

“WHAT, THEN, IS THE QUESTION?”

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETICS OF ADDRESS

BY

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You shouldn't let poets lie to you.

—Björk, talking about her TV

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A large part of the project has been navigating how to account for the effects of any writer's—including my own—social position on a text's reception, and how to address a text's socio-political effects across time and place. My intervention has been to attempt a mode of reading that studies and is as conscious as possible of social processes and expectations, but which does not expect a text to either directly meet or directly resist common expectations of and in reading. I am extending longstanding critiques of gendered race, blackness, and representation to reconsider form as tangible and abstract, as a condition of being, doing, and changing, and as a mediation of subject and object. I offer “address” as a formal term that better captures these ambiguities and contingencies. I am trying to read in a mode that opens but does not preclude questions of *for* and *against* and which does not justify indecision or promote avoidance.

I chose Brown's English PhD program because I wanted to ‘surround myself with beauty’ and ‘spend my 20s reading what I want to read.’ It was my studying and teachers in political and social sciences that made me notice the significances of race and gender that attended my shift toward literature; I never wanted to talk *only* about poetry, and I never really knew who I wanted to address. Lacking a satisfying figment of an audience, I wanted to talk to everyone and no one. I think I wanted to—and believed that I could—be understood by anyone. I then and still know myself to feel and act in excess of language; I still care to understand how processes and systems (like ‘the state,’ like ‘policy’) work beyond language; and I still want ideas of how to make my and others' lives softer and more fulfilling, though these years of studying have shifted my sense of limits and drawn my attention to smaller scales. In graduate school I became convinced and discouraged by particular experiences and existential ideas which turned me away from thinking about coordination and the shared. In a shift that feels frustratingly miraculous, in my final year I rediscovered many interests and pleasures in the world. I am delighted to have found a sense of direction for my work and an enthusiasm to share this writing—even as it is still certainly in development and subject to my future revisions—as well as a desire for more and other doings, too. I am grateful for the person I have become in the time that I had to think, talk, study, coordinate, and write at Brown. I will keep doing these things in all my next

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Introduction

The Call of Poetic Form in 21st Century American Poetry

“What is the answer?” Stein asked, and when no answer came she laughed and said: “What, then, is the question?”

“So many questions.” —Bertolt Brecht, “Questions from a Worker who Reads”¹

—Anne Boyer, “Questions for Poets”²

Who asks?

I first found part of this dissertation’s title, “What, then, is the question,” in the epigraph of Anne Boyer’s “Questions for Poets,” the penultimate piece in her collection *A Handbook of Disappointed Fate*. I have used Boyer’s full epigraph as my own epigraph above. The words “What, then, is the question” are by Boyer, and now by me, and historically by others, attributed to Gertrude Stein.³ Boyer—and now I here—have each introduced our different written works by arranging words represented as spoken by Gertrude Stein above words quoted from a poem written by Bertolt Brecht. Brecht’s title also attributes *those* words to “a worker who reads.” These reproductions and rearrangements pluralize and confuse speakers on and off the—and this—page. Positioned in a way that looks like an “epigraph,” these lines are (re)directed to “indicate” the central concern of the writing that follows: Boyer’s “Questions for Poets,” and now, mine.⁴

To bring Stein, Brecht, Boyer, and myself together stages a conversation between writers and writings. This grouping of writers and writings hails, for me, concepts of and commitments to literary traditions and canons, the contemporary and contemporary poetry, feminism, and anticapitalism. The figure of Boyer, in particular, attracts my personal identification with her writing style, my sense of her values, and her social positionality.⁵ Because my scholarship is also

attuned to race and blackness, I also recognize that this grouping hails race primarily in its noticeable nonappearance. The two historical icons within the group are rarely read as engaged in or with racialization and antiblackness. If isolated, this conversation would be limited by white perspectives, but I begin with this grouping to represent, engage, and problematize racialized circumscriptions of attention and authority in, as well as one of my own entry points to, discourse of American poetry and poetics. In this project, in offering my readings of nonwhite, gendered, contemporary American poetics in relation to scholarship on poetry, race, gender, and aesthetics, I hope to contribute to both existing and emergent conversations around American poetry with the understanding that antiblackness affects all American discourse.

I cannot know for sure whether Gertrude Stein actually said “What, then, is the question?”; there is no recording, nor were these words written by Stein. These are Stein’s words only as reported by Alice B. Toklas, who wrote the quote first in her *What Is Remembered* (1963). If we read the question as Stein’s, and if Stein is an icon of American poetry, do we read the question as a or *the* project of American poets and poetics?⁶ Should it matter, to us, that Stein really asked these questions, according to Toklas, in response to a necessary medical decision?⁷ Does it matter that these are now collected as famous *last* words? And what does it matter that the laughter was fabricated later, shifting the tone of the questions entirely?⁸ In this project I am grappling with two questions broad and familiar in American literary studies: the difference that writing and speech make to language’s attributions—especially as these differences implicate *voice in address*—and the importance of context (history, identity, time and place) to close reading.

Because it repeats the grammatical object—the word *question*—of the question (“What, then, is the question?”), the last line of Bertolt Brecht’s poem would seem to ‘answer’ Stein’s quote directly (“What, then, is the question” calls for the repetition of its object: “The *question*

is...”). But this reply does not answer directly at all; it merely pluralizes the object of the question: “so many *questions* [my emphasis].”⁹ Why does Boyer reproduce such a tonally flat and figurally empty, explicitly written and reproduced, response? To answer “what, then, is the question?” with only an abstract and tonally flat statement of plurality and unknowing—“so many questions”—answers the question of the question only in the insistence that there is no one question, or at least no one question without spatio-temporal, and tonal, context. But even if “there is no answer in and as poetry,” according to Boyer, I am arguing that “poetry” itself indexes the indeterminacy of spatio-temporal, tonal context *and still forms a response*, without saying definitively *to what*.

Why does Boyer then reproduce specific, historical questions, but only in her endnote, in the place of her citation’s provenance? The endnote quotes a short section from “Questions from a Worker Who Reads” that questions the singularity of imperial ‘defeats’ attributed to single people, asking: “Was he alone?” of Alexander the Great, “Did he not even have a cook with him,” of Caesar, and “Was he the only one to weep?” of Philip of Spain.¹⁰ Though the answers to these questions are not offered in the reports that the worker reads, maybe their answers should be obvious: No. Maybe we know this when we are asked, but do we ask?¹¹

A reader who leaves Boyer’s *Handbook* to read Brecht’s “Questions from a Worker Who Reads” in full might notice that the worker consistently asks *who*. The worker also asks *where* people lived and went and implies questions of *how* by asking about the construction of spatial forms—gates, walls, arches, entire cities.¹² The preposition in Brecht’s title—*from*—does not specify any particular addressee(s), but it does name a place or subject of expression and register a recipient. But are these questions *from* a worker or *from* Bertolt Brecht, who wrote this poem? Does it matter whether these questions are transcribed from a speaker or not? Does it matter if Brecht identifies with or otherwise imagines himself to be “a worker”? While my title is asking

what as a question of orientation—what should we try to figure out? what should we ask?—it is not only *what* the question is but also *who acts* and *who asks* that make a difference.

Like the worker who asks despite the record's unanswerability, this dissertation likewise follows questions of *who* and *how* without providing definitive answers. I intend to differentiate people from what they made or arranged while insisting, with the worker's questions, *that* people made and arranged—formed. I am asking about when and where what people form might go, whether “we” want to go with or get out, and what else we could and would like to form. I cannot say if or what the differences that constitute a reader's relation to a text and its writer *are*, nor especially what these differences *mean nor could mean*, to anyone other than the particular, real reader that I write *as*. These unanswerable questions and indeterminable differences problematize, and ultimately hold my thinking between, questions of subject and form in poetics and reading.¹³ To register without determining subjectivity and form, I focus my thinking on the paradoxical ‘form’ of *address* in the context of contemporary American poetics.

In Chapter One, I consider poetics of address in Mercedes Eng's *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* (Talonbooks, 2017). Like each book under study, *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* responds indirectly, in this case with Eng's aesthetic of appropriation and her aesthetic of written answers to written questions. I argue that *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* investigates the grammatical construal of indeterminacy, equivalence, and cause; problematizes the mobility of figures of race and gender; and ultimately models explosion via shared singing and coordinated release. In Chapter Two, I discuss Layli Long Soldier's response to an American national “Apology to Native Americans” and how *WHEREAS* (Graywolf, 2017) grapples with the effects and *uses* of language. I focus on the aesthetics of the conjunction “whereas,” the deictic “this,” irony, and written sound in *WHEREAS* to read the book ultimately as a call for responsibility. In

Chapter Three, I read the aesthetics of subjective indeterminacy in Cameron Awkward-Rich's *Sympathetic Little Monster* (Ricochet Editions, 2016) and discuss how the book figures a refusal to align with the given, a turning away from addressors who refuse to acknowledge the given, and a plural and specific addressee who shares both knowing and indeterminacy. In that chapter I ultimately consider the possibilities of handing over and letting go.

Though I contend that poetry often pulls attention away from conversational, public, historical, and published norms and frames of language—what I am calling “discourse”—I hope this project offers useful resources and interventions into the discourses hailed by and hailing each book.¹⁴ It is my claim that poetics often if not always appropriate and address discourse—where discourse may or may not be distinguishable from language in theory and language in general. Each chapter will therefore account for specific, relevant discourses: I contextualize Eng's *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* in relation to contemporary public and academic discourses of appropriation and multiculturalism; Long Soldier's *WHEREAS* in relation to legal, historical, and academic discourses of indigeneity and irony; and Awkward-Rich's *Sympathetic Little Monster* in relation to academic and poetic discourses of blackness, transness, and lyric.

In this Introduction, I will contextualize the chapters which follow in relation to literary critical discourse perennially invested in the (non)existence of the poetic “speaker.” In recognition of the vast range of historical appearances, affirmations, and refusals of the literary ‘speaker,’ this Introduction will focus on contemporary American poetics to theorize the poetic speaker as a conceptual intransigency in and between *form* and *subjectivity* and a point of triangulation between ‘writers’ and ‘readers.’¹⁵ Recalling my earlier question—who asks?—I return to Anne Boyer along with Lyn Hejinian and Audre Lorde to discuss the social position of poets and the social practice of poetry before letting the poets go.

Though by the end of the 20th century the “speaker” in poetics discourse seems to reference something categorically separate from both *poet* and poetic *form*, I recall the New Critical connection between ‘speaker’ and ‘form’ and return all the way back to Immanuel Kant’s “Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment” to model aesthetic form as subjective. Staying with the aesthetic, I address without redressing the violence of Kantian and subsequent Western aesthetic theories of formalization and formalized sense in yielding logics of representation, figuration, and freedom. I address the aesthetic production of racialized figures of subjectivity by the Western “racial regime” traced across centuries of aesthetic theory and discourse in David Lloyd’s *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics* (2019).¹⁶ Theorizing personified and categorical “figures” along and in tension with concepts of subjectivity as transcendent and unrepresentable, I ultimately follow Hortense Spillers, Sylvia Wynter, and Evie Shockley to recognize “genre” as a distinct mode of figuring both literary forms *and* subjectivities. I consider a genealogy of theoretical aesthetic autonomy from various other ‘realms’ of experience—especially the ‘real’ and the ‘political’—and reiterate questions of this distinction’s ambiguous social and subjective effects.¹⁷

With Evie Shockley’s critique of genre, I address some final objections to the ‘aesthetic’ itself in my turn toward aesthetic forms of address in *writing*. I follow Monique Roelofs’ expansive account, in *Arts of Address: Being Alive to Language and the World* (2020), of address as “a distinctly verbal, historically codified form” that encompasses “structures,” “modes,” “norms,” “scenes,” and “scripts,” to define “poetics of address” as *the way poetic form calls*.¹⁸ I advocate for an aesthetic mode of reading that both deconstructs grammar *and* attends to tone as a figure of both ‘light’ and ‘sound’ in poetics. I reach tone only through an attention to the lyric speaker, and

voice. I hope ultimately that “grammar,” “voice,” and “tone” might serve as objects of orientation in an aesthetic mode of reading for poetics of address.

While Roelofs’ attention to social *norms* of address that exceed language avoids *figurations* of address in literary and rhetorical terms like “the vocative, anthropomorphism, or direct or indirect discourse,” in this project I am interested precisely in the literary function or *poetics of* address: of and to literary figures but also of and to grammar, poetic materialities, and written voices.¹⁹ While accounts of *social* address, especially as a formation of subjectivity, are crucial to my thinking, in my attention to *literary* address I emphasize subjectivity in *aesthetic form* and prefer terms of intra- and extra-textual orientations rather than “subjectivity.”²⁰

Like the poetics I have studied, I hope this writing might invite different forms of attention, attunement, and orientation to readers. As Sarah Dowling writes in *Here is a Figure: grounding literary form* (2024), I likewise hope to participate in and extend a shared context: that “we are [or might be] all grounded in a shared, living literary culture” and that I might “speak[] first to those who ‘read what I read’ [Dowling cites Barbara Christian’s “The Race for Theory” here].”²¹ And finally, also like Dowling, I am writing “to advocate for specific texts and for the forms of theorizing undertaken in them,” and as in an attitude of potential friendship.²²

Poet

Given my sense of a stubbornly indeterminable difference and distance between a poet and their poem, what can I say about the poet? If Boyer is a poet, her “Questions for Poets” is *for* her—displacing Boyer from the position of the writer. Yet, and though Boyer’s epigraphic language invokes the voices of others, the appearance of an epigraph as such (re-)indexes the writer and encourages—ironically—a sense of these quotes’ meaning as Boyer’s writerly intention. If the epigraph figures Boyer’s intentions, I could look elsewhere for her intentions too. I could consider

connections between her statements, actions, experiences, and writings in the world. But in this project I am not trying not to figure nor judge Boyer.²³ Though I know that what I already think and sense—consciously or not—about Boyer will inevitably influence my readings of her poetry, I can also intentionally allow for indeterminacies of and between Boyer, Boyer’s meaning, Boyer’s writing, and my reading.²⁴

In 1983, another white woman poet, definitely one of Boyer’s influences, asked: “Who is speaking?”²⁵ Lyn Hejinian’s talk under that title was addressed to the public, or at least to Hejinian’s “poetry community.”²⁶ In 2000, Hejinian recalled a recognition that many people interested in reading and writing poetry were *not* speaking, and that: “To invent other public formations—even to enact an ungrounding—seemed desirable, even necessary, and it certainly seemed possible.”²⁷ What happened since 2000? 2015 sticks out to me as a moment of heightened American public attention to American poetry.²⁸ However, my sense of that moment, both having been juvenilely present and in retrospect, suggests to me that this attention was driven by public attention to racial violence and ‘cultural appropriation’ being oriented *toward* poetics rather than emerging from poetics and poets. Hejinian’s vision of the *poetic* invention of new ‘public formations’ remains to be seen, in my view, because the white American ‘public’ and poets still struggle to acknowledge and account for—much less act in the face of—violence of many kinds, but especially that which is underwritten by an antiblack, patriarchal, nationalist, and capitalist system of values.²⁹ This disavowal of systemic, ambient violence devalues speakers and speech that acknowledge or demonstrate it.

Reading *The Language of Inquiry* as a record of Hejinian’s public/private (re-)thinking around poetics discourse, I find in Hejinian’s introduction to the collection a working through of the relation between poets and poetics. Retrospectively, Hejinian observes that she had “tended to

cast *poetics* into the role of articulating how and why a poet works, elaborating her reasoning and reasons.”³⁰ Hejinian’s anonymizing of “a poet” offers without assigning the “role of articulating how and why” to others.³¹ But then Hejinian slides away from the emergent question of who is or can be a poet as she revises poetics from a “role” to a “realm” of inquiry. Poetics becomes improvisatory yet might also produce a “praxis.”³² Hejinian’s attention almost immediately shifts from “a” writer’s (her) motives and intentions toward a practice of acknowledgment and unknowing, a practice of “com[ing] to know that things are” but “to know *that* without *what*” is.³³ Poetry for Hejinian becomes a practice of non-identificatory, perhaps non-linguistic, yet determinate knowing and remembering. But how does a poet know and write, and how does the writer’s social position—here, (not only) as a white woman—affect what they know, remember, *and write*?

Resonant with but more precise than Hejinian’s grammatical anonymization of “a poet,” Audre Lorde’s “Poetry is Not a Luxury” (1977) addresses the effect of social position on thinking and writing directly. Lorde slightly separates writers and thinkers from static social identities by figuring identity as a *mode* of seeing, thinking, and living: “When we view living, in the european [sic] mode, only as a problem to be solved, we then rely solely upon our ideas to make us free.”³⁴ Lorde’s grammar both opens the position of a poet to “us” and accounts for a racialized specificity of not quite subjectivity, but “view.” Consistently referring to “we” and “our poetry” rather than to a “poet” or “poets,” Lorde ultimately and only once figures “the poet”: “The Black mother within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free.”³⁵ This gendered and black specificity is important because the “Black mother” is *not* “the white fathers [who] told us: I think, therefore I am.”³⁶ Shared across “each of us,” this personal figure and poet “within” doesn’t “tell” or address anyone outside “our dreams.”

Lorde's "we" might be refiguring a collective distinct from the public and the published (note: "Poetry is Not a Luxury" was first delivered as a speech at a feminist conference). Boyer's publication of *A Handbook of Disappointed Fate* (2018), a reference or how-to guide, formed a different address less directly toward a 'we' but toward the case of what 'we' didn't want or what wasn't supposed to happen. In November of 2023, Boyer addressed the public in another form—this time as a writer *about* poetry—by publicly resigning from her position as poetry editor at *New York Times Magazine*. She published a short, open letter on her own website and it was reported across a handful of other sites, including Fox News online.³⁷ Boyer's letter begins with the assertion: "the Israeli state's U.S-backed war against the people of Gaza is not a war *for* anyone."³⁸ The poet explains: "I can't write about poetry amidst the 'reasonable' tones of those who aim to acclimatize us to this unreasonable suffering."³⁹ She believed that: "[b]ecause our status quo is self-expression, sometimes the most effective mode of protest for artists is to refuse."⁴⁰ This letter asserts a poet's reading of her present to explain her response at a certain time and place to a certain condition of language use.⁴¹ A close reading of the letter reveals that Boyer's refusal is not of writing about, nor of, poetry. It is a refusal to contribute to an unreasonable, seemingly unaffected, *tone*. She refused to write *among those* who normalize "euphemisms" and "lies." I could not find any information about Boyer's work or whereabouts since 2023; her website is deactivated.⁴²

Let's let Boyer and all the real people who are poets out of *this* writing about poetry. As Boyer withdraws from the public, *Handbook* and its questions remain accessible to us.⁴³ What does poetry itself ask and say to us? Does poetry itself *do* anything? When "Questions for Poets" advises: "all poetry until the revolution comes is only a list of questions and the answer to them is almost always 'no,'" is that a 'no' of fact or of allowance? Who decides? Boyer's grammar slides away from these questions of respondents and meaning to stay with the idea of *recording*. The

“trial of today” isn’t quite to say but rather to *keep* “the record of being a person or people who said no...”⁴⁴ It might be the poets’ trial to keep, but *poetry* itself records. With Boyer and Brecht, poetry records *being* that may exceed the naming of *who*. Without describing the poet, can I say more about the forms of being (in) poetry?

Form

Sometimes language calls. Something feels meant or at least meaningful, preserved with intention, maybe we sense something that we would like to remember or repeat. In trying to say what it is about language that touches, the concept of form has been useful to me.⁴⁵ Simply thinking about “form” colloquially—is it an action or an object?—indicates the expansive implications and lines of thinking made available by the term.⁴⁶ Similar to Roelofs’ expansion of the concept of address beyond the necessity of human interlocutors, Caroline Levine’s *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (re-)extends the concept of form to indicate “all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference.”⁴⁷ Compelled by the implications of “form” across fields of thought, I focalize my concept of form through aesthetic theory to describe objects of orientation and the experience of sense in poetics of address.

My theory of poetics of address presumes a mode of reading for/in the orientation of aesthetic ‘forms’ that follows a Kantian theory of “the aesthetic power of judgment” inaugurated in Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790).⁴⁸ I am theorizing reading in an aesthetic orientation directed by “the feeling of pleasure and displeasure” or, in translator Paul Guyer’s explanation, “the only kind of sensation that we do not automatically transform into a predicate of objects.”⁴⁹ This distinction both acknowledges the existence of objects and separates them from their effects on us, in what Kant articulates as a process of formalization. In a disinterested “attitude” of aesthetic judgment, a “mind” (Kant’s term; I prefer a “subjectivity”)

represents its perception of an object (perhaps, an objectivity) to *itself* and judges its own representation “without concepts of the object, merely with respect to subjective purposiveness” and “with regard to the mere manner of representation.”⁵⁰ The aesthetic power of judgment, for Kant, displaces or defers any ‘object’ of determination with reflection on the purposes of (one’s own) perceptions: any determination in the power of judgment refers only to a principle of *purposiveness*.⁵¹

Though Kant’s theory of “aesthetic power” is rightly much maligned for his implicit and explicit universalization of ‘common *sense* [my emphasis]’ and ‘taste’ only as mediated by white, male, European values, Anna Kornbluh offers another reading of Kantian common sense in *The Order of Forms* (2019). Kornbluh revisits the “common sense” which “aesthetic thinking” references or attends to and suggests that we might recognize “common sense” as not only subjective but also “a paradoxically objective, specially social process, a registering of qualities *beyond* [emphasis mine] subjective sensation that simultaneously conjures an extensive social field of others who share the same registering.”⁵² With Kornbluh, aesthetic reading for poetics of address might attend not only to the reader’s personal sense but also sense an undetermined, imagined, social or otherwise shared field.⁵³

Indeterminacy—as the perception of form without concept—is crucial to Kantian aesthetic judgment. Though it might be nice to linger in indeterminacy as alibi, Kant’s *Critique* also suggests that aesthetic perception always produces a determination—a judgment. Even *if* “we” could suspend our own judgments indefinitely, I am ultimately interested in how the aesthetic can inform the decisions that we will want and simply have to make. But what is often forgotten, I think, is that the object of Kantian aesthetic judgment is not an ‘object’ but rather a form’s *beauty*. I find Walter Johnston’s redefinition of beauty as “purposiveness without purpose” most apt in aesthetic

judgment's separation of an object from any concept and (ideally total) disregard for (if not refusal of) the object's teleological purpose or *use*.⁵⁴ If form is the representation of a perception *and perception's representation*, the "purposiveness" of form indexes the making and intentionality in and of *one's own (representation of (one's own)) perception*.

The indeterminacy of the place of "one's own" in my formulation above becomes a problem when Kant writes: "if one then *calls* [my emphasis] the object beautiful, one believes oneself to have *a universal voice* [my emphasis], and lays claim to the consent of everyone, whereas any private sensation would be decisive only for him alone and his satisfaction."⁵⁵ When one claims one's personal judgment of beauty to be a "judgment of *taste*," the concept of "taste" allows one to claim "a universal voice with regard to satisfaction" and to claim to voice this satisfaction "without the mediation of concepts"—in that attitude of (total) 'disinterest' that I already find hard to imagine.⁵⁶ In the confidence of a "satisfaction that we judge, without a concept, to be universally communicable," the discourse of "taste" figures the universally "agreeable" as the universally satisfying. Given the empirical, discursive differences of what is called "taste(ful)" in experience, and without attending to the sensoriality of 'voice' itself, Kant himself recognized "universal voice" and the "taste" it underwrites as mere idea(l)s.

Idealizing and universalizing aesthetic judgments of beauty produced a discourse of "common sense" that doesn't just claim universal voice but is read to *represent* universal *subjectivity*.⁵⁷ When the aesthetic perception of a subjective, formal representation of an object is itself *used* to determine the object—either what it is or what its purpose is—critiques of aesthetic discourse implicate all the myriad forms and concepts of "representation."⁵⁸ If a (representative) 'subject' is said to determine the (represented) 'object,' critics across race, gender, and postcolonial studies problematize discursive and especially academic conceptualizations of

(representing) Subjectivity as unaffected, without qualities, and thus (totally) sovereign.⁵⁹ Denise Ferreira da Silva's *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (2007) articulates this "post-Enlightenment version of the Subject" as "the sole self-determined thing," representable *only* in a self-referential, "transparent 'I.'"⁶⁰ In a genealogy of black feminists that recalls Hortense Spillers' "American Grammar Book," Ferreira de Silva directs our attention to subjectivity as (not only) linguistic, grammatical, *deictic*.

David Lloyd's *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics* (2019) traces the centrality of this conceptual Subject to the genealogy of Western discourse and values of representability and freedom.⁶¹ *Under Representation* shows how the hegemonic Western concept of "representation" has deviated from Kant's theorization of an aesthetic, subjective *function*, to theorize the Subject's *figuration* of static 'objects' (including objectified 'subjects'). This is how Lloyd traces the "racial regime," or the racialized logic, of "representation" across centuries of aesthetic theory and discourse.⁶² The (ironically, aesthetic) Subject in the racial regime figures (relatively imagistic, affectable, qualified, and irrational) subjectivities as objects *for* the Subject to judge.⁶³ The Subject figures political and aesthetic *representability* yet remains undetermined and of "unlimited possibilities."⁶⁴

While Lloyd usefully identifies iconic discursive figures of determined subjectivities, I emphasize Hortense Spillers' articulation of these figures as "overdetermined nominative properties" which "signify[] property plus" and need not remain figuratively consistent over time.⁶⁵ In response to critical devaluations of 'representation' and even 'subjective expression' as alibis for violence and willful ignorance, I move away from the identification of figures of *race* and, for now, from the figuration of subjectivity entirely. C. Riley Snorton and Hentlie Yapp's introduction to the New Museum's 2020 anthology *Saturation: Race, Art, and the Circulation of*

Value articulates clearly this early 20th century American discursive mode in the “cycle of media coverage and public discourse [which] reconfirms[/ed] and solidifies[/ed] how race continues[/ed] to be understood as a problem of representation and visibility” and which posed representation and representative *presence* or *visibility* as absolution for historic and ongoing racial violence.⁶⁶ In consideration of both a contemporary difference from 2020 and a longstanding attention to address in black studies, from Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and Spillers’ “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” (1987) in particular, this project considers both figures *in address* and form beyond the figural.⁶⁷

Is there a way to reappropriate aesthetic figurations—of subjectivity—from reified representations?⁶⁸ Lloyd’s acknowledgment of the figure of the “subaltern” and Sarah Dowling’s *Here is a Figure: grounding literary form* (2025) suggest ways of refiguring the concept of “a figure,” in Dowling’s framing: “It bears the shape of a person, and it refers to the person, but it is a kind of echo or shadow; it is a remembrance or an effect. It is a depiction, one among others.”⁶⁹ *Here is a Figure* ultimately conceptualizes the figuration of movements, performances, and material arrangements similar to my operative concept of form. Reading Renee Gladman, Dowling emphasizes an implicit invitation to collectivity in certain figures, where “lying down,” for example, is easily imaginable as something “every person does” and does habitually, in contact with their place, and in defiance of the upright Subject.⁷⁰

The concept of *blackness*, however, exceeds the racial figuration of subjectivities and/as properties. Blackness exceeds the figuration of subjectivity entirely. Figuring conditions as qualities and reversing causal order, blackness is conscripted to racial capitalist and *literary* ends to index (formless) matter *and* (maternal) *labor*.⁷¹ To ‘blacken’ labor facilitates its devaluation, obscures facts of making and made-ness, and precludes considerations of cost, responsibility,

indeterminability, and possibility. In the context of literary theory, Barbara Christian detected this aversion to the fact of labor in the 1980s in the (often deconstructive) shift of orientation from “works” toward “text.” The figure of a “text” elides the work of the *writer*, while “theory” and the *critic* who “creates” it displace the writer, thereby appropriating the practice of “teaching or writing one’s *response* [emphasis mine] to specific works of literature.”⁷² Blackness transcends the logic of subjectivity and becomes generic.

