imagination, we are henceforth (so long as you read) locked in a fraternal embrace, the classic caress of author and reader. We are one. Whenever I say 'I' I mean also 'you.'" <sup>31</sup> His unity of "I" and "you"

offers subjectivity to the object and demands that the subject experience objectification.

Williams's insistence on contact between the reader and the poet through the imagination, manifested in a work of art, presents particular difficulties for both poems. To read the entire text is to be complicit, to acquiesce silently to the violence of the inappropriate thoughts, however ambiguously manifested. Roger Shattuck explains our discomfort in such a role noting that our "humanity entails not having complete insight into the motives and intentions of other people and even into our own"; he goes on to suggest that "'The veil of ignorance' . . . defines our humanity in both senses of the word *define*: to describe and to limit."<sup>32</sup> A poem exists on the page to be read and performed, but a witness to the poem cannot interpret away the act of transgression and as "the veil of ignorance is lifted" a reader must contend with her appreciation of a piece of art that is/seems out of bounds. Williams's solution to limitations in language is the imagination. According to him, the imagination acts as both "medium" and "force" that will "free the world of fact from the impositions of 'art' . . . and liberate the man to act in whatever direction his disposition leads."<sup>33</sup> Because Williams relies on poetry to create new worlds and

realities, poems cannot be bounded by rules and restrictions that cultivate fear and do not account for the local environment.

Williams's work pushes boundaries in language and form in order to push boundaries in the ways the modern subject can construct her or his reality. In the first large-scale effort to recuperate Williams for feminists, *Poetics of the Feminine*, Linda Kinnahan highlights this period as "marking his transition toward an embrace of radical, linguistically innovative poetry that culminates with *Spring and All* in 1923."<sup>34</sup> Her analysis suggests "an early focus within Williams's poetics upon the construction of experience or 'reality' through language" (*PF*, 19). This focus and effort continues to crystallize in his poems and prose throughout his career. In 1939, he maintains that the artist

does not translate the sensuality of his materials into symbols but deals with them directly. By this he belongs to his world and time, sensually, realistically. His work might and finally must be expanded—holds the power of expansion at any time—into new conceptions of government. (*SE*, 197).

A new world or new way of understanding is exactly what Williams makes of his early forays into love poetry, and

this transfigures the tradition of objectification in love poetry in the process.

The discomfort felt in response to Williams's "The Young Housewife" and "The Ogre," despite his grand and often admirable project, is not without warrant. Contact in experience and language may destroy boundaries and result in creation, but the actual physical contact in rape might also follow the same destructive and creative cycle. Kinnahan justifies Williams's frequent portrayal of objectified women in his work by arguing that Williams's "identification with the powerless, the degraded, the violated remains a central impulse often embattled with the awareness that his own position, as male, grants him power" (*PF*, 44). While this argument is not universally persuasive, Williams's display of powerless girls and women in several poems does recognize the state of the modern female subject as both multi-dimensional and precarious. By utilizing transgressive content and then pushing on the boundaries that constitute something as transgressive, "The Young Housewife" and "The Ogre" question the tenability of societal structures that force unilateral judgments. Williams recognizes the limitations of language as they exist for modernist poets, but sees the valuable possibilities in transgressing artistic and social



boundaries to prove to others that those boundaries are self-imposed. His project cannot be served by the maintenance of rhymed and metered poetry or the restriction of content to subject matter "appropriate" for art. He modernizes the familiar tropes of love poetry to explore the multiplicity of the modern subject and recognize the explicit necessity of troubling old forms and boundaries. Through their transgressions in content and form "The Young Housewife" and "The Ogre" present Williams's early recognition of the challenges of modernization and the dangers of refusing to modernize.

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<sup>1</sup> Dated April 25, 1960, the letter was later republished in the 1985 fall issue of *The William Carlos Williams Review*.

<sup>2</sup> Jad Adams, "William and Edna Clarke Hall: Private and Public Childhood, 'Your child forever,'" in *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 49.4 (2006), 399-400.

<sup>3</sup> Earl Miner, "Love Poetry," in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 706; There is a 2013 version of the *PEPP* that offers several careful analyses of regional and national love poetries and has proven useful elsewhere, but I retain this 1993 quote as a useful summation of the assumptions Williams is mostly likely writing under.

<sup>4</sup> Steve McCaffery, "Writing as a General Economy," in *Artifice and Indeterminacy*, ed. Christopher Beach (Tuscaloosa: U Alabama P, 1998), 210.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> William Carlos Williams, "Marianne Moore," in *William Carlos Williams: Selected Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1954), 130; hereafter abbreviated in text as *SE*.

<sup>7</sup> William Carlos Williams, *In the American Grain* (New York: New Directions, 1956), 175; hereafter abbreviated in text as *IAG*.

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<sup>8</sup> Field poetics serves as an umbrella term describing the work of several midcentury poets associated with Charles Olson and Black Mountain, such as Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov, and Ed Dorn. Olson's essay "Projective Verse" (1950) describes the aims and methods of field poetics, or "composition by field."

<sup>9</sup> Robert Creeley's first major collection was titled *For Love: Poems 1950-1960*. In 2008, he was lauded in *The New York Times* by poet August Kleinzahler as having "no equal among modern love poets writing in English" for his poem titled "The Warning," which opens with the stanza "For love—I would / split open your head and put / a candle in / behind the eyes."

<sup>10</sup> In the most recent entry on "love poetry," S. L. Bermann notes that modern and contemporary poetry "is increasingly aware of its many poetic encounters over time and geographic space." Roland Greene et al., *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton University Press, 2012), 816.

<sup>11</sup> William Carlos Williams, *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, ed. Christopher MacGowan and A. Walton Litz, vol. 1 (New York: New Directions, 1991), 57; hereafter abbreviated in text as *CP1*.

<sup>12</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985) 100; *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), xvi.

<sup>13</sup> OED Online, s.v. "négligée," *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. March 2015, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/125867?redirectedFrom=neglige>  
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<sup>14</sup> William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: New Directions, 1953), 238-9.

<sup>15</sup> Carolyn Cocca, *Jailbait: The Politics of Statutory Rape Laws in the United States* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2004), 12.

<sup>16</sup> Melissa Hope Ditmore, *Encyclopedia of Prostitution and Sex Work* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), 661.

<sup>17</sup> David J. Langum, *Crossing Over the Line: Legislating Morality and the Mann Act* (University of Chicago Press, 2007), 181.

<sup>18</sup> Ariela Dubler, "Immoral Purposes: Marriage and the Genus of Illicit Sex," *The Yale Law Journal* 115, no. 4 (2006): 762.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Bernstein, "Artifice of Absorption" in *A Poetics* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992), 23.

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<sup>20</sup> Carl Eby, "'The Ogre' and 'The Beautiful Thing': Voyeurism, Exhibitionism, and the Image of 'Woman' in the Poetry of William Carlos Williams" *William Carlos Williams Review* 22.2 (1996): 30.

<sup>21</sup> Julio Marzán, *The Spanish American Roots of William Carlos Williams* (University of Texas Press, 1994), 190.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Burt, *The Forms of Youth* (New York: Columbia UP), 219.

<sup>23</sup> Veronica Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), 16.

<sup>24</sup> Several experimental modernists employ this trope at the beginning of the twentieth century. See Marianne Moore's "To Browning" and Gertrude Stein's "Sacred Emily." Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven responds directly to Goethe's "Heidenröslein" in her poem "Thistlerose."

<sup>25</sup> William Carlos Williams, *I Wanted to Write a Poem*, ed. Edith Heal (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 19.

<sup>26</sup> Marianne Moore, *The Poems of Marianne Moore*, ed. Grace Schulman (New York: Penguin, 2003), 141.

<sup>27</sup> Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago, IL: U Chicago P, 2002), 146.

<sup>28</sup> Mina Loy, "Feminist Manifesto.," in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, ed. Roger L. Conover (New York: Farrar, 1996), 155.

<sup>29</sup> Edward De Grazia, *Girls Lean Back Everywhere* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 11.

<sup>30</sup> Jewel Spears Brooker, "To Murder and Create: Ethics and Aesthetics in Levinas, Pound, and Eliot," in *Rethinking Modernism*, ed. Marianne Thormählen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 55.

<sup>31</sup> William Carlos Williams, *Imaginations* (New York: New Directions, 1970), 89.

<sup>32</sup> Roger Shattuck, *Forbidden Knowledge* (New York: St. Martin's Press), 314.

<sup>33</sup> Williams, *Imaginations*, 20.

<sup>34</sup> Linda A. Kinnahan, *Poetics of the Feminine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 20; hereafter abbreviated in text as *PF*.

## Chapter 5

### "Astride": Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven's Queering of Love and the Love Poem

The Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, who was published in the annals of *The Little Review* more often than William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound and who was a frequent model for Man Ray, seems like an unforgettable figure of modernist culture.<sup>1</sup> Her aristocratic title and her avant-garde fashion creations ensured that Freytag-Loringhoven's stay in the United States did not involve much time in the background. Jane Heap called her "the first American dada," and "the only one living anywhere who dresses dada, loves dada, lives dada" ("BE," 442). Even before she became a dada artist, Freytag-Loringhoven was dedicated to traversing borders and boundaries: from crossing the ocean to travel from her homeland in Germany, to crossing the borders of gender construction and sexual mores, the Baroness famously and ardently flouted propriety in all its many guises.

To be "astride"—the title for my chapter and a title from one of the Baroness's poems—is to be in a "striding position; with the legs stretched wide apart" and its root comes from the Low German *strîden*, which means "to set the

legs wide apart, straddle, to take long steps."<sup>2</sup> To be astride is to use the body as a physical bridge between two spaces, and the word describes an act captured in mid-motion. The word aptly describes Freytag-Loringhoven's poetry and her ability to translate the material experience of the body directly into her poetry. She deploys dashes, portmanteau word constructions, homophonic wordplay, and provocative content into poems in order to create new intimacies between materials otherwise politely kept separated. The poem "Ah Me!" aptly constellates her understanding of the body, the bodily, and poetry:

As poetry-coitus urges  
 Driven courses rhythmic surges  
 Energy-  
 Executive ability.<sup>3</sup>

She calculates precise pacing and line length to energize her poems with a bodily momentum. Unlike the many failures the Baroness witnesses in lovers, the avant-garde art scene, and American culture writ large, her approach to art charges forward with its "executive ability," fully capable and operative. If the body can bring together the nude form—a shape classically celebrated in art—and a sophisticated waste processing system, then art, according

to the Baroness, must widen its stride to better capture the body's experiences.

By rooting her provocative aesthetics in the body, the Baroness "naturalizes" practices and pleasures that early twentieth century Americans often found strange and "queer." However, for Freytag-Loringhoven, queerness is not a reference to a same-sex object choice—which modern sexologists had labeled "inversion"—but as a description of her tactics for consistently flaunting her body as a tool for non-normative desires. My analysis proceeds from a combined definition developed by Anne Herrmann, with the help of Michael Warner, where *queer* "as the resistance to regimes of the normal' means not changing identities to justify desire, but desiring in ways that make strange the relations between identities."<sup>4</sup> By asserting her body and her sexuality as public art, in her presence and her poems, Freytag-Loringhoven forces separate entities, like English and German, or public and private subject matter, into surprising new intimacies. She reveals that the normative identities circumscribing gender, sex, and sexuality are no match for a body's variety of desire and capacity for associations.

By using the love poem as an outlet for her boundary-crossing identities, Freytag-Loringhoven proclaims not only

the queerness of her own sexuality but also the queer possibilities of the modernist love poem. In their essay "Sex in Public," Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner argue that "[m]aking a queer world has required the development of kinds of intimacy" that do not depend on privacy or private forms of personhood.<sup>5</sup> Berlant and Warner's argument helps to clarify the impact of Freytag-Loringhoven's innovations. While her artistic identity relied on her queering of the modern woman subject, her poetic project highlights the queer world demanded by poems that present sex for public consumption.

The Baroness's poems range from short quipping verses that poke fun at the normalized idiosyncrasies of her contemporaries to sharp, cataloguing structures that build and crash with a libidinal intensity often mirrored by the content of the poems themselves. Correlating the excitement of chasing wild ponies with the thrill of a nighttime lovers' rendezvous, the poem titled "Astride" escalates from a "Silverbugle" call that instigates the lines

Keening –

Heathbound

Roves

Moon

Pink –

Straddling

Neighing

Stallion:

"Hueessueessueesssooo

Hueeeeeee Prush

Hee Hee Heeeeeeeaaa

Ochkzpnjrprrrr

Hü

Hüü Hüüüüüü

Hü-Hü!"

Aflush

Brink

Through

Foggy

Bog

They

Slink -

Sink

Into

Throb

Bated.



Hush

Falls –

Stifling –

Shill

Crickets

Shrill –

Bullfrog

Squalls

Inflated

Bark

Riding

Moon's

Mica –

Groin –

Strident! (*BS*, 143)

The opposite of a monostich, this poem compiles a vivid sequence of evocative single words that invite questions about how combination and order operate. In most lines of poetry, nouns and verbs receive the metrical emphasis, but a poem with single-word lines reorients those metrical relationships. The poem has no articles and skillfully uses each line to describe, arrange, or amplify the lines before and after. The poem highlights the flexibility of poetic

language where parts of speech are able to adopt one another's qualities and functions, such as "Moon / Pink - " or "Throb / bated," where an adjective follows the noun and intensifies the verb-like qualities of the descriptor. In Ernest Fenellosa and Pound's understanding, all parts of speech find their root in action, and the Baroness's ordering helps to empower adjectives with the intensity of verbs.<sup>6</sup>

The dashes offer a beat to pause in a poem that otherwise tends to move quickly through the single-word lines. The single-word lines evoke the repetitive, building by "one and one" in a Steinian arithmetic of accretion where single units are distinctly privileged as necessary to the whole.<sup>7</sup> After a series of onomatopoeic cries the lines arc into a peak of tension with "Aflush / Brink" and then wind down with sibilants and past tense verbs in "Slink - / Sink." Where T. S. Eliot and Pound, among others, were popularizing the persona for their modernist poems, Freytag-Loringhoven wrote directly from the body: a woman's body, a German body, a dada body, and a creative body. Her work draws from the physical, but also emphasizes the physicality of the page, words, and symbols, stacking short lines into tall columns. Like the body she is fascinated

with, her poems ask readers to reevaluate the dependencies and associations of constituent parts.

To be "astride," to have a foot in two worlds, is to be both powerful in one's pervasiveness and to be exposed to greater vulnerability. The Baroness does not shrink from such a challenge and the exclamation "Strident!" that closes the penultimate stanza of "Astride" applies to her broader aesthetics and public persona. Rodolf Kuenzli argues that Freytag-Loringhoven's "insistence on being respected as writer and artist, her refusal to masquerade as a subservient lover, and her frank expression of her own desires and needs made her troublesome" to many of her contemporaries ("BE," 448). In "Astride," the Baroness plays on homophonic variations of "astride" in "straddling" and "strident." The former shares etymological roots with "astride," but the latter is a false cognate that comes from the Latin *stridentem* or creaky.<sup>8</sup> The poem appreciates that a body willing to submit to the vulnerabilities of being "astride" or "straddling," must also be willing to disrupt unexamined thought processes and restrictive mores with the "harsh, grating" noise that garners attention.<sup>9</sup> Freytag-Loringhoven was no greased wheel, and a poem like "Astride" demonstrates her willingness to disrupt and disturb in order to take clarifying risks for modern art.

Nonetheless, she frequently contended with the ways her most liminal qualities—her sexuality, sexual appetite, gender, economic status, nationality, and art—made her both a living legend and a struggling, often-exploited laborer in the avant-garde art scenes of Berlin, New York, and Paris. In order to subvert such possible exploitations Freytag-Loringhoven queered her relationship to sex and sexuality in gestures that permeated her life and her work. In describing her audition for a vaudeville theater in Berlin, after being stripped naked and dressed in sheer tights, she described the vaudeville boss's scrutiny as pleasurable, saying she felt "safe inside my meshshell" of exposure.<sup>10</sup> Irene Gammel highlights this scene as exemplary of Freytag-Loringhoven's penchant for locating "her safety zone in a high-risk danger zone. Already the risk of self and body was a trademark" (*BE*, 62). Despite the struggles she faced throughout her life, the Baroness refashioned a narrative often associated with exploitation into a triumph by queering her own relationship with her body, art, and commodification.

**"[T]ake it by the neck and make Art out of it": The Body as the Origin of Truth and Art**

Freytag-Loringhoven was not shy about bodies or bodily functions, and her intimate familiarity with the body provided her a philosophy for understanding and creating art from the materials of her life. Her 1920 essay "The Modest Woman" presents her body through the public functions of a machine-like efficiency. In this gesture she reclaims her body as a tool capable of action—with herself as the agent—rather than an object to be acted upon:

If I can eat I can eliminate — it is logic — it is why I eat! My machinery is built that way. Yours also — though you do not like to think of — mention it. . . . Why should I — proud engineer — be ashamed of my machinery — part of it? Is there any engineer of steel machinery who is? Unless he runs a ramshackle one? (BS, 287)

Her explanation may at first appear colloquial and homespun, but her emphasis on the body as a machine, a made thing with functions and usable parts, transfers usefully into her poetry and her artwork. If the body can bring together all of its diverse operations, including "elimination," then why should art not similarly bring together the diverse experiences of the body into form?

When readers accused *The Little Review* of printing the ravings of a mad woman in response to Freytag-Loringhoven's

"The Cast-Iron Lover," she responded by steering the conversation back to the effective mechanisms of the body.

In "The Art of Madness" she countered,

Is it not necessary for emotions to come out – is it not necessary for emotional people to be like insane sometimes? – to be more sane and steady and strong than others, weaker people, after that? Is it not wonderful to be able to control that then, that emotion, which otherwise would throttle you? – but take it by the neck and make Art out of it? and be free? (*BS*, 289-90)

As in her descriptions of consumption and elimination, the Baroness organizes emotions in terms of use: certain materials can be used by the body to create, and other materials must be eliminated. Moreover, by recognizing the body as a machine, a collection of functions, Freytag-Loringhoven can hold it as the prime natural example of straddling boundaries. In the face of the censors, her critics, and even at times her editors, Freytag-Loringhoven sought to shock American sensibilities by recognizing the proximity of normative and taboo ideas and actions.

In "Kindly" Freytag-Loringhoven effectively uses language to cross boundaries between the sacred and the profane, the conventional and the shocking, figured here as

the "heart" and the "fart." In the poem's conversation between the speaker and God she ventriloquizes for God, the self proclaimed "proud master of the arts":

He said:

"I made -

The foreparts

And the hinderparts -

I made the farts -

I made the hearts - - -

I am grand master of the arts!"

He said:

"Ahee!

I made the oyster shit the pearl-

I made the boy to screw the girl!"

Said He. (BS, 86)

Her mock gravity with the opening "He said" and closing "Said He" bookend the frank and crude lines articulating two of the most basic functions for most life forms. If the beginning brings "the word" and the word is God and the word is good, Freytag-Loringhoven's bouncy lines question the twentieth-century bindings being placed on the word, primarily by the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. The poem was written after *The Little Review* was

brought to trial for publishing James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and instead of curtailing her language she directly prodded censors. She subtitled the poem "Inspired by J.J.'s 'Ulysses,'" and offered preferred spellings for her expletives such as "(f-)" in place of "fart," with the footnoted comment, "As it can be printed should there arise any objection to candidness" (*BS*, 86). Over two decades later Ezra Pound's Canto LXXIV highlighted the root of "candid" in the Latin *candidus* in the lines, "what whiteness will you add to this whiteness, / what candor?"<sup>11</sup> Through her strident insistence, the Baroness attempts to demonstrate the purity of her art and simultaneously castigate editors for attempting to muddy art's clarifying capacity.