Genre

Black studies scholarship in particular, including that of Sylvia Wynter and Philip Brian Harper, critiques the linguistic, figurative abstraction of “modes of being human” into commodifiable, reified *genres*. Virginia Jackson’s *Before Modernism* thoroughly historicizes the figuration of “poetry” in particular as a genre constituted by the conflation of subjectivity with aesthetic form.⁷³ But Evie Shockley’s *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* (2011) brings me back to *black aesthetics* that account for subjectivity and form beyond the frames of *genre*.

Shockley circumvents the problem of delineating “poetry” as a formal category by shifting “African American Poetry” to designate a social tradition, a material archive, or perhaps simply a recognized commercial label. “African American Poetry” limits and grounds what Shockley attends to and asserts the context to which she addresses her book as contribution and reformation. Shockley then orients her (book’s) own attention toward “black aesthetics” and “formal innovation” in African American poetry.⁷⁴ *Renegade Poetics* reminds us that there is no “organically derived” “set of characteristics” that define black aesthetics; there are only characteristics that become expected to represent blackness.⁷⁵ *Renegade Poetics* provides the most lucid map of contemporary discourse on American poetics to me, and I theorize reading for poetics

of address in orientation toward what Shockley calls “formal innovation” in an open-ended questioning of “the aesthetic and expressive, intellectual and *transformative* possibilities of language.”⁷⁶

Shockley’s discussion of the “avant-garde” and its relation to the “innovative” suggests “genre” is primarily if not entirely a social and discursive, rather than an aesthetic, formation. The avant-garde “most usefully signifies people working in the context of a movement or a visible collectivity seeking not simply to push their own work individually, but to shift the whole discussion around poetics away from current norms.”⁷⁷ Shockley describes the or “*an* [my emphasis] avant-garde” as a “context” and as a social group; To be a part of the “avant-garde” is to be recognized as a member of a group defined by its intention to “shift the whole discussion around poetics away from current norms.”⁷⁸ Even if Shockley allows that writers of “innovative” poetry might instead—first?—prioritize “push[ing] their own work individually,” “innovative” always directly describes form: not the poet, nor the poet’s group, nor any intention beyond the work itself. Shockley also clarifies that what she calls “innovative” in fact does or can do the work that the avant-garde seeks to do: shifting or at least challenging *the* conversation, a conversation which can only ever *seem* to be the one and only (and seem this way only ever to someone already a part of it).

Renegade Poetics offers a compelling historical account of 20th century American reading practices that construct the “innovative,” and especially the “avant-garde,” as implicitly ‘white.’⁷⁹ This assumption of the avant-garde’s whiteness is evident in 1) the elision of both the work and the names of singular non-white writers as participants in or influences to ‘avant-garde’ communities and production, as well as 2) the elision of the names and the work of entire avant-garde communities—those which were *not* defined by whiteness—from the “laundry list of U.S.

avant-gardes.”⁸⁰ Sometimes, Shockley observes, work by non-white writers that *is* recognized as innovative then goes unrecognized as *non-white*.⁸¹ Likewise, Dorothy Wang observes, innovative forms are not recognized as part of *genres defined by non-whiteness*, like “Asian American Poetry.”⁸² With Wang and Shockley, I suspect that the “avant-garde” and all its associated concepts have not only been implicitly white but have been defined or bounded by the sense of whiteness, even if whiteness has been couched in seemingly universal or non-subjective terms of “universal subjectivity,” “non-subjectivity,” “structure,” or “form.”

Quickly deconstructing “blackness” *as* (any or no) form, *Renegade Poetics* draws our attention to *black aesthetics*. I ask you to indulge my quoting at length in order to share Shockley’s nuance and examples:

black aesthetics, plural: a multifarious, contingent, non-delimited complex of strategies that African American writers may use to negotiate gaps or conflicts between their artistic goals and the operation of race in the production, dissemination, and reception of their writing. These strategies might be ‘recognizably black,’ as with Langston Hughes’s successful experiment in bringing the blues lyric into poetry, or might not seem particularly concerned with issues of race (and, specifically, ‘blackness’) as in the fragmented voice, disjunctive logic, and paratactic lines of Erica Hunt’s poems. In any case, the ‘black’ in the conception of ‘black aesthetics’ I am positing is *not meant to describe the characteristics or qualities of the texts* [my emphasis], nor does it refer specifically to the (socially constructed) race of the writer. Rather, it describes...the subjectivity produced by the experience of identifying or being interpolated as ‘black’ in the U.S.—actively working out a poetics in the context of a racist society. Black aesthetics are a function of the writing process, are contingent, and must be historicized and contextualized with regard to period and place, and with regard to the various other factors that shape the writer’s identity, particularly including gender, sexuality, and class as well.⁸³

My sole ellipses in this description removes the phrase “the subjectivity of the African American writer—that is,” in order to emphasize a difference between blackness and the term “African American” and to make more space between “identifying [oneself]” as and “being interpolated” as. I want to mark the difference that the speaker makes to the meaning of identificatory (and all)

language. In both written and spoken language, I want to insist on the difference of the subjectivity indexed by the *I* that *is* and refers only to itself, from the subject *you* that is addressed by an *I* and *they* who are only *said to be*.⁸⁴ I would like to let lowercase “black” mean blackness as such—not *necessarily* of a subject, and unbounded from nation and recognition: without knowing exactly what ‘blackness’ is, was, or might be.⁸⁵

I follow Shockley’s concept of “black” in “black” aesthetics to acknowledge without interpreting the (writer’s) subjectivity that affects each of the books I read for poetics of address. Though Cameron Awkward-Rich’s *Sympathetic Little Monster* is the only example of *black* aesthetics in this project, I emphasize that academic discourse of black *aesthetics* has influenced my thinking across this project, and I hope the entire project might likewise be relevant to further discussions of black aesthetics. Especially in *Sympathetic Little Monster*, I follow C. Riley Snorton’s diction of “blackness” (for me, race) as “an enveloping environment” and “trans” as a mode of being or “movement” toward an indeterminable if not indeterminate orientation.

Consistent with this figuration of race and gender and Shockley’s example of acknowledging a writer’s subjectivity, in Chapter 2 I contextualize Layli Long Soldier’s *WHEREAS* with indigenous studies’ concepts of indigeneity in a gesture of attention beyond aesthetic reading. Turning to *WHEREAS* itself, however, the chapter describes how *the book contextualizes itself* both within state discourse but also in its attention to a shared history, shared contemporary experience[s], shared ideas, and shared feelings *of indigeneity*: some that are often but not always, and some that are rarely, recognized *as* indigenous. Working backward, of the three books studied here, Mercedes Eng’s *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes*, most overlaps itself with state, corporate, and public discourse. Chapter 1 therefore attends most to an ‘American’

context that demands discursive critique, but which also creates figures that can be appropriated and which will always fail to capture subjectivity.

While I think this detour through “genre” has been important, I now want to reorient back to *the aesthetic*. I want to pivot from questions of figure and genre to follow Dionne Brand’s thinking of an *aesthetic* as: “a set of arrangements designed and perceived [by some] to give pleasure. An aesthetic. A dream. A desire. And one no sooner dreamt than realized.”⁸⁶ This is a radical last sentence, as it collapses linear time by stacking dream and realization and makes the aesthetic—long theorized as a perceptual, subjective experience of form—*real*. This sentence addresses concerns about advocating a reader’s turn toward the aesthetic as a distraction from reality and ‘politics’ that *Under Representation* also addresses.

Lloyd attends to the aesthetic appearance of discursive figures, and the discursive use of aesthetic figures, but ultimately critiques (academic) discourse of the aesthetic itself. Also a critique of antisocial academic orientations, *Under Representation* appraises aesthetic attention as demobilizing: “Aesthetic philosophy arises out of the necessity to forestall the revolutionary claims of its epoch and to substitute for the immediacy of political demands and practices an aesthetic formation of the disinterested and ‘liberal’ subject.”⁸⁷ But even here, we might make a subtle distinction between (academic) aesthetic *discourse* and aesthetic *reading* or experience itself.

Even if this ‘looking away’ was determinably motivated by or effective in the interest of containing demands for freedom and other desires, I understand as the same aesthetic attention Lloyd problematizes as Rei Terada’s “phenomenophilia” in *Looking Away: Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction, Kant to Adorno* (2009). Directed not toward conceptualizing or feeling “freedom,” “phenomenophilia” attends to “*particularly ephemeral perceptual experiences, perceptions that*

seem below or marginal to normal appearance” and satisfies “a wish to be relieved for a moment of the coercion to accept whatever one does not dispute.”⁸⁸ Phenomenophilia also resonates with Lloyd’s recognition of “the sensuous remnant that withstands rationalization” in aesthetic perception and which, according to Lloyd, might lead to “another conception of life in common, predicated on the pains and pleasures of the suffering, desiring, necessitous subject.”⁸⁹ *Looking Away* also offers a possibility of refusing both to accept *and* refusing to dispute the apparent “world ‘as is,’” in one turn that I want to call a form of address.⁹⁰ I leave *Looking Away* for now where Terada has only begun, noting without addressing her association of phenomenophilia with “noncoercive relation.”⁹¹

In his reading of *Looking Away*, Stephen Best offers another model of a noncoercive aesthetic (dis)orientation between ‘art’ and ‘world.’ Best reaches a concept of “epiphanic shimmer” through a reading of Barthes’ *punctum* as a perception of a form not *for* you but which nevertheless touches you. Though Best’s reading of El Anatsui’s *Fading Cloth* in *None Like Us* is worth its own dedicated reading on all its own terms, for now I emphasize the sense of simultaneity that I arrive to in my reading of Best’s reading. Best reads *Fading Cloth* as a *trompe l’oeil* between ‘trash’ and ‘gold’ that confuses those determination in the disappearance of (framed or framing) form, where the frame is the border between the aesthetic and the social, or for Best historical and signifying ‘world.’⁹² Best’s reading figures *to me* a perception of formless beauty or value *simultaneous to* the perception of form as causal and caused; the idea of this perception contributes to my sense of an aesthetic orientation toward address, but here I will claim this as my own speculative reading without claiming to represent Best in an agreeable way.⁹³

Philip Brian Harper’s *Abstractionist Aesthetics: Artistic Form and Social Critique in African American Culture* (2015) makes a different argument, perhaps by taking better account of

black aesthetics. Harper claims that within genres expected to represent reality (or figure real people), the perception of aesthetic *abstraction* might instead emphasize the work's "distance from reality by calling attention to its constructed or artificial character—even if it also enacts real-world reference."⁹⁴ Deployed as a *literary* aesthetic, where the "literary" is the "locus classicus for narrative function," abstraction can disrupt the narrative logic of subjectivity as linearly causal over time, as well as the linearly causal logic of language more generally, which is to say language's "syntactical flow," especially "whereby meaning derives through temporal elaboration and sequential development."⁹⁵ Readings of particular, historically contextualized aesthetics can make our perception of reality itself appear contingent and contextual—and thus a matter of orientation.⁹⁶

Readings such as Terada's, Best's, and Harper's should bring us pause in any wholesale disavowal of the aesthetic on the grounds of social effect. Christina Sharpe reminds us not to take discursive and figural antiblack representations as given referents.⁹⁷ While they might refer or gesture to antiblack discourse and antiblack structures, black aesthetics can turn away from or perhaps even refuse to address antiblackness at all.⁹⁸ Even if "one's life and mind are organized by and positioned to apprehend the world through...antiblackness," even if experiences or awareness of antiblackness "texture" one's reading practices, a Black artist—and anyone—can remain "attuned" to what Sharpe calls "circumstances."⁹⁹ This "attunement," a particular orientation, is neither empathy nor experience itself, but may be shared and performed.¹⁰⁰ The aesthetic question of address shifts from 'what is figured' in address to address 'toward what,' and to whom?¹⁰¹ Finally, without letting go of "form" as a term for our conceptualization, but in recognition of "form's" discursive baggage, I want to shift my attention to aesthetic form as

address, or attempt to read address as “a structural constituent” of the aesthetic as Roelofs figures it.¹⁰²

Reading

How can we read for address in an aesthetic orientation toward *writing*? If we have agreed that the *poet* cannot directly address the reader, and that we therefore cannot read a poem as the real poet’s unmediated voice, the poetic figure of “the speaker” arises as a convenient origin of the *poem*’s voice in address. I will shortly come back to “voice” as a term neglected in the speaker’s extensive genealogy. Recall, the New Criticism coincided with a paradigmatic shift in American pedagogies of *reading*. Practices of directing readers toward morality judgements or appointing the work of reading to expert historians shifted to a mode of reading supposedly, democratically, available to anyone: a mode eventually codified as ‘close reading.’¹⁰³ In the uptake of ‘close reading’ the ‘author’ was displaced from the text. It is my argument that practices of “close reading” refigured a poetic “speaker” to preserve and focalize both *formal* questions of perspective and *subjective* questions of character.¹⁰⁴

Recognizing what escapes writing’s communicability as the writer’s intention or even “the desire to mean what one says” in general, Derrida’s “Signature, Event, Context” figures writing as an appearance—or even an invisible presence—made meaningful only or primarily through reference to a logical code—in an exercise of logocentrism.¹⁰⁵ If writing “perhaps communicates [in logocentrism], but certainly does not exist” beyond “the form of the most improbable signature,” what is the aesthetic perception of the “signature”?¹⁰⁶ Derrida defines a signature as a paradoxically iterable and singular mark of a singular person; does any given text have a ‘signature’ existence? And what about the existence of writing as ink on paper? And how does the writer’s *hand* affect (the (il)legibility of) her signature?¹⁰⁷ “We” write (and name) subjectivity

through racialized and gendered figures.¹⁰⁸ Or, to take “us” out of it, Virginia Jackson is right to observe that “while Derrida may be right that writing always goes astray—or is, by definition, disseminated in order to become literature—*published* writing does not wander away on its own: it is directed and addressed by some to others.”¹⁰⁹ Even if the legibility of language requires reference to a “code,” American culture persistently derives meaning and effect in consideration of “who says.”

Though Barthes believed “that writing is the destruction of every voice” and Derrida emphasized “dissemination” across contexts as an overwriting of internal polysemy, the persistent figure of the “speaker” in literary discourse suggests to me that writing retains a vocal, or perhaps *tonal* aesthetic.¹¹⁰ How, then, have we and might we sense the perspective and intention, or the “subjectivity,” in written language via *and beyond* the figure of ‘the speaker’? Could there still be something to say about the relation between “subjectivity” and the logics, “forms,” and effects of the *language* we read in front of us? How does the social recognizability of subjectivity via marks of race and gender and the logic of identity affect the recognition of subjectivity in writing? At the same time, if we conceptualize race and gender and identity not only as subjective but as formal logics or structures, couldn’t we account for those logics in writing without reference to the speaker?

Given Virginia Jackson’s historical analysis of American readings of poetry as *the signature form*, poetics becomes an addressee for all of these questions. Jackson locates what she terms “Lyric Reading”—reading for subjectivity—as a reading mode associated in particular with ideas of the *lyric*, even though Jackson also recognizes that ideas of the *lyric* have subsumed ideas of *poetry* in general outside of poetics discourse. What is “poetry’s” signature? “Poetry,” we imagine, used always to follow rules of rhythm and rhyme. It used to be performed to and for

certain audiences. But now it is impossible to describe everything called “poetry” with a single form or quality. General readers, perhaps, and certainly many literary scholars who do not study poetry, can imagine “poetry” as one given *genre*, not their problem and a matter I address to my “Genre” section above. Though publishers, poetics scholars, and many readers of poetry and poets might not consider poetry a “genre” at all, distinguishing terms for poetry are both historical and invented. Older categorizations are defined by the quantification of meter and line count and from the determination of rhythm and rhyme: for instance, 14 lines forming one of two (and a half) rhyme schemes makes a “Sonnet.”¹¹¹ In contemporary American poetry, categories of non-numeric, *subjective*, description like “Lyric,” “Avant-Garde,” “Conceptual Poetry,” “Asian American Poetry,” and “Experimental Poetry” are much more commonly used.¹¹² In this second grouping, a categorical antagonism with associated reading methods developed (again, circa 2015): “Lyric” was cast old-fashioned, sentimental, even shameful to read.¹¹³ And the “Avant-Garde,” especially what was called Conceptual Poetry at that moment, was accused of being the product of elitest, racist, white men.¹¹⁴

Before this moment of discursive devolution, poetics scholars had already recognized another antagonism of reading modes spanning the field of literature. Dorothy Wang’s *Feeling Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* (notably published in 2014) traces these allegiances to certain reading modes in conflicting explanations of a “fallen state of literary studies” evident in the scarcity of teaching positions “in MLA-related departments,” according to Marjorie Perloff’s 2006 MLA Presidential Address: “It Must Change.”¹¹⁵ Wang also traces this mournful tone through eight essays published under the title “The New Lyric Studies” in the January 2008 issue of *PMLA*.¹¹⁶ Wang deconstructs the rhetoric of oppositionality across the essays:

What seems to me so drearily familiar in this exchange in *PMLA* is how much the readers both intuit and are expected to intuit, in a myriad of ways, spoken and unspoken, precisely what the terms invoked ‘really’ mean and what is at stake here, at stake not just in the debates about the state of the profession but in the very conditions—the framework and terminologies—of the forum itself. In other words, what is even more operative here than what is explicitly stated is what is not stated, what does not need to be stated, or what needs to be stated only by shorthand: ‘identitarian,’ ‘identity politics,’ ‘cultural,’ ‘social,’ ‘political,’ ‘anxieties,’ ‘prejudices,’ ‘exotic,’ ‘carelessness,’ ‘haphazard’ versus ‘literary,’ ‘classic,’ ‘classical,’ ‘discipline,’ among other terms [like ‘aesthetic,’ in Wang’s own title “Aesthetics Contra ‘Identity’”]. These terms (as does the term ‘avant-garde’) act as placeholders for larger assumptions and beliefs, many of which have largely become normative in shoring up the supposed opposition between the cultural against the literary.¹¹⁷

I quote Wang at length here to emphasize her reading of a foundational binary across myriad, ambiguous terms. While she offers close readings of grammatical examples, Wang’s assertion of the authority of her own sense of the language she quotes is crucial to articulating this binary beyond the (strictly grammatical logic of the) texts. Especially because Wang is critiquing discourse, I am compelled by this method of saying something about “voice” that I am working toward.

I share Wang’s orientation toward a literary critical community that she asks to grapple with the question of “Why is it so difficult for poetry critics to talk about race?”¹¹⁸ I hope this project might address, though not always directly, those critics who struggle to name race—I have been and sometimes still am one of them. Talking about race requires an acknowledgement if not an attention to the social that poetics often seems to offer not only an avoidance of but a respite from. In this project I am excited by poetics that open up concepts of subjectivity to indeterminacies that preclude racial determinations. At the same time, my intention in reading—and especially in writing to you now—is ultimately social. I change in relation not only to the books I read but also, consequently, in relation to the people around me within social structures. Because I feel distinct from my social positionalities but also limited control over my meanings to others, I make

decisions of what to read, who to talk to, and what to say from my social positions and in my understandings of them in relation to the a/effects of my readings.

As much as I want to keep subjectivity—my own and others’—indeterminate in or by this and any *writing*, I think it is important to reiterate Wang’s reminder that “a [poet]’s use of form is inseparable from the larger social, historical, and political contexts that produced the poet’s subjectivity.”¹¹⁹ Reflecting on the incommensurability of the typographical “I” to the self, Claudia Rankine likewise warns that “not to investigate subjectivity is to reinforce cultural stereotypes...” and to conceal and confuse compromises and assertions—choices and acts.¹²⁰ In this writing, “subjectivity” is a heuristic for intention, agency, affect, social position, subjection, and the origin of language. To for now avoid the evident weight of that term, and to focus first on my own relationship with singular books, I turn to “voice” as a more precise figure for my interest in subjectivity.

Voice

“It becomes impossible to tell
whether language is what gives life or
what kills.”
-Barbara Johnson¹²¹

“sticks and bricks might break our bones,
but words will most certainly kill us.”
-Hortense Spillers¹²²

To think the question of “to(ward) whom” in literature implicates the reader without producing a determinate figure of her. But the effort of publication—the cost of not just writing and its reproduction but also its *distribution* (a cost Derrida forgot to count)—would seem to orient published literary writing, to at least some degree, toward the (most) people who will pay (the most) for it.¹²³ Yet considering the relative, almost non-profitability of poetry as a commodity in contemporary America, I think I can safely assume that the publication of poetry is motivated by

more than economic profit.¹²⁴ If the writer's intention is not written, and even if we think it is or could be, does the poem, as the writer's *signature*, have its own directionalities? Does the poem allow you to move (with) it in certain directions more easily than in others? Could we then read 'address' in its other tone (ádress), to imagine address as the poem's intended destination—rendered in numbers (figures?) and names (words?)—affected by but not determinable according to any address the writer wrote 'on the envelope'?

But there is still something in written address that exceeds signification and figuration. There is something that I wanted to call *voice* that ultimately brings me to *tone*. To move through "voice" is thus crucial to my theory of poetics of address. To briefly contextualize and historicize "voice" in American legal and literary discourse before turning to its function in poetics discourse, Stephen Best's *The Fugitive's Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession* (2004) is illuminating. Best traces in late-19th century American jurisprudence "voice as a veritable marker of identity" legally figured as "inalienable" from the person.¹²⁵ Derrida reiterated the reading of voice as "measure of authenticity and veracity" according to a cultural figuration of writing in a "supporting role" to voice.¹²⁶ But *The Fugitive's Properties*, with Jane Gaines' *Contested Culture*, suggests that Derrida failed to account for an antiblack cultural aesthetic that the "development of mimetic technologies in Western culture" revealed in the resultant prioritization of *writing's* (figural) authenticity over (auditory) speech.¹²⁷ The "measure" of authentic personhood, Gaines suggests, was never just "voice" but was "defined by the model of the socialized body."¹²⁸ In this model, subjective authenticity was located in the (racial, gendered) visual body *before* the auditory voice.

With this legal and social discursive context of "voice" in mind, it is *lyric* discourse that has had the most to say about the voice of address not just in writing but in *poetics*. John Stuart

Mill's famous claim in 1860 that "poetry is overheard" in distinction from directly-addressed "eloquence" persisted for centuries. In the 21st century, Gillian White and Virginia Jackson made crucial feminist, historicist interventions in constructs of the lyric "reader" and "speaker," respectively.¹²⁹ Ultimately, I primarily follow Anthony Reed's *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing* (2014) to extend my theory of contemporary poetics of address beyond strictly "lyric" theory.¹³⁰ Though "a certain critical hermeneutics of 'the' lyric" might try to contain poetic "voice" within or as a stable lyric form, *Freedom Time* attends to various figures of "voice" across American poetic genealogies.

Freedom Time figures lyric "objectivity" as the lyric speaker's position within a social situation which simultaneously objectifies or "marks [the black] voice as one of protest" and entirely abstracts "the black subject" within "the racializing project of speaking for and as the human in general."¹³¹ This is how Reed articulates "lyric" reading and "racial" reading in a "hermeneutic circle." This lyric genealogy in and as social context leads to Reed theorize a contemporary black experimental "postlyric" poetics that responds from "the position of the racialized subject" in a different voice: one "embedded in the languages of popular culture and the social languages of difference that is at once unitary and so multiply fractured and contradictory that it demands reconception of the singularity and integrity of the poetic 'voice.'"¹³² It is my contention that pivoting away from reading *for* subjectivity, and toward reading for poetics of address might get us out of that circle.

Though I have glossed "voice" in *Freedom Time*, Reed's title suggests that the book is most interested in a poetic temporality of "now" and which "makes the disciplinary processes of common sense apparent *as* process rather than figuring them as the encoded truth of phenomena."¹³³ Reed theorizes an aesthetic that "temporalizes words: suspend[ing] them between

the retention of past association and anticipation.”¹³⁴ At the same time, Reed theorizes a poetics of address might then point toward “a future anterior audience” of subjects who will have been and thereby makes possible the paradoxical speculation of an “unimaginable”—nonconceptual, perhaps—readership.¹³⁵ I part from this unimaginability as I part from Reed’s disinclination “to question” how poetic voice might affect “the solidity of the phenomenological subject on which the fiction of the lyric rests.”¹³⁶ In this line of questioning, I share Reed’s attention to apostrophe—the address to an absent, often abstract figure closely associated with lyric form:

Apostrophe traditionally guarantees the solidity of the poem’s imagined speaking subject to the extent that although the invoked, absent other does not—and is not expected to—speak back, the structure of address confers being to both. In other words, apostrophe’s calling out gives the poem’s voice its solidity: for it to call out to something absent, the voice must be in some sense *there*.¹³⁷

An aesthetic reading for poetics of address would imagine the subject of poetic voice indeterminable, yet ‘solid’ in Reed’s prior sense: as “in some sense *there*.” To read for poetics of address asks for directions to “there.”