According to her verse, God created the actions she describes as well as the words she uses to describe them. None are beyond the purview of the creator, so why should they be left out of the lives of the creations themselves? In "The Modest Woman," Freytag-Loringhoven expresses admiration for the use of colorful language as illuminating language: "The way he [Joyce] slings 'obscenities'—handles them—never forced—never obscene. . . .(thank Europe for such people—world will advance)" (*BS*, 289). The Baroness reprimands Americans for being vastly inferior to Joyce's



intellect, and because of their lack of candor and their "show at make believe," their culture remains disconnected from the body and its needs. For this reason, the Baroness declares "They ought not to marry – They ought not to make love – to shame the word even – how much more the sense – and the action" (*BS*, 290). Her footnotes to "Kindly" only highlight the point her poem already crafts so well. Rather than risk a redaction, or dismissal from the editor altogether, she offers options that retain the expletives in meaning even if some of the roman symbols must be left out, and with Freytag-Loringhoven, there is no doubt that she considers them symbols. Her choices allow her to transgress even as she pays tribute to the very boundaries that allow her to work as an avant-garde artist.

Her insistence on crossing boundaries allows her to queer her relationship to the avant-garde in a poem conscious of its relationship to more constrained forms of poetry. The regularized repetition of "heart" and "fart" in the first two stanzas deploys a variation on interlocking rubaiyats—a popularized Persian quatrain form used by Charles Swinburne in poems such as "Relics" (1878) and Robert Frost in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" (1922)—before moving into a less regularized, but still rhyming, pattern in the last two stanzas. Her formal

choices riff on a complicated poetic form to throw the esteemed organ against the often embarrassing bodily function. Nonetheless, these two parts are imperative to the regulatory needs of the living body: a problem with either is a serious threat to the body. The third stanza also emphasizes the "farts"/"hearts" rhyme with "foreparts," "hinderparts," and "arts." The rhymes argue for equal consideration of all creation: the admissible and inadmissible alike. It is not so much a matter of equal value that concerns the poem, as much as equal standing as created objects. Things, actions, words, are all constructions, like Freytag-Loringhoven's poem and its candor. This joining of high and low shows us Freytag-Loringhoven's mastery of contrast and skill in holding distinct registers, rhythms, and even modes of signification together in a single poem.

Freytag-Loringhoven's ability to hold together contrasting, and at times dissonant, poetic elements emphasizes her contribution to art and culture during an era of sweeping change globally. Her ability to recognize the walls and restrictions her time and culture contended with draws attention to the paradox of an advanced era clinging to outdated social codes. The early twentieth century hailed a dawn of change in technology, social

mobility, as well as an expansion in the rights of marginalized groups. Her work, however, helps to highlight what liberal thinkers were up against, even in the supposedly free-thinking havens of literature and art.

### **"Lusting Palate"**

Like Eliot, Williams, and other canonical modernists, Freytag-Loringhoven engaged with the historical imagination and literary tradition in her push toward the future, but, notably, her art rewrites sexual mores in extremes unmatched by other modernist poets. Freytag-Loringhoven used her love poems to express a wide-ranging sexuality consistently engaged with what Gayle Rubin describes as the "abnormal, unnatural, damned sexuality" that falls outside the boundaries of privileged sexual activity: the former includes sadomasochism, sex with manufactured objects, casual sex, sex outside of vaginal penetration, same-sex lovers, and promiscuity.<sup>12</sup> Rubin points out what the Baroness often seems to insist upon, which is that

the exercise of erotic capacity, intelligence, curiosity, or creativity all require pretexts that are unnecessary for other pleasures, such as the enjoyment of food, fiction, or astronomy.<sup>13</sup>

In the beginning of the twentieth century those pretexts still revolved around procreation and the stable, heterosexual, married, monogamous couple. Although first-wave feminists were pushing for greater recognition for women's rights, much of that feminist resistance centered on "social purity," the eradication of prostitution, and the "protection" from the dangers of sexual exploitation for white women.<sup>14</sup> Some sexologists, like Havelock Ellis, were making the case for a woman's right to pleasure, but that right was only afforded within the sanctified realm of marriage.<sup>15</sup>

Freytag-Loringhoven balked at sex negativity and embraced pleasure for its own sake: she pointed out the sexual failings of multiple specific partners and explicitly re-created her most satisfying fantasies. Her poems frequently diminish masculine heterosexual sexuality and document a voracious feminine sexuality. After building the love poem toward climax the masculine beloved of "Ah Me!" leaves his lover unsatisfied with the smirking admission "I don't perform" (*BS*, 43). Without the "executive ability" the Baroness demands of coitus and poetry, such a beloved cannot be tolerated (*ibid.*). In "Lucifer Approachant," the climax occurs quickly in the first line, "Ejaculation-embrace," but the poem continues to hint at

dissatisfaction by following the climax with lines like "Pressure / Of no / Meaning," "Shadowmimicry," and "Mock sigh" (*BS*, 50). A series of failed lovers traipse through "Graveyard Surrounding Nunnery," all failing to satisfy the speaker. The speaker is frank about her disappointment and concludes the short poem with the lines

I go to bed – saint –  
 Corpse – angel – nun –  
 It ain't  
 (Fun). (*BS*, 201)

With the running dashes, the speaker conflates the idealized "saint," "angel," and "nun" with the grotesque corpse. Just as the speaker remains cloistered alone in her bed, the poem brackets "Fun" as if it too is now isolated from the outside world. Without the "fun" of satisfying her sexual appetite the speaker can find little difference between being a saint or a corpse. The fact that the poem equates casual sex with "fun" radicalizes the very possibility of the love poem: it prioritizes self-satisfaction without any pretexts.

Freytag-Loringhoven refused to be disappointed, and several of her poems present a speaker unabashedly demanding pleasure without pretext. Unlike Loy, whose *Love Songs* documents the failings of a single relationship and

often turns to the psychic realm for satisfaction, Freytag-Loringhoven's love poems focus more explicitly on her lived, bodily experience. The bright, skipping lines of "A Dozen Cocktails Please" delves into the taboo realms of non-procreative sex, contraceptives, vibrators, and same-sex pleasure. Gammel describes the poem as a "carnival of oral sexuality," but Freytag-Loringhoven pushes even further against taboos by making additional references to anality throughout the poem (*BE*, 378-379). The poem begins,

No spinsterlollypop for me — yes — we have

No bananas — I got lusting palate — I

Always eat them —————

They have dandy celluloid tubes — all sizes —

Tinted diabolically as a baboon's hind complexion. (*BS*, 48)

The first two lines invoke the "Yes! We Have No Bananas" a song by Frank Silver and Irving Cohn that Eddie Cantor popularized in the 1922 Broadway revue, *Make It Snappy*. The song grew to become a hallmark of 1920s popular culture and prompted Will Rogers to insist in the *Illiterate Digest* (1924)—three years before the Baroness wrote her poem—that he

would rather have been the Author of that Banana

Masterpiece than the Author of the Constitution of the

United States. No one has offered any amendments to it.

It's the only thing ever written in America that we haven't changed, most of them for the worst.<sup>16</sup>

Rogers's comment underscores the popularity of the song and its phrases as language that clarifies even without adhering to standards of grammar and usage. Based on a presumed lack of facility with the English language evinced by a Greek grocer, the song emphasizes the fluidity of language that can mean in multiple ways in a single instant, and that has broken free of inefficient restrictions. The Baroness's poem capitalizes on this bridging of opposites by opening her poem in an echo of the song's seeming contradiction: first no, then yes; "we have," then we do not have. Emma Lazarus's poem "The New Colossus" inscribed on the Statue of Liberty in 1903, registers the fears of an immigrant "teeming" mass that the Baroness purposefully stokes in this poem. The original song combines the grocer's foreignness with his business acumen as an explanation for why "he never answers no" (1923). Freytag-Loringhoven purposefully implicates herself as another foreigner who "never says no," but makes no pretense toward productivity; she answers yes to pleasure, because she can.

From this foray into popular culture, the Baroness goes on to catalogue her desires in richly allusive and

evocative language. The "spinsterlollypop" could refer to the vibrator Freytag-Loringhoven describes a few lines down or to oral sex performed between women. The speaker quickly turns her attention to a desire for phalluses (bananas) and replaces descriptive language with a long string of dashes to illustrate how she prefers to consume them. Although vulcanized rubber had been available since the 1850s, Trojan's invention of latex in 1920 allowed condom manufacturing to become more automated and efficient. As Aine Collier notes, "Condom sales skyrocketed in the Jazz Age," and the Baroness's celebration of the "dandy" device registers such enthusiasm.<sup>17</sup> She draws attention to their particular color and likens the color to a primate's backside, which highlights the color's signal of sexual availability and a fascination with the tabooed backend. Later the speaker asks,

. . . What is the dread  
 Matter with the up-to-date-American-  
 Home-comforts? Bum insufficient for the  
 Should-be well groomed upsy.

That's the leading question. (BS, 49)

Gammel explains that Freytag-Loringhoven's domineering and abusive father initiated her into the realm of the "bawdy and scatological" (BE, 35). As several of her poems



demonstrate, including "A Dozen Cocktails Please," she retaliated by adopting his strategies to dismiss the sacred idealization of sexual life his bourgeois exterior was supposed to portend. In the course of the poem readers are introduced to same-sex acts, sex with nonhuman objects, and references to anality. By addressing what Rubin describes as pleasures without "pretext," the Baroness can circumvent the necessity of production often imposed on women throughout the twentieth century under the guise of virtue. The poem goes beyond a simple list of desires to gesture toward the full palette of materials that are available for supplying pleasure.

The end of the poem returns to the speaker's demands for pleasure and her willingness to both articulate her preferences and compromise to take pleasure where she can get it. After a series of orgasmic cries, the speaker narrates her feelings,

Hhhhhphsssssss! The very word penetrates!

I feel woozy!

I like that. I don't hanker after

Billy boys - but I am entitled

To be deeply shocked.

So are we - but you fill the hiatus.

Dear - I ain't queer - I need it straight - -

A dozen cocktails – please – – – – (BS, 50)

She maintains that her unconventional onomatopoeia is not only a word, but a word that “penetrates.” Like the phrase she borrows from the popular song and by extension the Greek grocer, “Hhhhhphssssssss” is treated as fully functional language. The onomatopoeia effectively stands in for the deep post-coital sigh her lines have built toward. Moreover, the onomatopoeia offers an embodied piece of language that powerfully affects the speaker, turning her “whoozy.” Freytag-Loringhoven skillfully employs the evocative sound as demonstration of the ability poetry has to effectively and affectively make meaning from non-standardized language.

Unlike the sexologists pathologizing much of sex in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Freytag-Loringhoven detaches her sex acts from her identity. Her contrast of the words “queer” and “straight” should not be confused with the now common usage of those terms to refer to sexual identities. The association between queerness and same-sex desire would have been a more coded reference at the time the poem was written. In this instance, Freytag-Loringhoven’s juxtaposition of straight and queer has less to do with the question of *whom* and more to do with a question of *how*. The German root of “queer,” and its

cognate, is "quer," which translates as "oblique" or "obstructive."<sup>18</sup> Conversely, she desires a directness, a straightness, that can "penetrate" and "shock" her. The Baroness is literally "entitled," in that she has a title to her name, but she also uses the language of the poem to entitle herself with the pleasure she seeks. She refuses both the privacy that so commonly shrouded sexual pleasure, and any notion that her desires could be separated from the body that desires them—with all its various hungers.

Although Freytag-Loringhoven never portrays her own sexual appetite as unconventional, the poem "Aphrodite to Mars" recognizes that even the most desired beloved may not fulfill her expectations. Mars, or "M'arse," was Freytag-Loringhoven's nickname for Marcel Duchamp, the "dada gift to the man who enjoyed scatological jokes,"—a mark of admiration for the artist she saw as a warrior for the avant-garde (*BE*, 172). Duchamp's resistance to her sexual advances led her to redirect her energy into her poetry. In "Aphrodite to Mars," the "Shaped / Female" lover maintains both a "Flexible tendernessweb" and "Systems / Equal Steel" (*BS*, 64). Mars, on the other hand, is "Aflirt" with a "buried" blade (*BS*, 64). The central part of the poem is a long mediation on the aggressiveness of Aphrodite figured as a sea monster with octopus-like tentacles and suction

discs. Even after Mars is left "asleep / At / Hearth,"  
Aphrodite is still enlivened by

Capacity

Suckdisks clinglust

To

Sharp arm

Ecstatic elasticity

Feminine –

*Increases! (BS, 66)*

While the greatness of the goddess swells with descriptions of the color, texture, and variety of the sea, the god of war is effectively swallowed up. Freytag-Loringhoven returns to the scatological by equating the throne of man-as-king to the porcelain throne in the final lines. Here, too, the water swallows the god of war in the lines "Flush / Poised / Mars" (BS, 67). Despite her affection for Duchamp, she also criticized "Duchamp whose art succeeded too easily in America, as she saw it, while she was involved in a hard and bitter struggle to establish herself" (BE, 12). She articulates that resistance in "Aphrodite to Mars" in her refusal to bow down, even to a desired beloved, within her art.

Although resistant to any degree of social or gendered hierarchy, Freytag-Loringhoven frequently articulates within her love poems a desire to submit sexually. Two poems, "To Whom it May Concern" and "Dornröschen" meditate on the pleasure found in submitting to a dominant beloved—a sexual preference marginalized throughout the twentieth century—and exemplify her insistent queering of sexual identities. The imperative verbs of "To Whom It May Concern" make the poem read like an instruction manual for the beloved to deliver pleasure through an avenue of pain:

Glean

Whip of

Hair —

Queu swish of

Racing mare —

Love's spontaneous

Gesture.

Tilt

Spine

Back

Deep —

Hurt —

That —

Loves —

In:

Hate cool

Subtle mistrust

Vast pleasure

Of

Equal measure. (*BS*, 74)

Prompted by a demand to both notice and initiate (or "Glean" and "Queu"), the "whip" of the hair, and "swish of / Racing mare" are suggestive phrases asking to be steered like the ridden horse. Then, in the aftermath of coitus, "hate" and "mistrust" are overwhelmed by "Vast pleasure." Gilles Deleuze describes the "imperative" toward description in literary representations of masochism as functions of "persuasion and education."<sup>19</sup> Freytag-Loringhoven's openness to instructing a desired sexual practice in poetry that Richard von Krafft-Ebing had coined just years earlier, in 1886, does not mean the practice itself was new, but that she was specifically engaged with the intersections of sexuality and what would have been pathologized as deviant bodily practices. Her rebellion anticipates a third wave feminist recognition of the complicated relationship women have with sexuality that is "simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression, and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure, and agency."<sup>20</sup>

In "Dornröschen" Freytag-Loringhoven responds to Goethe's classic "Heidenröslein" (1779) or "The Heathrose." Her title translates as "little rose thorn" or "little briar rose," and is the German title for the Grimm's *Sleeping Beauty* (1857). Whereas "Heidenröslein" is often read as a problematic tale of violence, or even rape, Freytag-Loringhoven writes from the flower's subject position as it anticipates a kind of rough pleasure. The title begins the contrast by introducing the possibility of pain for the (masculine) plucker in a way "The Heathrose" only threatens. As it continues, the poem does not shy from violence, as we read in the first stanza:

Stab for me  
 Ruthless intensity  
 Press to my bow'r –  
 My nook – my core! (BS, 61)

The speaker is awaiting and hoping for the arrival of the rough lover of Goethe's poem, to take the flower home to the castle. The plucked flower does not anticipate death but "ahunting," or the joint play of the lover and beloved. Rather than being hunted like Goethe's rose, the "thistlerose" will join the lover in the hunting.

The problems of Goethe's "Heidenröslein" originate in the powerlessness of the flower, despite her struggle.

Edgar Bowring's English translation (1853) of the final lines reads:

Said the boy, "I'll now pick thee,  
 Heathrose fair and tender!"  
 Said the rosebud, "I'll prick thee,  
 So that thou'lt remember me,  
 Ne'er will I surrender!"  
 Rosebud, rosebud, rosebud red,  
 Heathrose fair and tender!

Now the cruel boy must pick  
 Heathrose fair and tender;  
 Rosebud did her best to prick,--  
 Vain 'twas 'gainst her fate to kick--  
 She must needs surrender.<sup>21</sup>

Rather than eliminate the violence from the tale, Freytag-Loringhoven refigures the violence by shifting the desires of the flower. Loringhoven's verse admits to and celebrates a sexual violence free from the connotations of rape or abuse without removing the element of dominance and submission. Her choices parallel Freytag-Loringhoven's own recorded sexual fantasies of dominance and submission, which she recalled for Djuna Barnes in a proposed biography (*BE*, 38). Art provides the Baroness with opportunities for



sexual satisfaction that she was not able to realize in her relationships. The poem juxtaposes the immobile flower with the active "Messire," a word that echoes both the Middle French denotation of title and rank as well as the German "messer" or knife.<sup>22</sup> The flower claims to "wait for thee" "breathlessly," unable to "stir alone," echoing scenes of bondage. Moreover, the flower's inactive subject, and the single iteration of the pronoun "I," seems diminished next to the four-times repeated "thy" article describing attributes of the "Messire." Freytag-Loringhoven's poems are often interpreted as shouts rather than cries in their intensity and fervor, and this kind of repetition provides a powerful presence for the voiceless "Messire." Only he can "lift - carry" the flower from its rooted position.

Yet, the flower commands the action, it arranges the story and directs the fantasy. Even the construction of "Messire" can be broken down into "Me's sire" with a playfully constructed possessive pronoun. Fears of the independent New Woman are realized in Freytag-Loringhoven's vocal flower, but with a sexual appetite unanticipated by Goethe's poem or twentieth-century gender expectations. Despite her estimation of the American Woman as the "Helpless victim-pulled over gravel-dust-by that indecent machine-your body," Freytag-Loringhoven's poem presents a

beloved who speaks, and demands to be dominated. The classical image of the dominant lover and passive beloved is rearranged by the supposedly passive woman, thereby circumventing a love narrative reliant on masculine action. The poem does not stage a simple reversal, but demands that readers consider a wide, complex range of how desire can manifest.

The dashes in "Dornröschen" and the portmanteau construction of "Messire" accentuate Loringhoven's use of boundary crossing as a means joining. The fourth line, "my nook – my core," brings together a private, secret, tender place as well as a place of power, or essence. Taken together, the phrasing bespeaks of Freytag-Loringhoven's thesis that our most private and sensitive selves are always implicated in shifting dynamics of power and self-representation. The dashes at the ends of lines, her dashes within lines, and her portmanteau word constructions, like the title of her art piece "Limbswish," all work as varied means of joining. The editors of her collected poems, Gammel and Zelazo, write, "What is perhaps most striking about the Baroness's poetics is the way in which she crossed cultural boundaries by composing 'American' poetry as a German immigrant" (*BS*, 14). Her word constructions like "Limbswish," "Spacelarge," and "Dullgold," which we

see in "Orgasmic Toast," do away with prepositions, articles, and verbs in order to create singular meaningful signifiers. Rather than explicate for readers that the space is large or the gold is dull, Freytag-Loringhoven capitalizes on her German linguistic heritage to form her own signifying constructions. Her act is not revolutionary in itself, especially because such concatenation is common for German speakers, but it draws attention to the possibilities of joining and the very constructedness of the other words on the page.