Much of Virginia Jackson’s work complements Reed’s in de-conceptualizing the poetic “speaker” and recognizing poetry as part of a “densely woven fabric of social relations” rather than representative of a universal(ly identifiable) subjectivity.¹³⁸ Jackson’s earlier *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (2005) asked readers to acknowledge that a poem has “an intersubjective economy of its own,” rather than figuring lyrics as paradoxically isolated personifications of ‘the social (subject).’¹³⁹ That is, *Dickinson’s Misery* asked us to read a ‘lyric’ *as addressed to someone*.¹⁴⁰ If we don’t read poetry as addressed to *someone other than the reader* (if only the writer herself), we must decide to read it as if addressed to no one at all or *only directly addressed* to the reader. In both of these cases the poem is entirely subject to the reader’s

appropriation and determination, taking into account anything the reader knows about its ‘origin,’ writer, ‘speaker,’ or voice or not.¹⁴¹

Jackson poignantly critiques Mill’s infamous articulation of lyric solitude in emphasizing Mill’s observation that lyric “song” “has always seemed to us like the lament of a prisoner in a solitary cell, ourselves listening, unseen in the next,” in asking: “who or what has imposed the sentence?”¹⁴² Who or what has made us think we are—or the poem is—alone, and that no one is listening to us? Instead of this lyric reading, *Dickinson’s Misery* offered a reading of lyric as (an addressed) letter. It is the materiality of the poem—not its significations—that confirms a material relation between reader and writer.¹⁴³ Though Jackson emphasizes the materiality of paper and print, in this project I am curious about other materialities or material effects, like the affect of “voice,” in and of language.

In extension of *Dickinson’s Misery*, *Before Modernism: Inventing American Lyric* (2023) problematizes the elision of historical conditions and material differences in lyric abstractions of subjectivity, as well as any subsequent attempt to “organiz[e] us around that abstraction.”¹⁴⁴ Jackson reads an American figuration of “lyric” as “one *speaking* genre [emphasis mine]” that could figure or at least ‘voice’ “a single historical identity” as its paradoxical source and representation.¹⁴⁵ *Before Modernism* reminds us of the historical existence of poetics that “unravel[] the idea that poetry expresses a single historical identity,” if only in “response[] to the White poetics of universal lyric speech.”¹⁴⁶ Jackson then warns against reading in “ventriloquy,” by recognizing the structure of ventriloquy as an idea directed toward real people as a violence, raising questions of appropriation and the elision of historical and material difference in an ongoing context of racial and gendered exploitation.¹⁴⁷

In tracing three common readings of ‘the lyric speaker,’ *Before Modernism* also suggests that lyric reading projects affect upon the abstract, speaking, “person(a),” which, in white American reading and writing especially, “often appeared suspended in a sympathetic pathos of uncertain agency rather than in revolutionary rage or reactionary oppression.”¹⁴⁸ If the projection of “uncertain agency” in particular not only validates a reader’s uncertainty but also allows readers to disidentify with that (and any) affect, perhaps the lyric speaker also allows readers to feel certain—of their interpretations, their agency, their race and gender (anti-black, anti-femme) and, ultimately, their freedom.

In this light, if we could simply let go of the personified speaker, would any poetic “expressivity” remain? Gillian White’s *Lyric Shame: The Lyric Subject of Contemporary American Poetry* (2014) reads the consequence of the discursive conflict between reading *for* subjectivity or *against* it to be a “missing lyric object.”¹⁴⁹ White then articulates the subsumption of “expressivity” in an object of feminized “lyric shame.”¹⁵⁰ Always, White theorizes, “that ‘expressive lyric’ is an abstraction that gets projected onto some writing” to produce a “subjective voice.”¹⁵¹ Following *Lyric Shame*, to identify as a ‘lyric’ reader or writer would then be to identify with one’s own projection of (the expression of) subjectivity ‘in’ or ‘of’ a poem.¹⁵²

Though White suggests that “acts of literary identification” were enough to be shamed, she also observes that “writerly acts of self-enunciation (saying ‘the pronoun ‘I’’)” were “not only personally shameful but figured as forms of culturally implicated violence,” as if “to say ‘I’” was to “presume to speak” for another.¹⁵³ To analogize this kind of reading and writing as “culturally implicated violence” would seem to figure not just writing as “overdeterminedly ‘overheard’” but *reading* as a social address.¹⁵⁴ If an antilyric disavowal of poetic subjectivity necessarily disavows

poetic *address*, the “shame” of lyric must be *personally* ascribed to writer and reader rather than poem or form.¹⁵⁵

Jonathan Culler’s critique of lyric reading in his contribution to the MLA’s special 2008 issue scholarly dedicated to “new lyric studies” seems to recuperate reading with regard to subjectivity without identification by placing language and reading *before* subjectivity and conceptualizing lyric as “the site where language is linked not only to structures of identification and displacement...”¹⁵⁶ Yet Culler’s focus on “discourse” makes unclear his distinction of “structures of identification and displacement” from language and the nature of their “link.” Perhaps this “link” implicates Culler’s invitation to readers to “think of the poem as discourse addressed.” I follow Culler’s invitation to attend to language as discursive in my attention to grammar. Though I could also attend to discursive *figures* in my readings, I try to maintain figural indeterminacy and avoid reading *in reference to*, especially to(ward) non-codified, discursive *figures* that do not appear in the writing itself. Culler’s theory of reading lyric *only* as discourse precludes questions of “what would lead someone to speak thus and to feel thus?” that I am still hesitant to exclude from an aesthetically oriented reading for poetics of address.¹⁵⁷ Gillian White offers another model of lyric reading that better accounts for readerly subjectivity.

Introducing her close reading of a poem called “Anybody Can Write a Poem” by Bradley Paul (2010), White asks, “what if we read [this poem] without identifying Paul with the speaker” or any other figure of a subject in the poem: neither “the idiot” nor the “I” either?¹⁵⁸ This reading mode allows White to argue that Paul figures the poem *itself* as “ashamedly entangled in an identification of ‘writing’ with ‘speech’” and resistant to this entanglement in its foregrounding as *written* and the irony of what it ‘says.’¹⁵⁹ White draws our attention to the ambiguous aesthetic of Paul’s italicization:

The line [in Paul's poem] "I have something to tell you all, / I'm *different*" depends on italics to make us "hear" (read) this "spoken" difference and only calls attention to the lexicality it suppresses by urging us to "listen." Furthermore, the specialness of "I" (its supposedly important difference from everyone else) is comically undermined by the fact that it wishes to make this claim on behalf of a universal "you."¹⁶⁰

White holds Paul's "I" accountable to its generic and collective use of "you" in pointing out the irony of a singular "I" asking a collective "you all" to *all hear* (having been 'told') it in the same way (as 'different'). White follows this brilliant observation by directing our attention toward *tone*, and emphasizes the effect of her recognition of pathos in these lines—or is it in *her reading of* these lines? White reads Paul's poem as *both* tonally "wayward" and ironic, *and* "[a]t the same time, given the revelation of pathos at the end" asks: "how can I not read the poem as sincere speech, given especially what I know of Paul's life?"¹⁶¹ White is influenced by her personal knowledge of Bradley Paul. It is difficult if not impossible to read as if we know nothing of a writer, even if we can imagine written voice is always ultimately unlocatable.¹⁶²

We might avoid the pitfalls of ascribing our sense of writerly intention to the *writer* if we can trust language itself is unmotivated or motivated only indeterminately.¹⁶³ At the same time, reading aesthetically acknowledges that poetry and other language itself *does* affect us. Could we reappropriate the Kantian aesthetic to linger in indeterminacy, not to justify inaction but in fact to make a new determination and orient us toward something—a value ambiguously articulated before and after the influence of reading? Could this value, or simply this process, be recorded in writing? What would be left to signify and figure could only be speculative, limited, affective, and relative.¹⁶⁴

Perhaps more than or alongside grammar as a sense of codified value, an aesthetic orientation toward language must account for the effects of tone.¹⁶⁵ I am drawn to tone because it signifies something about light and something about sound. I am also drawn to "tone" as an aspect

of “voice.” Paradoxically registered as affective yet subject to discursive control (tone policing), tone also implies true feeling, sometimes more meaningful and affective than the “direct” “meaning” of representational language. To detect tone in writing is to sense *the speaker’s affect*, but “tone” is only (never) determinable between “us.” *Tone* also suggests light, hue, and color. Reading for tone as light might follow Audre Lorde’s description in “Poetry is Not a Luxury” of “poetry as illumination,” and Boyer’s “light falling on the no a precise or general record of the subtly shifting qualities of these refusals, a record of the way the light falls on each refusal, sometimes a warm light, sometimes a cold one, these different lights falling on the no, the light which is subject to its own record....”¹⁶⁶

If the light “falls” and is “falling on the no,” the present tense of these verbs ask poets to make a paradoxical record of the shifting *present* rather than a record of the *past*. The “light” comes from the poem *and* the reader. The light is also “subject to its own record,” the record that is a poem does not “subject” the light: does not make the light a subject or subordinate the light within itself. Yet to frame this assertion under the question form (of “the trial of today”) structurally implies both a voic(ing) and an addressee. If these *questions* are a record of something subject to its own record, they also exceed their voicing and any intended addressee.¹⁶⁷

In their collective study of tone recorded in *Tone* (2024), Sofia Samatar and Kate Zambreno refigure tone as an ambiguity comparable to the ambiguity I have articulated in ‘form’: “A tone is perhaps a room that we inhabit and are inhabited by. It is the interior that surrounds and the exterior that invades. Something we must listen to, be attuned to, within the necessity of silence.”¹⁶⁸ If “tone” is something to “attune” to, perhaps we can judge whether and how *we and the book* share a not fully or always known *orientation* toward or within *something shared*. Describing tone as collective and atmospheric, the authors observe that tone “cannot be restricted to a single voice or

even a single language,” leading to a crisis of communicability in the “unanswerable question of the senses—is what we call gray the same for all?”¹⁶⁹ Who, as ever, are ‘we’ asking?

Poetics of Address

“Grammar” has been productive to me in my desire to understand the usage of language (‘why someone might say that’) to understand the implications of language for me. *Abstractionist Aesthetics* reminds us that poetics of broken syntax can help us challenge linguistic logics of cause and givenness (ground); to break up universal meaning into (limited) plurality; to disrupt, fracture, and disarticulate linguistic representations; and to aesthetically represent subjectivity *as* a representation “which evidently occurs at the initiative of some other subjective entity operating beyond the poem and determining its overall form.”¹⁷⁰ Harper’s aesthetic reading of poetics emphasizes not so much the absence of the writer but the existence of a writer whose subjectivity is outside of the poem and thus inaccessible to the reader. At the same time, the reader as a “reading subjectivity” also “assumes” a “mode of consciousness” that can “make sense” *to the reader* only if the reader can feel that they share *the poem’s* discursive logic and “momentum.”¹⁷¹ That “momentum,” might also be articulated as “tone.” “Tone” helps me understand how language *affects* me and how it might affect others. I like how “tone” complicates “voice” as a figure of one’s singular, inalienable self: through one’s multiplicity of tone, one’s changeable *use* of grammar and language, and one’s capacity for expression, response, and song.¹⁷²

Come back with me to Boyer’s epigraph to consider grammar and voice, inscription and tone, together in address:

“What is the answer?” Stein asked, and when no answer came she laughed and said: “What, then, is the question?”

What does it mean that Stein laughed? If tone *means*, if meaning is both what is said and *how* it is said, any sense of shared meaning between speaker and reader requires us to share the same

ground, the same assumptions—assumptions which extend to orientations toward *values*. Yet Boyer’s grammar noticeably positions Stein between her own questions, as both asker and (emotive) respondent to herself. The quotation marks also frame this laughter in a contextual, fleeting moment of *speech*. Though *I* “cannot now unknow,” as Jackson describes longstanding generic referents, not only the historical record that Stein asked these questions on her deathbed, but also that Stein is an icon of American poetry, to associate the site of laughter across these contexts and figures of differing motives only heightens the ambiguity of an already ambiguous, and relatively *unintentional* expression (laughter).¹⁷³

By drawing our attention to poetic tone and tangibility, and by rendering language ambiguous and opaque, poetics of address emphasize a multidimensional sense beyond representation as identity. Finally, I want to gesture to how poetics of address might be conceptualized as a formal model of reproducible arrangements: postures and structures. Kornbluh calls for modes of reading literature for formulas or architectural models of space and relationality.¹⁷⁴ Though I am more inclined toward deconstruction as “practices [of] a code of particularizing and concretizing, of destabilizing norms, disassembling systems, undoing universals,” I also read Kornbluh’s idea of “building” of—I emphasize *abstract*—models with my figure of poetics of address as tracing and retracing what exists in(to) *form*.¹⁷⁵ Kornbluh herself suggests a kind of deconstruction in inviting us to refigure our ‘words’ into ‘letters,’ where: “The letter is here not the sign of an absent thing, but rather a mark of something that cannot be read, that cannot be assimilated to intuition, experience, phenomenality. An act, not a revelation,” and an “inscription in excess of signification.”¹⁷⁶ This refiguration of writing as inscription emphasizes the book-ness of the book or the page-ness of the page as a site of inscription: the dimensions, the texture, the distribution of white, black, and color. It draws our attention to the question of why

someone would write (or say) this *here*, and it draws our attention to how writing and language *touch*.

“Contemporary American Poetics of Address” allows me to conceptualize reading through the paradox of form both *of* and *between*. Poetics of address orient language toward particular readers without determining nor separating those readers from others. I hope to further clarify ‘poetics of address’ through the examples of reading contemporary American poetry that I elaborate throughout this dissertation. I can’t tell you what to orient yourself toward in reading for poetics of address; you have to trust that you will be called in the right direction by what you notice. Because “tone” is so subjective, in my readings I have tried to ground any claim of “tone” in the “grammar” of the language that exists on the page. While ‘grammar,’ ‘voice,’ and ‘tone’ might orient you through all of my readings, each of the following three chapters offers different terms of focus to account for variable aesthetics of address.

¹ 20. “The young Alexander conquered India. Was he alone? Caesar defeated the Gauls. Did he not even have a cook with him? Philip of Spain wept when his armada went down. Was he the only one to weep?”

² Anne Boyer, *A Handbook of Disappointed Fate*, Penguin, 2015, 211.

³ You might recognize these words; they are frequently reproduced and even included in *Respectfully Quoted: A Dictionary of Quotations Requested from the Congressional Research Service*. They also appear in Elizabeth Sprigge’s *Gertrude Stein, Her Life and Work*, p. 265 (1957), cited by *Respectfully Quoted*, and in Donald Sutherland’s *Gertrude Stein, A Biography of her Work*, cited by *Oxford Essential Quotations* (online).

⁴ An epigraph is definitionally expected to “indicate the leading idea or sentiment.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. “epigraph,” Oxford UP.

⁵ We are both contemporary white women writers from the Midwest, but this is not to say that I don’t identify with non-women, non-Midwestern, non-white writers too.

⁶ Stein’s iconicity as a representative of American poetry ironically supersedes even the facts of her expatriation and Parisian fame.

⁷ Stein’s words first appeared in writing in Alice B. Toklas’s *What Is Remembered* (1963), pg. 173. That Toklas represents them as Stein’s *last* words enhances their iconicity.

⁸ Sutherland seems to be the first to add laughter. *Gertrude Stein, A Biography of her Work*, 203.

⁹ Brecht’s poem is almost entirely written in questions about historical record, though in a volta, he deviates from “history” to describe “fabled Atlantis.” The poem’s moments of observation rather than questioning, and especially that this stanza also grammatically reverses the poem’s structure and figures slaves, is worth a paper of its own.

¹⁰ Boyer, *Handbook*, 223.

¹¹ Who cares? To whom do these questions occur? To think to ask these questions requires a sense of absence, doubt, or incompleteness in the story. Did the writers of history leave the answers to these questions out because the questions didn’t occur to them, because they could not answer them, or because they did not want to answer them?

¹² Never naming any particular “worker,” nor “workers” at all after its title, the poem’s grammar does not rewrite “workers” into the record. Nor do the title and questions speak for plural workers or a figurative ‘the worker’; this is just one worker who reads. The record can’t answer the worker’s questions, but maybe Brecht’s reader can.

The final question no longer asks who built but rather: “who paid the bill?” The subject of this question is ambiguous: it could be the workers, who pay with their labor, or it could be the one who paid money. The object of the bill is also unclear: what is this bill for? I also follow Boyer’s figuration of poetry not as a record of people themselves but of “being a person or people who,” in saying no, refused something: maybe even to answer a question. Or to say anything at all. This little bit of space between people and what they said, where what they are said to have said only represents a general refusal, a determinate refusal of something that itself remains indeterminate, figuring a record of *how* rather than *what* these people were.

¹³ Note that the difference between these two 3-letter question words in writing is simply a matter of rearranged letter order.

¹⁴ See Michel Foucault’s oeuvre, especially “The Order of Discourse” in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*. Foucault calls us to “[a] task that consists of not—of no longer—treating discourses as groups of signs (signifying elements referring to contents or representations) but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak.” Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (Pantheon Books, 1972), 49.

¹⁵ A scattering of fruitful sites for considerations of the ‘speaker’: Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads*; Modernist aesthetics of fragmentation and dialect; Black aesthetics and theories of doubled voice; the uptake of New Criticism; critiques of “sentimentality” and “sympathy” alongside deconstruction, affect studies, and new materialism; the paradoxes of conceptual aesthetics and identity politics; and the 2025 MLA panels on “Poetry’s Genres and Publics” and “Poetry as an Object of Study.”

¹⁶ Lloyd also cites Cedric Robinson’s “racial regimes:” “constructed social systems in which race is proposed as a justification for the relations of power.” Robinson quoted in Lloyd 7. Asma Abbas’ *Liberalism and Human Suffering: Materialist Reflections on Politics, Ethics, and Aesthetics* critiques “the Liberal sensorium,” while Stallings’ *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures* traces the creative attempts of black artists “to configure a sensorium for a new humanity whose knowledge system would not require privileging one human sense over others, would not produce disciplines begging for interaction with each other or forms awaiting a validated deconstruction and reconstruction by capitalist endeavors and corporate institutions” (12).

¹⁷ “[I]s aesthetic autonomy—the argument for the freedom of art from the realm of the real, an argument inaugurated within western aesthetics by Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*—a conservative or radical discourse?” Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship*, 146.

¹⁸ Monique Roelofs. *Arts of Address: Being Alive to Language and the World*, Columbia UP, 2020, 7. I also follow Roelofs’ turn away from the work of “matching,” and especially of *identifying*, existing objects with existing “audiences,” in order to acknowledge “the productivity of address in shaping experiential propensities, material relations, and patterns of collectivity” in excess of ties to or even orientations toward “specific cultural objects” (29).

¹⁹ Ibid., 28.

²⁰ Ibid., 7.

²¹ I deeply appreciate Sarah Dowling’s example of addressing her intended audience and naming her purpose and intended use as clearly as possible. Dowling makes Dowling’s orientation toward readers explicit: “In this book, I’m writing as a friend (or a friend-of-a-friend)...” Dowling also acknowledges explicitly the stubborn, and perhaps much more public than academic, question: “What can art *do*?” I also admire Dowling’s model of archive formation; *Here is a Figure* reads across genres, across texts marked by differing identities, and across “well-known and counter-canonical texts” (cover copy). Rather than genre, Dowling’s attention to certain *figures* (of people “on the ground”) limits her objects of reading. And further, *Here is a Figure* responds to its highest question—what can art do?—in a provocatively responsive grammar unusual in literary criticism: explicit invitations, if not directions or even imperatives. The book is structured by calls to (abstract, metaphorical) action: “Recompose the Lines through Which Significance Is Drawn,” for instance (*Here is a Figure: grounding literary form*, Northwestern UP, 2024, 9-13, 18). Dowling cites Barbara Christian’s “The Race for Theory” in her articulation of this shared reading.

²² Ibid.

²³ It does, however, matter to *me* who Anne Boyer is, as a matter of admiration.

²⁴ It is public information that Boyer is a living writer based in Kansas City and has been an Associate Professor at the Kansas City Art Institute. She has written four full books; the last of which, *The Undying: Pain*,

vulnerability, mortality, medicine, art, time, dreams, data, exhaustion, cancer, and care, won the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction in 2020 and was blurbed by Ben Lerner as a “work of embodied critique.”

²⁵ Hejinian is an icon of ‘Language poetry.’ “Who is Speaking” is collected in Hejinian’s *The Language of Inquiry* (2000).

²⁶ Hejinian, “Who is Speaking,” 30.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Though I am not making a historical argument, I want to mark here the confluence of publications academic and public, as well as public discourse, concerning poetry in this very short period 2014-2015, which preceded the publication of the books discussed in this dissertation by only one or two years. For just two examples: both Kenneth Goldsmith’s highly controversial performance of antiblack language at Brown University and Johari Idusuyi’s iconic reading of Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) from the VIP section of a Donald Trump rally happened in 2015. If you allow me to treat these discursive moments as representative of a general tone, I emphasize the vocality of Goldsmith’s performance (and Goldsmith himself) in contrast to the quiet yet performative aesthetic of reading spontaneously enacted by Idusuyi.

²⁹ If ‘public’ poetics discourse and work no longer seems feasible, or even desirable, in 2025, I still grapple with Hejinian’s assertion that the practice of “[p]oetics entails involvement in public life. And that involvement, in turn, demands a negotiation with, and a willingness to take on, power.” If this is true, it is important to remember that Hejinian acknowledged the existence of and possibilities for private conversations that address questions like “who is speaking” *before* turning them toward the public. Hejinian, “Who is Speaking,” 32. “In this context, the question ‘Who is speaking?’ prompts a second question, one that is addressed to oneself as the speaker of the first: ‘Am I speaking?’ From this, numerous questions follow...” Hejinian documents a series of ensuing questions reminiscent of Boyer’s own questions for poets (32).

³⁰ Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, 2. Having stated that she expects the collection of her own essays “will be read as poetics,” this language suggests that Hejinian is referring in the third person to her own motives and reasons. Consider the similarity between Hejinian’s move here and Boyer’s self-reflexive move in “Questions for Poets.”

³¹ See also Hortense Spillers’ 1987 “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” which acknowledges the discursive difference racialization makes to a writer’s ability to speak for herself and articulates the antiblack overdetermination of any name for “the ‘black woman,’” such that, perhaps, rather than writing as “a poet,” Spillers writes as a black woman in the first person: “I must strip down through layers of attenuated meaning” to reach “my own inventiveness” of self-expression. In a function comparable to Hejinian’s “a poet,” Spillers then “offers” the personal pronoun “in the service of a collective function” to register her deliberate orientation toward others—a collective. Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer, 1987): 65.

³² “[T]he act of writing is a process of improvisation within a framework (form) of intention” (Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, 3).

³³ Ibid., 2.

³⁴ Audre Lorde. “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” in *Sister Outsider*, Crossing Press, 2007, 37.

³⁵ Ibid., 38.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ She even got a great headline and lead: In “NY Times Magazine poetry editor resigns in protest of Israel’s ‘US-backed war against the people of Gaza’” Joseph A. Wulfsohn writes: “Anne Boyer denounces ‘verbally sanitized hellscape’ and ‘warmongering lies’ in her resignation letter,” published November 17, 2023.

³⁸ Anne Boyer, “my resignation,” *Mirabilary*, Nov 16, 2023, <https://anneboyer.substack.com/p/my-resignation>.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ I hope this Introduction will explain my ambivalence about the claim that “our status quo is self-expression” in consideration of the differential forces of race and gender on the effect of “self” expression. I will emphasize that the intention of Boyer’s sentence seems to lie in the problematization of a particular valuation of or intention in self-expression: self-expression not for its own sake, and not quite for others, but as an “effective mode of protest.” Boyer is here suggesting that self-expression is not (at least in the time and place that is “ours”) an effective protest.

⁴¹ She is attentive to the “reason[.]” of and the “aim” in the production of certain “tones.” This attention is consistent with Boyer’s opening emphasis of the lack of human interest in, the nihilistic uselessness of what she called “war against” in November 2023 before multiple international organizations designated a “genocide” of “the people of Gaza.”

⁴² Does it matter what becomes of the public from which the writer withdraws? Where does the writer withdraw *to*?

⁴³ In using the word “access” here I am thinking about Rei Terada’s reading of Kant in “The Racial Grammar of Kantian Time.” Terada writes: “The ‘thoroughgoing community of mutual interaction’ that connects Kant’s body to ‘matter in all parts of space’ makes connection itself merely a logistical challenge, and this suggests that what is at stake in ‘coexistence’ and ‘relation’ is as much access as communicability and reciprocity. To put it another way, communicability and reciprocity are also about access: why, and for whom, has finding their principle become urgent? To his credit, Kant notes an ethical problem of the successful arguments: if there is ‘thoroughgoing community,’ it has to be curbed by the complete exemption of the ‘human’ from the instrumental. But that Kant adds the qualification, shows that he knows what has already been done: it is access to bodies and global regions that the lawfulness of causality describes. The instrumentalization of the human is not given the status of an impossibility” (273-4).

⁴⁴ Boyer, *Handbook*, 215-6.

⁴⁵ The concept of “form” in literary study is often discussed with regard to Russian Formalism and characterizes our discursive memory of the New Critics. For an empiricist, rather than a formalist idealist model of perception, see Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. I follow Francis Ferguson in my preference for Kant’s model: “In brief, my view is that the advent of aesthetics as a more or less distinct area of philosophical speculation marks an intensification of interest in the mental image and in the difficulties of assimilating it to the problems of ontology and epistemology, on the one hand, and to those of ethics, on the other” (1). “If objects can be known, in Burke’s aesthetics, only through experience, the persistence of mental images, the accumulation of previous responses to objects...of prior experience continually threatens to make present experience virtually illegible” and “epistemology becomes parasitic on form” (2, 3). In contrast to Burke, Kant theorizes “less about the reality of objects and responses than about the *place* [my emphasis] of the mental image” (3). Ferguson suggests that Kant’s sublime is the perception of formlessness because the “object” of sublime perception has no “clear and distinct boundaries.” This experience then contrasts with “intersubjective experience,” which I believe in this logic always requires the perception of boundaries (5). *Solitude and the Sublime: The Romantic Aesthetics of Individuation*, Routledge, 1992.

⁴⁶ Discursively, “form” is paradoxical. “Form” designates the shape *of something*, or a manner or a type of something, or simply the making *of something*. Form is *of* things while things are also *in* form; form is iterative like a type yet distinct like an instance; form is the boundary between something and what is not that thing; to form something is to make it or to shape it. ‘Form’ is often used as the negation of ‘content’ or ‘matter.’ Yet form’s perceptibility, especially if we juxtapose ‘form’ with ‘concept,’ seems to depend on such terms of substance. Is a ‘concept’ an imperceptible form, and a ‘form’ a perceptible concept? Is form sensible? Only the two-dimensional (merely visual? tangible?) exterior or edge of a thing *or* the whole dimensionality of a thing, ‘form’ can be sensible and abstract, perceptible and conceptual, both the making of something and the thing itself. If “form” conceptualizes a perceptual boundary that is also abstract, sensible, and conceptual, *and* names a differentiable instance of a common (if not universal) substance, is form itself also the sensibility of difference? Levine’s glossing of form’s conceptual history humbles any humanist who would restrict form to the ‘aesthetic’ when she proves that the term “does not originate in the aesthetic, and the arts cannot lay claim to either the longest or the most far-reaching history of the term” (2).

⁴⁷ Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, Princeton UP, 2015, 3.

⁴⁸ I am especially compelled by an idea of a paradoxical, simultaneous perception and production (of not determinably subjective nor objective, but beautiful forms) in my readings of Kant. Compare Kant’s concept of form’s purposiveness as a matter of design but not color; composition but not notes, with Fred Moten’s analogy of written composition and sound when he writes: “The relation between a musical score and the music is like the relation between the page and the poem” in *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (96-7).

Later, translator Paul Guyer explains, Kant subordinates form as only one of beauty’s aspects and designates “a work of art [as] beautiful when we respond with a free play of our imagination and understanding to a harmony among *all* of its perceptible features as well as to its content and intellectual associations as well.” Yet Kant contradictorily theorizes an “ideal” and valuable form of beauty and, Guyer’s reading “argues that only the human figure seen as an expression of the incomparable worth of human morality can be seen as an ideal of beauty. *Again, Kant could not call this a form of beauty at all unless the harmony between the perceivable form of a human being and the abstract idea of moral worth were a fit subject for the free play of imagination and understanding* [my emphasis]” (xxx). Paul Guyer, “Editor’s introduction,” in Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Translated by Paul Guyer, Cambridge UP revised ed., 2001.

⁴⁹ Guyer, xxvi. Ferguson gives us another reading of Kant, which “insist[s] upon an identity between form and sensation, and...suggest[s] that such an identity is the basis for aesthetic pleasure” (90).

⁵⁰ Guyer, vii, 48, 49. I find Guyer’s term “attitude” illuminating and theorize “disinterest” as only an impossible idea of non-orientation. Kant figures aesthetic judgment as a “power” of “mind” more than a subject’s doing as I have refigured it above. Kant writes: “by the aesthetic power of judgment as a special faculty necessarily nothing else can be meant than the reflecting power of judgment, and the feeling of pleasure (which is identical with the representation of subjective purposiveness) must not be regarded as the sensation in an empirical representation of the object, nor as its concept, but must be regarded as dependent only on reflection and its form. *Aesthetic* judgment of “the mere manner of representation of the subject,” contrasts with the teleological judgment of the “objectively purposive in relation to the possibility of the object itself” (48-9).

⁵¹ I am isolating a small part of Kant’s “system of the powers of mind, *in their relation to nature and freedom* [emphasis mine]”: the “transition” or “connect[ion]” between determinations of nature and freedom “by means of the power of judgment.” Kant divides judgments “under the name of aesthetic (whose principles are merely subjective)” from judgments under the name of logical...” according to the “teleological power of judgment.” Kant connects “the sensible substratum of the first part of philosophy to the intelligible substratum of the second, through the critique of a faculty (the power of judgment) which serves only for connecting and which hence cannot provide any cognition of its own nor make any contribution to doctrine...” (46-8).

⁵² Anna Kornbluh. *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space*. The U of Chicago P, 2019, 15.

⁵³ See also Leela Gandhi’s *Affective Communities*. If the subject of aesthetic judgment is not universal, but rather particular, the work of aesthetic judgment could be reframed not as the exercise of innate or learned ‘common sense’ but rather the work of situating the particular within the (a perhaps newly theorized) *general*—Kant’s original term in Paul Guyer’s translation (Kant, 8).

⁵⁴ I thank Walter A. Johnston for this phrase, verbally offered to his students in the course *Political Romanticism* at Williams College in 2016. Johnston might have adopted this term from Terry Eagleton’s *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 159.

⁵⁵ Kant, *Critique*, 101.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ See Simon Gikandi’s *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* and Pierre Bourdieu’s *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Attending to theories of black aesthetics has been crucial to my consideration of aesthetic antagonisms in relation to social antagonisms that might go unnoticed in the discourse of ‘taste.’ My attention to aesthetic forms of address draws from my understanding antiblackness as a social formation that functions through social relationality including forms of address. Work in black studies on aesthetics has given me nuanced concepts of the figuration and the abstraction of both form and subjectivity. Black studies scholarship has been essential to my understanding of social ideology that not only influences readers and writers, but also manifests linguistically, both figuratively and at the level of grammar.

⁵⁸ Kant says that the determination of aesthetic judgment via “a given representation [that] is certainly related to an object” is “not the determination of the object but of the subject and its feeling” (25). We could trace the relations of aesthetic representation to logics of identity, of mimesis, of participation, of repetition, of displacement, or of advocacy, for example. To accurately represent without defending Kant’s ambiguities and confusion: The critique distinguishes “representation” from objects, articulates representations as “given” and sensible in contradistinction to “form,” and uses these terms only as means toward his end of grounding aesthetic judgment in “common sense.” Kant writes that “[O]nly this relation [between a theoretical proposition and a practical formula], as far as its origin is concerned, is represented as possible through a cause whose determining ground is the representation of that relation (our choice)” (4).

⁵⁹ Here “form” is likewise conceptualized; the Subject is conceptualized as a “form.”

⁶⁰ Silva, Denise Ferreira da, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, (U of Minnesota P, 2007), xvi, xiii, *passim*.

⁶¹ David Lloyd, *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics*, Fordham UP, 2018.

⁶² Lloyd cites “racial regimes” from Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism*: “constructed social systems in which race is proposed as a justification for the relations of power.” Robinson quoted in Lloyd, 7.

⁶³ Lloyd, *Under Representation*, 17. With the support of discourses of education and development, the Subject is distinguished from a range of subjective, (un)qualified figures. The humanity of each of these “figures” is discursively uncertain and they are often discursively situated “on the threshold” of personhood, projected as the Subject’s figurative precursors who often exist simultaneously to the Subject as ‘underdeveloped’ subjects. Each of these figures is imagined to be driven by affect and subject to nature and none are capable of representing themselves or being free (yet). Resonant with Lloyd’s *figures*, Ian Baucom critiques the development of the logic of literary

characters in *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*. In his critique of the racial regime, Lloyd also draws from Fanon's critique of settler colonial assimilation, Sylvia Wynter's critique of Man, and Hortense Spillers' critique of racially figurative discourse. Lloyd emphasizes Fanon's "exploration of the phenomenology of being seen" and "famous account of being the object of a racist gaze" (Lloyd, *Under Representation*, 14). See also Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. Lloyd works from Wynter's argument: "In a series of essays beginning in the 1980s, Wynter argues that the colonization of the Americas and the global expansion of the West impelled the emergence of a new 'descriptive statement /prescriptive statement of what it is to be human.' This new statement introduced a categorical 'human /subhuman distinction,' inaugurating a 'coloniality of being' in addition to that of power/knowledge. This epochal 'redescription of the human' displaced the medieval Christian /pagan opposition and instituted a secular conception of Man that at once divided the world between rational humans and irrational subhumans and produced the subject of the newly sovereign European states" (Lloyd, *Under Representation*, 5).

⁶⁴ Ibid., 76. Lloyd quotes "subject without properties" as Kantian but cites only Schiller's "Person and Condition." Note the potentially alarming resonance with "purposiveness without purpose."

⁶⁵ Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 65. I recognize with Lloyd and the fact of black studies that "the Black" is the most historically stable figure of subjectivity read as "property plus." I prefer Spillers' gestural "property plus" rather than Lloyd's formalized, identifiable "the Black" and "the Savage," because the names for these figures of "property plus" can and do change over time; Spillers exposes an American concept of subjectivity as inviolable that conflates visual marks of violation with violability, sometimes (and historically) inscribed physically but constantly refigured. Silva also recognizes these "properties" as the figuration of conditions. Though I am convinced by black studies that the 'Black' is presently the *most* iterated figure of 'property plus,' I suspect all figures (of subjectivity) are conceptualized on a scale of "property plus" and follow Zakkiyah Iman Jackson's concept of 'blackening' in *Becoming Human*. I emphasize the ambiguously valued excess of "plus," where that which exceeds the property relation is simultaneously articulated as grounds for attribution and ownership (value) and itself disavowed any value.

Note Virginia Jackson's connection in *Before Modernism* of the figuration of blackness as both excess and irrelevantly expressive when she suggests: "what if [early Black poets'] importance to the history of transatlantic Anglophone poetics is enormous precisely because the idea that 'what is left unsaid is more significant than what is said' is one way of describing the surplus value accorded to *all* (lyricized) poetry for the past two hundred and fifty years" (9)? I hesitate, however, to blur the distinction between the idea of a *speaker's* intention as more significant than what is said and a *listener's* prioritization of their own interpretation of the unsaid. See also Alexander Weheliye's *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*.

⁶⁶ C. Riley Snorton and Hentyle Yapp, *Saturation: Race, Art, and the Circulation of Value*, MIT Press, 2020. My editorial interventions in this 2020 writing reflects my hesitancy to read American discourse in 2025 as the same.

⁶⁷ As "overdetermined nominative properties," racial figures deny their objects the discursive "right" (especially as this term authorizes violence) to name—themselves (as representable), anyone else (with paternal authority), or anything (including reality). Meanwhile, in Rei Terada's theory of antiblackness in *Metaracial: Hegel, Antiblackness, and Political Identity*, the abstract concept of "universal" yet racial Subjectivity designates an irreducibly and eternally "political" subject to a *state*. In this light my question is: what distinguishes the Subject from a figure of the (rights-giving) State, and what distinguishes the State from a figure of the (American) Collective? If you indulge my signifiatory chain, I ultimately arrive to a distinction between indeterminable collective will and its figurations (which are then conflated back into figures of History—what *was* (said), Subject—what is (universal being), and Law—what *should be* (written grammatically)).

⁶⁸ Lloyd suggests so when he highlights a discursive figure of unrepresentable subjectivity: "Subalternity, therefore, offers the possibility of alternative modes of life to those shaped around the matrix of freedom, self-determination, subjecthood, and universality that constitute the terms of representation grounded in the aesthetic." Lloyd, *Under Representation*, 8.

⁶⁹ Dowling, *Here is a Figure*, 10. With Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Dowling also rearticulates a figure as a "type, repeating and recognizable" (11). Dora Zhang's talk at MLA 2025, "Being a Type, Being in Common: The Case of Asian American Literature" promises relevant forthcoming work.

⁷⁰ Dowling, *Here is a Figure*, 92.

⁷¹ Dionne Brand's *Salvage: Readings from the Wreck* (2025) offers an accessible elaboration of Western literary manifestations of this. Joy James figures those who made and make things yet are not figured as Subjects as "Captive Maternals"—her figuration of "those whose very existence enables the possessive empire that claims and dispossesses them" because they "provide[] the reproductive and productive labor to stabilize culture and wealth."

Joy James, “The Womb of Western Theory: Trauma, Time Theft and the Captive Maternal,” *Carceral Notebooks*, Vol. 12, 2016, pp. 255, 256. Rizvana Bradley then recontextualizes “Captive Maternal” in the racial regime of representative aesthetics as the unfigurable figure of material, affectable, maternal subjectivity *through* which all forms—including the world, and including the form of the Subject called “the body”—appear. Again, the Subjective “body” is constitutively separated from materiality and affectability (flesh). Asked to perform “the operations of simultaneously being everything and nothing for an order—human, animal, machine, for instance—[the idea of blackness] constructs black(ened) humanity as the privation and exorbitance of form,” as Brand formulates in *Salvage* (88). Bradley’s work analyzes blackness and visibility, arguing that blackness might never be sensible in the form of visual figuration. See also Nicole R. Fleetwood’s *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visibility, and Blackness*. Avery Gordon’s *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* invites us to attend to the possible figurations of *ghosts* as invisible forms of being if not of subjectivity.

⁷² Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 6 (Spring, 1987): 52.

⁷³ Jackson, *Before Modernism: Inventing American Lyric*. Princeton UP, 2023, 7.

⁷⁴ Evie Shockley, *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry*. U of Iowa P, 2011. The social category “African American” starts to come apart from the *forms* of the poetry Shockley studies and raises questions of the relation between the significations of race, tradition, genre, and aesthetic.

⁷⁵ This jump seems obvious when Shockley highlights the conflation of black aesthetics with “the Black Aesthetic.” Recalling the reification of *the* Black Aesthetic during the mid-20th-century Black Arts Movement (BAM), Shockley recognizes that “an emphasis on and celebration of black music, black speech, black heroes, and black history, should and do [*are expected to*] determine both the form and content of black poetry—according to this reductive view of BAM theory that I am calling the Black Aesthetic, commonly associated with militant, revolutionary politics and angry, incisive criticism of white supremacy and racial oppression” (2-3).

⁷⁶ Shockley distinguishes her use of the term “innovative” with a conceptualization inspired by Harryette Mullen’s comments on a panel called “The Role of Innovation in Contemporary Writing.” While Shockley quickly uses “innovative” to describe poetic *form* explicitly (rather than poetic criticism or reading, explicitly), it is part of Shockley’s central premise not to reify any particular form as innovative beyond its contextual effects. I also keep the criteria of the “innovative” vague to acknowledge (and yet to try not to speculate about) the role of *readers*, not just of form alone, in the work of questioning. Because the innovative is definitionally open and questioning (especially of language), to evaluate the innovative cannot take the criteria of “beauty” or “mastery” for granted and must question these “the literary establishment’s most highly valued criteria for poetry.” In explaining her focus on innovative form, Shockley situates the term “innovative” as:

one of a string of terms—including ‘experimental,’ ‘avant-garde,’ and ‘modernist/post-modern’—that are used somewhat interchangeably and with across-the-board dissatisfaction by poets and critics to identify work less interested in mastery and beauty (two of the literary establishment’s most highly valued criteria for American poetry) than in social critique, aesthetic revolution, unbounded exploration of language, and other forms of notable unconventionality. (10)

Shockley does not grammatically specify here whether the “work” that “innovative” can describe is the work of the poem or of the “poets and critics.” Shockley also notes that the “innovative” is often indexed to clear socio-political purpose and effect—“social critique,” “revolution,” and “unconventionality.” These concepts would seem to prioritize the work of *people* rather than the work of *poems*, but only if we imagine people as the only socio-political beings and agents. By laying out what is often discursively articulated as oppositionalities, Shockley’s description helps us see that the values of “innovation,” “mastery,” and “beauty” in fact all call attention to poetic form *and* effect, or poem and people, rather than what might sound like a necessary choice between these orientations. See also Julietta Singh’s *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements*.

⁷⁷ Shockley, *Renegade Poetics*, 11.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ My phrasing intentionally allows that white writers could have been part of avant-garde communities not defined by whiteness. As an instance of the first case, Shockley names Bob Kaufman’s importance to the Beat movement, and the Black Arts Movement and its predecessor, the Society of Umbra, as an instance of the second case. Shockley names the BAM and the Society of Umbra together, and I list them as a single “instance,” because Shockley points out that the elision of the Society of Umbra precipitated the elision of the BAM. Other “instances” of the second case could be not just other non-white movements but other non-white *genealogies* of movements.

⁸¹ Shockley, *Renegade Poetics*, 12. It seems that an idea of *tradition* (determined and sustained socially) underwrites the idea of *genre*, and *genre* is often conflated with or reduced to *form*. The idea of identity-based

genres like “African American poetry” then throws us back to where Shockley began: the idea of forms of identity, in this case, the idea of African American or black *form*. See also Philip Brian Harper’s *Abstractionist Aesthetics*.

⁸² See Dorothy Wang’s *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry*.

⁸³ Shockley, *Renegade Poetics*, 9. My ellipses excise Shockley’s phrasing “the subjectivity of the African American writer—that is,” because I do not want to limit “the subjectivity produced by the experience of identifying or being interpolated as ‘black’ in the U.S.” to “the African American writer.”

⁸⁴ See Benveniste, Buber, Irigaray for a few.

⁸⁵ I follow Rei Terada’s *Metaracial* here, to acknowledge that “antiblackness” structures *racial*ism. With Terada, I also want to “expand the methodology of the study of race beyond attention to instances that already assume that the reader can recognize what counts as race and racism (and therefore what counts as a reference to it), or attention that limits itself to what a period text thinks race is.” Rei Terada, “The Racial Grammar of Kantian Time,” in *European Romantic Review* 28, no. 3 (2017): 268.

⁸⁶ Dionne Brand, *Salvage: Readings from the Wreck*, Macmillan, 2024, 112.

⁸⁷ “To become such a subject is the precondition for participation in the public sphere.” Lloyd, *Under Representation*, 14.

⁸⁸ Rei Terada, *Looking Away: Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction, Kant to Adorno*, Harvard UP, 2009, 3.

⁸⁹ Lloyd, *Under Representation*, 17. Lloyd also observes “[t] The ego-ideal of the disinterested and ethical subject—an ideal whose genealogy in the aesthetic this book traces—continues to exert a powerful influence over the humanities and over the distaste of the professional scholar for engagement in political activism” (20).

⁹⁰ Terada, *Looking Away*, 4.

⁹¹ Ibid. See also Leela Gandhi’s “Invisible, Inc.” for a consideration of aesthetic *abstraction* as potentially “desirable, especially amongst groups, and disciplines that traditionally complain about epistemic violence” (424). Gandhi also figures the perspective of the *kevalin*, who “sees everything at once. More so, and this is salient, she sees that everything is true (a step up from the perception that everything is real). Minimally, this is a position of epistemological pluralism that grasps the cogency of all perspectives. It includes the view that propositions must incorporate rival possibilities and contradictory predicates in order to be valid” (430-1).

⁹² See also Ada Smailbegović’s theory of “haptic poetics” in *Poetics of Liveliness: Molecules, Fibers, Tissues, Cloud*. Smailbegović “argues that the turn toward the ontological, the material, and the nonhuman can work to disentangle a dualist loop that poetics often finds itself in—a loop structured around an oscillation between a sense of language as a material site that is often accompanied by a foreclosure of referential access to nonlinguistic forms of materiality and the chiasmic inverse of this, an emphasis on the properties of the material world that renders language into a transparent lens through which such a world is observed and represented, thus obfuscating the material recalcitrance and opacity of language itself” (276).

⁹³ Here is what Best wrote:

In the split second when you recognize that your perception has been a mistake, when time dilates just enough to open up a bit of space between what you thought was gold and what you now recognize as trash, the form of the artwork disappears, and the bottle caps (for a brief moment escaping that form) return themselves to the world. In that *trompe l’oeil* blink of an eye, the artwork ceases to exist; it forces you to lose sight of its form, and what have disappeared along with this form are all of the symbolic “links” it was said to sustain. The connection to Africa. Gone. The slave trade. Gone. Liquor. Gone. The West Indies. Gone. Liverpool. Gone. What remains is one’s presentness before a matter that quivers, flickers, and shimmers without you, without being pushed. Frayed, fragile, denied the privilege of not being in the world because always already denied by the world. A world in which Fading Cloth has achieved what its name suggests—and faded away—is the very world that the work itself invites you to imagine. To see the beauty to which this work of art directs your gaze, in short, one would actually need a world without art. (50)

And here is how I read Best’s description of his own aesthetic perception of a work that “both has a frame (has to have a frame) and doesn’t have a frame”: Best articulates the aesthetically perceived formal object as the *thought* of “gold” which “disappears” in your ‘recognition’ of “trash.” Curiously, Best aligns the “form” that you only “thought” was gold with “all the symbolic ‘links’ it was said to sustain” like, in this case, the connection to Africa. This is deeply confusing to me, as I would expect the *bottle caps* as *trash* to signify this historical causality much more than “gold.” It is not the sense of *gold* but the sense of *cloth* that I think Best reads as insistently historically significant. I come back into what I think is agreement with Best in his conclusion that it might be possible to sense “one’s presentness before a matter that quivers, flickers, and shimmers without you,” and which is also “[f]rayed,

fragile, denied the privilege of not being in the world because already dented by the world.” But I think I deviate again from Best as I read this experience of immanence to depend on the perception of *form* as subjectively determined.

⁹⁴ Harper, Philip Brian. *Abstractionist Aesthetics: Artistic Form and Social Critique in African American Culture*. NYU P, 2015, 2.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 11.

⁹⁶ For another compelling consideration of the relation between the “aesthetic” and the “world,” see Timothy Bewes’ account in *Free Indirect: The Novel in a Postfictional Age* of “free indirect” as a “thought” that is “not localizable” and does not take the “does not take the form of speaking, seeing, or knowing.” *Free Indirect* questions “the ideology of *form* (the existence of nameable ideas that are given legible or sensuous manifestation in art and literature), the ideology of the *expressive subject* (individuals as the principal subjects or envelopes of thought), and the ideology of *fiction* (a fundamental separation between two registers of writing based on the writer’s intentions with respect to the real)” (5).

⁹⁷ Because Blackness in aesthetic discourse and discursive aesthetics forms everything and signifies nothing(ness), *black aesthetics* create a particularly nuanced site of experimentation with and evasion of the racial regime’s demand for the representation of (collective) subjectivity.

⁹⁸ This is how I read Kevin Quashie’s invitation to “imagine a black world” in *Black Aliveness*: to try to read as if “we” share or are of blackness; to look for and suspend our antiblack expectations, if only within the time and place we share with a poem.

⁹⁹ There are black aesthetics because “experience[ing], recogniz[ing], and liv[ing] subjection”—being figured in subjection by and in antiblackness—is “not *simply* or *only* liv[ing] in subjection and *as* the subjected.” Christine Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Duke UP, 2016, 4.

¹⁰⁰ This is to agree with Claudia Rankine, that “the white liberal imagination” might claim to feel sympathetic, but “there really is no mode of empathy that can replicate the daily strain of knowing that as a black person you can be killed...” (qtd. in Sharpe 16). In Chapter 3, I think more about the form of *sympathy*.

¹⁰¹ I always think about Cheryl Clarke’s noting that the Black Arts Movement was often articulated as “by Blacks, about Blacks, to Blacks,” and of Gwendolyn Brooks’ response: “Any poetry is FOR any readers or listeners willing to investigate it” (*After Mecca: Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement*, Rutgers UP, 2005, 14).

¹⁰² Roelofs, *Arts of Address*, 18-19. “The field of the aesthetic, in my usage of the term, encompasses an assembly of conceptually inflected, socially embedded, multimodal engagements among persons, things, and places. Normative force comes into play in aesthetic territory. Specifically aesthetic meanings take residence in objects, actions, experiences, and sites of production, consumption, and exchange. Aesthetic phenomena are elements of materially supported, historically unfolding webs of relationships. These relationships are traversed by modes of address. Address, here, thus enters the aesthetic as a structural constituent.

While practical and cognitive meanings are important ingredients of aesthetic experience, aestheticians commonly believe that these registers alone cannot do justice to the particular meanings that matter to people in the aesthetic domain. Rather, there is a specifically aesthetic dimension to life that, even if it sustains varieties of moral, political, economic, and epistemic signification and content, remains irreducible to those elements. The aesthetic concerns, then, a distinctive aspect of existence that involves the creation and presentation of objects, the realization of events and interactions, and the undergoing of sensorially and cognitively embedded experiences of such things and happenings.

Meaning, in the aesthetic domain, is experiential in a basic way. It is charged with value, in the sense that we, for example, can find interest in it or, in a similar vein, consider it of little consequence” (19-20).

For compelling accounts of address as a formation of social subjectivity especially relevant to this project, see the work of Franz Fanon, especially *Black Skin White Masks*, Louis Althusser’s “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation),” Hortense Spillers’ “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” and “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words,” and Judith Butler’s *Giving an Account of Oneself*.

¹⁰³ See John Guillory’s *On Close Reading* for a concise account of ‘close reading.’ Guillory points out that the New Critics didn’t actually invent the term in writing; “close reading” discursive. See also Suzanne Mettler’s *Soldiers to Citizens: The G.I. Bill and the Making of the Greatest Generation* for a compelling argument that New Criticism emerged in the context of the GI Bill, when more people with less or different formal educations were accessing higher education. A heightened discourse of “democracy” that Mettler traces to “close reading” is not hard to associate with broader American post-war culture. And Louise Rosenblatt’s *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* for another discussion of the consequences of a shift from reading for mimesis and realism to reading literature as subjectively *expressive*.

¹⁰⁴ Though the Author is (agreeably still) Dead to “us,” if not to the publishers, many of “us” no longer cosign Barthes’ attendant claim that the reader *displaces* the Author as the site of a textual “unity” without loss. Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 148. We are not so obviously in agreement with Barthes’ claim that the reader *is* the text’s spatial “destination” and that “this destination *cannot* [my emphasis] any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field *all* [emphasis] the traces by which the written text is constituted. We know something is lost or at least absent to writing—we have read Derrida.

¹⁰⁵ The logos which Hortense Spillers named our “American grammar” has itself been aesthetically white, patriarchal, and disembodied.

¹⁰⁶ We can’t *read* a signature to the extent that a signature’s legibility exceeds its referentiality to an impersonally accessible logical code. If a written signature communicates a(n absent) person, could this prove that we have never just been logocentric in the perception of personhood: that we have been aesthetic?

¹⁰⁷ In *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*, Rankine cites Paul Celan: “I see no difference between a handshake and a poem.”

¹⁰⁸ Spillers articulates “a class of symbolic paradigms that 1) inscribe ‘ethnicity’ as a scene of negation and 2) confirm the human body as a metonymic figure for an entire repertoire of human and social arrangements.” Spillers highlights the language of ‘ethnicity’ as a category of “signifier that has no movement in the field of signification” (Spillers, “American Grammar,” 66). Following Barthes’ *Mythologies* with Spillers, ethnicity is a “mythical signifier.” That is: “defined by its intention [read as an example]...much more than by its literal sense [read as a fact]” but which is read as an factual example. Because they are constitutively appropriative—moving a signifier out of its historical and physical context—mythical signifiers *address* those who recognize them as out of place, delivering “an imperious injunction to name this object” according to its original signification “or even better, to see it as the very essence of” its origin. Mythical signifiers both demand the acknowledgement of a signifier’s instrumentality in general *and* the will of its user made evident by the signifier’s recognizable reproduction out of place, yet *also* hide the fact of their instrumentality behind the mere ‘fact’ of their present appearance (Barthes, *Mythologies*, 122-4).

¹⁰⁹ Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*, Princeton UP, 2005, 13.

¹¹⁰ Though Barthes’ essay begins with the assertion that: “We shall never know [who is speaking], for the good reason that writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative· where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing,” through the rest of the essay Barthes implies that writing itself might retain voice, if in the very next paragraph it is when “the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins.” Barthes “Death of the Author” in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, Fontana, 1977, 142. Derrida asserts: “the semantic horizon that habitually governs the notion of communication is exceeded or split by the intervention of writing, that is, by a *dissemination* irreducible to *polysemy*. Writing is read; it is not the site, “in the last instance,” of a hermeneutic deciphering, the decoding of a meaning or truth” (Derrida, “Signature, Event, Context,” 20-1).