Essentially, her radical forms of joining follow some of the most basic principles upon which languages are formed. Freytag-Loringhoven uses all manner of linguistic resources to highlight and capitalize on boundaries between words. "Omnipulsespun" and "Limbswish" can both be read as sharing the middle "s." These kinds of constructions increase the physicality of word constructions because they are not just two words without a space between them; rather, they are two signifiers with overlapping and shifting borders. Not only can each word inflect on the meaning of its partner, but they rely on each other to exist and make meaning. In much same way as normative and non-normative sexual practices, the borders between linguistic units articulate a particular relational understanding; Freytag-

Loringhoven recruits the symbols and spaces of linguistic constructions to perform new kinds of poetic relationships. By shifting the physical boundaries of words on the page, she reminds readers that her poetics stems from the felt experience of language.

### **Love Poems in Public**

Freytag-Loringhoven's portmanteau constructions juxtaposed with trimmed lines emphasize the liminality of poetic language in its ability to shift and rearrange materials into meaning. Tristan Tzara, who snubbed the Baroness when she sought a visit with him in Paris (*BE*, 298), wrote in his dada manifesto (1918) that

[t]he new artist protests: he no longer paints (symbolic and illusionistic reproduction) but creates directly in stone, wood, iron, tin, rocks, or locomotive structures capable of being spun in all directions by the limpid wind of the momentary sensation.<sup>23</sup>

And whether Tzara witnessed it or not, Freytag-Loringhoven truly embodied such an ability to create from the materials of the moment. When "New York City was quite literally the city of the present moment," and the Baroness "an impoverished marginalized, and disenfranchised woman," she

still "claimed the space of high art from society's margins," according to Gammel (*BE*, 185). In her poetry, her fashion, and "spontaneous theatrical street performance," Freytag-Loringhoven lived her art as sincerely as she occupied her own body. In understanding poetry as a function of and an extension of her body, Freytag-Loringhoven enacted perhaps one of the oldest actions of love poetry by making sex—in all her imaginative iterations—public. In her defense of Joyce's so-called "obscenity"—and, by extension, her own—she reminds readers,

Goethe was grandly obscene — what do you know about it? Flaubert — Swift — Rabelais — Arabian Nights — Bible if you please! only difference — Bible is without humour — great stupidity! So: how dare you strut — step out — show yourself with your cotton-tuft in ear? (*BS*, 288)

For Freytag-Loringhoven a refusal to acknowledge the body candidly marked an uninformed and willfully ignorant audience. True "superiors," she argues, recognize and understand the long history of culture engaged with what a vocal few have described as obscene—what they demand to be kept private. To her credit she sought to educate her audience at every opportunity, by making clear the body's capacity for modeling the variety and efficiency from which

poetic language could benefit. Her poetry, and wise defense of it, reveals the very queerness of love poems as a genre that often revolves around the private spectacle of sex revealed for public consumption.

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<sup>1</sup> Rudolf Kuenzli, "Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven and New York Dada," in *Women in Dada* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 446; hereafter abbreviated in text as "BE".

<sup>2</sup> OED Online, s.v. "astride," accessed March 2016, <http://www.oed.com.libproxy.unm.edu/view/Entry/12228?redirectedFrom=astride>.

<sup>3</sup> Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, *Body Sweats: The Uncensored Writings of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven*, ed. Irene Gammel and Suzanne Zelazo (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 43; hereafter abbreviated in text as *BS*.

<sup>4</sup> Anne Herrmann, *Queering the Moderns: Poses/Portraits/Performances* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 7.

<sup>5</sup> Lauren Berlant and Warner, Michael, "Sex in Public," in *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone, 2005), 199.

<sup>6</sup> Ernest Fenollosa, *Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, ed. Ezra Pound (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 1968), 28.

<sup>7</sup> Gertrude Stein, *Writings 1932-1946, Vol. 2* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 324.

<sup>8</sup> OED Online, s. v. "astride," accessed March 2016, <http://www.oed.com.libproxy.unm.edu/view/Entry/12228?redirectedFrom=astride>; OED Online, s. v. "strident," accessed March 2016, <http://www.oed.com.libproxy.unm.edu/view/Entry/191594?redirectedFrom=strident>.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Irene Gammel, *Baroness Elsa: Gender, Dada, and Everyday Modernity: A Cultural Biography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 62; hereafter abbreviated in text as *BE*.

<sup>11</sup> Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1993), 445.

<sup>12</sup> Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston, MA: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 281.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 278

<sup>14</sup> Ellen Carol DuBois and Linda Gordon, "Seeking Ecstasy on the Battlefield: Danger and Pleasure in Nineteenth-Century

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Feminist Sexual Thought," in *Pleasure and Danger* (Boston, MA: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 36.

<sup>15</sup> Havelock Ellis describes sexual gratification for women as pivotal for a happy marriage and as protection against divorce in *Sex in Relation to Society*, vol. 4, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (New York: Random House, 1906), 521.

<sup>16</sup> As quoted in Eric Partridge, "Yes, We Have No Bananas," *A Dictionary of Catch Phrases, American and British, from the Sixteenth Century to the Present Day* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1992), 362.

<sup>17</sup> Aine Collier, *The Humble Little Condom: A History* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2007), 199.

<sup>18</sup> OED Online, s. v. "queer," accessed March 2016, <http://www.oed.com.libproxy.unm.edu/view/Entry/156236?rskey=gCg5AA&result=2&isAdvanced=false>.

<sup>19</sup> Deleuze contrasts this with the descriptive imperative in sadism which is intended "to demonstrate that reasoning itself is a form of violence" in *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty* (New York: Zone, 1991), 18-20.

<sup>20</sup> Carole S. Vance, "Pleasure and Danger: Toward a Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger*, 1.

<sup>21</sup> Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *The Poems of Goethe, Translated in the Original Metres, with a Sketch of Goethe's Life*, trans. Edgar Alfred Bowring (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1853), 46.

<sup>22</sup> OED Online, s. v. "messire," accessed March 2016, <http://www.oed.com.libproxy.unm.edu/view/Entry/117124?redirectedFrom=messire>.

<sup>23</sup> Tristan Tzara, "Dada Manifesto," in *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources Documents* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1998), 276.

## Chapter 6

### **"Such a strange disease": A Pathology of Love in Langston Hughes's *Fine Clothes to the Jew***

Love has frequently been treated by artists and philosophers alike as wholly redeeming despite the ubiquity of loss, death, and pain included in love poetry as the very things that threaten love. In contrast, Langston Hughes's presentation of diseased love in *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927) articulates love's potential joy as contingent upon race, class, gender, and space. In declining to portray love as a universal good, Hughes rejects the articulations of centuries'-s of poetry and philosophy that understands love as *the* universal good. For Hughes, love is always precarious. He does not deny that romantic love serves as a primary desire for most people, but the realities laid bare in his lyrics question the possibility of experiencing that form of love given the lived reality of most of Americans during the early twentieth century. Jahan Ramazani explains how in Hughes's work the blues are both the "misery" being sung about, and that which can "ease" one's misery.<sup>1</sup> The speaker in "Lament over Love" makes a similar comparison, observing



furthermore that love is like an addiction that needs to be fed.<sup>2</sup> The speaker laments that

Love is like whiskey,  
O, like sweet red wine.

If you wants to be happy  
You got to love all de time.<sup>3</sup>

Although Hughes's poem predates the medical community's assessment of addiction as a disease, his association between love, addiction, and disease provides a useful framework for thinking about how the speakers and subjects of his poems seem unable to disentangle their fates as subjugated individuals from their fates as victims of a diseased love.

In his studies of violence as a "bio-psycho-social" disease, James Gilligan argues that the "pathogen" or cause of violence is "spread primarily by means of social, economic, and cultural vectors," and his paradigm aptly describes Hughes's own approach to diseased love.<sup>4</sup> His articulation of diseased love draws on and particularizes a tradition that treats love as an intoxication or poison. For Hughes, love has been diseased by the pathogens of inequity and the resulting sexism, racism, and classicism only perpetuates the disease, *and* the intoxicating qualities of love, generally, make would-be lovers

especially vulnerable to diseased love. Gilligan's public health paradigm for violence provides useful inroads for understanding how violence, overt and institutional, persists in Hughes's poems through the social shaming embedded in both poverty and racism. Hughes's poems also nuance Gilligan's theory by highlighting the addictive qualities of romantic love and its ability to compel individuals to commit bodily harm to themselves and others in its name.<sup>5</sup> Like an addict overdosing on her drug of choice, the speaker in "Lament" is consumed by thoughts of her beloved, a consumption that enables her to commit suicide from a tower: she plans to "think about ma man an' / Let ma fool-self fall" (*P*, 109). Death, abuse, exploitation, and loss are the stark consequences of diseased love in Hughes's poems.

Similar to the speaker who returns to thoughts of her beloved, Hughes, too, returns to love poems again and again, even though such poems are rampant with violence, trauma, loneliness, and anxiety. While love—and love lost—is a common trope for blues music and love poetry, this only partially explains the particularity of Hughes's love poems. All the authors I have discussed so far similarly choose to write love poetry despite modern conditions that might discourage it, but Hughes's poems provide a clear-sighted

understanding of the high stakes of doings so. Hughes's poems underscore the fact that love poetry has always been contingent on and associated with pain.<sup>6</sup> Not until the thirteenth century did the French word "passion" come to be associated with love and strong emotion; previously, it had been associated with suffering.<sup>7</sup> Hughes's poetry reveals the painfulness of diseased love to be pervasive and institutionalized along the same racial, gender, and class lines that stratify other kinds of suffering in the United States. Ignoring those facts of love is tantamount to ignoring the very conditions that made Hughes reflect, "The ordinary Negroes hadn't heard of the Negro Renaissance. And if they had, it hadn't raised their wages any."<sup>8</sup>

In this chapter I follow Hughes's lead in *Fine Clothes* by grouping poems within a similar setting together for analysis and uses that setting to particularize Hughes's attention to the environmental risks and possibilities endemic to the rural South and the urban centers—in both the North and the South—that many African Americans migrated to during the beginning of the twentieth century. He perceives the openness of the rural South as a lawless and, therefore, dangerous environment that subjects black women and men to a myriad of degradations that breed diseased love. That diseased love is then passed on through

the "social, economic, and cultural vectors" that led many individuals and families attempting to escape the hazards of the rural South to resettle in urban areas (V, 105). The cabaret, with its cosmopolitan mingling of race and class, provides a possible alternative to diseased love in Hughes's poems. The cabaret does not stand in for a cure, but instead represents a hardy ecosystem that can overcome the threats of diseased love. For Hughes, treating love like a lucky accident of fate erases the experience as a contingent one that requires explicit contextualization. His observations rightfully ask if the accidents of fate ever bear on the sufferings of love, or if, as so many of Hughes's poetic lovers and beloveds experience, love is always subject to explicit and implicit economies of power.

One of Hughes's achievements in *Fine Clothes* is his successful use of dialect, which treats black vernacular speech as sufficient to the complexity of his verse. His choice allows him to apply vernacular speech to both the love poem and the black experience of diseased love. As a result, he recovers vernacular speech from arguments that is inadequate to the complexities of lived experience, or that it had been so corrupted by white audiences that it only served to simplify complex experiences into a kind of minstrel performance. James Weldon Johnson's critique of

dialect in the preface to *God's Trombones* (1927) highlights the boldness of Hughes's choice when publishing *Fine Clothes* in the same year. Johnson argues that "although the dialect is the exact instrument for voicing certain traditional phases of Negro life," its exactness limits it to "pathos and humor" because of its "long association with the Negro only as a happy-go-lucky or a forlorn figure."<sup>9</sup> Nearly seventy years later George Hutchinson echoed Johnson's concerns when he maintained that dialect poetry "was quite cozy with the genteels" to whom it "posed no threat" because, "unlike Whitman's poetry, it made no claims to compete with the language of the classics."<sup>10</sup> Hughes's use of dialect to insist on the history of violence perpetuated by white southerners disrupts the possibility of that coziness in *Fine Clothes*. His ability to "juxtapose standard and nonstandard dialects" allowed him, like Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles Chesnutt, "to demonstrate multicultural fluency" and "underscore social inequities that maintain hierarchies of power."<sup>11</sup> In taking advantage of multiple discursive modes, Hughes developed what David Chinitz describes as a "self-concealing art" that capitalized on the authenticity made possible through dialect and the improvisational nature of blues form even while contending with the "demands of traditional poetry."<sup>12</sup>

Hughes himself complicates any divide between traditional and vernacular modes by frequently creating a conversation between his poems using dialect and his poems using Standard American English. Several of his poems echo one another by presenting a similar event in different discursive modes, but the more "traditional" version tends to adopt a ballad form. If the English ballad serves as the acceptable version of a folk form, Hughes's choice to shift between old and new folk discourses signals an appreciation for literary history as an evolution of forms and discursive modes. If poetry written in "the real language of men," as Wordsworth put it in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), had become the standard for poetry by the beginning of the twentieth century, then the dialect that was once the appropriated mode of the minstrel performer could not only be recovered as a mode of authentic black expression, but it could comprise a future standard in poetic language. Hughes's skillful manipulation of forms and discourses, juxtaposed with his persistence in detailing ugliness, constitutes the incurable quality of Hughes's diseased love.

**"And ain't there any joy in this town?": High-Risk Environs  
in Hughes's Love Poems**

In the southern and rural spaces Hughes details in his love poems, Hughes takes advantage of a pastoral longing for openness to highlight the explicit dangers to black women and men in those exposed spaces. Several of Hughes's blues poems are set in the rural spaces of small towns and the countryside. Here, Hughes establishes the precipitating events and contributing circumstances that lead to a diseased love, presenting an alternate reality to the space of the pastoral. While these rural spaces, especially in southern regional literatures, are often valued for a slow pace of life, reflection, and the tranquility of nature, Hughes highlights the dangers of the environment in order to illustrate what happens to love under such circumstances.<sup>13</sup> His poetry anticipates the discourse of toxicity that Lawrence Buell finds "pandemic" in the late twentieth-century.<sup>14</sup> While toxicity complicates, but ultimately maintains the promise of the pastoral, Hughes's poems refuse such a recovery.<sup>15</sup> The spaces that should provide peace prove instead to ensnare citizens in cycles of exploitation and violence. Although not a love poem, "Mulatto" is probably the most explicit example of Hughes rewriting the pastoral environment as a landscape of sexual violence for black women. The evacuation of humanity inherent in such act stands out when the disgusted speaker

asks, "What's a body but a toy?"; twice the "white man" interlocutor interjects with "What's the body of your mother?" emphasizing the dissonance between human and object in this setting (*P*, 104).

In "Song for a Dark Girl" Hughes poeticizes the violence visited upon black men in the plantation South framed as the bucolic "Dixie." The title and refrain invokes the popular song "Dixie," also known as "Dixie's Land" (1859), and the echo of that popular song serves to heighten the clash in tone between the "nationalist" song and a poem that documents exclusion and dehumanization in the abuse it witnesses. The song, attributed to Dan Emmett and performed as a minstrel song, originally made a pastoral argument for the "simple" pleasures that the rural South afforded African Americans—presuming that this argument justified the practice of slavery—and later became a rallying song for Confederate soldiers during the Civil War.<sup>16</sup> Instead of using the dialect, rhythm, or rhyme of the song, Hughes's sentimental folk-ballad form presents an alarmingly stark portrayal of violence in the following lines:

Way Down South in Dixie

(Break the heart of me)

They hung my black young lover

To a cross roads tree.



Way Down South in Dixie

(Bruised body high in air)

I asked the white Lord Jesus

What was the use of prayer.

Way Down South in Dixie

(Break the heart of me)

Love is a naked shadow

On a gnarled and naked tree. (*ibid.*, 106-7)

The poem refashions the familiar but ill-founded matrix of the "the black rapist, the white rape victim, the white avenger" and the "displaced" black woman often represented by "the black woman as prostitute."<sup>17</sup> In Hughes's poem, the black woman's voice is centralized as the speaker, and the white rape victim often held up as the cause for a lynching is noticeably absent—an absence that gestures to the specious allegations often used to instigate a lynching.<sup>18</sup>

While the naked shadow is first and most literally the beloved's body hanging, lynched, from the crossroads tree, Hughes's metaphor instantiates love as a dangerous obstruction by defining it through comparison to the "naked shadow / On a gnarled and naked tree." A shadow cannot exist independently; only another shape, a person or object,

can cast a shadow. The unknown "They" in the first stanza looms large as a brutal unidentified collective. Just as Gilligan insists, "the tragedy of violence involves not just victims, but also victimizers" (V, 19). Like an unseen shape casting a shadow over the remainder of the poem, "They" precipitates the violence of the poem without ever being questioned to reveal more detail. The fact of the tree's existence and its requisite size—tall and sturdy enough to suspend a human body—suggests that the shadow was not always present, but the poem dwells on the shadow, and the resulting darkness of the action.

The lingering shadow on the tree suggests that this love is simultaneously intangible and yet deeply destructive, like the disease of addiction. The repetition of "naked" as an adjective to the predicate nominative in the final two lines draws attention to the relationship between the shadow and the tree: if one is somehow lacking or vulnerable, according to the poem, than so is the force causing that deprivation. The adjective stands out: a tree can be described as naked when its stripped bare of its bark, but a shadow has no covering to strip. By forcing the shadow into a parallel relationship with the tree the poem attempts to understand love as the process by which a weak entity, to no advantage of its own, seeks to further weaken

another entity. The poem itself exposes love, "in Dixie," as both obstructive and destructive.

The emptiness of pastoral memory limits even the young woman's capacity for faith when she asks "the white Lord Jesus" if there is any use to her prayers. Without the attendant question mark, the girl's plea is largely rhetorical—she knows that an actual question would go answered. The poem parallels her murdered beloved with Christ, formally through the phrasing of "black young lover" and "white Lord Jesus" and conceptually through the young man's Christlike position on the "cross roads tree," but does not recognize any redemptive power in either sacrifice. The poem makes ironic the idea of Christ's sacrifice for love—a sacrifice made in the name of god the father's filial love for humanity—because redemption is so far removed from the picture of humanity we find in the lynch scene. The poetic comparison, then, only highlights the contrast between the glorified "Dixie" and its ineffectual god, "white Lord Jesus," and between the broken heart and the broken body of the young beloved. Persecuted by the ruling Jews and Romans, Christ's sacrifice further parallels the systemic oppression facing African Americans subject to the legal and illegal manifestations of Jim Crow law. While Jean Toomer used the rupture and alteration of

form to highlight the impossibility of language to hold the trauma of the black American experience, Hughes's move is more subtle. His use of the folk-ballad form amplifies the brutality of the plantation South. The poem reveals what becomes of love subject to a history full of horror.

Hughes evacuates any attempt to define love in "Gal's Cry for a Dying Lover," a poem from *Fine Clothes to the Jew* that uses dialect in recounting a murder similar to that of "Song for a Dark Girl." Once again, Hughes privileges the voice of a black woman as speaker. Here the form of the folk ballad is left behind, and instead of three quatrains we have three sestets that follow the form Hughes adopts for most of his blues poems. While blues songs generally follow a three-line pattern, Hughes "recovered the possibilities of enjambment by writing out his blues in half-lines."<sup>19</sup> Hughes's use of enjambment in "Gal's Cry" dictates the logic of the poem. In the first stanza, the speaker "knowed somebody's 'bout to die" by interpreting the night's sounds (*P*, 110). More sounds provide her with greater assurance in her interpretations as she declares "Hound dawg's barkin' / Means he's gonna leave this world" (*Ibid.*). The poem then tries to extend that certainty to the promise of "mercy" when the gal prays, "O, Lawd have mercy / On a po' black girl" (*Ibid.*). Because of the poem's

title, however, readers already know that the beloved is dying, so the speaker's prayers are framed by a kind of hopelessness. While the logic of violence seems sure, the logic of compassion is precluded by the very title of the poem. Similar to the "Song for a Dark Girl," this poem treats religious love as ineffectual by ironically calling out for the compassion of a deity that displayed love through the mortal suffering and sacrifice of his only mortal son.