¹¹¹ “Sonnets” are either Petrarchan or Shakespearean, but the Petrarchan sonnet’s second stanza can use either of two rhyme schemes. But then there are more deviations. Rachel Richardson’s description of the sonnet as (perhaps) irreducibly 14 lines with a certain undefined “spirit” is illuminating of formal declension even in the case of numerical specificity: “Modern writers have increasingly felt free to use the basic structure of the sonnet and vary some of its requirements to suit the poem or poet. Because of our long history with the form, whenever one writes a fourteen-line poem, it’s likely to be read as a variation on the sonnet. Some are so loose as to contain only a “ghost” of the sonnet within them, but many fall somewhere in between, allowing the meter to overflow the line a bit, or allowing slant rhyme instead of full rhyme, but sticking to most of the requirements of the form and retaining its spirit.” Rachel Richardson, “Learning the Sonnet,” *Poetry Foundation*, August 29, 2013. Ultimately, even categories defined by definitive number allow deviations: consider slant rhymes and other minor adjustments to poetic patterns.

¹¹² But what made any given poem categorizable according to any of these concepts? What made any given text a poem? If we concede that what we mean by poetry is determined by publishers much more than ourselves, can we trust that we don’t need to know exactly what we mean when we say “poetry”? If we don’t try to represent “poetry” through quantification, sentimentality, or any other categorical aspect, could we attend more fully to each poetic *form* we encounter?

¹¹³ See Gillian White’s *Lyric Shame* and Anita Sokolsky’s “The Resistance to Sentimentality: Yeats, de Man, and the Aesthetic Education.”

¹¹⁴ See Cathy Park Hong’s “Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde” in 2014 for *Lana Turner*: “The avant-garde’s ‘delusion of whiteness’ is the specious belief that renouncing subject and voice is anti-authoritarian,

when in fact such wholesale pronouncements are clueless that the disenfranchised need such bourgeois niceties like voice to alter conditions forged in history.”

¹¹⁵ Wang articulates this conflict as the context of Marjorie Perloff’s address and traces the antagonism within the address. See Marjorie Perloff, “Presidential Address 2006: It Must Change,” *PMLA*, vol. 122, no. 3, May 2007, 652-662.

¹¹⁶ Dorothy Wang, “Introduction Aesthetics Contra ‘Identity’ in Contemporary Poetry Studies,” in *Feeling Its Presence*.

¹¹⁷ Wang, *Feeling Its Presence*, 10.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, xxiv.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, xxii. I have shifted Wang’s term “poem” for “poet,” in accordance with my argument that it is people, not poems, who use forms.

¹²⁰ Claudia Rankine, “The First Person in the Twenty-First Century,” in *After Confession: Poetry as Autobiography*, ed. Kate Sontag and David Graham, Graywolf Press, 2001, 132-36.

¹²¹ Barbara Johnson, “Apostrophe, Animation, Abortion,” *Diacritics*, vol. 16, no. 1 (Spring, 1986): 34.

¹²² Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 68.

¹²³ The profit/loss (in their terms) motive manifests to the publisher in the rejection of manuscripts despite the editor’s interest, and of *most* submissions.

¹²⁴ Dionne Brand made the point that poetry resists commodification in her talk at Brown University on February 7, 2024.

¹²⁵ Stephen Best, *The Fugitive’s Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession*, Duke UP, 2004, 47. And, nevertheless, even “we” do not fully identify with our own voices—our tones can be impressions of others’, unintentional, misunderstood.

¹²⁶ Jane Gaines, *Contested Culture*, 126.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ John Stuart Mill, “Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties,” *The Crayon*, vol. 7, no. 4, April 1860, 93-7.

¹³⁰ Anthony Reed, *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing*, Johns Hopkins UP, 2014.

¹³¹ Reed posits a contemporary American lyric “fiction” that coheres around “the assumed solidity of the speaking, universal ‘I.’” Though Reed implies a longer history of lyric reading aligned with the dynamic of Kant’s aesthetic, which “presume[s] an ‘objectivity’ of lyric’s subjective presence as a mediation of the general and the particular,” Reed’s grammar turns away from lyric particularity as it orients against lyric ‘objectivity’ (97-8).

¹³² Reed, *Freedom Time*, 98. He continues to claim that an attention to the “beat” of postlyric writing or voice “can effect a dialectical interruption of the modes of social thought that condition the idea of the black voice, confronting readers with a subject that does not easily reduce to an appropriable object of knowledge.” Though I agree with Reed, I deviate slightly from his unelaborated diction of “confrontation” on the part of a text that a reader willingly reads in favor of a non-antagonistic relationship between reader and text. Reed ultimately argues that “Black experimental writing ‘speaks’ with what is at once a singular and plural ‘voice,’ and through that act it lays claim to yet unfigured visions of a liberated future” (18).

¹³³ Reed, *Freedom Time*, 27.

¹³⁴ Reed, 31. Reed writes, “At stake, then, is not just the accommodation of African Americans within U.S. civil society but the very constitution of the present and meaning of the past: in Jacques Derrida’s phrase, “a certain complicity or co-implication *maintaining* together several current nows [*maintenants*] which are said to be the one past and the other future” (16). Reed describes W.E.B. DuBois’ concept of “propaganda” in “The Criteria of Negro Art,” here. See also Chapter 3 of Paul C. Taylor’s *Philosophy of Black Aesthetics* for further discussion of art and/as propaganda and Boyer’s “A Handbook of Disappointed Fate” to consider her society for the destruction of unwritten literature that operates “in future reverse.”

¹³⁵ Reed, *Freedom Time*, 214.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 70. Reed continues: “Apostrophe, which Jonathan Culler has called a “sign of fiction which knows its own fictive nature,” displaces subjectivity onto the surface of the poem itself. The time of apostrophe is “a special temporality which is the set of all moments at which writing can say ‘now’” (Reed 70-1).

¹³⁸ Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*. Princeton UP, 2005, 90.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 90, 129.

¹⁴⁰ and probably a particular audience, as Emily Dickinson’s poems often were.

¹⁴¹ Jackson also suggests lyric reading is motivated by a “desire for an abstract, ahistorical, singular, publicly shared, and structurally feminized voice that can deliver the poetry of the future to us in order to make history disappear” (41). Though it is perhaps obvious why one might want history to disappear, reasons for this desire range from guilt to trauma. I also read this as a desire for a sense of recognition and privacy in the place of a sense of communal responsibility.

¹⁴² Ibid., 129-30.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 134-5.

¹⁴⁴ Virginia Jackson, *Before Modernism: Inventing American Lyric*. Princeton UP, 2023, 32. *Before Modernism* claims that lyric reading foreclosed “poetic reading publics generated by spontaneous collective generic recognition” and, problematically “began to turn into poetic reading publics generated by individual vicarious identification” (232).

¹⁴⁵ Though Jackson quotes this concept from Cedric Robinson’s certainty that *there is* (“harbored in the African diaspora,” according to Robinson) such an “identity that is in opposition to the systemic privations of racial capitalism,” Jackson draws our attention away from the question of what or whether such a single ‘identity’ might be (226). *Before Modernism* traces a process of reification of various “popular verse genres that addressed a wide range of real and imaginary publics” into a single genre of “lyric poetry.” *Before Modernism* historicizes American poetics from the 17th through “the first half of the nineteenth century, [when] the poetics of whiteness was defined against non-White figures, and the poetics of blackness was defined against discourses of antiblackness” (190). My thinking deviates from Jackson’s here to the extent that Jackson attends to oppositionalities like these, as well as, “public” and “counterpublic”—understandably as a historian interested in *counter*-history, whereas mine here is not a historical project but rather interested in questions of *toward* rather than *against*.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 226. *Before Modernism* suggests that white American poets and readers appropriate the idea of “universal lyric speech” to themselves only through the logic of identification *with* through identification *of*. That is, where readers perceive *identity expressed through speech*, antiblackness and any concept of identity as (always already, at least partially) determined (by race, gender, the body etc.) still figures the limit of an antiblack reader’s capacity to identify *with*. If, in the relation between a reader and a text, the reader has already determined her own identity but still identifies with the text, she can only assume the identity of the text *was always already* her own. If universal identity is then figured as lyric speech, any appreciation of any difference between the reader and the text reduces this reading to a ventriloquy *of the text*.

¹⁴⁷ *Before Modernism* emphasizes the threat slavery posed to every subject as potentially “hopelessly troubled by, in being emphatically detached from, the action whose agent it is supposed to be” and articulates *that* subject as the subject of racialized reading (41). Jackson goes so far to claim: “That appropriated, printed voice that we have come to call “the speaker” has always been a minstrel performance” and a “cultural appropriation” (56), but it is not clear to me what “culture” is being appropriated in the figuration of (un)freedom. But Jackson’s reading of poetics of address as “ventriloquy” seems to presume determinate subjectivity projecting into determinate objectivity that I have tried to suspend in an aesthetic orientation. Perhaps this aesthetic perception of address is actually *most* possible in lyric form, which offers a ‘body’ of text that a reader might ‘hear’ in their own voice as a nevertheless disorienting, not entirely self-identical self-address. Later, Jackson aligns with Barbara Johnson’s political problematization of the apostrophic personification of something for which the reader should not be made responsible for in “Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion.”

¹⁴⁸ Jackson, *Before Modernism*, 191.

¹⁴⁹ Gillian White, *Lyric Shame: The “Lyric” Subject of Contemporary American Poetry*, Harvard UP, 2014, 6.

¹⁵⁰ I read *Lyric Shame* to suggest that the concept of “lyric” in the wake of American Modernism became so abstract within “a powerful and increasingly canonical avant-garde antilyricism” that it there merely indexed the “expressive” (4).

¹⁵¹ Ibid. Ironically, then, not only did ‘lyric’ become an object for a readers’ identification as such but also made possible a “shame experienced in identifications *with* [emphasis mine] modes of reading and writing understood to be lyric” (2). White relates the possibility of this identification to New Criticism; if I were to identify as a ‘close reader,’ would that also identify me *with* ‘lyric’ or lyric reading?

¹⁵² White also warns against the anthropomorphization of lyric.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 4, 10. ‘Lyric’ represented not just readerly and writerly “acts of literary identification” with the nonsubjective but also acts of readerly or writerly “speaking for” actual (non-poetic) people..

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 6.

¹⁵⁵ The reader ashamed for her lyric reading is ashamed for her *presumption* (implicitly social, yet also *presumed* to be by her identifiers) of subjectivity in “lyric” poetic *form*. In her poetry collection, *Fourth Person*

Singular, Nuar Alsadir asks: “And why is it that writing a lyric poem that has an *I* that matches up with the person I consider myself to be in my everyday life induces shame?” and describes both the *I* and the *you* as chains of metonymic displacements (39). Nuar Alsadir, *Fourth Person Singular*, Liverpool UP, 2017.

¹⁵⁶ “Lyric is the foregrounding of language, in its material dimensions, and thus both embodies and attracts interest in language and languages—in the forms, shapes, and rhythms of discourse. If we believe language is the medium for the formation of subjectivity, lyric ought to be crucial, as the site where language is linked not only to structures of identification and displacement before the consolidation of subject positions but especially to rhythm and the bodily experience of temporality, on the one hand, and to the formative dwelling in a particular language, on the other.” Jonathan Culler, “Why Lyric?” *PMLA*, vol. 123, no. 1 (Jan 2008): 205.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 201.

¹⁵⁸ White, *Lyric Shame*, 9.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 10. “Even as the semantic content of several lines encourages our identification of written poetry with expressive speech, they emphasize craft’s artifice to the point of ironizing the illusion of poetry as spontaneous speech.”

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 10–11.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.* 11.

¹⁶² At the same time, White’s diction, “at the same time,” addresses a longstanding discursive opposition that she locates especially in readings and writings of Language poets and their critics (who included Lyn Hejinian quoted above): “What they called for was ‘artifice’ and ‘intellect’ over ‘nature’ and ‘sentiment’” (12). But is a poem’s risk of being read as if speaking for a real person (ventriloquy), or of being dismissed for (feminized) sentimentality and sincerity enough to justify this opposition?

¹⁶³ See Eve Sedgwick’s “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction is About,” and Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus’s “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” for two examples of reading modes that ‘trust’ their objects.

¹⁶⁴ I don’t want to undermine the fact of what Elizabeth Freeman calls “sensory pleasures of referentiality,” in my attempt to turn away from figuration. Freeman’s attention to “style” which “neither transcends nor subsumes culture but pries it open a bit, rearranges or reconstitutes its elements, providing glimpses of an otherwise-being that is unrealizable as street activism or as blueprint for the future,” suggests a way to figure and read figures in parts that do not cohere into any aesthetic, generic, or temporal category (Freeman, *Time Binds*, xix). This potential for stylizing is how I read Spillers’ call to refigure “black women” in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” as well as the Combahee River Collective Statement: “If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression” (22–3); and Michelle Wallace’s “A Black Feminist’s Search for Sisterhood”: “We exist as women who are Black who are feminists, each stranded for the moment, working independently because there is not yet an environment in this society remotely congenial to our struggle—because, being on the bottom, we would have to do what no one else has done: we would have to fight the world,” cited by the CRC.

See also Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s *The Undercommons*. Their description of “study” as “speculative practice,” and “rehearsal” resonates with Kornbluh’s figuration of reading poetry as ‘model.’ See also Boyer’s “No” in *Handbook*.

¹⁶⁵ What would be left, I think, to do, would be to trace the form of what we can still articulate as our own figure, knowing that the figure is different from, but not the negation of, ‘us’ or ‘it,’ describing and deciding our own way.

¹⁶⁶ “The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized. This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are, until the poem, nameless and formless—about to be birthed, but already felt.” Audre Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” 36; Boyer, *Handbook*, 215–6.

¹⁶⁷ Poetry gestures to what is simply not *here* or not *with us*, but also confronts us as material presence; poetry is epitaphic. See Sokolsky.

¹⁶⁸ Sofia Samatar and Kate Zambreno. *Tone*, Columbia UP, 2024, 9.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁷⁰ Harper, *Abstractionist Aesthetics*, 135.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.* If the reading subjectivity’s capacity to make sense of a poem *also* relies on that subjectivity’s own sense of self-continuity across reading(s), poems that represent subjectivity in non-linear poetic fragment(s) determined from without might also “infringe[] on” the reader’s sense of their own coherent, continuous (reading) subjectivity.

¹⁷² “Voice,” in address, always exists before its writing.

¹⁷³ Jackson, *Before Modernism*, 228. We could speculate over this emotive expression, laughter, as Stein’s judgment of her own question, as if Stein has made herself laugh by addressing someone or something she quickly realized is unknowable and silent. In the face of this ambiguity, it might be easy to rely on laughter as an index of inconsequentiality. If I do not feel addressed by the laughter—do not feel that *I* am being *laughed at*—it is easy to dismiss the laughter as its own dismissal. If I don’t perceive the laughter to be directed toward me, I might not feel compelled to understand its cause and meaning (to anyone). In fact, the “laughter” does not appear in Toklas’ account but was added to later reproductions. Toklas contextualizes the questions in a “state of indecision and worry” (Toklas 173). See also Jean-Luc Nancy “Laughter, Presence” in *The Birth to Presence*, which begins with the question: “Is it possible to be the in the presence of laughter?” In reverse, we might think questions of material significance do or should register affect; that they must *matter* to *us* and must *mean* someone—either us or not us—is responsible to respond. But if I *do* feel that the laughter addresses me directly, I have already assumed *the speaker’s intentions* and might continue to extrapolate them via my social judgments of the *writer*. If I cannot separate the writer’s intention from the book—and if I think my sense of the writer’s intention is most representative of the book’s meaning, in general and to me, then my reading has shifted from the book to the writer as a real person. If I expect the (writer of the) book’s “meaning” was *meant to and for us*, we can easily expect *books* to “treat” us certain ways: to agree with our deepest principles or not, to teach us something pragmatic or something abstract, or, to be mad at us: to be *not* for us. If I decide to interpret the book’s words as hostility against me, or if I am frustrated because I think the book’s affect (its tone) toward *me* is hostile, I stop reading.

¹⁷⁴ Kornbluh’s writing about the realist novel (a category easily posed as lyric’s antithesis), justifies considering poetics of address and form across genres.

¹⁷⁵ Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms*, 1. *The Order of Forms* reiterates my caution about conceptualizing ‘building,’ especially conceptualized as ‘making new out of nothing.’ Lorde already told us: “[T]here are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt, of examining what our ideas really mean (feel like)...” (“Poetry is Not a Luxury,” 39).

¹⁷⁶ Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms*, 9. Recall one last time theories of “blackness” as the signification of excess and the excess of signification.

Chapter One

"the ground / her feet don't touch" **Appropriation in Mercedes Eng's *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes***

In this chapter I trace Mercedes Eng's aesthetics of appropriation as a poetics of address in her book-length poem *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* (2017). Eng is a Canadian poet who has been deeply invested in anti-displacement efforts and sex workers' rights in her Vancouver neighborhood, Downtown Eastside. Her debut *Mercenary English* (2016), *my yt mama* (2020), and most recent *cop city swagger* (2024) frame *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes*. As she makes clear in many instances of her poetry, Eng is the daughter of a white Canadian mother and a Chinese-Canadian immigrant father. Eng's father was incarcerated multiple times throughout his daughter's childhood.¹

On pages where Eng copies anonymized, public-facing language like corporate mission statements, *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* obscures its writer. Other pages, however, invoke Mercedes Eng—as an arranger or source—by reproducing images of personal materials like family photos and official (identificatory) documents. Eng also occasionally intersperses first-person accounts of growing up with a father in prison. Yet I argue that these personal elements of *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* most directly represent not Mercedes Eng, but rather Sue Dong Eng, the writer's father. In between the corporate discursive and the familial aspects of the book, a figure of a hypermobile indigenous mother appears occasionally. Clearly invented by Eng for this particular book, the "Notes on Sources" section of Eng's book also states that Carole was "inspired by" both a real person whom Eng knew as a child and who "died of the system," and by a particular play about "mythic mother figures."² *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* juxtaposes and blurs the appropriated, the personal, and the figural. The book thereby addresses conflicting expectations

of contemporary poetry at once: including for conceptual and socially critical interventions and for personal expression and memorial.

But I can also read *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* for poetics of address more simply: the book is formally structured as a series of responses to the particulars of a questionnaire.³ Eng copies questions—always on a (but not every) verso (left-side) page—from a legally mandated survey seeking to confirm “multiculturalism” across Canadian federal institutions. On recto (right-side) pages (and on several verso pages as well) appear various linguistic and visual materials: news excerpts, corporate statements, lineated passages describing Carole, lists, childhood memories, and copies of documents and photos regarding Sue Dong Eng. Though they are never discursively responsive to the language of the questions as the most ‘sensible’ or ‘direct’ answers, the materials that Eng juxtaposes as ‘answers’ constitute a poetics of address *to the questionnaire*. At the same time, especially given their oblique responsivity to the questions, these materials also address themselves beyond the questionnaire. The book’s expansion beyond its own structural demands (answers to the survey’s questions), is registered as early as Eng’s dedication: “for my nieces so that one day / they will know their grandfather.”⁴

In this chapter I offer an overview of discourses of “appropriation” contemporary to *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* to partially contextualize my readings of the book. These discourses were convoluted and overlapped across visual art—especially regarding financial disputes, news and social media—especially regarding interpersonal exploitation, and American poetry and poetics—especially regarding the “conceptual.” Turning away from these discourses, I then demonstrate one mode of reading that the book invites in its appropriations: to linger and deconstruct the logics and intentions of corporate and state language regarding prisoners. In this mode, I elaborate how Eng’s poetics of address defamiliarize logics of accountability based in

determinable value and material appropriations (theft). Ultimately, I argue that the book exceeds its structure and responds to the *aesthetic* of appropriation in its memorialization of a particular person—Sue Dong Eng—and in its indetermination of racial figuration and lyrical effect.

“Cultural Appropriation”

Prison Industrial Complex Explodes was published just after a discursive height of “appropriation” across mainstream American (social) media and American poetic forums. Throughout the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, “appropriation” was not a significant part of American social discourse, nor of American poetics discourse.⁵ In the 20th century, “appropriation” typically designated a visual aesthetic and was often deployed as a term of discussion regarding visual reproductions in art. But around 2015, American media attention concentrated around “*cultural* appropriation.”⁶ The discursive objects of “cultural appropriation” shifted from the “cultural” of Duchamp’s “readymades” or Warhol’s Marilyn Monroes to a different “cultural”—more identitarian, and especially, more racialized.

When the objects of appropriation were defined via “cultural” identity, so too were the agents of appropriation identified. Notably often focused on instances of *costuming*, it is my reading that discursive objects of appropriation extended from the visual to the performative especially in the early 21st century. Less a matter of one artist reproducing and monetarily profiting from the *work* (whether product or process) of another artist, “cultural appropriation” designated a personal (if allegedly not quite self-) expression via aesthetics attributable to a “culture” to which the appropriating person did not belong (and thus a culture more specific than the “American”).⁷

But it was not just a matter of belonging; it was also a matter of devaluation or exploitation. The culture to which an appropriated aesthetic ‘belonged’ was consistently marked as “minoritized” and its aesthetics implicitly, sometimes explicitly, recognized as previously—if not

still—devalued by the appropriating person(’s ‘culture’).⁸ While concerns over commodification remained implicit in American discourse of appropriation, determinations of the profitability of cultural appropriation became even more ambiguous than the profitability—also ambiguous but more strictly commercial—of appropriative 20th century visual art. Though deeply implicit in condemnations of cultural appropriation, the relationship between cultural appropriation and cultural capital was little questioned in American popular discourse.

The discourse of “cultural appropriation” in the United States complemented the discursive purchase of “multiculturalism” particular to contemporary Canadian history. “Multiculturalism” has a long legal history in Canada, perhaps beginning with the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism’s 1969 distinction between integration, which “does not imply the loss of an individual’s identity and original characteristics or of his original language and culture,” and assimilation, which “implies almost total absorption into another linguistic and cultural group.”⁹ Promoting “Canadian” identity as “integrationist”—discursively a ‘salad bowl’—rather than “assimilative”—compared in Canada to the United States’ ‘melting pot’—this official Canadian discourse placed greater emphasis on *language* as an aspect of identity. The influence of French culture and language rivaled the influence of English to such an extent that the Canadian government fashioned a dual identity, but both North American governments and media articulated the non-white, non-English(-nor-French)-speaking, as the “cultural” or “ethnic” “others.”¹⁰

This framing of multiculturalism extended to frame “appropriation” into the 21st century. Canadian poetics scholar Sarah Dowling reflected on this succinctly in 2020: “the act of appropriation itself is culturally associated with whiteness.”¹¹ Unsurprisingly, as Dowling’s diction of “whiteness” juxtaposed with the subtle restoration of generality and indetermination in her adjective “culturally” reflects, the “cultural” in cultural appropriation stands in for a particular,

(aesthetically) identifiable human collective that Dowling names more directly as the *racial*.¹² American and Canadian *nationality* or “culture” might be figured multicultural as in multiracial, but each are figured as either uni- or bi-cultural *as in linguistic*. Focused on individual people and racial aesthetics, discourse of “appropriation” routed through the “multicultural” also deemphasizes the term’s other references to legalities of resource use, of monetary distributions, and especially of enclosures of land.¹³

Peripherally and in contrast, discourse of “appropriation” in American poetics circa 2015 drew attention to materialities and spaces—of language—if only in what seemed like a disavowal of material, spatial, interpersonal determinacies of, or even relevance to, language in the internet age.¹⁴ A contemporary discourse of appropriation in American poetics was almost logically antithetical to the zenith of “cultural appropriation” discourse in American media, but the relationship and overlap between these two polarities of discourse illuminates the figurative (in)determinability *and* performativity of writing.¹⁵ Conceptualizing *writing* as “appropriable” detaches writing from its materiality and context of production. Conflating writing with *language*, appropriable *language* becomes fungible and either non-figurative or indeterminably figurative (*especially* of the writer and its production). If appropriations of (or in) writing are simply materializations and (re-)contextualizations of universally accessible (if not interpretable), intrinsically immaterial and contextless language, then matters of linguistic appropriation could avoid questions of the *use of, claim to, or value in* language—questions directly relevant to the discourse of “cultural” appropriation.¹⁶

Though American poetry at least since the early 20th century has included aesthetics of appropriation, late 20th and early 21st century articulations of “Conceptual Poetry” laid claim to the aesthetic of “appropriation.”¹⁷ Raising the specter of writing’s material subjectivity or even

performativity, the attachment of the “conceptual” to the appropriative was marshaled “against expression” made explicit in Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith’s massive *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*.¹⁸ Ideating a reproductivity of *procedure* through or made evident by written language and subordinating the concept of writing’s expressivity or expression in general to multiple unspecified “ideologies,” Dworkin hoped to “reclaim[]” poetry “as a venue for intellect rather than sentiment” by “[u]nderstanding writing to be more graphic than semantic, more a physically material event than a disembodied or transparent medium for referential communication.”¹⁹ Dworkin prioritizes aspects of language that work like a venue, an image, an event, and a material.

Dworkin refigures language from a medium to an object in itself: to inhabit, view, experience, or hold. For whom? If language is not written *for* communication, does it become *non-*communicative? Why does Dworkin problematize *mediation* in his insistence on the materiality of writing? If conceptual writing is merely recontextualized linguistic materials “for intellect,” what is the difference that distinguishes one context from another, and one linguistic material from another, both of which are necessary to define “appropriation”? Is it simply the re-designation of any linguistic object as “uncreative” or as “(conceptual) writing”? Shying away from the intersubjective toward the material, yet figuring material language as an object of various functions (to inhabit, view, experience, and hold), Dworkin’s language then shies from any qualitative specificity of conceptual writing, where perhaps he could have but declines to turn to the specificity of the “poetic.”

Dworkin admirably avoids the categorical demand of the “poetic” by articulating the “conceptual” simply as a matter of “reclaim[ing]” and “understanding”—a method or an orientation toward—(already, any?) written language.²⁰ Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman

similarly acknowledged the dependence of conceptual writing's value on the reader early in their *Notes on Conceptualisms*: "Conceptual Writing, in fact, might best be defined not by the strategies used but by the expectations of the readership or *thinkership*."²¹ Though they still disavow the place of the *writer*, Place and Fitterman allow more room for difference and an indirect communicability of ideas from writing to a single ('the') group defined by ambiguously by their common reading objects or common reading procedures.