The emptiness of her town, and the implied danger of that emptiness, are the same forces that drive the eponymous character in "Ruby Brown" into prostitution. "Ruby Brown," written in standard English with sophisticated grammar and syntax and even French terms, suggesting a speaker with access to advantages Ruby Brown herself does not have, opens with a description that echoes Toomer's poetic portrait of Karintha in *Cane*.<sup>20</sup> The speaker explains broadly:

She was young and beautiful  
 And golden like the sunshine  
 That warmed her body.  
 And because she was colored  
 Mayville had no place to offer her,  
 Nor fuel for the clean flame of joy

That tried to burn within her soul. (*P*, 83)

We know so little about Ruby Brown in these first lines and she seems to blend into a long tradition of beautiful young women admired in love poetry. Based on the style and usage we can infer more about the speaker, who seems comfortable engaging sentimental descriptions, idiomatic phrases like "the bottoms" or "good church folk," as well as the modernist archness required to identify euphemistically the brothel patrons as "Habituéés." The speaker, like Hughes himself, presents as sympathetic to the situation facing Ruby Brown while maintaining a distance. The speaker is not like Ruby Brown, the white women she works for, the white men who now patronize her, or even the good church folk who are scandalized by Ruby Brown's choices, and that distance allows the speaker to propose a kind of objectivity that tempers the sympathetic descriptions of Ruby. While the speaker uses sentimental descriptions, the poem dignifies Ruby Brown by resisting sentimentality's tendency toward pity.

Unfortunately for Ruby Brown, Mayville sees her as a "colored girl" instead of "like the sunshine." Although the speaker describes her as golden, hinting at white ancestry, both her given name and her surname register the color-ness that prepares and defines in advance her place in society.

The implicit preciousness indicated by her first name cannot overcome the limitations of her last name: although rubies are valuable, a brown discoloration brings down the market price. The speaker establishes the logic of the place in the first stanza—strikingly similar to the logic of gem pricing—by explaining that because of her skin color she was devalued by her town. Ruby has interpolated this logic, and her self-reflecting question—“What can a colored girl do / On the money from a white woman’s kitchen?”—only affirms the speaker’s dire assessment. Before she has the chance to recognize it herself, the town has destined Ruby Brown to prostitution, and, by the end of the poem, whatever details we know about her are locked behind “the high shuttered houses” (*ibid.*, 84).

The poem clarifies Ruby’s lack of agency through its descriptions of who knows what, presenting Ruby’s choice as distinctly disadvantaged. The speaker knows little about Ruby, the “good church folk” no longer speak her name, and even Ruby is searching for answers about herself in vague terms, asking not “What can Ruby Brown do?” but instead “What can a colored girl do?” While the speaker seems to see potential in her beauty, like that ascribed to Dante’s Beatrice or Petrarch’s Laura, the advantages of Ruby’s beauty do not bring her closer to a divine sublimation. The

speaker of the poem attests that "Now the streets down by the river / Know more about this pretty Ruby Brown," and the white "Habituéés of the high shuttered houses" pay to know more of her. The void in this small town is the lack of "joy," which gets substituted by the illicit pleasure bought and sold in the "high shuttered houses" of the town brothels. Ruby does not have the chance to know herself beyond being "a colored girl" in a rural town, and so her only opportunities are relegated to the kitchen or the brothel. The act of narration reinforces Ruby's disadvantage by subsuming her in description. Even in the moment when Ruby might speak aloud, the speaker paraphrases her questions with an equivocating introduction: "they ran something like this" (*ibid.*, 83). Any possibility of self-realization through joy is supplanted by the town's treatment of her as a laboring body: laboring for white women in kitchens or laboring for the illicit pleasure of others in the brothel. Janet Whyde points out that the "African-American body that is privileged is not the physical body, which is alien and irrelevant, but the art that develops out of the black experience," yet Hughes insists on inserting the body back into his poems to refuse a sublimation of black experience into an aesthetic experience.<sup>21</sup> Ruby's body and soul, so admired by the



speaker, cannot be saved from their circumstances by artistic rendering and this is why both must disappear behind the walls of the brothel.

"Red Silk Stockings" uses the frame of dialect to nuance Ruby Brown's choices with a speaker who is intimately familiar with the limited choices for a young woman of color in a small town. While "Ruby Brown" presents a Standard American English dialect, with flashes of cosmopolitan sophistication and colloquialisms, "Red Silk Stockings" performs the black dialect Hughes cultivates most explicitly in his blues poems. Rather than observing the predicament of a young attractive woman of color from a distance, the speaker in "Red Silk Stockings" is close enough to speak to the young woman and advise her to sell her body to the "white boys." With no advice to give, the speaker's comments serve as an ironic disavowal of the guiding roles (friend, parent, or mentor) that should serve the young woman. Resigned to the same essentializing and restrictive logic facing Ruby Brown, this speaker maintains,

Ain't nothin' to do for you, nohow,

Round this town,-

You's too pretty.

Put on yo' red silk stockings, gal,

An' tomorrow's chile'll

Be a high yaller. (*P*, 105)

The warning here seems to be as much for the young woman as it is for the speaker. The speaker cannot do anything for this woman precisely because she is attractive, and, in rural towns—like Ruby Brown's Mayville—that is a real danger for black women.

These lyrics respond directly and critically to the idealization of agrarian pastoral and black pastoral life depicted in nineteenth-century regional literatures and in minstrel shows. Similar to the vignettes that comprise Toomer's *Cane*, Hughes's love poems "challenge the conventions of black genteel literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and its endorsement of Victorian notions of purity, chastity, and domesticity."<sup>22</sup> Unlike an elegy mourning lost pastoral life, however, Hughes's poetry is always distinctly aware that for marginalized subjects the past may not be preferable to the present. When the rape of black women by white men replaces sex at such frequency to give rise to new castes of color in the plantation-era and Jim Crow South, as Hughes highlights in "Mulatto," "Ruby Brown," and "Red Silk Stockings," an idealized pleasure in the past or present seems ignorant, or at least irrelevant. Here, my argument intersects with that of Ramazani, who makes the case that

Hughes's blues poems illustrate a modern approach to elegy that challenges the nostalgia often perpetuated in classical elegy.<sup>23</sup> I read Hughes's love poems as refusing nostalgia for a past that, in Susan Stewart's words, "has never existed except as narrative."<sup>24</sup> Slavery complicates the idea of home whether in the United States or an imagined African homeland, and Hughes resists any received concept of *nostos*, or "homecoming," that informs nostalgia. The love poem does not serve to redeem human experience from a history of oppression tied directly to human commodification and attendant sexual abuse; instead it provides an opportunity to reveal such history through a lyric mode that translates specific human conditions, without mitigating them, for a wider audience.

**"I brought her from de South": Contagious Violence in Hughes's Love Poems**

*Fine Clothes* encompasses the dangerous open spaces of the rural South as well as the resulting violence that travels to urban centers, where diseased love breeds further violence. The urban settings of Hughes's love poems continue to associate love with both pain and violence, and they emphasize the distortions that class consciousness contributes—in the name of taste and style—to to the blight

of diseased love. Urban settings are safer spaces in some ways, and characters seem safer from the unabashed violence of white abusers. However, the space remains unsafe for both men and women, vulnerable to the trauma of institutionalized racial and gender subjugation that can result in violence enacted upon black women by black men. Referencing the challenges of African Americans migrating from the rural South to urban centers in the North specifically, Nellie McKay points out that black individuals and communities struggled "to establish an identity out of the remnants of their past and the values and ideals of their newly acquired home," but this process was necessarily fraught when both the past remnants and present values directly thwart the agency of black individuals.<sup>25</sup> The legalized discrimination of citizens in the Jim Crow South necessitated a double consciousness that James Smethurst, through Du Bois, summarizes as "the problem of being a citizen and yet not a citizen (and, by extension, of being legally human and not quite human)."<sup>26</sup> Hughes highlights the mental and emotional strain new community and identity formation placed on black women and men in urban settings to reveal the ways in which a distorted and diseased love can spread.

Another direct definition of love, "Beale Street Love" illustrates this distortion by equating love with a painfully detailed description of violence. The slow pace of the poem maximizes the affective impact of comparing love to physical violence. The seven-line poem's turn in the last line—as it identifies the victim of the abuse by name—gives it the emotional power of a Shakespearean sonnet reduced by half. The full poem reads:

Love  
 Is a brown man's fist  
 With hard knuckles  
 Crushing the lips,  
 Blackening the eyes,—  
 Hit me again,  
 Says Clorinda. (*P*, 97)

The radical enjambment of the first lines runs up against the impact of the fist to the face, where the present progressive verbs "crushing" and "blackening" slow down time to a painful crawl. The impact of a punch certainly crushes the soft tissue of lips, but to imagine the "crushing" requires a lingering over the impact of both the blow and the definition. The slow persistent violence, like the naked shadow of love darkening and, thus, destroying the tree, directly metaphorizes love as an assault. The

first words of the poem—"Love / is . . ."—centralizes violence as *the* definition of love by echoing the famous biblical formula so familiar from Christian wedding ceremonies, which begins, "Love is patient, love is kind," and adds authority to a definition that seems antithetical to love as it is conventionally understood. Given the extreme violence of the Old Testament and the complex logic of Christ's crucifixion for a love of humanity, Hughes's allusion might also be gesturing toward the kinds of contradictory messages many communities maintain about love.

The speaker's proximity to the scene of violence and repetition of Clorinda's words without quotation creates a strange sense of the action's regularity or normality. The penultimate line of the poem, the words ostensibly and indirectly spoken by Clorinda, alter the poem from an abstract definition to an actual happening even as they torque the predicted response to that event. For the first six lines, the strange definition of love seems to come from a distant speaker—one able to maintain the scope necessary to slow down the action being described—but the final line positions the speaker as a bystander, in some capacity, to a specific scene of violence.<sup>27</sup> The speaker's ambivalence to the violence contributes to the brutality of the definition, and the ambiguous relationship between the

speaker and the scene invites readers, too, to feel implicated by a scene that surprises while seeming unpreventable.

The facts of this particular poem (who sees what, who does what, and who says what) entail a public reckoning for this definition of love. Unlike the musician who cannot "stand to see a colored woman abused by a colored man," described in Hughes's autobiography, the speaker of the poem does not intervene or interject in the scene of violence.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, the poem refuses any impulse to explain whether Clorinda's response to this violence is rebellious in its demand for more violence, if she is voicing a distorted desire for more "love," or if this is this response is presumed by the speaker watching Clorinda refuse to leave an abusive relationship. The attribution, "says Clorinda," in the final line makes it unclear whether Clorinda herself claims that this violence defines love, or if an omniscient speaker observing the interaction defines the couple's love based on an observed violent scene. This ambiguity is important because the title of the poem establishes that this is a public love. "Beale Street Love" is not the unacknowledged activity of the private sphere; rather, it is love in an urban environment where even private homes function as semi-public spaces given closely

situated the living quarters, open windows, and porches that flank the explicitly public space of the street.<sup>29</sup>

Public violence, or the threat of it, resurfaces in both "Workin' Man" and "Evil Woman." The speakers of both poems are largely concerned about the public presentation of their female partners. In "Workin' Man" the speaker's female partner is "out in de street," which leads him to conclude that she "Ain't nothin' but a 'hore" (*P*, 98). He follows this complaint with an even more vague assessment that "she don't gimme lovin' / Cause she ain't de right kind" (*ibid.*). The speaker accuses his wife of both rampant sexuality and frigidity within the space of two stanzas. The question of "kind" comes up again in "Evil Woman," where the frustrated speaker claims that "a blue-gummed woman / Ain't de style now days" (*ibid.*, 99). Hughes critiques this attention to "kind" and "style" in "Our Wonderful Society: Washington" (1927), where he found a black populace "most Nordic and un-Negro," who valued "pinks" who "looked just like 'fay women" and made apologies for "less than coffee-and-cream ladies they happened to know" (*E*, 42-43). Hughes claimed to be unimpressed by these self-imposed color lines, and the questionable speakers of both poems reflect his objections. The female speaker of "Black Gal" laments losing her lover



to precisely this preference for "rinney yaller gals" (*P*, 102). While she has been taken advantage of financially and emotionally by "Albert," the female partner discussed in "Evil Woman" will either be subject to the violence of her partner or shipped back to the South where she will continue to be at risk for violence—as we have seen in poems like "Mulatto" and "Ruby Brown." Urban spaces do not provide protection from violence for black women, but instead open up a new set of threats rooted in diseased love.

Hughes's poems set in urban environments demonstrate the potential for violence to infect human relationships so profoundly that a diseased version of love becomes contagious. The speaker in "Gypsy Man" tries to understand her situation by calling love "a strange disease" that leaves one without any options for healing (*ibid.*, 78). If the love poem defined by this project revolves around the spectacle of the sex act, then Hughes's poems innovate by recognizing the propensity of violence in relation to that act.<sup>30</sup> He inverts the perpetual desire often celebrated in the love poem by foregrounding love as an unending, incurable, contagious condition. His speakers, for the most part, are isolated and can only yearn for the kind of unity celebrated in "classical" poems such as Pound's "Alba" or

"Erat Hora." On the other hand, while Stein's fragmentation provided her an opportunity to diffuse cohesive identities, Hughes eschewed a modernist fragmentation that might erase the history and subjectivity of the real violence experienced by individuals. Hughes chose to present love poetry in a chorus of voices clearly presenting individual experiences, however dissonant those experiences might seem with the echelons of "respectable" art.

#### **"Out for a Spree": The Possibilities of the Cabaret**

Despite the violence that continues to threaten black women in urban spaces, Hughes presents more opportunities for love and satisfaction in the crowded space of the cabaret or nightclub than in the dangerous open spaces of the Jim Crow South. In particular, Hughes presents the cabaret as a haven within an urban setting. Historically, cabarets were sites of racial mixing, sexual freedom, and liberal consumption of alcohol, fashion, popular entertainment, and bodies.<sup>31</sup> In "Jazz Band in a Parisian Cabaret," presented in the section titled "From the Georgia Roads," Hughes's list-like structure details the wide-reaching interactions of a modern, cosmopolitan, and insistently foreign cabaret.<sup>32</sup> The "lords and ladies" as well as "whores and gigolos" are all swept up equally in

their search for pleasure (*P*, 106). The inset multilingual chatter emphasizes the diverse scene, but the final two lines present perhaps the greatest stride for equality in *Fine Clothes*. After the lines in "polite" English, French, German, and Spanish, Hughes adds in dialect, "Can I go home wid yuh, sweetie?" and an unidentified speaker answers, "Sure" in a one-word, one-line, complete sentence lacking dialect (*ibid.*). The anonymity of these last two speakers opens up the possibilities for rural and urban, black and white, poor and wealthy, to find in the democratizing space of the cabaret an avenue for mutual erotic pleasure. With the horrors visited upon black men in response to the mere threat of sexual interactions between black men and white women, Hughes's lines are nothing short of revolutionary. In this insistently diverse and foreign space love seems resistant to the disease present in both the rural South and urban centers Hughes documents elsewhere.

For Hughes, the cabaret provides the scene of possibility, despite its associations with the seedy underbelly of life. In the "New Cabaret Girl!" he presents the cabaret as the setting for the reeducation of a young cabaret girl who seems to be living only the sad realities of the blues without any of the humor or cheek. Presented in the section "Railroad Avenue," this cabaret attests—if

to a lesser extent—to the fact that the diversity of audience brought together in the nightclub, a diversity cultivated by proximity to a travel hub, fosters surprising possibility. Robert von Hallberg describes the poem as a traditional barroom verse where readers might expect to find a “seduction” scene, and instead find an “instruction” scene where the speaker tells the woman she can’t spend her life in sadness.<sup>33</sup> Although the speaker begins by trying to get to know more about the young woman’s history, perhaps because of a preference mirrored by the young men Hughes commented on in “Our Wonderful Society: Washington,” he ends by advising the young woman to “play” (*P*, 106). The advice recasts the resignation of the speaker from “Red Silk Stockings” into an opportunity for both agency and fulfillment. A more skeptical reading of the poem might be wary of advice that encourages the young woman to immerse herself in cabaret culture, where she might be more likely to answer “sure” if the speaker were to propose accompanying her home. Nonetheless, the speaker in “New Cabaret Girl” never indicates sexual interest, instead placing value on the “play” that provides one more option for living.

In the poem “Ma Man,” the penultimate poem in *Fine Clothes*, Hughes particularizes the pleasure possible for a

woman in the cabaret, enthralled with her beloved bluesman. The bluesman's playing and his "eagle-rockin'" translate directly into the speaker's state, "Eagle-rockish as I kin be!" (*ibid.*, 114). Despite the speaker's celebration of love, the poem underscores the tension between violence and sexuality in many of Hughes's blues poems when the speaker proclaims,

When ma man looks at me  
 He knocks me off ma feet.  
 When ma man looks at me  
 He knocks me off ma feet.  
 He's got those 'lectric-shockin' eyes an'  
 De way he shocks me sho is sweet. (*ibid.*)

Like Clorinda, this lover reframes actions that might seem abusive. The beloved's look that "shocks" and "knocks" the speaker off her feet seems "sweet" to her, and suggests her sexual availability to his advances. The unreconciled description of violence and pleasure compares to the violent actions to which Clorinda responded, "Hit me again" in "Beale Street Love." The blues form of the poem as well as the poem's tension between pleasure and violence recalls the blues ethos Hughes suggests in the opening of *Fine Clothes*: "The mood of the *Blues* is almost always

despondency, but when they are sung people laugh" (*ibid.*, 73).

### **Conclusion: The Contingency of Love**

Any study on love and love poetry risks imposing normative value on both concepts. Langston Hughes's love poems unveil the precariousness of love as a universal good. In "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926), Hughes celebrates the "common element" of black life as the source for "authentically" black poetry (*E*, 32). His audience and inspiration are the "people who have their nip 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" (*ibid.*, 33). Hughes defended portraying black life through dialect and explicit subject matter, and the resulting poetry takes his work "beyond the churches and even the dead-end jobs, and into far seamier places," where he "does not shrink from describing a culture of poverty . . . in which sexuality has a commanding power."<sup>34</sup> His description of black folk life in the essay anticipates his more critical examination in love poems of the economic, gendered, and racial risks implicit in the pursuit of love in modernity. And, his love

poems confront white American and European presentations of love by articulating the realities of love for black Americans, and a strategy that rescues the lyric mode from criticisms of false universality.

Audiences did not want Hughes's version of the love poem. Black audiences, in particular, lambasted the text as both betraying the race and pandering to white audiences who enjoyed the exoticized scandal of texts like Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*.<sup>35</sup> Although it was "the least successful both in terms of sale and of critical receptions," Arnold Rampersad maintains that *Fine Clothes* was "by far Hughes's greatest collection of verse" and "remains one of the most significant single volumes of poetry ever published in the United States."<sup>36</sup> Chinitz calls it "one of the most innovative books in the canon of modernist poetry."<sup>37</sup> As Stein insisted, innovation requires ugliness, and *Fine Clothes* asks audiences to consider how ugliness perseveres across forms.<sup>38</sup> Traditional forms cannot mute ugliness and modernist fragmentation cannot disrupt it. This is why, in a direct response to the criticism that his "poems are indelicate," Hughes answered bluntly and aptly, "But so is life" (*E*, 39).<sup>39</sup>

In choosing to write about the suffering of black women and men in the context of the love poem, Hughes engages in

the avant-garde use of shock, by presenting daily, working-class black experiences framed by one of the most common human pursuits. For Hughes, love is subject to the worst hazards of addiction and the best way to expose that experience is through the love poem. Hutchinson, quoting John Dewey, argues that pragmatism had a profound effect in reintegrating the "esthetic experience with normal processes of living."<sup>40</sup> In Hughes's blues poems, his use of dialect, his attention to traditional ballad forms, and his frank portrayal of the dangers of love daringly portray the completely average experiences for a large group of Americans. If, as James Wilson has argued, Hughes "helped to legitimize" the musical forms of jazz and blues through his "themes, rhythms, and compositional structures," then Hughes's treatment of love might serve to delegitimize the unifying promise of the lyric mode. In doing so, he underscores the contingency of love poetry and complicates the lyric experience in a way that recovers the lyric mode from critiques of its false sense of universal appeal.

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<sup>1</sup> Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1994), 149.

<sup>2</sup> The speaker's gender and sexuality in this poem and several of Hughes's love poems is often debated. Scholars such as Monica Michlin and Martin Ponce have fruitfully read the queer politics of Hughes's ambiguous speaker in



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this poem by framing the speaker as a father, or framing the child as a young version of Hughes. Several of Hughes's other poems avoid the precise gendering of either the lover or the beloved and invite a queer reading of Hughes's poetry. For the purposes of this chapter, these readings provide another element of danger to the love that Hughes consistently and explicitly treats as a hazardous experience. Hughes maintained an ambivalence about his own sexuality, but—most likely—because of social and cultural pressures did not openly display a preference for a queer lifestyle like Gertrude Stein or Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. For further reading, see Monica Michlin, "Langston Hughes's Blues," in *Temples for Tomorrow: Looking Back at the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 236-53; and Martin Ponce, "Langston Hughes's Queer Blues," *Modern Language Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (2005): 505-37.

<sup>3</sup> Langston Hughes, *The Poems: 1921-1940*, ed. Arnold Rampersad, vol. 1, *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 109; hereafter abbreviated in text as *P*.

<sup>4</sup> James Gilligan, *Violence: Our Deadly Epidemic and Its Causes* (New York: Grosset/Putnam, 1996), 93, 99-100, 105; hereafter abbreviated in text as *V*.

<sup>5</sup> Gilligan maintains that "all violence is an attempt to achieve justice" and argues that "people feel incomparably more alarmed by a threat to the psyche or the soul or the self than they are by a threat to the body (Ibid., 12, 96). What Hughes's poetry makes explicit, then, is how deeply romantic love is imbricated in any sense of "the psyche or the soul or the self."

<sup>6</sup> Julia Kristeva theorizes that "the speaking subject is a wounded being, his speech wells up out of an aching for love, and the 'death drive' (Freud) or the 'unbeing' (Lacan) that are coextensive with human nature determine, if they do not justify them, the discontents of civilizations." Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 372.

<sup>7</sup> OED Online, s.v. "passion," accessed November 2015, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/138504?rskey=nfBiAE&result=1&isAdvanced=false>.

<sup>8</sup> Hughes, *Autobiography: The Big Sea*, vol. 13, *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 178.

<sup>9</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *Writings*, ed. William Andrews (New York: Library of America, 2004), 838.

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<sup>10</sup> George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 113.

<sup>11</sup> Harryette Mullen, "'When He Is Least Himself': Double Consciousness in African American Poetry," *African American Review* 41, no. 2 (2007): 278.

<sup>12</sup> David Chinitz, *Which Sin to Bear? Authenticity and Compromise in Langston Hughes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 67, 71.

<sup>13</sup> The dangers Hughes confronts in these poems are distinct from the awesomeness of the Romantic notion of the sublime. Here, there is a fear of the small-minded and malicious, as opposed to awe in the face of a powerful natural force.

<sup>14</sup> Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 31; for more on the impact of the pastoral mode on discourses of race and what constituted the human in American nineteenth century see Ian Finseth, *Shades of Green: Visions of Nature in the Literature of American Slavery, 1770-1860* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009); and, for an astute reading of African-American literature and the recovery of the pastoral, see Kimberly Ruffin, *Black on Earth: African American EcoLiterary Traditions* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>16</sup> For more on "Dixie's Land" and Dan Emmett's minstrel shows see Hans Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of the Early Negro Minstrelsy* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962).

<sup>17</sup> Sandra Gunning, *Race, Rape, and Lynching: The Red Record of American Literature, 1890-1912* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 12.

<sup>18</sup> For early evidence against claims of sexual violence perpetrated by black men, see Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *Southern Horrors and Other Writings: The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892-1900*, ed. Jacqueline Jones Royster (Boston, MA: Bedford, 1997).

<sup>19</sup> Chinitz, *Which Sin to Bear?*, 78.

<sup>20</sup> Hughes explicitly references seeking out and reading *Cane*, much to the chagrin of "the female heads of several nice families," in "These Bad New Negroes," reprinted in *Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and World Affairs*, ed. Christopher De Santis, vol. 9, *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 36-37 (hereafter cited in text as *E*).

<sup>21</sup> In her reading of Jean Toomer's *Cane*, Janet Whyde argues, "The African-American body that is privileged is not the

physical body, which is alien and irrelevant, but the art that develops out of the black experience." See "Mediating Forms: Narrating the Body in Jean Toomer's *Cane*," *Southern Literary Journal* 26, no. 1 (1993): 50.

<sup>22</sup> Jennifer Williams, "Jean Toomer's *Cane* and the Erotics of Mourning," *Southern Literary Journal* 40, no. 2 (2008): 87.

<sup>23</sup> Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 135.

<sup>24</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 23.

<sup>25</sup> Nellie Y. McKay, *Jean Toomer, Artist: A Study of His Literary Life and Work, 1894-1936* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 125-26.

<sup>26</sup> James Smethurst, "Lyric Stars: Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 115.

<sup>27</sup> The narrator here could also be a child witnessing violence at a formative age and developing the surprising definition of love based on his/her understanding of the scene. Monica Michlin's reading of Hughes as the attendant child in "Lament over Love" quoted in note 2 lends support to such a reading. As we saw in a chapter 4, discomfort developed through proximity to a scene of violence is a strategy William Carlos Williams deploys skillfully in his poem "The Ogre."

<sup>28</sup> Hughes, *Autobiography*, 143.

<sup>29</sup> For more on the history of Beale Street, see Preston Lauterbach, *Beale Street Dynasty: Sex, Song, and the Struggle for the Soul of Memphis* (New York: Norton, 2015); Margaret McKee and Fred Chisenhall, *Beale Black and Blue: Life and Music on Black America's Main Street* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981).

<sup>30</sup> As mentioned in the introduction, Remy de Gourmont insisted on aggression being present in one of the two sexes in a given species in order to guarantee that procreation would occur (see page 33). While de Gourmont's ideas may seem misguided, his essential thesis is maintained by Randy Thornhill and Craig T. Palmer in *A Natural History of Rape: Biological Bases of Sexual Coercion* (2000) where they propose that rape is reproduction strategy used by males and as such has become an evolutionarily selected trait. Their work has met fierce resistance from theorists like Christine Drea and Kim Wallen who argue that Thornhill and Palmer have over-estimated the reproductive possibilities of forced

copulation, mistakenly ignored the ways in which female mammals participate in mate selection, and ignored the impact of social factors that contribute to a history of rape. Nonetheless, the debate within evolutionary theory belies the ongoing struggle to understand the relationship between sex and violence. See Christine M. Drea and Kim Wallen, "Female Sexuality and the Myth of Male Control," in *Evolution, Gender, and Rape* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 29-61.

Randy Thornhill and Craig Palmer, *A Natural History of Rape: Biological Bases of Sexual Coercion* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000).

<sup>31</sup> For more on racial, gender, and sexual performance in cabaret culture see Shane Vogel, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009); James Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011).

<sup>32</sup> For Hughes the foreign and the cosmopolitan also open up the possibilities of the race and class equality. Jonathan Scott explains that

From *The Weary Blues* on, Hughes had been searching for an archetype that could express the organic links between African Americans and the colonially oppressed nation-peoples of the modern world. And through the blues mode came the mestizo trope. Coming as it did from the vantage point of the United States, rather than the Caribbean and Latin America, his vision of the mestizo broke free of the obsession with skin color altogether and signified instead a fresh utopian moment of American national identity, a mestizo North America—a concept startlingly new in the U.S. context yet already present in the everyday social life of the laboring classes.

Jonathan Scott, *Socialist Joy in the Writing of Langston Hughes* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 80.

<sup>33</sup> Robert von Hallberg, *Lyric Powers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 86.

<sup>34</sup> David Chinitz, "Langston Hughes," in *Companion to Modernist Poetry*, ed. David Chinitz and Gail McDonald (Oxford, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 541; Edward Brunner, "Langston Hughes: *Fine Clothes to the Jew*," in *A Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2006), 372.

<sup>35</sup> Rampersad's review of the public response illustrates the vitriol of such attacks:

On February 5, just as [Hughes] prepared to set out on a tour for Negro History Week, the black critics opened fire. Under a headline proclaiming Hughes a "SEWER DWELLER," William M. Kelley of the *New York Amsterdam News* denounced *Fine Clothes to the Jew* as "about 100 pages of trash. . . . It reeks of the gutter and sewer." The regular reviewer of the *Philadelphia Tribune* adamantly refused to publicize it; Eustance Gay confessed that *Fine Clothes to the Jew* "disgusts me." In the *Pittsburgh Courier*, historian J. A. Rogers called it "piffling trash" that left him "positively sick." The Chicago *Whip* sneered at the dedication to Van Vechten, "a literary gutter-rat" who perhaps alone "will revel the lecherous, lust-reeking characters that Hughes finds time to poeticize about. . . . These poems are unsanitary, insipid and repulsing." Hughes was the "poet 'low-rate' of Harlem." The following week, refining its position, the *Tribune* lamented Hughes's "obsession for the more degenerate elements" of black life; the book was "a study in the perversions of the Negro."

From "Langston Hughes's *Fine Clothes to the Jew*," *Callaloo*, no. 26 (1986): 150-51.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>37</sup> Chinitz, "Langston Hughes," 540.

<sup>38</sup> Getrude Stein, "A Transatlantic Interview 1946" in *Primer for the Gradual Understanding of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Robert Bartlett Haas (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1975), 32.

<sup>39</sup> Although Hughes emphatically defended the subject matter of *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, he did regret the title of the volume. In his autobiography, he wrote that he wished he had gone with his first choice: *Brass Spitoons* (*Autobiography*, 202). Arnold Rampersad conjectures that the title might have been chosen by Van Vechten, who could have believed the "crudeness" would afford Hughes fame similar to the fame Van Vechten received with *Nigger Heaven*.

Rampersad, "Langston Hughes's *Fine Clothes to the Jew*," 150.

<sup>40</sup> Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance*, 47.

## Chapter 7

### "Into the company of love / it all returns": The Mediated

#### Love Poems of Anne Sexton and Robert Creeley

Wherever it is one stumbles (to get to wherever) at least some way will exist, so to speak, as and when a man takes this or that step—for which, god bless him. Insofar as these poems are such places, always they were ones stumbled into: warmth for a night perhaps, the misdirected intention come right: and too, a sudden instance of love, and the being loved, wherewith a man also contrives a world (of his own mind). —Robert Creeley

Robert Creeley and Anne Sexton are rarely treated together in scholarship about midcentury American poetics. However, their books of love poems, *For Love* (1962) and *Love Poems* (1969), respectively, demonstrate markedly similar concerns for how the love poem could remain a fruitful outlet for poets interested in an earnestness of voice and emotion as well as the revelatory potential of artifice. In efforts to distinguish Creeley's interest in emotion from confessional poetics, Michael Davidson describes a relationship between emotion and language that in fact illuminates both Creeley's and Sexton's work. He argues,

[w]hatever prompts the emotion is so thoroughly imbricated in the language by which it is contained that there is literally no separation between word and

event, a fact that differentiates Creeley from the confessionalists with whom he was initially confused.<sup>1</sup> While Davidson uses an attention to the relationship of events, emotions, and words to set Creeley apart, I would argue that this relationship better describes the challenge both Creeley and Sexton faced in developing a poetic persona for the love poem, a persona that responds to the historical challenges of understanding the self in midcentury America.

Their most significant influences differ vastly: Creeley advanced a field poetics heralded by his correspondence with Charles Olson that informed the influential essay "Projective Verse" (1950); Sexton fine-tuned a confessional voice influenced first by W. D. Snodgrass and then later by Robert Lowell. Both strains of midcentury poetry saw their innovations as attempts to revivify "traditional verse" with an understanding of all they had learned from it. Olson hoped that the adoption "of the conventions by field,"—which treated the syllable and the line as the units of composition, arranged with respect to the breath of the poet in the act of composition—would "bring into being an open verse as formal as the closed, with all its traditional advantages."<sup>2</sup> In an interview with Hilary Holladay, W. D. Snodgrass explained his influential

confessional collection *Heart's Needle* (1959) in relation to the nineteenth-century German tradition of lyrics addressing the death of a child, exemplified in the poems of Friedrich Rückert that were later set to music in Gustav Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder* (1905).<sup>3</sup> He regretted the term "confessional," and argued that his poems were meant to disrupt the "academic snobbery" that restrained poets from responding to their current experiences ("OCP").

While Creeley and Sexton each recognize the major contributions of formal poetic traditions, their poetic projects are both deeply invested in reawakening an earnestness and veracity that any uninvestigated relationship with form prevents. For Creeley and Sexton, then, the challenge of their age and their respective poetic movements was to deploy artifice that revealed more than the documentary realities film and photography had made available to them.<sup>4</sup> Creeley's work accomplishes this feat with a considered investigation of masculinity as a prescribed role and reinforces complex syntax with compelling line breaks as a strategy for revealing what does and does not fit within the gendered paradigms he is trying to understand. Sexton's poems take a different formal approach, generally, by shaping more traditional lineated structures in contrast to a content-driven



resistance to feminine passivity and silence. Both poets prove that the love poem is capable of responding to a diversity of desires and interests.

"Contrive," Creeley's central term in his epigraph to *For Love*, means to "invent, devise, excogitate with ingenuity" and also "to find out or discover (as the solution of a problem or a riddle)."<sup>5</sup> Through this contrivance, similar to that imagined by T. S. Eliot as a catalyst in a chemical experiment in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1921), a poet has the opportunity to bring new understanding to materials that, as W. B. Yeats explained, have been and "shall be again."<sup>6</sup> My study of the twentieth-century love poem recasts the opposition between the schools or movements with which Creeley and Sexton were associated, finding instead similarities in interest and influence in their experimental love poems. This is not to argue that both Creeley and Sexton counted the modernist poets collected here as direct literary progenitors, but to observe how the love poem, situated beyond the bounds of historical convention and traditional aims, draws two very different kinds of poets into a perspective from which we can arrive at a compatible understanding. Creeley and Sexton—representatives of two major strains of midcentury poetics who were faced with the destructiveness of World

War II, the Holocaust, and the atomic bomb—continued to find in the love poem a form capable of capturing the disappointments, anxieties, and pleasures of the historical moment.

As we have seen in previous chapters, the modernist love poem often resists the “impersonality” posited by Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” The midcentury love poem (late modern), then, is able to overcome some of the divides drawn between what Donald Allen called “New American Poetry,” an umbrella term that encompasses Creeley’s field poetics, and what M. L. Rosenthal described as “confessional poetry” in its treatment of poetic persona.<sup>7</sup> Creeley himself was sensitive to the dismissive attitude toward confessional writing, and recognized in his own writing such an uncomfortable semblance to confession that he felt the need to clarify in the final lines of “For Love”:

Let me stumble into  
 not the confession but  
 the obsession I begin with  
 now. For you

also (also)  
 some time beyond place, or

place beyond time, no  
 mind left to  
  
 say anything at all,  
 that face gone, now.  
 Into the company of love  
 it all returns.<sup>8</sup>

Here, Creeley uses the term "confession" to indicate a giving over, or an exorcising of the material. Confessional poetry was often prescribed as a therapeutic practice for psychiatric patients, a treatment Snodgrass was wary of ("OCP"). This understanding of confession treats the content of the poem as whole and unaltered in its delivery to the page; like a burr, it is an agitating substance that needs to be removed whole.

The negative connotations of "confessionalism" stem from the very descriptor used to gather the work of Lowell, Snodgrass, Sylvia Plath, and Sexton under one term: if a poem is a confession, then artifice complicates the promise of expiation. Instead of "confession," Creeley's poem insists on an "obsession," figured as close and intense attention to the material. This obsession is both productive and encompassing, like his description in "I Know a Man" of the darkness that "sur- / rounds us" (CCP,

132). Like a mollusk working a bit of irritant into a pearl, an obsession allows the poet to discover (or contrive) in language a solution to some motivating experience—even if that solution is purposefully resistant to the notion of resolution. Through the besieging of “obsession” and not the therapy of “confession, the speaker recognizes his experiences in the larger “company of love.” The personal, the “time,” “place,” “mind,” and “face,” that might restrict the possibility for the poem to affect more than just himself, is subsumed in the persona of a lover—a contrivance that reveals more than it conceals.

Because confessional poetry was supposed to give “unmediated access to the personal,” it is easy to see how a poet like Sexton has been read very differently than someone like Creeley.<sup>9</sup> Less certain of her intellectual prowess, Sexton did not publish poetics essays, but Creeley’s poetry and prose usefully illuminates the challenges of persona both poets faced. After providing what seems like “unmediated access” to a post-coital scene in “Something,” Creeley emphasizes the subjective and didactic experience of witnessing the event that inspires the poem. He frames his question as a declarative with the final lines “What / love might learn from such a sight” (*CCP*, 281). If we take seriously William Carlos Williams’s

statement that poetry has always been "tapped into the subconscious, the unconscious" and "has also been a construction in the words," then we might well wonder whether any poem ever gives us "unmediated access to the personal."<sup>10</sup> Robert von Hallberg quotes a 1952 letter from Lowell to Allen Tate where Lowell demonstrates the labor, or obsession, entailed in making language seem unmediated. "Nothing's harder," Lowell writes, "than getting the unpretentious variety of letters or conversation into a poem. I've been turning out a lot lately, none of it good yet."<sup>11</sup> The language-centered poetry of Bruce Andrews, taken up in the conclusion, makes a convincing argument that language—by its very nature a political construction—can never be "unmediated."

Creeley's love poetry is often read as the natural inheritance of the work of experimental modernists collected in this project—and so too, I would argue, is Sexton's love poetry. Sexton's approach to what may have been considered shocking content harkens back to the poems of Langston Hughes, Mina Loy and Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, as does Creeley's approach to the daily and the intimate. Like Williams, Sexton appreciates the dangers of the creative process as a transgressive process, and like Pound she understands how the restrictions of form can

give rise to greater precision in tone and image. The conceptual divide between confessional and field poetics seems much less clear when we consider the dimensions of the modernist love poem.

### **"One must picture a woman": Gender Trouble and Poetic**

#### **Persona**

Many of Sexton's and Creeley's love poems continue to do the work of Williams, Loy, Freytag-Loringhoven, and Hughes by drawing attention to damaging inequities within heterosexual love. Sexton's poem "The Nude Swim" captures the persistent pressures of the male gaze and the risks of subjugation that are always present in the interstices of love and gendered power dynamics. Creeley's "The Way" provides a self-conscious perspective on such pressures to both mock and critique the restrictive masculinity aestheticized in the tradition of courtly love. Together they reveal how one significant marker of experimental love poetry remains its confrontation with the constraints of gender norms that expect men to be knowing, speaking, and acting subjects and women to be passive objects.