Yet the acts of conceptualizing, naming, *writing*, and especially of anthologizing "conceptual writing" require determinations that Goldsmith and Dworkin justify as more than (and not at all) personal orientations and methods—they hail the aesthetic of "appropriation" as an qualitative determinate of the "conceptual." Dworkin's conceptual writing ultimately required that a determinable procedure—if not a determinable idea (where the distinction between procedure and idea-of-procedure also becomes unclear)—be immediately accessible across readers as performers. When "conceptual writing" is understood to designate not the procedural directions themselves (necessarily communicative, as immediately as possible), it figures simply a material reproduction as evidence that a conceptual 'procedure' *has already been* performed. If the *conceptual* procedure of writing is itself understood as *appropriation*, any mediating effect of the performer—the writer—disappears in an understanding of their (all) writing only as a *referent* to an indeterminable 'having done.'

A logic of agency, effect, and maybe even determinacy beyond (given) language on the part of readers and writers as performers is more apparent in Dowling's articulation of the poetics of appropriation as an act of *reframing*. Dowling refuses to demure from questions of value and accessibility in pointing out a subtle persistence of possessive logic in the discourse of poetic appropriation, an attachment that would seem to foreclose the total disavowal of subjectivity in

writing sometimes ascribed to conceptualism. If conceptual writing is an indeterminable or strictly self-referential signification that a writer merely frames in a particular place—their book—Goldsmith’s articulation of his own writing process in his introduction to *Against Expression* admits a writerly *visual* intervention in “formatting and font.” Is this visual intervention distinct from, insignificant to, or crucial to the concept? Curiously, it is precisely this visual, material restyling that Goldsmith credits for making a reproduction “look exactly like it’s always been [where the language is reproduced]”—a visual change makes a contextual change invisible. Even more curiously, this aesthetic intervention makes language—where Goldsmith is ambiguous in his referent to the reproduced language or to (the concept of) *all* language—“feel[] like it’s mine.”²² What is the sense of that possessive?²³

Some concept of ‘subjectivity’ clings to all the discourse of conceptual writing under my review, especially regarding conceptual writing’s value and effects.²⁴ Brian Reed theorizes a conceptual aesthetic of subjectivity that is ontologically “bound up in, inseparable from, circuits of communication” where this inseparability makes it “impossible to distinguish one’s own words from another’s.”²⁵ But this indistinction would seem to require a reader to recognize herself in or as (but perhaps also at a distinguishing distance from) her (uses of) words, her (acts of) reading, and her sense of the writer. Reed’s claim that digital circuits of communication obscure particularities of subjectivity is also complicated by the “cultural” fact that certain forms of language, for better or for worse, index certain subjectivities. The concept of both writing and reading require some concept not only of subjectivity but of subjective particularity. Could poetics of appropriation then both avow subjectivity as particular and *unfigure* the subjectivities of reader and writer?

What then is the effect and value of that unfiguration? If subjectivity is unfigured across reader, writing, and writer, what is the site of the written, the writing, and *language itself*? What remains possible to write—by whom? If a conceptual writer only “reframes” and “mixes” (appropriates) preexistent language, writing becomes “inseparable from the replication of [any] error under critique,” as Place and Fitterman acknowledge.²⁶ How does a reader (or writer) recognize the error? While conceptual discourse resists the elevation of a critic over her linguistic object of reading as its judge, Place and Fitterman imply some difference between the error and its replication when they retain the concept of “critique.”²⁷ The difference, in my argument, is not a representation but a redirection.²⁸

Does redirecting language toward an idea or context of “poetry” suffice to reorient readers toward that language and make noticeable something they wouldn’t have otherwise been looking for? Less a matter of determinable framing and context, I retheorize conceptual *reading* along the lines of Barthes’ concept of the (visual) punctum in language. Supposed by Barthes to be unintentional on the part of ‘writer,’ supposed by me to be produced by the writer intentionally or not, but always to indeterminable effect, the punctum affects the reader. It is up to the reader to figure out why. A reader’s investment in noticing and critique as processes rather than evidential directs their attention to what affects them and suggests that they have not already recognized (if recognition produces determination) or have forgotten something in or of the reproduction and its reproducibility.²⁹

“does your workforce represent Canada’s diversity?”

Turning to *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* with this context in mind, Eng engages appropriation in two ways: first through the appropriation of language that obscures both its speakers and its implicit grammars of accountability, and secondly through the book’s figural

response to the appropriability of racialized figures. Eng's appropriation of the 2013 version of Canada's federal multiculturalism survey as the structure of her poetry both reshapes the language of the survey and puts her book in direct address to the Canadian state. As the book's structure, the survey serves as a taken-for-granted context.³⁰ Yet, Eng also draws our attention to the structure not just of her book but of the survey itself by isolating each of the survey's questions on its own page. Because the survey is a series of questions already, and because it is reproduced in lineation and juxtaposition, these pauses and breaks make the repetitions and logical inconsistencies of the survey more noticeable. Moving from left to right, the tonal and grammatical dissonance between the questions and what is posed as their answers then refigures both the questions and answers. Though never directly responsive, when Eng's multi-page responses to the survey become visually and tangibly distanced from the questions, there is more space for readers to detach the working of the book from the survey.

In response to the survey, rather than a yes or no called for by the first three questions about an institution's mission, policies, programs, respectively, Eng's first three responses each reproduce corporate (identity) 'statements.'³¹ Because *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* voices corporations rather than the federal institutions to which the questions were originally directed, to accept the corporate responsiveness staged by *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* draws corporations in relation to federal institutions as (representatives of) the state. By reproducing language that we might otherwise disregard or absorb in inattentive passing, *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* offers a place to look again, more closely, and consider implicit assumptions and directionalities in rhetoric reproduced both in the book and outside of it.

How then *do* these appropriations of language produced by or at least attributed to corporations, including news corporations, respond? Though that answer is ultimately

determinable only in the particularity of each reader's reading, in my readings I noticed that Eng's juxtapositions repeatedly position diction of accounting or accountability in response to questions concerning abstract concepts like "diversity," "representation," and "multiculturalism." For example, this pairing:

Q. 2.1 Throughout your institution, does your workforce represent Canada's diversity?	A strike by federal inmates over a cut in their pay that began in Ontario has now spread to prisons in New Brunswick, Quebec, and Saskatchewan. Inmates are protesting a 30% pay cut that took effect this week. The Harper government began deducting the money from prisoners' pay as part of a move to recover costs under the Deficit Reduction Action Plan. Correctional Service Canada confirmed, "Work and program refusals are occurring sporadically across the country." The average pay is \$3 a day, a rate established in 1981 and based on a review by a parliamentary committee that also factored in a deduction for inmates' room, board, and clothing. Despite inflation over the past 30 years, inmates have not had a pay raise. The strikes have also forced the shutdown of the government's CORCAN operations inside the prisons. CORCAN makes textiles, furniture, and other goods for the war machine. A spokesperson for the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness called the strike "offensive to hard-working, law-abiding Canadians."
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Prison Industrial Complex Explodes responds to a question about a “workforce” with language about federal inmates. Since Eng tells us in her notes section that the survey was addressed, by law, to all federal institutions—which include federal prisons—we might notice that the survey’s logic clearly does not actually account for a legal (or any) responsivity of federal prisons. Not only since not a single word of the question is reproduced in the ‘responsive’ text, in this writing I will first attend to the recto page without reference to the question. What is the text on the right saying on its own?

This is the report of a strike. Its first three sentences respectively communicate: the fact of a spreading strike; the naming of a pay cut as the strike’s cause; and a justification for the pay cut. By explaining the pay cut that is the cause of the strike “as a part of a move to recover costs,” the logic of these three sentences constructs an equivalence between “pay” and “costs.” Grammatically, this positions the prisoners’ labor or even the prisoners themselves as a cost to the government, obscuring their labor as a remunerable service or resource to the government. A reversal of causal order makes the strike traceable to a governmental action only by the third sentence, a sentence which itself is not directed toward the strike but rather directed toward a justifying “Action Plan.” Along with an “action plan,” the article tells us that there has also been a “review,” together connotating rationality, investigation, and even double-checking.³³ Ultimately, the “review” produces a number: \$3 a day.³⁴ A number: an impersonal, indisputable sign of reality and truth. A formulaic (rather than subjective) calculation.

While the prisoners’ pay is represented as fairly figured, the term “recover” extends the equivalency of “pay” and “cost” to position the prisoners as *responsible for* the government’s deficit, as if the prisoners had stolen the lacking funds. The language of calculable equivalences and debts that begins the article finally culminates with a claim of harm; the strike is “offensive to

hard-working, law-abiding Canadians.” Not quite an ‘offense,’ merely “offensive,” the strike is also separated from this adjective by quotation marks. In parallel to the grammatical directionality of the third sentence, this sentence likewise directs itself “to hard-working, law-abiding Canadians.” If the strike is offensive *to* “hard-working, law-abiding Canadians,” the grammatical opposition between “strike” and “Canadians” confers agency to the strike itself and invites the blurring of agentive “strikers” with their action of a “strike.” The previous naming of the agentive subject as “inmates” invoked preexisting stereotypes of prisoners and extends these associations to not just inmates but now inmates who strike—strikers—as *not* “hard-working, law-abiding Canadians.” Moving back through this grammatical chain, this language finally, effectively positions the *idea* of a “strike”—via its association with strikers as inmates as offensive as not-Canadians—as a disrespect if not threat to anyone who identifies themselves as hard-working, law-abiding Canadian.³⁵

The news article mediates its (own) responsibility for the articulation of the strike as “offensive” by attributing it to a different speaker: a “spokesperson for the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness.” Though this language does register a speaker, *that* person *also* doesn’t speak for themselves.³⁶ The figure of a representative displaces the intended meaning of this speaker onto the Minister at the same time that it creates an absolving distance between the Minister’s intended meaning and their spokesperson. This “spokesperson,” who both takes on the authority of a Minister and displaces the Minister in their representative position, speaks not only for the Minister but also grammatically *speaks for*—represents in this sense—all Canadians. Furthermore, whatever the genre of “news” signifies to the reader (disinterest, truth, etc.) will both extend to the ‘appropriated’ statement and appropriate the ‘official statement’s’ generic significations (authority, disinterest, etc.).³⁷

Because the statement that appears on this page of Eng's book is indexable to myriad, though not infinite, positions and intentions—including the Minister's, the representative's, Canadians', the news', poetry's, Eng's, the book's—I could only speculate *why* someone would say this. Following a question of conceptual implication rather than motivation, I will also get farther and farther away from Eng's book.³⁸ I could stay closer to the book by following its own referents.³⁹ But *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* refers to any number of specific things (including, in this case, Eng herself). From any place, event, or institution named or described in the book *I will have to choose* or at least prioritize in my investigation. If an interest in form guides my reading, I could start my investigation not only into what *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* refers to but what it is explicitly *structured around*, but if I read even that structure as referential, I will again leave the book to investigate the Canadian Multiculturalism Act.⁴⁰

It was, in fact, illuminating for me to in fact conduct this research and discover such grammatical consistency with the grammar I spent time to deconstruct in *Prison Industrial Process Explodes*.⁴¹ The Act and survey both confer authority to the audited institutions to represent themselves accurately.⁴² Like the survey questions that Eng reproduces, the Act prioritizes *discursive* responses. The law requires just one non-linguistic act: to “collect al data in order to enable the development of policies, programs and practices that are sensitive and responsive to the multicultural reality of Canada.”⁴³ This “statistical data” is not clearly linked to any object whatsoever. Straining for one, positioned as the purpose of the data collection we find “the multicultural reality of Canada.” But this ‘reality’ is supposed to orient policy that is supposed to, presumably and paradoxically, change (in sensitivity and response to) reality.⁴⁴ “Multiculturalism” is supposed to be statistically real and factual *and* only a future-oriented policy *goal*.⁴⁵⁴⁶ In the

survey, then, “multiculturalism” shifts from a descriptor or a measurable aspect of reality to a policy *goal* that is ultimately a mere “consideration” or word of affirmation.⁴⁷

Returning to the page spread, even as it offers countless directions off the page, does the text on the right nevertheless have anything to say *to* the text on the left? If the question on the right is about diversity, I remember that the demographic statistics *of prisoners* represents the inverse of the “multicultural reality” that (other) statistics show. If the question is about a “workforce”—a group of people who work—the striking federal inmates on the right are the closest grammatical subject to a “workforce.” At the same time, there is a rhetorical dissonance between “inmates” and “workforce,” whether one wants to recognize “inmates” as workers or not. To make *that* determination depends not only on whether you think inmates *work* but on whether you want to focus on the commonality of labor or labor interests *or* the separation and containment of prisoners out of society. As we make decisions *and* rethink them in the text’s (deliberate) contradictions, all of these readings might become ‘visible’ at once.⁴⁸

“one gold or gold-coloured neckchain.”

Though only two survey questions request numerical responses, many of Eng’s ‘responses’ share the logic of accounting, quantification, and responsibility that the news excerpt displays. Numerical accounting requires the figuration of things (including people) into universally significant figures (numbers) and produces an aesthetic of exchangeability. In the case of capital, this exchangeability requires the total abstraction and universalization of value as well as the total releasability and ownership of things. We can trace these logics through a series of letters from the Canadian police addressed to Sue Dong Eng and their culminating legal release, in text consistently orientated toward the indeterminacy of an absent object’s existence. A brief poetic response to the appropriated language concludes the second section of *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes*:

Royal Canadian Mounted Police Gendarmerie royale du Canada
P.O. Box 1320
Edmonton Alberta
T5J 2N1

July 9, 1984

WITHOUT PREJUDICE

Mr. Sue Dong ENG
Medicine Hat, Alberta

Dear Mr. ENG:

This has reference to your complaint of December 8, 1983, regarding the possible theft of a gold necklace from your effects during escort.

Please be advised our investigation into your complaint is continuing and you may expect further correspondence in due course.

Yours truly,

Assistant Commissioner

Royal Canadian Mounted Police Gendarmerie royale du Canada
P.O. Box 1320
Edmonton Alberta
T5J 2N1

August 14, 1984

WITHOUT PREJUDICE

Mr. Sue Dong ENG
Medicine Hat, Alberta

Dear Mr. ENG:

This has reference to your complaint of December 8, 1983, alleging that our members were responsible for the theft of your necklace. Following your complaint a thorough investigation was conducted. I have now had the opportunity to review the material.

The investigation revealed that your necklace did go missing some time prior to, during, or after your escort from Medicine Hat City Police Cell Block to the Lethbridge Correctional Centre. However, the person(s) responsible could not be determined. In my view there is no evidence to support your allegation of theft.

Notwithstanding my decision in this matter, the criminal allegation in your complaint was thoroughly reviewed by a Senior Agent of the Attorney General's Department, who agrees with my findings.

Your claim against the Force had been referred to the Department of Justice for their review and decision.

Yours truly,

Assistant Commissioner

Department of Justice Canada
Royal Trust Tower, Edmonton Centre
Edmonton, Alberta
T5J 2Z2

October 11, 1984

WITHOUT PREJUDICE

Mr. Sue Dong Eng
Drumheller Correctional Institute

Dear Sir:

I refer you to an incident occurring on or about December 8th, 1983 wherein you have alleged the loss of a necklace owned by yourself while you were being transported from the Medicine Hat Police cells to Lethbridge Correctional Centre. The Crown is prepared to compensate you in the sum of \$150.00 for the apparent loss of your neckchain.

I have enclosed a form of Release in respect of the alleged loss to be signed by yourself and a witness. Upon receipt of completed Release I will requisition and forward a cheque payable to yourself in the sum of \$150.00.

Yours truly,

Edmonton Regional Office

KNOW ALL MEN by these presents that Sue Dong Eng, of the City of Medicine Hat, in the Province of Alberta, does hereby remise, release and forever discharge Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada, Her servants, employees, agents and assigns, from all matters of action, claims or demands, of whatever kind or nature that Sue Dong Eng ever had, has now, or can, shall or may hereafter have reason by loss of property owned by Sue Dong Eng to wit: one gold or gold coloured neckchain.

IT IS UNDERSTOOD AND AGREED that this Release shall only be effective when payment shall have been made on behalf of Her Majesty in Right Of Canada to Sue Dong Eng the sum of One Hundred & Fifty Dollars.

These letters foreground language's *referentiality*. The first letter begins: "This *has reference to* [emphasis mine] your complaint of December 8, 1983, regarding the possible theft of a gold necklace from your effects during escort."⁵⁰ While referring to a "complaint," framing the subject of the letter as a linguistic act, the self-referential deictic *this* redirects the reference of the letter back upon itself as abstract language: just "this."⁵¹ The only reference to a discrete, tangible object in this letter (besides, possibly, a written "complaint") is "a gold necklace" isolated "from" Eng's otherwise amorphous (formless) "effects." Even here, the reality of the necklace is conditioned by its absence—"from." At the same time, *Eng's* gathering of the dated letters together makes evident the excessive delay between each address.⁵²

The language of these letters manufactures existential, causal *and* spatiotemporal indeterminacies. By revising "theft" to "loss" to "apparent loss" to "alleged loss" across the letters, the state devalues Eng's claim—not just to the necklace but to reality—through qualifications of perspective and credibility. The second letter displaces the determinability of theft with the determinability of *responsibility*, or cause.⁵³ Though the letters determine the date and place of their own writing (Edmonton Regional Office), the body of the letters make no determinate temporal or spatial reference to the (theft of the) necklace. Though the first letter temporally framed the theft "during" escort, the second letter temporally dislocates the event of the necklace's theft entirely: "some time prior to, during, or after" Eng's escort.⁵⁴ The third letter then reasserts temporal specificity by locating the "incident occurring on or about December 8, 1983." But this is the date of the *complaint*, and the subsequent grammar of the letter articulates the "incident" not as the event of theft but rather strangely as the incident "wherein you alleged..."⁵⁵ Only the "complaint"—whether written or spoken—remains temporally determinate and effectively displaces the theft with its linguistic consequence.⁵⁶

The absence of the necklace is crucial to the state spatio-temporal assertion and reconfiguration of the necklace as “complaint.” Having done so much to render the reality of the necklace’s past existence undeterminable, the state ultimately tries to assert an eternal determination of the necklace as simply gone, no longer ‘claimable,’ either in a physical relation or in language. Prohibiting any *potential* claims, the Release asserts a homogenous future of permanent and perfect resolution.⁵⁷ This temporal logic precludes the possibility of the necklace ever being returned, or of its value to Eng ever changing.⁵⁸ The logic of the Release also renounces any lasting effects of the necklace's theft after the settlement's exchange is made.

As “complaint” subtly comes to name the entire “incident,” the state renders the theft itself a matter of language rather than a material appropriation. The last letter destabilizes the difference between language and (perceptible) *reality*. Shifting from the complaint “wherein you have alleged the loss” to the Crown’s offer of compensation for “the apparent loss of your neckchain” before reverting in the final paragraph back to describing a Release “in respect of the alleged loss.” Did that “apparent” acknowledge the necklace’s existence, or did it render the necklace merely perceptual? How can something “alleged” also be “apparent”? The connotation of doubt in “alleged” undermines the linguistic while “apparent” validates the perceptual. Except, the word “apparent” is a contronym: it can also be a term of doubt used ironically to designate that which only seems or is claimed to be. It seems likely that this is the Edmonton Regional Office's intention in applying the term “apparent” to a negative appearance: “loss.” These qualifying adjectives articulate “loss” only as a matter of language and perception. We may not know what a thing is, how it got there, or whose it is, but can’t we at least know whether something existed and exists before us—physically—or not? Though we might take these questions in a different direction, the state raises them only so that it might ultimately determine and assert its own perception.

In the state's final release of claims, the necklace is ultimately rendered "one gold or gold-coloured neckchain." The shift from gold to gold-coloured most obviously diminishes the necklace's value by calling into question whether it is *real* gold (the weighty material figure of monetary value par excellence). This *grammar of the aesthetic*—gold [*and*] gold-coloured—represents the necklace as an (absent) object that is indeterminably, paradoxically *either* allegedly and universally real *or* apparently and particularly perceptible. To grammatically insist that "gold" might not be "gold-coloured," and that "gold-coloured" need not be "gold," seems to draw a strict distinction between matter—figured here as measurable and thereby valuable, yet also invisible—and appearance—figured here as immediately determinable (apparent) *yet* perhaps also superficial or deceptive of substance and value. Is the (contained) form of the necklace its appearance or its materiality? The aesthetic and the material are shimmering.⁵⁹

Ultimately, the state accounts for "the necklace" as a strictly monetary value. The bulkiness of the phrase "owned by yourself" subtly undermines Eng's relationship to the necklace with its nonpossessive article "a," and represents the connection between Eng and the necklace strictly as a relation of ownership. This phrasing, rather than "your" or even "owned by you," also dislocates the state as the agent of representation by designating its representation as only (Eng's) language.⁶⁰ Having evaded any acknowledgment of the necklace's determinate existence, "the Crown" nevertheless offers "to compensate [Eng] in the sum of \$150."⁶¹

Why does the state offer Sue Dong Eng compensation at all? Lindon Barrett's *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double* (1999) suggests an answer by pointing out that the boundary and form of value is always arbitrary. Barrett notes that those who claim value ironically sometimes *pay* those devalued in order to affirm the boundary.⁶² This is perhaps exactly what happens in the Crown's exchange with Sue Dong Eng. Because it refuses responsibility for the necklace's

absence, the Crown forces itself to admit that it offers \$150 not for the necklace but *for Eng's claims*.⁶³ The displacement of the necklace with Eng's "claims" shifts the site of value from the necklace itself, in this case not even to a measurable material, but rather to the necklace's discursive representability and responsibility: its claimability.⁶⁴ The Crown pays Eng not for his necklace but rather to confirm the state's authority over value: both monetary *and* discursive.

If Eng's claim to the necklace is an assertion of Eng's reality, it is not just the necklace but also Eng as a speaking subject being dematerialized and (de)valued in the Crown's language and 'compensation.' If \$150 is also figured as the (universal) value of the necklace *to Eng*, a figure of Eng himself comes into the state's valuing frame. Even before the object of exchange shifts from the necklace to the discursive (and property) *claim* to the necklace, the lexical shift from "necklace" to a "neckchain" in the final letter and release of claims subtly revalues the object of exchange, by way of the two words' relative racial and gender associations. While the discursive use of "gold necklace" often signifies beauty and affluent femininity, "gold neckchain" invokes representations of lower-class, non-white masculinity and possibly even criminality.⁶⁵ The connotations made more noticeable in this linguistic shift suggest a monetary value of racial aesthetics.

As I have traced the state's figuration of indeterminacy through the letters, the final page of this section figures separability and sequentiality, which Denise Ferreira da Silva links to determinacy as "*the* triad sustaining modern thought."⁶⁶ The first two lines of this final page emphasize the paradox of "apparent" and "alleged" as already discussed:⁶⁷

the apparent loss
the alleged loss

a gold neckchain
a ligature
a tight rope
a border
a revocation

Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada wears a lovely
gold-plated neckchain of copper

Shifting from the abstracting, displacing effect of rendering something discursive (alleged), a vertical list of increasingly abstract figures lead to a final, horizontal determinacy.⁶⁸ The concepts in this list invoke separability and are themselves separated, while the repetition of "a" invokes both determinacy and iterability, and the small, short list form of single nouns both establishes a sequentiality yet evades the grammar of sequentiality.⁶⁹ This list also traces a signifying chain which blurs object, action, and intent. At the same time, the verticality of this list simultaneously refuses to represent any grammatical, and especially causal, sequentiality. The definitional and visual proximity (both through the image of a line and as they appear on the page) of the first four terms, along with the repetition of the article "a," invites us to think all their aspects together if not also to collapse them into the same 'thing.'⁷⁰ Yet the list also works against this total collapse through the same verticality, which insists on a spacing between terms that a horizontal writing of the list would minimize.

The “gold neckchain” leads to a “ligature”: a word that combines the representation of or call for a linguistic or sonic binding or ‘slurring’, binding material, and the act of binding itself: a tie or string *used* to bind, the action of tying, a musical notion “expressing two or more tones to be sung to one syllable,” and “two or more letters joined together and forming one character or type.”⁷¹ Furthermore, the purpose or effect of a ligature is indeterminable in itself: a ligature could be used to strangle someone or to save someone from bleeding out. A ligature *is* a tight rope, but Eng’s isolation of that phrase also allows us to reconceptualize the image at hand in relation to entertaining performance, or precision, or wavering, or anything else we associate with tight ropes. A border could be imagined as an *invisible* tight rope, though my figure of person walking on and in the same direction of the line shifts to a prohibited motion *across*. Or, a border could be visible: “A defined edging, of distinct material, colour, shape, pattern, or ornamentation, made or fixed along the margin of anything.”⁷² Eng’s list ends with a term that refers ‘only’ to language: a revocation. But a revocation is not of language as referential, but rather as *performative*. Discursively, even if the object of revocation is a law or a license, a revocation is not a matter of the *existence* of words but rather their *functionality*. As a calling *back*, “revocation” also points toward and situates its linguistic object’s functionality strictly in the past.⁷³

All of these words implicate force: binding, bounding, and separating of a ligature, a tight rope, a border, and revocation, and Barrett argues: “Only when value as force begs attention — as the result of its magnitude, or as the result of special circumstances — is the surprising, forcibly transformative nature of all value noticed.”⁷⁴ The special circumstances of these letters, an unusual kind of capitulation of debt to a state prisoner, exposes not just egregiously mismatched valuations but all value as arbitrary: “at the site (sight) where incontrovertible identity [between value and object of value] should be found — where, at least, *any* principle should be found — the perceiver

discovers instead a relation of violence to the Other..."⁷⁵ Eng's nouns figure this violence as the violence of separation and containment. In recognizing this \$150 as arbitrary, we could refigure our sense of "value" as unrepresentable and uncommunicable, non-exchangeable.⁷⁶ Following Marx's suggestion that the value of an object should instead be understood as "a physical relation between physical things," rather than a subjective or social construct, the state has effectively undermined any possibility of Eng's physical relation to the necklace.⁷⁷

This page ends with a declarative statement: "Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada wears a lovely gold-plated neckchain of copper."⁷⁸ though Eng here names the Queen, how curious that the Release employs a synecdoche of personhood—and all that personhood seems to 'contain' (intentionality, agency, reason, feeling)—in the "Crown" rather than the more abstract "State." Here, Eng's sentence lacks a period, and the claim it makes is obviously metaphoric—or is it? The last word on this page "copper," both reasserts the necklace's materiality—designating it of a substance never mentioned by the state—and yet again relies on a word that can also signify abstract color. Though "copper" *is* a color, the sentence also specifies that the necklace is not copper-colored but rather *gold-plated*—someone has covered it.⁷⁹ This last line registers the necklace as a matter of aesthetic determination by asserting its form—gold-plated copper—implying but not asserting its color. The neckchain in this sentence is also used to create another image: the Queen wearing a neckchain. The figure of the queen re-personifies the state and thereby emphasizes a question of human intention and performativity. To emphasize the neckchain as something worn casts the aesthetic itself as a motive for the necklace's theft. Both an appropriation of an aesthetic and an appropriative aesthetic, if the Queen is wearing something that only *looks* valuable, perhaps the value of the state and police force that the Queen represents can be similarly assessed.