"The Nude Swim" responds to the particular complications that arise for a woman writing love poems. The poem foregoes rhyme for repetition of words and phrases to build

and shift its tone, while maintaining the sentence form. The beginning stanzas insist on the power and promise of a unified "we":

On the southwest side of Capri  
we found a little unknown grotto  
where no people were and we  
entered it completely  
and let our bodies lose all their loneliness.

All the fish in us  
had escaped for a minute.  
The real fish did not mind.  
We did not disturb their personal life.  
We calmly trailed over them  
and under them, shedding  
air bubbles, little white  
balloons that drifted up  
into the sun by the boat  
where the Italian boatman slept  
with his hat over his face. (*SCP*, 183)

The repetition of "we" that bookends the second and third lines, and then begins lines nine and ten, combined with the object pronoun "us" and adjectival "our," establishes both the importance of the unified "we" and its distinction

from other forms of being. The line "where no people were and we" suggests that to be "we" has greater potential than to be another form of human. (The other living creatures present are "fish," a noun that can signal both the singular and plural.) By combining the dependent clause with the pronoun from the next clause, the lineation emphasizes Sexton's skill for creative phrasing without altering the overarching syntactic clarity of the poem.

Away from the crowds and the sleeping boatman, the lover and the beloved can find the comfort, calm, and delight of a collective "we." In his essay "Inside Out: Notes on the Autobiographical Mode" (1973), Creeley calls the pronoun "we," "that unimaginable *plural* of I" to emphasize the false pretense that one's experience can be expanded, or "multiplied" as he writes in "Numbers," into the greater authority and perspective of "we" (CCP, 395).<sup>12</sup> For Creeley, "we" is not merely the expansion of "I"; instead, it is an addition to one's subjective experience. "Love me," Creeley writes later in "Numbers," "One by one" (*ibid.*, 397).

Philosopher Alain Badiou, argues that love gives individuals the opportunity to experience the world "from the point of view of two and not one," and that this perspective is, in essence, "a quest for truth."<sup>13</sup> The pressure Sexton puts on the plural pronoun forms in the



first half of the poem portends this kind of hopefulness in the possibility of "we."

Within that possibility she creates a peaceful stasis with the lover and the beloved, and with their place in the scene. They are experiencing the pleasure of the grotto and maintaining an idealized harmony with the creatures already there. She is not speaking to the boatman or to the assumed collective masculine audience often associated with the lyric, and in this space the "we" is possible, "loneliness" can be shed. The consonance of that last line in the first stanza dwells upon the loneliness draining from the two bodies, which is then turned into something better through the "we" of the experience. The poem dispels that loneliness and quickly moves on to a champagne-like image of the bubbles rolling off skin like tiny fish in the midst of actual fish. In this moment of "we" the loneliness of the individual's interiority can be released safely, or even in celebration, like the air bubbles rolling off the skin.

Against this scene the poem shifts to underscore the fleeting nature of such peacefulness. The speaker of the poem easily slips back into her role as an object of the male gaze after comparing herself to a woman rendered in art. Once she has been "pictured," or captured in an

artistic rendering, the speaker cannot recover the sense of calm or connection she has in the beginning of the poem. The poem does not fully register the shift until the final lines, however, when the lover responds to the first words of the beloved. By switching from the collective references of "we" and "us" to the individualized "you" and "I," the final two stanzas document the slow build to her reaction:

Water so clear you could  
read a book through it.

Water so buoyant you could float on your elbow.

I lay on it as on a divan.

I lay on it just like  
*Matisse's Red Odalisque.*

Water was my strange flower.

One must picture a woman  
without a toga or a scarf  
on a couch as deep as a tomb.

The walls of that grotto  
were everycolor blue and  
you said, "Look! Your eyes  
are seacolor. Look! Your eyes  
are skycolor." And my eyes  
shut down as if they were suddenly ashamed. (SCP, 184)

After the poem's "we" splits into "you" and "I," the lover's thoughts trail toward the historical tradition of women rendered in art. The speaker's awareness of the sleeping boatman nearby, her likening of herself to the woman lounging on a divan in "Matisse's *Red Odalisque*," predicts her exposure as an aesthetic object, "without a toga or a scarf" and trapped by her environment, "on a couch as deep as a tomb." The poem illustrates the struggle for a woman poet who is associated with both the objectified women captured in art and the artist-subjects responsible for such objectification.

A scene as sweet and playful as floating nude on her elbow in an isolated grotto cannot escape the long history of romance and art stripping women bare for display in front of the male gaze. "One must picture" speaks to the limits of one's imagination and the limits of the speaker's access to an idealized joy in "we." Within this framework, the speaker's sudden withdrawal from her beloved after the compliment does not indicate a feminine capriciousness, but rather a feminine subjectivity constrained by the historic bounds of her own imagination. The kindness of the beloved then becomes a reminder of the speaker's position as woman and object, rather than as a partner in the more capacious identity of "we."

Unlike Sexton's attempt to remove the scene of love from a collective masculine audience, Creeley's poem "The Way" instantiates a lyric triad in order to critique faulty expectations of masculine knowledge and action with respect to romance and sex. Critics Stephen Fredman and Marjorie Perloff both comment on Creeley's "aversion" to controlling a moment in order to adhere to "pre-existing categories or paradigms."<sup>14</sup> Perloff summarizes her reading of this tendency succinctly: "Creeley does not concern himself with cause and effect, past and present."<sup>15</sup> And while Creeley is clearly not interested in the kind of historical citation and quotation employed by Pound or Olson, he does not shy away from translating classical lyric tropes, paying close attention to the potential for humor in making personal relationships part of the public forum of poetry. He notes both the restrictions of lyric expectations and the formality of the romance associated with them.

In "The Way," Creeley employs a trio of quatrains that maps out the classical love lyric triad articulated by Rachel Blau DuPlessis (a masculine lover speaking about the feminine beloved to a presumed audience of masculine peers).<sup>16</sup> The following lines recognize the insufficiency of a romantic tradition that does not want to hear from women about their desires for pleasure:

My love's manners in bed  
are not to be discussed by me,  
as mine by her  
I would not credit comment upon gracefully.

Yet I ride by the margin of that lake in  
the wood, the castle,  
and the excitement of strongholds,  
and have a small boy's notion of doing good.

Oh well, I will say here,  
knowing each man,  
let you find a good wife too,  
and love her as hard as you can. (*CCP*, 168)

The speaker starts by indicating that he wants to discuss the beloved and the spectacle of sex, but suggests that he finds such talk unbecoming before going on to have that very conversation. His proclaimed attention to propriety encodes the presence and the power of the assumed masculine audience. In a gesture meant for their benefit, he digresses—albeit mockingly—to discuss childhood imaginations of castles and fortresses and implies a conquering in the “small boy's notion of doing good.” In its philosophical uses relating to logic, “notion” equates

to intention, and such usage enhances the mocking tone adopted by the speaker. Here, naïve effort replaces communication. Davidson aptly points out, "This self-mocking posture deflates any claims to heroic agency and diverts responsibility for action from the speaker onto a narrative code that precedes and organizes all agency."<sup>17</sup> Such a narrative code usefully taps into a large and broad history that can seem ahistorical, but nonetheless maintains a relationship with present and past configurations of sanctioned heterosexual love.

The speaker's emphasis on "doing good" drives both his actions toward his wife and his impulse to share his advice. The appositional phrase "knowing each man" in the final stanza winks directly to the community the poem imagines as its audience. His posed apophasis stands as a defense against the unreasonableness of the expectation that his wife also refrain from commenting on his "manners" in bed; he is merely doing good, or so he assures his audience, while she would be diminishing their love. The poem, made of language, has no way of reconciling restraint in language with right action. Instead it relies on unidentified ways of knowing that enable the lover to both pleasure his wife and proffer advice to his audience.

Creeley further mocks the lyric tradition he so closely mimics by mythologizing sex with the language of medieval legend. The poem purports chivalry in its restraint and its aggrandizement of a knight's errand, but closes with a fairly explicit instruction. His advice to love one's wife as "hard as you can" appears as a hypermasculine directive compared to the more earnest closing lines of "The Rain," where the speaker implores the beloved in a direct address to "Be wet / with a decent happiness" (CCP, 207). "The Way" mocks traditions like the *troubar clus*, the elaborate closed form used by the troubadours to mitigate the restrictive circumstances of their writing lives, while admitting its own failure or insufficiency. The speaker's qualification for his directive is "as you can," and not "as you should," an alternative sonically anticipated by the "good" that closes the second stanza. In his biography, Ekbert Faas quotes Creeley admitting, "I didn't have a clue as to what men did, except literally I was a man."<sup>18</sup> Unlike much love poetry before the twentieth century, "The Way" acknowledges the sexual side of married life and advocates for the beloved's sexual pleasure, but with only a naïve "notion" of how to achieve it. Naïve because, as Davidson points out, the speaker "is always talking" and "cannot

attend to his interlocutor," which means he cannot be informed, questioned, or challenged.<sup>19</sup>

Much like Williams's "The Young Housewife," "The Way" elides the voice, thoughts, or opinions of the speaker's beloved and treats her as an object of attention that can be mysteriously known without an exchange in language. Creeley's poem makes of the beloved exactly what Sexton's poem fears to be made into: an object of art rather than a speaking subject. But by creating a persona that evinces naïveté, and by mocking the speaker's self-aggrandized notions, Creeley's poem both engages with and recognizes the shortcomings of such a tradition.

### **"For love—I would split / open your head": The Artifice of Shock and Juxtaposition**

Both Creeley and Sexton achieved some of their most compelling love poems by employing the avant-garde tradition of shock through the use of surprising juxtaposition. As Peter Bürger argues, "in the historical avant-garde movements, shocking the recipient becomes the dominant principle of artistic intent."<sup>20</sup> The isolation of such shock, unrecovered from assimilation into a greater purpose or universal image, carries forward the Dadaist and Futurist impulse to forgo meaning in favor of effect. In



her overview of confessionalism, Lucy Collins regrets that "Sexton rarely manages to transmute the matter of her own life into something universally meaningful," and blames Sexton for the aspersions often cast on confessional poets more generally.<sup>21</sup> Sexton's careful control of her material, however, and her resistance to sublimation by a universalizing tendency—similar to Stein's resistance to the lyric in *Tender Buttons*—actually establish her as a far less conventional poet than most critics have recognized. Sexton and Creeley's willingness to present intimate details of their lives and of their poetic imaginations gives them access to a kind of shocking content that readers continue to find familiar in contours yet surprising in intensity. Similar to Hughes's concerns with the dangers of love in the previous chapter, the following poems figure the troubling encounters of love and violence in order to magnify the love poem's capability for shock.

Creeley's "The Warning" is one of his most memorable poetic achievements. In his reading of the poem, August Kleinzahler declares that "Creeley has no equal among modern love poets writing in English, even if love for Creeley is characteristically an occasion for turmoil and rather grim business."<sup>22</sup> Unlike in his poem "For Love," the

voice of the lover in "The Warning" reads as distant and somewhat stilted in its brevity:

For love—I would  
 split open your head and put  
 a candle in  
 behind the eyes.

Love is dead in us  
 if we forget  
 the virtues of an amulet  
 and quick surprise. (*CCP*, 140)

The darkness of Creeley's poem juxtaposes love with death, its most familiar counterpart. Rather than invoke the fear that death will take the beloved or a *carpe diem* trope to spur the beloved to action, the poem instead collapses the passion of love with a willingness to engage in violence. In his essay "Was That a Real Poem or Did You Just Make it up Yourself" (1974), Creeley describes a reader's protest that this poem "was a literally violent proposal that was not demonstrably involved with usual senses of 'loving' the recipient" and his own earnest contestation that "I had always felt that poem a true measure of an ability to love, and possibly it is."<sup>23</sup> This is not a glib retort. More than twenty years before he had written to Rosemarie Waldrop,

"The Warning [*sic*] has the sense of 'for the sake of love' and is, in that sense free even of the qualification of 'my love.'"<sup>24</sup> Like the speaker from Robert Browning's "Porphyria's Lover," Creeley's speaker posits that the willingness to take extreme measures to stop time—to engage death—is the very thing that prevents love from becoming "dead in us" (*CCP*, 140).

Sexton's "Loving the Killer" articulates the desperation of love that often leads to the surprising sentiment Creeley expresses in "The Warning." Sexton's poem ruminates on death and the grotesque as a fact of the lovers' experience together. The poem lists the content of packages and the details of daily experience to highlight the presence of death in the mundane. In the final stanza the poem culminates, as many of Sexton's poems do, in its most striking image. Here, it is of the lover devouring her beloved in the act of love.

And tonight our skins, our bones,  
 that have survived our fathers,  
 will meet, delicate in the hold,  
 fastened together in an intricate  
 lock. Then one of us will shout,  
 "My need is more desperate!" and  
 I will eat you slowly with kisses

even though the killer in you  
has gotten out. (*SCP*, 188)

After listing the dead animals they have packed up in a crate, the lover treats herself and her beloved as animals that have barely escaped such a fate. Her juxtaposition of delicacy and hardness—both literally and figuratively in the form of the “intricate / lock”—undergirds the poem’s larger tension between a love that sustains and a love that kills. The animals in the poem, all killed for their bones, heads, pelts, are consumed as prizes. The only “kill” served for sustenance makes the lover so sick that she “vomited behind the dining tent” (*ibid.*, 186). The final stanza squarely accuses the beloved of providing the wrong kind of love (the kind that kills), but also admits to the lover’s predatory actions. The need and desperation between the two forces them to consume each other without sustenance or nourishment.

Combining love and death—specifically, violent death—allows both Creeley and Sexton to explore the magnitude of affect that love evokes. It allows both poets to torque their love poems by using one of the greatest threats to love to elucidate the dangerous workings of love itself. Creeley’s “The Warning” and Sexton’s “Loving the Killer” impel readers to reckon with the depth of feeling that love

elicits and to question whether our human relationships with love are not already irrevocably diseased by love's association with violence, destruction, and death.

**"The need / before the bed": Productive Tension between Form and Content**

The relationship between form and content motivated both Creeley and Sexton, like the moderns in the previous chapters, to imagine new ways of constructing the love poem. In "Projective Verse," his seminal essay on field poetics, Charles Olson insists that

FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT. (Or so it got phrased by one, R. Creeley, and it makes absolute sense to me, with this possible corollary, that right form, in any given poem, is the only and exclusively possible extension of content under hand.)<sup>25</sup>

This axiom, among the most important concerns for poets like Olson and Creeley, allowed them to innovate upon the poetics of modernists like Pound, Williams, and Stein, directly.

While Sexton did not publish poetics essays, her work reveals a careful attention to the productive potential of poetic form. Poet Maxine Kumin recalled spending hours on

the phone with Sexton workshopping each other's poems, reading them aloud to listen for the nuances of rhythm, rhyme, line breaks, and to temper the musicality poetic language. Kumin remembered that Sexton

strove to use rhyme unexpectedly but always aptly. Even the most unusual rhyme, she felt, must never obtrude on the sense of the line, nor must the normal word order, the easy tone of vernacular speech, be wrenched solely to save a rhyme.<sup>26</sup>

Without a formal education, Sexton still managed to strike balance between form and content that is closely reminiscent of the "integral" Louis Zukofsky described in "A"-12: "Lower limit speech / Upper limit music."<sup>27</sup> Even where her syntax approximates speech, such as in "The Nude Swim" her lineation resists and reveals the more interesting tension in remaining between those two limits. Sexton's "Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator" and Creeley's "The Bed" exemplify both poets' adaptations of traditional forms, which are altered in consonance with surprising content. These poems do not have the "unmediated" or "of the moment" quality that several of Creeley's or Sexton's poems develop.<sup>28</sup> Instead they invoke and distort traditional forms to enhance the drudgery of a dissatisfied speaker persona.

Like "The Way," Creeley's "The Bed" employs a regular form as part of a broader motif of irony in order to critique the layers of "common finery" that separate marriage from the basic sexual needs symbolized by the bed. The poem privileges the material of poetry, language, ahead of the passion of sex that often prompts the love poem and asks whether the poem can make truth out of such constructions. The short three quatrains read:

She walks in beauty like a lake  
 and eats her steak  
 with fork and knife  
 and proves a proper wife.

Her room and board  
 he can afford, he has made friends  
 of common pains  
 and meets his ends.

Oh god, decry  
 such common finery as puts the need  
 before the bed, makes true what is  
 the lie indeed. (*CCP*, 162)

The opening line of the poem invokes Lord Byron's poem "She Walks in Beauty" (1814), but the poem consciously

reevaluates its relationship to poetic form. Byron's poem idealizes the beloved through an extended meditation on her beautiful features and the imagined grace that lies beneath those features, while Creeley's poem hammers with tight knit rhyme and musical patterning on concrete and observable facts such as how the beloved conducts herself at the dinner table or the finances of the lover. Creeley's poem highlights the clunkiness of form in the first quatrain with insistent rhyme, overly formal language, and rhythm that only returns you to the regular clunk of each couplet. Unlike Byron's poem, which fills out to meet the regular rhyme scheme, the form hems in Creeley's first quatrain. This restrictive form allows Creeley to critique the idealized midcentury American marriage, where a "proper wife" is kept by her husband like a patron paying "room and board."

Sexton's poem "The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator" is less interested in critiquing formality through form, and yet also self-consciously employs an awkwardness of form in order to develop a mood of resignation. In a series of seven English sestets, each ending with the iambic tetrameter line "At night, alone, I marry the bed," she drives home the stiffness and discomfort of her own feelings of loss with this insistent repetition. Just as



the new beloved can make any scene brighter and more beautiful, so, too, Sexton reminds us, can the absent beloved make even the most intimate spaces feel foreign and uncomfortable. Like the poem's form, the bed is a large, solid, container, empty of the passion that would have filled it with more than utility. Her final stanza captures her images of desire juxtaposed with the coldness of the form to demonstrate fully the speaker's sense of emptiness:

The boys and girls are one tonight.  
 They unbutton blouses. They unzip flies.  
 They take off shoes. They turn off the light.  
 The glimmering creatures are full of lies.  
 They are eating each other. They are overfed.  
 At night, alone, I marry the bed. (*SCP*, 199)

Reminiscent of Stein's repetition for effect, Sexton's list of short declarative sentences beginning with "they" instantiate the lover's isolation. Even her frank and scintillating descriptions of masturbation earlier in the poem, such as "I beat her like a bell," are dulled by the insistent repetition and dreariness of the refrain. Kumin recalls Sexton "believing that the hardest truths would come to light" if they were shaped by the "rigor" of "a stanzaic pattern, a rhyme scheme, a prevailing meter."<sup>29</sup> For Sexton, form is not only an extension of content, but the

very tool by which content can be purposefully wrought to reveal something more precise and provocative than any unmediated content could achieve alone.

### **Conclusion**

There is a critically established distance between so-called confessional and field poetics. Even at the outset, Rosenthal's initial coining of the term "confessional" to describe Lowell's new approach was mildly derisive.<sup>30</sup> Rosenthal at first regrets "the use of poetry for the most naked kind of confession" that seems to be growing in popularity, and then reconciles himself to a kind of tepid admiration for Lowell's ability to "build a great poem out of the predicament and horror of the lost Self."<sup>31</sup> In contrast, Donald Allen, editor of *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960* anthology, coined the term "New American" to describe what he called "our avant-garde, the true continuers of the modern movement in American poetry," which meant to signal that this poetry developed outside of the academy, with which poets like Lowell or Snodgrass were associated.<sup>32</sup>

While both terms are ripe for critique and nuance, as many critics have shown, they are still used as touchstones of difference in discussing midcentury poetries. The terms

are useful in organizing literary history and understanding the different motivations and aims poets had in responding to the broad sense of loss felt by a generation that had experienced life before and after World War II. For confessionalists, Collins explains that the poem became a way of "redressing the balance" in a fragmented existence, and she posits that "the poem which spoke directly from troubled experience provided a means of validating feeling in a threatening world."<sup>33</sup> Creeley and Sexton each effectively developed poetic personas and an attention to the clarifying possibilities of artifice. With different methods, both authors were able to craft intimacy and immediacy that continues to resonate almost a half-century after their publications went into print. For both Creeley and Sexton, then, the specific contrivance available in the love poem became a valuable asset in resisting the sense of futility and fragmentation facing midcentury subjects.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Davidson, "The Repeated Insistence: Creeley's Rage," in *Form, Power, and Person in Robert Creeley's Life and Work* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010), 82.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," in *Collected Prose*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 22.

<sup>3</sup> W. D. Snodgrass, "The Original Confessional Poet Tells All," interview by Hilary Holladay, 2009, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/article/181671>; hereafter abbreviated in text as "OCP."

<sup>4</sup> The first photography was available as early as 1839, but better and lighter equipment allowed photographers and

documentarians access to more material by the middle of the twentieth century, when graphic news footage of overseas conflict like the Vietnam War or images of the Civil Rights movement had a dramatic effect on the American Public. Michael Renov examines the complicated relationship between objectivity and subjectivity that those interested in documentation have always been faced with in "Away from Copying: The Art of Documentary Practice," in *Truth or Dare: Art and Documentary* (Chicago, IL: Intellect Books, 2007), 13-24.

<sup>5</sup> OED Online, s.v. "contrive," accessed December 2015, <http://www.oed.com.libproxy.unm.edu/view/Entry/40555?rskey=CYURk&result=1&isAdvanced=false> (accessed February 23, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> "One should say before sleeping, 'I have lived many lives. I have been a slave and a prince. Many a beloved has sat upon my knees and I have sat upon the knees of many a beloved. Everything that has been shall be again.'" Anne Sexton attributes this quote to W. B. Yeats in the epigraph to *Love Poems* in *The Complete Poems* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 172; hereafter abbreviated in text as *SCP*.

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed examination of Allen's editorial process in constructing his seminal anthology see Alan Golding, "The New American Poetry Revisited, Again," *Contemporary Literature* 39, no. 2 (1998): 180-211.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Creeley, *The Collected Poems of Robert Creeley* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 258; hereafter abbreviated in text as *CCP*.

<sup>9</sup> Rose Lucas, "Gifts of Love, Gifts of Poison: Anne Sexton and the Poetry of Intimate Exchange," *Life Writing* 6, no. 1 (2009): 46.

<sup>10</sup> William Carlos Williams, *Selected Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1954), 219.

<sup>11</sup> Robert von Hallberg, "Robert Lowell's *History*," in *American Poetry and Culture, 1945-1980* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 155.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Creeley, "Inside Out: Notes on the Autobiographical Mode," in *The Collected Essays of Robert Creeley* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 558.

<sup>13</sup> Alain Badiou, *In Praise of Love* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 22.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Fredman, introduction to *Form, Power, and Person in Robert Creeley's Life and Work* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010), 2.

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- <sup>15</sup> Marjorie Perloff, "Robert Creeley Out of School: The Making of a Singular Poetics," in *Form, Power, and Person*, 27.
- <sup>16</sup> Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Genders, Races, and Religious Cultures in Modern American Poetry, 1908-1934* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 29.
- <sup>17</sup> Davidson, "The Repeated Insistence," 76.
- <sup>18</sup> Ekbert Faas, *Robert Creeley: A Biography* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2001), 33.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>20</sup> Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 18.
- <sup>21</sup> Lucy Collins, "Confessionalism," in *Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry* (New York: Wiley Blackwell, 2006), 206.
- <sup>22</sup> August Kleinzahler, "What Is Left Out," *New York Times*, February 24, 2008, sec. Books / Sunday Book Review, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/24/books/review/Kleinzahler-t.html>.
- <sup>23</sup> Creeley, "Was That a Real Poem or Did you Just Make It up Yourself," *The Collected Essays*, 572.
- <sup>24</sup> Robert Creeley, *Selected Letters of Robert Creeley* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 260.
- <sup>25</sup> Olson, "Projective Verse," 16.
- <sup>26</sup> Maxine Kumin, "How It Was: Maxine Kumin on Anne Sexton," in *SCP*, xxv.
- <sup>27</sup> Louis Zukofsky, *Selected Poems*, ed. Charles Bernstein, American Poets Project (New York: Library of America, 2006), 102.
- <sup>28</sup> Lucas, "Gifts of Love, Gifts of Poison: Anne Sexton and the Poetry of Intimate Exchange," 46; Perloff, "Robert Creeley Out of School: The Making of a Singular Poetics," 27.
- <sup>29</sup> Kumin, "How It Was," xxv.
- <sup>30</sup> M. L. Rosenthal, "Robert Lowell and the Poetry of Confession," in *Our Life in Poetry: Selected Essays and Reviews* (New York: Persea, 1991), 109-12.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.
- <sup>32</sup> Donald Allen, ed., *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999; reprint), xii.
- <sup>33</sup> Collins, "Confessionalism," 198-199.

## Chapter 8

### New Lyric Studies and New Lyric

Compared with finding out what comes next, it isn't important what lyric is. -Rei Terada

The recent and renewed attention to lyric studies has contributed a large body of research and criticism to the study of poetry. In the previous seven chapters, I have been careful to isolate the term "lyric" to address the lyric subject and the lyric qualities of language closely affiliated with song forms like the ballad. For example, Stein's diffuse subjectivity undermined the close association between lyric and the love poem in order to democratize the privileged role of the speaking subject in what I have called a "non-lyric love poem." Her poems anticipated the issues Theodore Adorno raised concerning the individuated speaking subject in "On Lyric Poetry and Society" (1957), which stands as a kind of urtext to what has been called in the last decade New Lyric Studies (the following pages will address his argument directly). In another example, the chapter on Hughes analyzes his adaptation of ballad forms, which he skillfully deployed to signal a relationship between African American folk idioms and the more canonical folk traditions of British and

American eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature. The work of lyric studies' critics who are disenchanted with the idea of lyric as a catchall phrase that often stands in for all short poetic forms largely influenced my scrupulousness in using the term "lyric," because, like traditional conceptions of the love poem, traditional conceptions of lyric can be made into straw men or models depending on the needs of the writer (or reader). In this conclusion, I will turn directly to the term "lyric" and use the previous seven case studies as well as the contemporary work of Harryette Mullen and Bruce Andrews, to argue for a language-focused reading of lyric that is precise in its methods while being sensitive to historically-specific and community-driven permutations.

Rei Terada's epigraph above is not meant to disabuse readers of the importance of lyric studies, but to turn the field to the task of elucidating "what comes next." The eight poets in the previous chapters found the love poem useful because of its conspicuous tradition and its flexible parameters. Similar to Terada, who questions the value of finding a conclusive definition of lyric, these poets were less concerned with defining love or love poetry as a monolithic concept than animating a poetics of love to produce love poems lauding pleasures and warning of hazards.

While philosophers from Aristotle to Stendhal to Julia Kristeva have fruitfully commented on the intricacies of love and romance, the poets in this project benefitted from their ability—at every historical moment—to actively challenge the various iterations of sanctioned love. Stein democratized love for every body, and Pound learned from the intricacies a classical love in order to renovate familiar themes for modernity. Williams and Freytag-Loringhoven revealed the intersections of love and transgression: Williams recognized the threat these intersections posed for women in a sexually conservative culture, while Freytag-Loringhoven saw the possibilities available for a woman willing to disregard such mores. Loy and Hughes pulled back the veil on the disappointments of lovers restricted by gender, class, and race. Like Creeley and Sexton, their poems reveal love that is not always, as Creeley's disappointed reader described it, "demonstrably involved with usual senses of 'loving.'"<sup>1</sup>

Like the lyric, however, the "usual senses" of loving are hard to pin down. This project grapples with that difficulty, and gleans from the modernist love poems analyzed in the previous chapters an alternative to a singular formal definition. Starting with the basic figures of the lover, beloved, and precipitating event—generally



associated with the spectacle of sex—the modernist love poems here ask how a love poem articulated the presence of such figures, question how the love poem idealized or objectified these figures, and clarify how objectification slips easily into sexism, racism, and violence. Just as my formally-driven framework of the love poem has made room for Pound's "Alba" and Williams's "The Ogre" in one study, a similar treatment of lyric proves useful in acknowledging historical and biographical context while recognizing the salient formal qualities of what has come to be called lyric.

**"Unaffected by bustle and commotion": Adorno's Lyric and Contemporary Lyric(al) Studies**

In light of his description of lyric as poetry that remains "unaffected by bustle and commotion," Adorno's concern in "On Lyric Poetry and Society" with lyric's "hopes to attain universality through unrestrained individuation" makes sense.<sup>2</sup> Scholars, especially historicist critics, have proven this to be a straw man argument against lyric. Most scholars agree that lyric has few, if any, consistent formal restraints and has been interpreted differently by poets as well as readers since the first uses of the term.

Mark Jeffreys's and Virginia Jackson's extensive research provides useful historical and critical overviews of the lyric as a contested genre. Jeffreys points out that the intermingling of short poetic forms during the Renaissance represents the "most important transformations of the usage of the term *lyric*."<sup>3</sup> During this period, "short inscriptive forms such as the epigram, newly distributed by printing presses and emblem books, mingled with Petrarchan song forms" and were often collected "in the confusion of miscellanies" represented by, Googe's *Eglogs, Epytaphes, and Sonnettes* (1563) or Lovelace's *Lucasta: Epodes, Odes, Sonnets, Songs, etc.* (1648) ("IL" 197). Jackson digs into these publishing practices to point out that, "[b]y the early nineteenth century, poetry had never before been so dependent on the mediating hands of the editors and reviewers who managed the print public sphere."<sup>4</sup> Jackson seconds Jeffreys in emphasizing that the "lyric takes form through the development of reading practices in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that become the practice of literary criticism" and, as a result, "[t]he reading of the lyric produces a theory of the lyric that then produces a reading of the lyric, and the hermeneutic circle rarely opens to dialectical interruption" (*DM*, 8, 10-11). Together Jackson and Yopie Prins intervene in that cycle to

demonstrate how the figure of the nineteenth-century "poetess" is particularly apt in revealing a polyvocal subjectivity and historical awareness that Adorno's description of the lyric seems to lack.<sup>5</sup>

Jackson contests that "the poetry that comes to be understood as lyric after the eighteenth century is thought to require as its context only the occasion of its reading," and "[w]hile other modes . . . may have been seen to be historically contingent, the lyric emerged as the one genre indisputably literary and independent of social contingency" (*DM*, 7). Jeffreys, Jackson, and Prins agree that critical practices in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, culminating in New Critical formalisms, encouraged scholars to treat lyric poems with greater importance than did many of the poets who wrote those lyrics. Jeffreys highlights the fact that poets ranging from Percy Shelley to Pound consistently valued the long poem or epic-forms associated with historical and cultural significance—over the short lyric. He concludes that "lyric did not conquer poetry: poetry was reduced to lyric. Lyric became the dominant form of poetry only as poetry's authority was reduced to the cramped margins of culture" (*ibid.*, 200). Modernists like those discussed here earnestly believed that poetry had an important role to play in shaping the culture in which they

lived, but even at the height of magazine circulation moderns were fighting the same battle for recognition that led Romantic poet Shelley to assert, "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." Pound echoes this assertion of poetry's social and cultural importance in his contention that "literature is news that STAYS news."<sup>6</sup>

For Jeffreys, Jackson, and Prins, Adorno's restrictive definition of the lyric corresponds to an ideology of lyric that is ripe for historical critique. Jeffreys posits a useful summary for these arguments when he admits, "whether [critics] identify the dominant Western culture of the past two centuries most explicitly with capitalism, patriarchy, or the metaphysics of presence," critiques of the lyric have in common the desire to "align themselves with the opposition," and "[t]heir disagreements hinge on whether lyric is also part of the cultural opposition" ("IL," 200). Terada echoes these thoughts in her summative article "After the Critique of Lyric," written in response to several 2006 Modernist Language Association panels engaged with New Lyric Studies. Terada chides literature departments for clinging to lyric as an ideological object in need of critique while at the same time continuing to reify it in anthologies and syllabi.<sup>7</sup>

So, if lyric is not the reified art object removed from the "bustle and commotion" of lived experience, if it is differently realized by poets across history and diversely presented by editors based on public reception and the costs of production, then its categorization as a genre with an explicit attention to poetics is its last salient quality, and the one most useful to understanding the importance of lyric to twenty-first century poetries. While valuable for revealing the mistaken assumptions about lyric's "purity" or historical constancy, I agree with Jonathan Culler that the historical particularization of lyric misses an opportunity to explore the very real affective potential lyric poetry has by relying extensively on the resources of language. Focusing particularly on lyric in his monograph *Theory of the Lyric* (2015), his argument resonates with the useful paradigm for recognizing and analyzing forms set forth by Caroline Levine that undergirds much of this project. Culler argues that "poets themselves, reading and responding to predecessors, have created a lyric tradition that persists across historical periods and radical changes in circumstances of production and transmission."<sup>8</sup> This persistence across space and time, according to Levine, is a hallmark of forms.<sup>9</sup> To Culler's point, Pound's renovation of the troubadour tradition,

Freytag-Loringhoven's response to German folk songs, and Hughes's interest in ballad traditions informed the previous chapters in this project to nuance the modernist fiction of rupture even in the midst of an experimental tradition.

Returning to Adorno, Culler's focus on the poetics of lyric allows us to reorient our understanding of lyric to register Adorno's hope for the effect of art more generally. Robert Kaufman highlights the historical mediation present in Adorno's own argument by turning readers' attention to the formal arguments made in "On Lyric Poetry and Society." Kaufman articulates Adorno's double task:

to challenge a reigning German formalism that (often reacting against recent Nationalist Socialist policies of saturating aesthetic matters with the hoariest of ideological agendas) seeks virtually to divorce aesthetic from sociopolitical concerns and equally to contest a reductionist, Left ideology-critique that finds its *raison d'être* in ritual demystifications of artistic illusion, in triumphalist revelations of artworks' sociohistorical determinism.<sup>10</sup>

In demonstrating how Adorno moves from formal analysis to social analysis in his reading of German lyrics, Kaufman repositions Adorno as arguing that "significant facets of

society remain to be discovered and that such discovery is unlikely to occur through use of society's own extant concepts for understanding itself."<sup>11</sup> The attention to a poetic approach to lyric, like that described by Culler, allows Adorno to reconsider the possibility for lyric specifically and art more broadly.

Harryette Mullen and Bruce Andrews, poets writing current variations on the love poem that carry forward an emphasis on language and formal innovation, amplify my argument and allow me to apply my methods for reading the modernist (and late modern) love poem to contemporary love poems, to address directly "what comes next." Because the modernist love poem combined a serious reconsideration of formal poetics in relation to provocative subject matter (and provocative speaking subjects), it instigated a tradition in love poetry that prioritizes direct attention to language and language's affective potential. Although distinct in voice and style, Mullen and Andrews extend and cultivate that tradition.

**"Affection—would be revolution enough": The Love Poems of Harryette Mullen and Bruce Andrews**

Mullen and Andrews each evince the turn toward language-focused writing that initiated literary modernism

and identified much of experimental poetry at the end of the twentieth century and continuing into the twenty-first century. John Kinsella celebrates this tradition for its attention to "seeing" and "the politics of that seeing."<sup>12</sup> In what he calls the "modernist avant-garde" and "the avant-gardes that have emerged out of modernities," he admires a tradition where the "relationship between the poet and the tools of expression, and the tensions between experience and expression are highlighted" (*VP*, xiv). A "paradox" arises from the tension between these elements because "language is of the user, but the user is also a product of language" (*ibid.*). In styles reminiscent of Gertrude Stein and Robert Creeley, Mullen and Andrews deploy parataxis, procedural methods, and the language of popular culture in order to politicize their poems even while avoiding discursive readings. Influenced by the Black Arts Movement, procedural methods, and experimental poets of color like Lorenzo Thomas and Nathaniel Mackey, Mullen's publications *Tree Tall Women* (1981), *Trimmings* (1991), *S\*PeRM\*\*K\*T* (1992), *Muse and Drudge* (1995), and *Sleeping with the Dictionary* (2002) trace a shift from a more clearly delineated lyric subjectivity at the outset to a language-focused practice interested in games, anagrams, and polyvocality. In collaboration with Charles Bernstein



and with the help of Ron Silliman, Andrews was one of the founders of the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* newsletter in 1978, which instantiated a broad project for language-centered poetry interested in treating language as material and asks poets to undertake a critical examination of the relationship between signifiers and referents.<sup>13</sup>

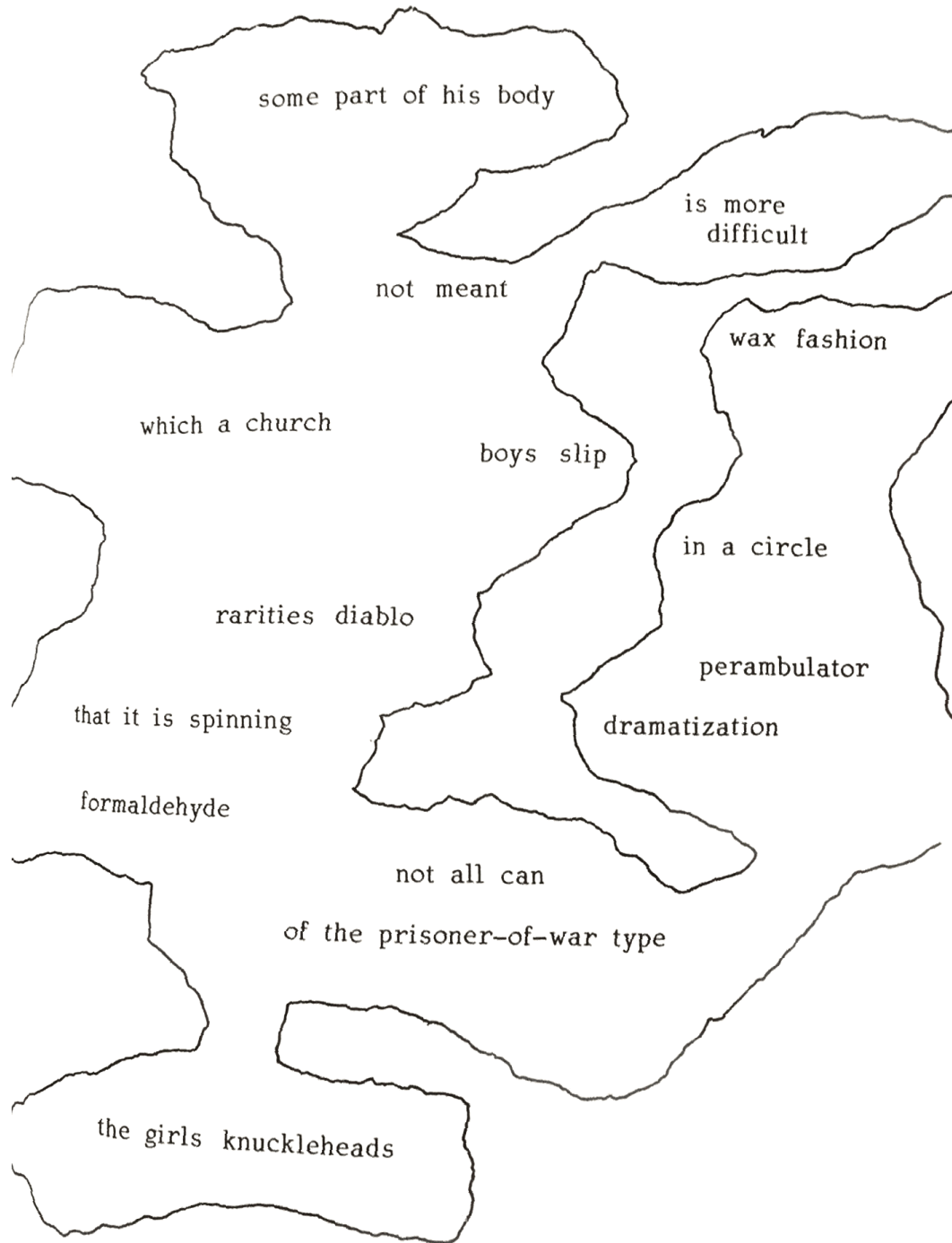
The central experience of their texts asks us to recognize individual words, morphemes, graphemes, and phonemes as entities, as embodiments of the materiality of language. The free interplay of signifiers and unstable subjects/speakers evoke Roland Barthes's concept of *jouissance*, which is useful in conceptualizing a love poem as a form not beholden to pleasure or optimistic iterations of love. Barthes's distinction between the pleasure of readerly texts and the *jouissance* of so-called writerly texts provides a model for understanding the excess generated through the language-focused poetry of Mullen and Andrews, an excess that induces erotic love, love poetry, and the materials of language to surpass any "imaginable finality—even *that* of pleasure."<sup>14</sup>

Mullen and Andrews differ in their particular approach to language-focused writing through their understanding of how language moves *and* moves readers. Andrews coined the term "language-centered poetry" in an attempt to highlight

the vital distinctions of the work that he, Bernstein, and Silliman were interested in writing and publishing. For Andrews, the term is most apt: he contends, "Language is the center, the primary material, the sacred corpus . . . the erotic sense of its own shared reality. . . . There is nothing to decipher / There is nothing to explain."<sup>15</sup> He privileges language with a subjectivity similar to what might have once been afforded to the lyric "I," but instead of an atomized speaking subject language is animated by the libidinal possibilities of its "shared reality."