“that yellow bead”

Eng’s appropriation of the letters’ language and her personification of the state with the figure of the Queen are aspects of her poetics of response to the series of letters. But as both this long series of letters that ends with a poetic rearrangement and the more direct juxtaposition with which I started both show, *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* does more than respond to the questionnaire by which it takes its form. These critical readings have been rewarding to me, as they have made me aware of logical elisions of which I was not before wary and which, most strikingly, have blurred my sense of aesthetic and reality.

Is this the only way—for me?—to read *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes*? (How) can I account for Eng’s epigraph, which names the purpose of this book not as a critique of the Canadian state but as means toward familiarity: “for my nieces so that one day / they will know their grandfather.” But how can *I*—who am not Eng’s niece—read the book’s representations of people? What are the effects of references to Sue Dong Eng and the more clearly figurative, yet named, Carole within the book? These figures address a desire to remember people beyond official, archival, even linguistic forms: as relatives and creators.

Prison Industrial Complex Explodes represents Sue Dong Eng in reproductions of identificatory documents including a passport and inmate ID card. These documents establish historical, measurable, and ‘apparent’ facts about Eng, including that he immigrated as a child from China to Canada, his height, his weight, and his “complexion.”⁸⁰ By including photos and these visual descriptions, these state documents reduce Eng’s identity and identifiability to his appearance. Of the six descriptions of Eng(’s body) on his inmate card, three are determinations of *color*: eye color, hair color, and skin color. But there are only two color words on this card—brown (eyes) and black (hair).⁸¹ As if the state was avoiding determinations of “skin” or “race,”

the ID card determines “complexion”—a term which has historically and etymologically signifies combination itself and now combines “quality, character, [and] condition; in modern use often with some notion of ‘tinge, colour, aspect’ from senses.”⁸² Ironically, by asking for Eng’s “complexion” the card asks a single determination to represent aspect, person, and context all at once. “Complexion” is documented with an explicitly relative term: medium. At the cost of admitting relativity, “medium” determines everything that complexion signifies simply as “in between.”⁸³ Perhaps uncoincidentally also signifying *physical material*, “medium” is another linguistic attempt to determine the indeterminable.

Sue Dong Eng is evoked differently when a first-person speaker describes “my dad” and childhood memories that seem to describe Mercedes Eng:

“my dad is inside when I am born. after I come out we live in Vancouver a bit then move to Abbotsford to be closer to the prison. we visit almost every weekend, both days, 8 hours a day. 832 hours in a year times 2. almost 70 days by the time I'm 2.”⁸⁴

The state’s routing of meaning through the language of measure is picked up by the child speaker’s counting and mathematical figuring. But the child does not or cannot always speak in numerical or any determinate terms. Some details, including where her father is at certain times and the duration of “a good time,” are hazy. Because these details are still included in the girl’s representation, *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* confers value to indeterminate memories. Appealing to a relativity that is not just linguistic or perceptual, these lines also use language of *spatial* relativity. Both the speaker and her father are described in relation to an “inside.” While “inside” refers to the imprisonment of her father, the child describes her own birth as a kind of exit: “after I come out.”

Turning the page, we encounter a spread with two family photos on the verso (left) page and several more stanzas written in the same first-person style, extended to a final stanza that

begins when “I’m 19.”⁸⁵ While this entire page is written in the present tense, the first person disappears for several middle stanzas and describes experiences with a “we” until the “I” returns at the age of 13. This first person singular and plural multiplies the subjectivity of the “I” across determinate ages in indeterminate times. The first person present perspective also collapses the temporal distance between the tense of the writer and the writer’s self-representations at/of various times. After this partial family history, Eng’s first-person doesn’t return for another 40 pages, and only in relation to Sue Dong Eng another 21 pages after that.⁸⁶

The third and last section of the book concerning Mercedes Eng in relation to Sue Dong describes “my father’s art”:⁸⁷

first exposure to art
called Indian craft
its production framed as money for the canteen

first exposure to my father's art
also called craft converted to money for the canteen
his cigarettes and my favourite, Big Chief beef jerky

he carved the wooden tools
he used to engrave
owls mountain lions phoenixes wolves dragons
into copper sheets hammered thin as his brown flesh

homemade like the tools used to carve stories
into thin brown flesh
a tape-player motor a ballpoint pen

homemade like the tools used to erase stories
hammered into thin brown flesh and mind
a light bulb filament to puncture the skin
solace brought from outside inside the body

Eng’s move from “called” to “framed as” in the first stanza of this excerpt again juxtaposes the effects of racializing discourse as both determining and aesthetic(izing). This passage also juxtaposes the representations that Eng creates in his art (the list of animals) with the object it is

exchanged for: “my favourite Big Chief beef jerky.” Though Eng trades his art for something his daughter found *tasteful*, the food is *branded* with a caricature of indigeneity. Eng’s aesthetic production as an indigenous person and his aesthetic ‘representation’ as an indigenous person *by a corporation* are both subject to the same system of exchangeability.

Shifting from describing the circular exchange of Eng’s aesthetic productions *as* representations of indigeneity (‘Indian craft’) *for* representations of indigeneity *as* food (Big Chief beef jerky), Eng redirects our attention to other purposes of or for making by figuring and refiguring “tools” and “thin brown flesh” across the three subsequent stanzas. First, the (seemingly) nonproductive decoration of existing form is made confusable with the production of form (a form that, as a tool, will itself either decorate and/or produce): “he carved the wooden tools.” This line figures “tools” ambiguously as either preexisting wooden tools which Eng carved upon decoratively or as the tools produced by Eng’s carving them out of a larger piece of wood. The line break then blurs Eng and the tools: did Eng use *the tools* to engrave or did Eng himself ‘use to’ *engrave*? The first instance of “thin brown flesh” forms a simile: “into copper sheets hammered thin as his brown flesh.”⁸⁸ Though these copper sheets are Eng’s own aesthetic material, the passively rendered “hammered” makes ambiguous whether Eng has done this hammering himself or simply engraved upon previously hammered copper. The analogy of *hammered* copper with Eng’s “flesh” then calls into question whether Eng’s flesh was also *hammered* thin, by whom or what, or whether Eng’s thin brown flesh serves only as an image of immanent thinness?

The ambiguity of agent or tool and especially the blurring of material with inscription heightens in the next stanza. Reiterating the grammar of simile but shifting the operative preposition from *as* to *like*, Eng constructs an agrammatical simile between an isolated adjective and a noun: “homemade like the tools.”⁸⁹ *What* is homemade like these tools? The adjective

gestures toward the tools Eng made, the engravings Eng made with those tools, or “his brown flesh”—the closest referent to this adjective even though it is separated by a double line break. But these first two ‘gestures’ rely on a discursive slide from “carved” and “engraved” to the made-ness of homemade, and the third gesture—toward flesh—relies on the spatial proximity of words alone. In contrast to the previous “wooden tools”—where the wood if not the tools themselves preexist their carving, “*homemade*” asserts not only a greater difference between the thing “made” and its materiality but also designates the site of creation as an aspect of the work itself. Though the closest association that I found—between carved and making—at first directed me toward Eng’s tools as the first “homemade” referent, Eng’s wooden tools ultimately don’t seem “homemade” with the distinction of ‘making’ and ‘carving,’ and because home-ness seems incompatible with imprisonment.⁹⁰

Though they seemed so similar *as tools*, the homemade “tools used to carve stories” on the second side of the simile now seem so different from the wooden tools Eng “used to engrave.” To further undermine the sense of “homemade,” this stanza’s last line names two tools that don’t seem to be homemade: “a tape-player motor a ballpoint pen.” In who’s home are these tools, that invoke a formal interview, or even a deposition, made? Combined, each of these ‘tools’ make a new tool: a readymade tattoo gun used by prisoners. Without knowing either who carves upon whose flesh, whether carving stories into flesh is a violence and/or a deliberate record-making or a decoration, nor knowing the relation between the stories and their speaker (do the stories themselves represent a speaker or otherwise speak *for* their speaker, *for* the flesh into which they are carved, or *for* only themselves as stories), it is impossible to determine just one directionality of purpose or effect in this stanza.

The final stanza in the excerpt above reverses the use of tools, now “used to erase stories.” Once again, “handmade” hinges a simile without a comparative object: “homemade like the tools used to erase stories.” If the “light bulb filament” from the third line of this stanza is a tool, again that tool doesn’t seem homemade, though it might be improvised as a needle. Again, the purpose of tools as “tools” in this stanza are decidedly used “to erase,” but the effect of the filament which “punctures” (*punctum*) is not clear. Though stories have been “carved” into “flesh and mind,” the filament is the only object that breaks the “skin” and thereby brings solace “from outside inside the body.” Does that “solace” become visible, like light, like a tattoo? Does it reach the flesh and mind? This stanza plays with the location and materiality of stories “carved” on the body by rendering them “erasable” and by finally figuring *skin* as permeable.

The page spread immediately after this one shows us that Eng not only made copper engravings but also made a pair of baby moccasins for his daughter. These two photos, the one on the left duplicated and cropped on the second page, are the only photographs in *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* that do not represent Sue Dong Eng in relation to if not *for* the state. Mercedes Eng writes above the left-side image, where both shoes are fully visible and perched on a cliff at the edge of moving water: “first shoes, made inside by my dad.”⁹¹ Above the second photo centering just one shoe, Eng writes: “I think about that yellow bead a lot.”⁹² As something Sue Dong Eng made, the shoes perhaps come nearest to something we can read as Eng’s own representation of himself rather than the state’s representations of him.⁹³ Made for his daughter, the shoes materialize an expression of her father to or for *her*. Though these shoes only ‘represent’ Eng by the attention to beauty and care for his daughter that they imply, we also know that those shoes, and this photo, and therefore the book in which the photo exists, only exist as they do because Eng himself also did. Is this attribution of the (part of the book that is the (photo of the))

shoes to Sue Dong Eng another kind of accounting for, rather than an accounting of, Sue Dong Eng's existence?

Even if the cost of printing *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* itself contributed to the reproduction of these photos in black and white, the grayscale rendering makes it impossible to distinguish the yellow bead referred to above. By preventing her readers from seeing the yellow bead but alerting them to its presence, and by claiming its significance to her but not specifying *what* she thinks about that yellow bead, Eng noticeably withholds both an aspect of the shoes and an aspect of her own relationship to them. She points to another aesthetic without showing it. Without the writer's thoughts, we are left to determine for ourselves the significance of a bead (invisibly) marked by the singularity of its color in relation to the other beads. If we read 'yellow' as a nod to "Asianness" Kat Chow historicizes its attribution to "Asian" people perhaps precisely because "[y]ellow had multiple [and apparently contradictory] connotations, which included both 'serene' and 'happy,' as well as 'toxic' and 'impure.'"⁹⁴ How are *we* going to parse these conflicting attributes that hold together both positive affect and negative materiality, in relation to a bead, to their use by a Chinese-immigrant-prisoner-father-artist, and to the *yellow-covered book* written by a Chinese-descended author in which the word "yellow" appears?⁹⁵

And, of course, what about the relation of the yellowness of the bead to the Indigenous style of the shoes? Will we accuse Sue Dong Eng, as a Chinese immigrant, of appropriating Native American culture by making this pair of moccasins, no matter that we don't know how he learned *how* to make them and no matter who and what they were for? How does *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* grapple with the racialization that its appropriations allow us to see? The photos

of Eng's gift to his daughter, leaving us with a referent to Eng as an artist and father, are the last reproductions in the book concerning Sue Dong Eng.

"Let it drop on down"

Everything in *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* that responds to the survey that this chapter has made some account for has been either an appropriation of public-facing, anonymous language; reproductions of personal records concerning Sue Dong Eng; or poetic rearrangements and responses to the reproduced language. But there is one more element in *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes*: pages concerning Carole. In her "Notes on Sources," Eng writes: "Carole is inspired by an Indigenous mother I met while visiting my dad inside – one of a few destituted mothers I knew when I was a kid."⁹⁶ But the Carole named in *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* is also clearly *figural*: "also inspired by [Marie] Annharte [Baker]'s *Cannibal Woman Camp Out*, a play about some of the many powerful and dangerous mythic mother figures from across this geopolitical entity called North America..."⁹⁷ By invoking a play, Eng also emphasizes the performative nature of Carole across the book. Carole is hypermobile, active, and creative.

In her first appearance, "Carole is": (still) "Jessi's mama" though "now a ghost mama." She is "whispering" on this first page and later flies, swims, and sings.⁹⁸ Carole moves in and out of her family's space and time. In her second appearance, Carole still "is" and still "whispers" specifically "into the ears / of the fertile red nation," in a reproduction of the language where she was introduced. Yet in this reproduction of Carole's first appearance, the line "Jessi's mama" at the top of the page, as well as the last two stanzas, where Carole *reads* the 2013 census report and celebrates the existence of indigenous babies whose parents deliberately "avoided [their children's] becoming state stats," no longer appear. Though Carole is decontextualized and *turns away from reading* (at least, reading about state language and accounting), she continues to

whisper to the “red nation” and still encourages the continuation of life: “plant seeds in the ground / and in the womb / ground zero for a revolution.”⁹⁹

Near the end of the book, Carole connects sites of state violence and state attempts to contain and control—prisons in Palestine, security check points in American schools, the U.S.-Mexico border—through her “research.” Through physical movements through water and air, Carole also connects sites of resistance: Wedzin Kwah, a river on Wet’suwet’en land that Canada did not recognize indigenous rights and title to until 2020; the Unist’ot’en camp, established to block the construction of natural gas extraction projects and oil pipelines; and the Lax U’u’la camp, also established to prevent the construction of a natural gas marine terminal, all places I didn’t know until I read this book and *researched*.¹⁰⁰

However, turning back to an earlier page reminds us that not only the relation between these sites but also Carole’s mobility between them is made possible by “slipstreams of capital’s desire.”¹⁰¹ If Carole can move through the wake of a consumptive desire for her body as both material and figure, can *we* distinguish “Carole” from the figuration of her as a, aesthetic, feminine and racialized embodiment of appropriable and extractable materials, land, and indigeneity itself: “beautiful Carole // cocoa skin a black waterfall of Pocahontas hair”?¹⁰² On the penultimate page of *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes*, Carole is not named but both figurations of her are invoked—as a fetishized image hailed by “Pocahottie” and as a hungry and uncontainable “she” who hunts and flies to the other side of the continent.

Though she might float above “the ground,” Carole is not entirely indeterminate—she appears in specific places and signifies variably. All of these figurations of Carole ultimately yield to the assertion: “she is a vision”.¹⁰³

she flies to Elsipogtog
setting her sights on the snipers
who situate their scopes on the Mi'kmaq warriors
the children, women, and men of the nation

she lowers herself into their crosshairs

she is a vision
wearing a feather headdress
that reaches the ground
her feet don't touch

each of the thousands of feathers
a spark to light the match

As a “vision,” Carole figures a visible idea, intent, or plan. But who’s, of what? Positioning Carole between the snipers and the indigenous people makes her visible to those on both sides. Yet this is also a vision with its own gaze, setting its own sights and interrupting others’ lines of sight with “her” own visibility. The final vision given by *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* pronominally indexes “she,” and figures “a feather headdress.” If we decide to read this pronoun and the “headdress” as a reiteration of the hailing “Pocahottie,” *or instead* to read the *doings* of this hunting and flying “she” as similar to previous behaviors of a figure of an indigenous mother, we could name this “she” Carole. Is “she” protective here, like before, or is she a stereotype, like before? The headdress that she wears—both made by indigenous people and used to represent them as appropriable and commodifiable—constitutes a two-sided symbol, and this double visibility might perpetuate Carole as an ambiguous and indeterminate figure.

But Carole doesn’t have to be here, and “she” could also be someone else. Eng’s lines ultimately direct our vision away from the pronominal, femininizing figure of a person toward a headdress as the only thing that connects this human figure to “the ground”: what *we* and other people—but *not she*—walk upon, sometimes shape, but are (almost) always stuck to and limited

by. The figure of a woman slips quietly out of our linguistic view and leaves us with a figure of a historical style of embodied signification and/as a performance without a performer: “wearing a feather headdress.” The image of the headdress itself finally shatters into “thousands of feathers,” ironically *focusing* on a part of the headdress as an imprecisely shaped and scaled multiplicity. Finally, this vision coalesces into “a spark to light the match.” One of many, just one spark floats before us. Who holds the match? And what kind of match is this? Is it an oppositionality or a complementary? Will its lighting show us something or make something explode?

That wasn’t the last page. And I have left something else (well, many things) out of my account of the book. *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* leaves us with a spark *and*:

Carole sings

Well, I raise up my hammer, let it
Let it drop on down
Well, I raise up by hammer, let it
Let it drop on down

Throughout the book, *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* appropriates the lyrics of popular songs. Carole is usually positioned as the singer of these lyrics. In addition to the words to “Eighteen Hammers” above, Carole sings Al Greene's "I Can't Get Next to You" with her incarcerated lover, and “raps along with Nicki” a line from Kanye West's "Monster."¹⁰⁴ But as Carole’s effects or even “use” as a figure become ambiguous, so too does it become ambiguous who is singing. In the scene of Carole's exploitation that begins with "beautiful Carole," it is not clear whether the lyric "but she's gonna wash the man right out of her hair" comes from Carole,

the participants in the corporate lunch, or perhaps even the writer.¹⁰⁵ Neither is it clear where this line itself comes from. It first appeared in a hugely popular 1958 musical called *South Pacific* that caused controversy for its promotion of interracial marriage, but it also served as a Clairol hair dye commercial jingle and was picked up in both The Weather Girls' 1983 "I'm Gonna Wash That Man Right Outa My Hair" (disco) and in PJ Harvey's 1992 "Sheela-Na-Gig" (alternative rock). The tone of this line that we hear and the associations that we make with it in *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* will depend on how (and if) we've heard it before and how we hear it now, in its new place.

Eng notes that the lyrics that close the book are from "Eighteen Hammers," a prison work song traceable at least to its recording in 1959.¹⁰⁶ Iterations of these lyrics appear twice before their final reproduction.¹⁰⁷ The specificity of singer, time, and place of these lyrics shift across iterations similarly to the progression of Carole first reacting to statistical news from 2013 to her final appearance singing these four lines.¹⁰⁸ Eng elaborates on "Eighteen Hammers":

It is a call-and-response song, which by its nature is made individual and improvised by the singers even as some parts stay standard. So the lyrics included here are what I hear in recordings of the song. You may hear the lyrics differently.¹⁰⁹

Naming Carole the singer of the final, least referential version of these lyrics insists that readers *hear* the lyrics in a voice that is not their own, yet in an almost toneless voice of a figure that has been decontextualized to ultimately appear only *as* the name "Carole"—or song. This song sings itself, but it also calls for response most directly by instructing "let it drop on down," and it ultimately remains available for readers to sing along. In her note, Eng is explicit that she has written what *she* hears in plural *recordings* of the song and insists, after insisting on Carole's voice, that *you* might hear differently. Eng knows that you might interpret what you hear and respond differently to the call to "let it drop on down."

Having been shown “a spark to light the match,” readers are directed to “let it drop on down.”¹¹⁰ That “it” could refer to a spark, the reader’s or the singer’s hammer, the floating vision, none or all of them. Though the image of a waiting match invited readers to imagine lighting the match themselves and then using it to light something else, to “let it drop on down” registers an orientation—if not a physical law or maybe even a strange material desire—of “it” itself. Yet, *can* “it” fall if the “I” doesn’t raise it up? The repetition of these present-tense lines renders the relationship between “I,” “my hammer,” and “it” interdependently dynamic, reproduced and reproducible. The third term in this relation, what we suppose we can allow, “it” is a word that conceptualizes both itself and what it is not *in their relation*, but materializes or makes visible and speakable *only itself*.

Can this relationship make the prison industrial complex explode? Is it already exploding? If we think of explosion as expansion, *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* shows the permeation of the system’s logic of accounting and valuing into realms of representation (the news, for instance) and modes of speaking (like the spokesperson’s quote), not immediately recognized as part of or affected by the system. More commonly, we understand explosion not as expansion but as destruction, particularly destruction from within. By appropriating—representing—recognizable language, *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* allows readers to notice both elisions and slides in (their own) logic and language. Conveniently, ‘explode’ is also defined as a matter of perception: “To reveal or expose the true nature of (a thing appearing to be something else).”¹¹¹ Could that “appearing to be something else” be achieved by an(other) aesthetic appropriation like that which the dispossession of Eng’s necklace facilitated in the Queen’s new look?

Prison Industrial Complex Explodes ultimately directs itself toward two aspects of knowing: having information about and being familiar.¹¹² These two kinds of knowing first register

in the difference between Eng's two epigraphs and her dedication. Her epigraphs, a quote by Audre Lorde and a quote by Angela Davis, are informational. The first, from Lorde, tells us: "We operate in the teeth of a system for which racism and sexism are primary, established, and necessary props for profit." The second quotation from Davis then shores up Lorde's more conceptual assertion with numerical citations: "Almost two million people are currently locked up in the immense network of U.S. prisons and jails. More than 70 percent of the imprisoned population are people of color."¹¹³ These quotes inform Eng's readers and contextualize her book, but the book's *poetics of address* point toward immanent being and potentiality rather than explanation. Eng's collection of examples of the prison industrial complex might invite the "noticing an aspect" that Fred Moten suggests "demands *description* in light of its exceeding of *explanation*."¹¹⁴ The "prison industrial complex" cannot be represented as a totality—it cannot be represented at all—because the concept names a totality of *relations* that paradoxically also includes spaces outside the system. *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* exhibits aspects of the prison industrial complex, but the book is not a report *of*, and especially not *for* (though the survey is *for*), the complex.¹¹⁵

The book arranges points of contradiction that weaken the prison industrial complex's logical coherence, while the final call to "let" the hammer "drop on down" figures change—the cycle of *revolution*—as ongoing, immanent, or at least, imminent. Carole just *is*—she simply exists. She appears and functions differently in different places. Carole contests the separability of inside and outside in her indeterminacy and offers another version of explosion as an uncontainment. Indeterminacy is a means to asserting hegemonic determinacy, but by maintaining indeterminacy and refusing closure, *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* figures an *uncontainable* indeterminacy.¹¹⁶

¹ According to her publisher Talonbooks: "Her writing has appeared in *Hustling Verse: An Anthology of Sex Workers' Poetry*, *Jacket 2*, *Asian American Literary Review*, *The Capilano Review*, and *The Abolitionist*. She

was the Writer-in-Residence and a Shadbolt Fellow at Simon Fraser University and recently co-curated her first exhibition with Keimi Nakashima-Ochoa, *Inside/Out: the art show my dad never had*. Mercedes teaches at Emily Carr University of Art + Design, where she organizes the On Edge reading series." "Mercedes Eng," Talonbooks, <https://talonbooks.com/authors/mercedes-eng>.

² Mercedes Eng, *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes*, 102.

³ Eng also affirms in her notes section: "I answer each question with information on relevant subjects" (101).

⁴ Mercedes Eng, *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes*, n.p.

⁵ American poet Craig Dworkin's brief history of conceptual art and discourse before the late 1990s in the anthology of conceptual writing *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* suggests that aesthetics of appropriation were not a significant point of concern in the literary industry. "Appropriation" often hailed mid-century postmodern aesthetics (like those made iconic by Andy Warhol) and copyright disputes in the visual art industry.

⁶ I make this claim based on my personal memories, a quick review of popular news articles, and most concretely, GoogleTrends frequencies of the search terms "appropriation" and "cultural appropriation" (both of which spiked in May 2018), and note that the "cultural appropriation" search registers as almost nonexistent prior to 2012. To illustrate the pivot to "cultural" appropriation from previous iterations of the term, compare Randy Kennedy's 2011 *New York Times* article "Apropos Appropriation," entirely about legal disputes over copyrights in fine arts, with Parul Sehgal's 2015 "Is Cultural Appropriation Always Wrong" for *New York Times Magazine*. Sehgal's concluding claim about literature is also illuminating of the discursive contrast between mainstream media and contemporary poetics discourse: "Can some kinds of appropriation shatter stereotypes? This has been literature's implicit promise: that entering into another's consciousness enlarges our own." Meanwhile, the discourse of Conceptualism was *foreclosing* linguistic access to another's consciousness.

In 2021, Paisley Rekdal's *Appropriate: A Provocation* was published. Rekdal's book is notable for her perspective as a creative writing professor, her attention to voice in writing, and the stylization of her book in the form of a series of letters to an anonymous student ("Dear X") regarding "cultural appropriation." 2022 may have been the peak of "cultural appropriation" in academic publishing, given Harvard UP's *Stealing My Religion: Not Just Any Cultural Appropriation* and U of Toronto P's *Voicing Identity: Cultural Appropriation and Indigenous Issues*. U Chicago P's 2018 *Imposters: Literary Hoaxes and Cultural Authenticity* is notable for its reflection of the popular discourse's emphasis on individual people. While "cultural appropriation" was rarely if ever articulated as a legal matter of economic profitability, *visual* aesthetics remained central to news of cultural appropriation, often including photographic evidence.

⁷ Public logic made appropriation a kind of group-identity theft that was detectable strictly in relation to the person guilty of appropriation. The appropriating person was aesthetically perceived to be intentionally expressing themselves *falsely*. This was most clear in the most commonly circulated instances of appropriation: the racial Halloween costume. This is also why it has been so outrageous to discover people who aesthetically "passed" in their appropriation, like Rachel Dolezal and Andrea Smith, even if at these moments of exposure the media did tend to more explicitly make appropriation a matter of *profit* (and not just personal or social capital).

⁸ Redundantly, the "cultural" seemed to both determine and be determinable by aesthetics, which to me suggests the aestheticization of 'culture' as a mode of *racialization*. Indeed, the American public was emphasizing cultural appropriation via the use of *racialized aesthetics*.

⁹ 5. The Commission implicitly recommends the Canadian government support integration by "foster[ing] the arts and letters of cultural groups other than the British and French" (220). Privy Council Office, Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism. *Report of the Royal commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, Book IV: The Cultural Contribution of the Other Ethnic Groups*, October 23, 1969, <https://primarydocuments.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/RepRCBBBook41967Oct8.pdf>. The Canada Council for the Arts synthesizes these concepts in its definition of "cultural appropriation": "the Council considers that 'cultural appropriation' applies when cultural borrowings or adaptations from a minoritized culture reflect, reinforce, or amplify inequalities, stereotypes and historically exploitative relationships..." "Cultural Appropriation and the Canada Council's approach," Canada Council for the Arts, accessed March 10, 2025, <https://canadacouncil.ca/funding/funding-decisions/decision-making-process/application-assessment/context-briefs/cultural-appropriation>.