In other words, language's play with and through additional language and signifying mechanisms creates an erotic and unpredictable charge rather than a universalizing hegemony. In the first page of "No. 116" from *Love Songs* (1982), reproduced below, Andrews uses a line drawing to group, order, and separate short phrases of words. The relationships generated between parts of the line and the alphabetic text, as well as between groupings of alphabetic text, demonstrate the charge that Andrews endeavors to create in his poetry:

NO 116



The line and the text signify as both similar and distinct. The line and the alphabetic text share the same color and general width, but the alphabetic text is regularized and the line appears hand-drawn or map-like in its irregularity. Unlike the alphabetic text, which never encircles itself, the line encloses the alphabetic text entirely (the four ends of the line extend from the right side of the page and enclose the remainder of the text on the next two pages). If this were a map to the poem, the line is as irregular as the lines of alphabetic text gathered within.

Yet the signifying mechanisms of this love song productively draw attention to the body, spirituality, heterosexuality, intensity, and death: all major themes for various iterations of love poetry. The gathering of "some part of his body" at the top of the page loosely mirrors "the girls knuckleheads" at the bottom of the page, which hints at the echo of "boy's lip" in the phrase "boys slip" in the central section.<sup>16</sup> These are all language-centers that are "constitutive and germinative [*sic*]" of meaning, without resolving in a particular meaning or referent.<sup>17</sup> The almost cartographic boundaries and the alphabetic text arranged in words and phrases are all meant to "charge material with possibilities of meaning—not by demolishing relations but creating them, no holds barred, among units

of language."<sup>18</sup> Unlike the notion that an atomized lyric subject creates understanding by saying "I, like you, am a singular consciousness experiencing this world," the charged centers in Andrews's writing asks what kinds of possible relationships and references can be imagined, how far can they reach, and how affective can they be.

The line generates possible relationships in this poem, and its hand-drawn quality may have additional significance. In one of their earliest correspondences Silliman rejects a set of the poems Andrews submitted to *Tottel's Miscellany* because they are handwritten. Despite protestations of his best efforts, Silliman cannot deny that his dismissal "is a reaction to the fact of it being printed & not typed."<sup>19</sup> For Silliman the handwritten poem makes it "[i]mpossible for me to get a sense (or nearly so) of the relationships involved."<sup>20</sup> Andrews responds by assuring Silliman that he, in fact, does own a typewriter but always composes by hand.<sup>21</sup> By effectively combining the typed and handwritten, "No. 116" challenges Silliman's criticism that the poem arranged by hand cannot convey relationships as clearly or efficiently as the poem arranged by machine. The poem relies on the line to create relationships that could not be created by the text alone. Considering the scarce availability of design software in 1982, the fact that many

of the poems collected in *Love Songs* had been written much earlier than 1982, and the numerous other hand-drawn aspects to *Love Songs*, this poem and the collection as a whole responds fruitfully to what was most likely an off-hand critique made in one of the first serious responses Andrews had received on his work.

A straight, white, Harvard-educated man, Andrews is less at risk of the identity erasure Mullen describes in her poetics essays, but his efforts correspond to hers in attention to pleasure, instability, and excess. Andrews articulates his motivations

[f]irst, as a materialized explosiveness of the subject and of *meaning*, in something like a "general economy" of bodily excitability. Second, as the search, inside writing's own medium, for *value* in an erotic mutuality (and passionate constitution) of self and other.<sup>22</sup>

He relies on the generative possibilities of language as it continues to beget more language, on the page and in the minds of readers, and thereby draws readers into a public community of language users. This strategy, in particular, relies on assumptions about a reader's sexual knowledge, a "bodily excitability," and takes advantage of the paradox that love poems offer public descriptions of private acts.

The tradition of coy language isn't new to love poems. Frequently, coyness, euphemism, and metaphor were the only strategies available to poets attempting to discuss explicit material. These strategies rely on a depth model where there are truths to be uncovered and meanings to be dug out. Andrews's poems are a limit case in that there is no pretext of privacy, or a layer under which the "true" or "pure" meaning of something resides. Although he attests that his primary focus is on language, he does not avoid connotative and denotative meaning. In a letter to Silliman, Andrews reflects, "If you use referential words but ignore the effect of their referential=ness [*sic*] you mess up I think."<sup>23</sup> Instead, referentiality is just one of the many materials Andrews uses when creating a poem: not central, but not insignificant.

In a poem like "Valentines," which looks like a list of definitions with single italicized words on the left margin, Andrews uses meaning-making structures to redirect readers from meaning back to language. His valentines do not have a clear recipient, nor do they sound much like the "Roses are red" verses commercially produced for mass exchange, but they do use the frame of the valentine to set up relationships in language. In a direct reference to poetics, Andrews hints that language can be enchanting but

it is always just language. He repeats the lines for clarification:

*Croon* ——— dazzling

*Content* ——— heart's decoy

*Croon* ——— croon <sup>24</sup>

In these lines Andrews provides a visual representation of lyric that nuances Culler's argument in favor of a poetics turn to lyric studies by reminding readers that language's power comes from language itself.

Andrews's work offers us an expanded view of the lyric, one that focuses on the possibilities created by the charged materials of language and that poses a direct confrontation with the materials as such. Andrews's remarks in the essay "Be Careful Now You Know Sugar Melts in Water," further explains his efforts in creating community through shared erotic understanding in his poems:

moving toward an active contextualizing of Production, the Other, in *you*, in the Constitution of Identity—self-folding & unfolding & enfolding. a rematerializing of language, with an eliding/eluding of anyone's, or my, privatized grasp, through erotic *interplay*, through implicatings of an other.<sup>25</sup>

Personal language, private language, and even the private sense that a meaning belongs to any one individual, are all



exploded by Andrews's work. Instead, the material is equal, or as Andrews arranges it, "Ornament — truth function," and explicitly accessible.<sup>26</sup>

Mullen too confronts language's productively tenuous relationship with stable meaning in order to spark, through multidimensional relationships, references to more language. Her poems are allusive while eschewing the supposedly unambiguous authority of the referent. She takes for granted the possible pleasure of the text and clarifies,

My desires as a poet are contradictory. I aspire to write poetry that would leave no insurmountable obstacle to comprehension and pleasure other than the ultimate limits of the reader's interest and linguistic competence.<sup>27</sup>

For Mullen, the pleasure of the text is not in penetrating the text for meaning, but in the experience of the language itself. She explains, however, that her goals do not include a "pure, simple, or accessible literary language" or a "consistent, recognizable, or authentic voice" ("IU," 201-2). Instead, she understands "writing as a process that is synthetic rather than organic, artificial rather than natural, human rather than divine" (*ibid.*). For Mullen, a lack of fidelity to any voice or style, or to an imaginary "pure" poetic language, opens up the potential for poetry

to resist the "cultural and linguistic imperialism" that demands a "distinction between 'blackness' and 'humanity'— or 'universality.'"<sup>28</sup> By paying close attention to the "synthetic" nature of language, Mullen's poetry can disabuse readers of any notion that language and the realities it governs are immutable.

As a black poet publishing experimental writing, Mullen is keenly aware of how her poetry has been perceived by critics, anthologists, and readers in terms of inclusivity and exclusivity. Through her attention to language as material, and her use of language deeply embedded in the "bustle and commotion" of popular culture, including black American history, her work disrupts the "imperialist" promise of universality. Like the love poem where certain language can be directed at both a public audience and the intimacy of the beloved, Mullen recognizes that language cannot be faithful to itself or its readers and she leverages language's infidelities in order to create a polyvocal poetry that is language-oriented rather than language-centered. If Andrews's language-centered poetry privileges unpredictable "libidinal economy" of multiple centers in relationship with one another, Mullen's language-oriented poetry recognizes language's capacity to both include and exclude, to orient and disorient.<sup>29</sup> She

particularizes the view that language is charged material by appreciating that certain materials can repel as strongly as they attract. Her synthetic approach to poetry recognizes and capitalizes on language's imbrication within and across communities, and its ability to orient communities toward particular ideas about themselves. In her preface to *Recyclopedia* (2006), she explains

Although I've been inspired by Stein, I'm also interested in the collision of contemporary poetry with the language of advertising and marketing, the clash of fine art aesthetics with mass consumption and globalization, and the interactions of literacy and identity.<sup>30</sup>

Mullen's language-oriented approach allows her to both generate the excess of a writerly text, and also to highlight what communities and experiences are often erased in the limited sense of "universal experience."

Her poem "Any Lit," from *Sleeping with the Dictionary* (2002), illustrates her interest in history, poetic traditions, and the *jouissance* of language's excess. She draws from the nineteenth-century African American courtship tradition that uses figurative language like "You are a huckleberry beyond my persimmon," to mean something like "you are perfect, but your skills of flattery are

beyond my abilities."<sup>31</sup> Mullen repeats this form thirty-three times using noun forms that begin with phonetic variations of the sounds "you" and "my."<sup>32</sup> Her repetitions register the variance in spellings that all yield the sounds of "you" and "my," such as, "u," "yu," "eu," and "mi," "mai," "mae" (*SD*, 6). Many of the single line phrases arc toward discursive meaning or some sort of connotative association, such as "You are a ubiquity beyond my minority" or "You are a uselessness beyond my myopia," but it is always suggestive without the resolution of concrete meaning (*ibid.*, 7). The multilingual associations in a line like "You are a Eurydice beyond my maestro" suggest some sort of underlying principle that binds together these sounds in order to invoke the lover and the beloved, but the range of language disrupts such a hunt for cohesion (*ibid.*, 6).

Like the title of the collection *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, "Any Lit" engages in a tradition of love language that often overlaps with major features of love poetry. Like Stein, Mullen purposely toys with assumptions about love poetry by evoking the lover and beloved to make explicit her relationship within and without a larger poetic tradition. She highlights the difficulties of making that history legible and explains that

the erasure of the anomalous black writer abets the construction of a continuous, internally consistent tradition, while at the same time it deprives the idiosyncratic minority artist a history, compelling her to struggle even harder to construct a cultural context out of her own radical individuality. She is unanticipated and often unacknowledged due to the imposed obscurity of her aesthetic antecedents.<sup>33</sup>

To engage the love poem and experimental poetics allows Mullen to claim influential poets, like Stein or Petrarch or Sappho, and traditions, like courtship rituals or the dozens, as part of her intellectual inheritance. Mullen's work demonstrates the necessity of "aesthetic antecedents" in thinking about a form that maintains and shifts across traditions.

Desire, as a theme, percolates across *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, but the poem "Between" best typifies Mullen's facility with a language-oriented poetics that attracts and orients layers of allusion. The poem was originally commissioned by Los Angeles visual artist Allan deSouza for an edition of *Framework* based on the theme "between" ("BH"). Mullen recalls that when she asked deSouza "What is that? Between what?," he responded "That's what I want you to tell me" (*ibid.*). Accompanied by a set of instructional

illustrations for using chopsticks, Mullen sent deSouza the following poem:

My ass acts bad  
 Devil your ears Charybdis  
 Good engagements deep blue sea  
 Heaven my eyes your elbow  
 Last night jobs hard place  
 Now his legs hell  
 Rock the lines me  
 Scylla her breasts shinola  
 Shit the sheets then  
 Yesterday my thighs this morning  
 You your toes today (*SD*, 9)

The poem rearranges a series of colloquialisms that pivot on the preposition "between" such as "between you and me," "between the devil and the deep blue sea," or "between a rock and a hard place." (Some of her source phrases only imply the prepositional arrangement of "between" such as "you don't know shit from shinola.") While "between you and me" fits in with Mullen's process for composition, the repeated inclusion of "my" and "your" emphasizes the poem's insistence that "between" always invokes "you" and "me." Moreover, her choice and rearrangement of phrases purposefully suggest the bed, the body, and an intimate

knowledge of "your" body. Her poem recalls Kristeva's assertion that the language of love is preoccupied with identifications and does not adequately address "what is really at stake in between."<sup>34</sup> Mullen's poem reorients that concern back to the very relational qualities of betweenness. It redirects Eric Selinger's concern as whether "lover or language" can close the gap between "me" and "you," by rejecting the very need to close such a gap and instead privileging the "between" that enlivens all the possible relationships "me" and "you" can have.<sup>35</sup> The poem activates the set of colloquialisms to render the elusive qualities of the preposition as usefully allusive within an erotic and libidinal register.

This is the direction the modernist love poem leads to, with its dedicated attention to explicit material, frank language, and formal achievement. Because modernist poets took seriously the lasting importance of the love poem, some of our most progressive contemporary poetry can still productively draw from the language of love-like courtship rituals and valentines—in order to remind readers how language continues to shape the most intimate relationships of our lives.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, Adorno's idealized portrayal of the lyric is very much a part of the

"bustle and commotion" shaping the way poets think about poetry. As Mullen's and Andrews's poems and essays outline, the tradition, identity construction, and the implications of language choices continue to be major poetic considerations. Both Mullen and Andrews push the boundaries of what we imagine to be love poems or lyrics, but considered in the light of the modernist love poem they are continuing a tradition invested in both the provocative content and form of experimental love poetry. The love poem, then, models for lyric studies an approach to studying form that is as supple and responsible as the tradition demands.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Creeley, *The Collected Essays of Robert Creeley* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 572.

<sup>2</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 38, 37.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Jeffreys, "Ideologies of Lyric: A Problem of Genre in Contemporary Anglophone Poetics," *PMLA* 110, no. 2 (1995): 197; hereafter abbreviated in text as "IL."

<sup>4</sup> Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 7; hereafter abbreviated in text as *DM*.

<sup>5</sup> Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, "Lyrical Studies," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 27, no. 2 (1999): 525.

<sup>6</sup> Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading*, ed. Michael Dirda (New York: New Directions, 2010), 29.

<sup>7</sup> Rei Terada, "After the Critique of Lyric," *PMLA* 123, no. 1 (2008): 199.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 3-4.

<sup>9</sup> Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 12.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Kaufman, "Adorno's Social Lyric, and Literary Criticism Today," in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, Cambridge Companions (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 357.



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- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 359.
- <sup>12</sup> Rod Mengham and John Kinsella, eds., *Vanishing Points: New Modernist Poems* (Cambridge, UK: Salt, 2004), xiv; hereafter abbreviate in text as *VP*.
- <sup>13</sup> Bruce Andrews to Ron Silliman, letter, August 2, 1977.
- <sup>14</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1975), 52.
- <sup>15</sup> Bruce Andrews, "Text and Context," in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, (Carbondale, IL: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1984), 31.
- <sup>16</sup> Bruce Andrews, *Love Songs* (Baltimore, MD: Kirby Malone and Ro Malone, 1982), n.p.
- <sup>17</sup> Bruce Andrews, "Writing Social Work and Political Practice," in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 136.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.
- <sup>19</sup> Ron Silliman to Bruce Andrews, December 6, 1971, UCSD, Archive for New Poetry, Geisel Library MSS 75, Box 1, Folder 12-13
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>21</sup> Bruce Andrews to Ron Silliman, December 10, 1971, UCSD, Archive for New Poetry, Geisel Library MSS 75, Box 1, Folder 12-13
- <sup>22</sup> Bruce Andrews, "Be Careful Now You Know Sugar Melts in Water," in *Paradise & Method: Poetics & Practice* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1996), 125.
- <sup>23</sup> Bruce Andrews to Ron Silliman, letter, April 29, 1972.
- <sup>24</sup> Bruce Andrews, *Designated Heartbeat* (Cambridge, UK: Salt, 2006), 60.
- <sup>25</sup> Andrews, *Paradise & Method*, 128.
- <sup>26</sup> Andrews, *Designated Heartbeat*, 60.
- <sup>27</sup> Harryette Mullen, "Imagining the Unimagined Reader: Writing to the Unborn and Including the Excluded," *Boundary 2* 26, no. 1 (1999): 201; hereafter abbreviated in text as "IU."
- <sup>28</sup> Harryette Mullen, "Poetry and Identity," *West Coast Line* 1, no. 19 (1996): 89.
- <sup>29</sup> I borrow the term "libidinal economy" from Steve McCaffery's useful reading of language-centered writing in "Language Writing: From Productive to Libidinal Economy," *Credences: A Journal of Twentieth Century Poetry and Poetics* 22, no. 2-3 (1983): 289-303.
- <sup>30</sup> Harryette Mullen, *Recyclopedia* (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2006), x.
- <sup>31</sup> Barbara Henning mentions this in her 2009 interview with Mullen

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([http://www.naropa.edu/academics/jks/publications/notenough\\_night/spring-10/conversation-with-harryette-mullen.php](http://www.naropa.edu/academics/jks/publications/notenough_night/spring-10/conversation-with-harryette-mullen.php)), and the practice tradition is described in more detail in Daryl Cumber Dance, *Honey, Hush!: An Anthology of African American Women's Humor* (New York: Norton, 1998), 284; Henning and Mullen's interview will hereafter be abbreviated in text as "BH."

<sup>32</sup> Harryette Mullen, *Sleeping with the Dictionary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 6; hereafter abbreviated in text as *SD*.

<sup>33</sup> Mullen, "Poetry and Identity," 86.

<sup>34</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 3.

<sup>35</sup> Eric Murphy Selinger, *What Is It Then between Us?: Traditions of Love in American Poetry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 2.

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