¹⁰ This is not surprising given Canada's official bilingualism of English and French.

¹¹ Dowling goes on to argue: "To the extent that an appropriation-based poem—especially one that purports to critique any aspect of property—fails to grasp this association, it fails as a work of art" (100).

¹² Unsurprisingly, popular discourse of appropriation in poetics focused on white poets who appropriated (and performed) racialized materials. Kenneth Goldsmith and Vanessa Place are the easily searchable examples of

this. But even here, a crucial slippage occurs: Goldsmith and Place didn't appropriate figures of (valued) blackness; they appropriated figures of (condemnable) *anti-blackness*. This slippage reflects the conceptual problem that blackness poses to figurability itself. Though I cannot offer a better articulation, I will here recognize that the idea of a single, generalizable (even linguistically defined) culture also seems impossible, especially given long histories of intra-cultural and intra-discursive appropriation. Another kind of project could richly study *discursive* appropriations, like the shifting function of the term "woke" in American discourse and culture.

¹³ A popular and perhaps preexisting discursive valuation of *representational* "inclusion" complemented the discursive dislocation of cultural aesthetics themselves out of place and away from use into determinable representations. To make "appropriation" signify strictly a misplaced, representational performance of a "culture" to which one determinately does *not* belong directed attention away from spatial access and material distribution and precludes thinking of 'culture' (race) as materially motivated or even historical.

¹⁴ In his introduction to a 2011 anthology of conceptual writing, poet Kenneth Goldsmith claims that "never before has language had so much materiality—fluidity, plasticity, malleability—beginning to be actively managed by the writer" (Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith, *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, xix).

¹⁵ The divergence between the popular discourse of cultural appropriation reveals diverging aesthetics and valuations of both *language* and *subjectivity*. The theory of "conceptual writing" also makes clear to me that the dispute was always rooted in a conflict over the *reality of the aesthetic*.

In between the broader mass media and the direct address of conceptual writers, Kenneth Goldsmith was made the most well-known representative of poetics of "appropriation" under the banner of "Conceptual Poetry," subsuming theoretical details of 'conceptual writing' with his iconography of self-proclaimed 'piracy' and reproduction (as "appropriation") of language documenting anti-blackness. But instead of problematizing Goldsmith's work as an aesthetic[ization] of anti-blackness and raising questions of his work's tone, intention, or context, Goldsmith's poetic *performance* was assimilated into the discourse of cultural appropriation.

It was easy at the time to articulate the violence of Goldsmith's appropriation as a conflict of framing his intention between "imagining other cultures versus stealing them," as Walter Benn Michaels' defense of Goldsmith for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* does. But this doesn't quite make sense, as the antiblack materials being appropriated were *not* produced by the cultures supposedly being made imaginable or stolen from. CAConrad articulates the violence of Goldsmith's appropriation most clearly as an aestheticization of racial violence. See CAConrad's "Kenneth Goldsmith Says He Is an Outlaw" for a rightfully seething response and collection of responses to Goldsmith's work and especially Goldsmith's subsequent self-explanations.

¹⁶ I synthesize this claim from my readings of Goldsmith, Dworkin, Place, Fitterman, and Dowling. These conceptualizations of language make more imaginable a linguistic "commons"—of either language or even print publication (writing). Dowling traces this ideal of a commons in poetic discourse as restored or manifest through poetics of appropriation. In my reading, the idea of a "linguistic" commons established or evinced by linguistic appropriation—at least in the 21st century discursive moment of "conceptual writing" and "cultural appropriation"—betrays a desire for a *conceptual* commons: a universal accessibility of *ideas* or at least, a universal capacity to read. Not only does imagining a linguistic commons require the abstraction of any given language's phonology, grammar, lexicality and other specific (even if supposedly 'systematic') aspects which make language(s) distinguishable and which preclude universal access to it, but so too does the concept of a linguistic commons necessarily disregard even *other ideas* of the ontology of language itself. While Dowling emphasizes the difference that place or context makes to the effect of a reproduction, she traces "accounts of conceptualist appropriation" that "imagine language, or at least the history of print publication, as a type of land—a commons wrongly enclosed." Dowling also points out that appropriation *can* be theorized otherwise; though it has been "most closely associated with conceptual writing, it is just as common in documentary poetry, essay poems, and pastiches." Sarah Dowling, "Property, Priority, Place: Rethinking the Poetics of Appropriation," *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 60, no. 1, Spring 2019, 98-99. See also Dowling's *Translingual Poetics*.

¹⁷ The aesthetic of appropriated language ironically seems to have facilitated an anti-aesthetic conceptualization of language or writing, or perhaps an ironic aesthetic of "conceptual writing." Christian Bök articulates this disinterest in aesthetics and a vague—ironically explicitly *subjective*—description of the "conceptual" in a blog post: "I might recognize...acts of Conceptual Literature, even though their authors might not identify very explicitly, if at all, with such a movement). Again, I make no claims for the aesthetic coherence of such a set, except to think of them as works, whose concepts of writing have goaded my own practice." Neither is it clear how Bök is conceptualizing the "otherness"—cultural otherness? Outsider aesthetics?—that appears in his title, "More Otherness from Conceptual Literature." Christian Bök, "More Otherness from Conceptual Literature," n.p.

Publishers situated Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith as most authoritative over the bounds of Conceptual Poetry when Dworkin and Goldsmith were made editors of *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* in 2011. Though Dworkin coined the term in 2003, he and several others have tried to open conceptual writing to include historical poetic forms at least as old as Gertrude Stein's. Nevertheless, Northwestern University Press' description of the anthology claims that "all the [Conceptual] writers are united in their imaginative appropriation of found and generated texts and their exploration of nonexpressive language." Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith, *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* (Northwestern UP, 2011). See also Kenneth Goldsmith, "Conceptual Poetics: On Appropriation," *Poetry Foundation*, June 10, 2008; Marjorie Perloff "Vito Acconci: Conceptual Poetry: Old and New" for *Parkett* magazine; and Peter Nicholls' conversation with Perloff: Peter Nicholls, "Conceptual Writing: A Modernist Issue," *Journal of Philosophy: A Cross-Disciplinary Inquiry*, Fall 2010, Vol. 6, No. 13 62-5.

¹⁸ In his introductory discussion of what the anthology's back cover paradoxically terms "conceptual aesthetics," Dworkin articulates "expression" as narration, phenomenological experience, emotional intensity—implicitly, the aesthetic itself—and posits "uncreative writing" as a non-expressive, impersonal aesthetic (Ibid., xxvii). This "impersonality" is achieved through the minimization of determinations—decisions, actions, performances, and perceptions—of the writer.

¹⁹ In his shift from 'visual art' to 'writing,' Dworkin's object of appropriation subtly shifts from visible language to language as conceptual (thereby universalizable) "procedure." Because appropriation of or as an aesthetic seems to depend on context and sense, perhaps Dworkin's concept of "uncreative writing" reaches for an anti-aesthetic appropriation, and an aesthetic of "uncreative writing" (Dworkin, *Against Expression*, xxiii-liv). Ibid., xliii. Though Dworkin's introduction to "conceptual writing" describes an aesthetic "appropriation" of "information," his writing subtly shifts away from the visual and communicative entirely to a concept of "writing" (perhaps tellingly, not conceptual *poetry*) as "impersonal procedure."

²⁰ Ironically, perhaps in the hope of both de-aestheticizing ideas and promoting the conscious performance (but only of predetermined procedure), Dworkin still seems to need a transparent and immaterial linguistic medium for his aesthetic of procedural appropriability. If "conceptual writing" communicates an "idea" which determines or is only an "impersonal procedure," Dworkin ultimately values that procedure/writing not for its motivation or effect but for the "integrity of that idea's execution"—which Dworkin seems to measure according to the procedure's singularity and its reproducibility—in as many different sites or contexts possible. The best idea for Dworkin seems to only to be the most manifestable or "executable." Though this and especially Goldsmith's discourse was notably more polemical and polarizing than other articulations, other "conceptual" writers also seem to have valued the possibility of de-aestheticizing ideas (or thinking?) simply by displacing the writer and making language's reproducibly apparent. Both Goldsmith and Dworkin go out of their way to address the "good" with Sol LeWitt's assertion that "[c]onceptual art is good only when the idea is good" (Ibid., xxii; xliii). Even in valuing "uncreativity," Dworkin's object of value seems to implicate the 'originality' of an individual's idea: "The question remains not whether one of these works could have been done better, but whether it could possibly have been done differently at all." Dworkin then wants a revaluation not of *one's* words but rather of *one's* ideas: "Here, then, is where conceptual writing shows up the rhetorical, ideological force of our cultural sense of creativity, which clings so tenaciously to a gold standard of one's own words rather than to one's own idea or the integrity of that idea's execution" (Ibid., xxxix).

²¹ Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman, *Notes on Conceptualisms*, Ugly Duckling Presse, 2009, 12.

²² Goldsmith, Kenneth, "Why Conceptual Writing? Why Now?" In *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* (Northwestern UP, 2011), xviii.

²³ Goldsmith slips writing into relation with himself through this possessive once, and he invokes judgment once by citing Sol LeWitt: "Conceptual art is good only when the idea is good" (xviii). How is the "good" determinable? Goldsmith also recognizes "filtering" as a practice of "taste."

²⁴ Reed suggests that this theory of subjectivity found grounding in an imagined equalizing effect of digital communication, where the anonymity of various speakers supposedly makes all words equally effective. Yet even anonymous words are not equally effective, as authority is conferred according to conformity with normative grammars, tones, and logics.

²⁵ Brian Reed, "In Other Words: Postmillennial Poetry and Redirected Language," 772.

²⁶ Place and Fitterman, *Notes on Conceptualisms*, 18, 22.

²⁷ Describing her own practice of poetic appropriation, Dowling acknowledges the instability of the position from which critique (or, for Dowling, even description) could be articulated. Dowling's response to this indeterminacy seems to be *more*, different appropriations of the same text: a "re-versioning of form" that multiplies

and reiterates different “views.” Sarah Dowling, *I’ll Drown My Book: Conceptual Writing by Women*, 253. This title also reflects a writerly desire for control over ‘their’ text.

²⁸ I follow Reed’s articulation of what was elsewhere called “conceptual writing” as “poetics of *redirected* [my emphasis] language.” Reed, “In Other Words,” 759.

²⁹ Does the citationality of appropriation also effectively “reward, even require, seeking out and scrutinizing other texts” as Reed claims? Ibid.

³⁰ Note, however, that the survey is now inaccessible to the public and that Eng almost certainly changed at least two of the questions regarding “reality-television programs” (12, 70).

³¹ The relative length of Eng’s responses to the questions in the first section highlights the simplicity of the answers the questions request. In fact, every single question in the first section is a polar question: answerable with a yes or a no. This grammar implies only a factual answer, not an explanation. The grammar of the answers likewise elide motives and convey unmotivated relationality rather than relations of power. For example, the conglomerate company Deloitte writes: “Canada is aiming to build its understanding of...P3 correctional facilities in a global context to determine their relevancy to the Canadian market.” To invoke “understanding” suggests a disinterested pursuit of knowledge; “Canada” is a term so abstract that any human or even material agents of this investigation are obscured in their conflation with the nation; and “relevance” portrays the Canadian market and P3 correctional facilities as only potentially connected, rather than in any more specific relationship, like one of profitability or derivation. Eng, *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes*, 7.

³² Ibid., 22-3.

³³ The writing quotes “Correctional Service Canada” for further “confirm[ation],” extending any authority readers grant to this institution (or intentionality in general) over the unquoted text.

³⁴ The grammar of “based on” does not admit a small distance between the review and the determined number.

³⁵ The categorical difference between a strike (an event or an action) and a citizen (a person) also obscures the fact of the human agents of the strike.

³⁶ Neither is any material (or any other kind of) relation of this “spokesperson” to the strike given, nor any relation to the striking prisoners.

³⁷ Though by the way, did the “news article” really name the “war machine”?

³⁸ I could think: *In order for one group of people’s demand for better—working? or carceral?—conditions to offend a(nother) group of working people seems to imply that both groups work under equal(ly fair and voluntary) conditions. For the insult to make sense wouldn’t I also have to believe that neither group is entitled to demand better for themselves?* I could go on.

³⁹ Reed encourages such an investigatory process.

⁴⁰ Eng, *Prison*, 101.

⁴¹ *Canadian Multiculturalism Act R.S.C., 1985 c. 24 (4th Supp.)* Web. <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/c-18.7/page-1.html>.

⁴² While disincentivizing honest responses by implying that an accurate response could, at least, confirm the violation of the law, and presumably would result in not only shame but also additional (legal) demands upon the respondents.

⁴³ *Canadian Multiculturalism Act*.

⁴⁴ Eng’s insertion of line breaks into the survey questions comparably isolate and usually delay the concept of diversity, creating distance between the concepts of “diversity” and “institution.” For example, Question 4.2 is divided into three lines: “Did your institution undertake / initiatives to foster a corporate culture / that embraces diversity?” Read together, the first two lines are almost redundant as the institutional the corporate are near synonyms. The second and third lines separate “corporate culture” from “diversity.” Both this line break and the verb “embrace” keeps diversity separate from the culture that affirms or surrounds it, subtly implying corporate culture cannot itself be diverse.

⁴⁵ Silva’s “1 (life) ÷ 0 (blackness) = ∞ – ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value” articulates a modern “consolidation of the Kantian knowledge program” where “the assignation of value that refers to a universal (scale or grid), while the object of knowledge becomes a unity of formal qualities (properties, variables, etc.), that is, an effect of judgements that produce it through measurement (degree) and classification (position).”

⁴⁶ The Act’s Preamble subordinates “multicultural” to “a policy of” and positions “multicultural” as a descriptor of “heritage.” “Multicultural(ism)” is again both a (new) mode of doing and a reality:

AND WHEREAS the Government of Canada recognizes the diversity of Canadians as regards race, national or ethnic origin, colour and religion as a fundamental characteristic of Canadian society and is committed to a policy of multiculturalism designed to preserve and enhance the multicultural

heritage of Canadians while working to achieve the equality of all Canadians in the economic, social, cultural and political life of Canada;

This final whereas statement slides to “multiculturalism” from the seemingly synonymous term “diversity,” which “regards,” as facts or “fundamental characteristic[s]” of Canadian society: race, nationality, ethnicity, color, and religion. If diversity “regards” these qualities determinate, the Government “recognizes” them—an odd grammar of perceptibility applied to a word that refers to discrete qualities and collects them into a single “characteristic.” The penultimate whereas statement does not use the words “diversity” or “multicultural,” but cites an International Covenant which:

provides that persons belonging to ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities shall not be denied the right to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion or to use their own language.

The grammar here strangely separates the “religious” and the “linguistic” from the “ethnic” and then seems to translate ethnicity to the “culture” of a person belonging to an ethnic minority. While this grammar figures culture as an object of enjoyment that can be denied, ethnicity is articulated as something to which a person “belongs,” rather than “has,” “is,” or might “enjoy.” Displaced from any referent, “multiculturalism” becomes entirely self-referential and discursive, yet continues to slip into adjectival form. Foucault would say this relationship where the word ‘multiculturalism’ is separated from reality characterizes all words in the modern episteme; “all language had value only as discourse.” *The Order of Things*, 43.

⁴⁷ Eng, *Prison*, 36: “Did your institution develop / policies and programs that took into consideration / multiculturalism and diversity?” “Multiculturalism” has a long legal history in Canada, perhaps beginning with the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism’s 1969 distinction between integration, which “does not imply the loss of an individual’s identity and original characteristics or of his original language and culture,” and assimilation, which “implies almost total absorption into another linguistic and cultural group” (5). The Commission implicitly recommends the Canadian government support integration by “foster[ing] the arts and letters of cultural groups other than the British and French” Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, *Book IV: The Cultural Contribution of the Other Ethnic Groups*, Ottawa: Queen’s Printer for Canada, 1969, 220.

⁴⁸ See Leela Gandhi’s “Invisible, Inc.”

⁴⁹ Eng, *Prison*, 29-32.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 29. The deictic *this* implies both writer and reader share the same referent.

⁵¹ Regardless of what the letters say, the designation “without prejudice” at the top of each letter designates the letters non-evidentiary and therefore non-functional, at least to the judiciary branch of the same state that would be the defendant.

⁵² Delay becomes evident as a central component of the state’s strategic, bureaucratic handling of this event. The first letter sent to Eng is dated July 9, 1984. But Eng registered his complaint on December 8 of the previous year. It takes another three months for the state to conclude its correspondence, having escalated the issue from the police to the Department of Justice. These delays arguably reduce the probability of Eng’s necklace ever being found. The delays also create many opportunities for Eng to end the pursuit of his claim for any reason.

⁵³ This sentence shifts the subject from “theft”—an event—to “responsibility”—a cause. The second paragraph again calls theft into question by affirming only that the “necklace did go missing and grammatically making the necklace the agent of its own disappearance. da Silva reads “the role of *determinacy*—formal determination articulated as a kind of efficient causation—in modern thought...” In the letters, the determinability of *cause* depends on the perceptibility or possession of ‘evidence’ *by a particular party*—the police. That “the person[s] responsible could not be determined” *by the police* becomes “no evidence” of theft at all, in the “view” of the commissioner at least.

⁵⁴ The state both asserts the relevance of the theft’s context and ironically broadens the possible time of theft so widely that context can no longer be thought an attribute of the theft.

⁵⁵ Eng, *Prison*, 31.

⁵⁶ These letters show that delay a central component of the state’s strategic, bureaucratic handling of this event. The first letter sent to Eng is dated July 9, 1984. But Eng registered his complaint on December 8 of the previous year. It takes another three months for the state to conclude its correspondence, having escalated the issue from the police to the Department of Justice. These delays arguably reduce the probability of Eng’s necklace ever being found. The delays also create many opportunities for Eng to give up the pursuit of his claim.

⁵⁷ I am drawing tangentially from Walter Benjamin’s concept of “homogenous, empty time,” on which the notion of linear progression into the future depends, as articulated in “Theses on the Philosophy of History” in *Illuminations*, 261.

⁵⁸ And of the state ever having to confront new evidence.

⁵⁹ See Stephen Best's *None Like Us*.

⁶⁰ The term "yourself," rather than "you," also oddly distances the Sue Dong Eng who is the addressee of this language ("you") from the Sue Dong Eng to whom the necklace belongs ("yourself").

⁶¹ Fitting in the case of the gold necklace, Marx's *Capital* reminds us that *gold* was the material historically abstracted into the universal form of equivalence, that is, money. This allows money "to play the part of universal equivalent within the world of commodities" (162). Marx explains that money becomes the universal equivalent because society distinguishes money from other commodities and takes the value of money in its intrinsic "natural form" to be equivalent to its exchange value. In order to universalize the relationship between gold and the value it represented, already the materiality of gold had to be *measured* and thereby separable, both within itself (its weight from its other qualities), and as a discrete and measurable 'portion': 2 ounces of gold became £2, in Marx's example. With Yusoff and Silva, we can elaborate on this "natural form." See also Kathryn Yusoff's *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, U of Minnesota P, 2018: "The organization of matter and subjects within descriptions that served as a mode of containment produced the very idea of a standing stock of gold, energy, and slaves, organized as they were, as concomitant categories on a bill of sale. Blackness is rendered as empty signifier, like gold, silver, and other precious minerals..." (71).

⁶² Barrett, *Blackness and Value*, 18-19.

⁶³ At the same time, the claims that replace the necklace are also undermined or devalued as *claims*. In the context of the state's thorough indeterminacy with regard to any occurrence whatsoever, "claims" indicate an unproven, and thus suspect, linguistic assertion (a claim *that* the necklace is stolen) more than a designation of property (a claim *to* the necklace).

⁶⁴ "Like value, the sign comes into being only as a result of diminishing, in its moment of self-display, that which it is not." 42. Both "mediated self-presence and dialectical self-difference constitute the linguistic sign as much as they do the moment or structure of value." 41 The Release even uses the word "presents"—a gift—as the cause for Eng's "release" Canada "from all matters of action."

⁶⁵ Both of these claims about discourse are rooted in my personal experience. If "necklace" signifies femininity, an object of value; I expect what is called a "neckchain" to signify a value (both monetary and aesthetic) less than the value of "necklace."

⁶⁶ Denise Ferreira da Silva, "1 (life) ÷ 0 (blackness) = ∞ - ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value," *e-flux*, no. 79, Feb 2017, n.p.

⁶⁷ Eng, *Prison*, 33.

⁶⁸ In contrast to this list, Eng creates another list of terms in a later section: "a settler / a husband / a father / a property owner / a taxpayer / a no-good recidivist ch****" (51). Unlike the earlier list, this list of identity categories is double-spaced, suggesting a greater difference or distance between each category. Yet again, the article "a" in this list makes categories of the terms. This list again comments on the political effect of discursive framing. Sue Dong Eng deploys each of the first five categories in a letter to his attorney that appears opposite to this list. Eng is requesting representation in a deportation hearing, and describes himself: "I have settled in Canada, I have married a Canadian citizen, and we have two children. I am a property owner and a taxpayer..." (50). Eng claims these identities strategically to appeal to the values of the state that will decide his immigration status. The final term in Mercedes Eng's list then reminds us of the racist framing available to be used against the same person.

⁶⁹ The article "a" that appears before each of these terms suggests abstract categories and evades the particular perspective and singularity that "the" requires; "a" positions its objects as determinate instances of abstract categories or concepts.

⁷⁰ A lyric accumulation as Culler and Reed theorize.

⁷¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. "ligature," Oxford UP. Consider Awkward-Rich's "&"

⁷² *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. "border," Oxford UP.

⁷³ The Release offered to Eng works like a revocation, whereby its language simultaneously implies *and* allows the state to revoke any (statement of) responsibility or accountability for the necklace.

⁷⁴ Barrett, *Blackness and Value*, 33.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ In Marx's terms, we could articulate the aesthetic (the perception of form) as the appearance of a physical relationship: "In the same way, the impression made by a thing on the optic nerve is perceived not as a subjective excitation of that nerve but as the objective form of a thing outside the eye. In the act of seeing, of course, light is really transmitted from one thing, the external object, to another thing, the eye. It is a physical relation between physical things. As against this, the commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material

relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things" (165). Though Marx calls us to attend to the "use-value" of the object itself, he still reduces this "use-value" to the satisfaction of human needs, reducing the value of the object to its usefulness to generalized "human needs"—rather than its meaningfulness, or sentimentality, or desirability—to a particular person. More relevant to this project, Marx also draws our attention back to the object *as a product of the expenditure of human labor*.

⁷⁸ Eng, *Prison*, 33.

⁷⁹ Think of Awkward-Rich's invitation to "let her coat your pink tongue."

⁸⁰ Eng, *Prison*, 55.

⁸¹ This card is too convenient for my purposes. That *only* black *and* brown appear on the card reiterates our current (racial) terms for the most devalued subjects. To list colors as a determinates of identity grounds identity in perceptions that are indescribable without reference to other colors, are intangible and shifting depending on context, unmeasurable and thus unverifiable.

⁸² *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. "complexion," Oxford UP.

⁸³ At least without access to a colorimeter, which still measures *light* rather than color: a device which "measur[es] the absorbance by a liquid of light at different visible wavelengths." *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. "colorimeter," Oxford UP.

⁸⁴ Eng, *Prison*, 17.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 18-19. Note: Fences limit the background of both photos. Though the mother and the child each seem to look into the camera once, the father's gaze is never quite direct upon the viewer.

⁸⁶ Eng's "I" returns on a page describing Jessi: Carole's daughter. This is the only time the "I" appears in relation to Carole; here, only in "wonder[ing]" about Jessi's experience as the daughter of a "destatused mama" and an incarcerated father who "looked like the kind of white girl I used to wanna be." My discussion of Carole will touch on the relations of desire for and toward her throughout the book. "Jessi's destatused mama died of the system / they let out Jessi's dad to look after her"; "I wonder how it is for beautiful / could-pass-for-a-white-girl Jessi" (59).

⁸⁷ Eng, *Prison*, 80.

⁸⁸ The image of "flesh" after two adjectives that more often describe "skin" is disconcerting, as "flesh" designates a material "enclosed by the skin" not typically described as "thin" or "brown" and which recalls the flesh that is (made into) brown beef jerky.

⁸⁹ "homemade" also extends the diction of food established by beef jerky and flesh.

⁹⁰ Though "homemade" often confers a valued self-sufficiency upon the homemade object's creator and a more artful quality to the homemade object itself, if to be imprisoned is decidedly *not* to be in *one's own* home, whose home does this adjective come from and who is the (home)maker? Because the first homemade object of the simile is indeterminable, as well as the home, the maker, and the mode of made-ness, the significance of "homemade" is minimized toward its self-referential definition: "made in one's home." *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. "homemade," Oxford UP.

⁹¹ Eng, *Prison*, 82-3.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ This would follow Marx. See "Estranged Labor," in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*.

⁹⁴ For an accessible and rich accounting of "yellow" as a racializing term, see Kat Chow's "If We Called Ourselves Yellow" for NPR, Sept. 27, 2018. Chow writes: "The idea of calling myself yellow stirs in the pit of my stomach, the same place where bellyaches and excitement form. It feels at once radical and specific. Though it's a slur — in fact, *because* it's a slur — it's the type of word that could force people to face its long, storied history of racism and resistance directly, every time they hear it. So, what *about* yellow?"

⁹⁵ That she "think[s] about that yellow bead a lot" suggests an ambivalence toward the bead's meaning. Can Eng resignify "yellow," especially in the color's absence, away from its historical, discursive use to refer to Asian people, or is that color—or is it just the word "yellow"—too powerful? In a future iteration of this chapter, I will address the fact that this image also appears in color on the inside cover of *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes*; there, we can see which is the yellow bead. The inside back cover also offers a color photo of an adolescent Mercedes Eng standing next to her father against an indeterminable, flat background.

⁹⁶ Eng, *Prison*, 102.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 102-3.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁰⁰ Carole lies with the salmon and meditates on "being like water," a well-known reference to Bruce Lee and a Taoist principle. To "be like water" has been a popular concept among grassroots protestors that allows them

to avoid dangerous direct confrontations with police and to avoid being isolated from each other. The image of water suggests a constant movement throughout the world in different forms. Eng states in her interview with Rob McLennan that she is working on "internalizing the principles of water." Mercedes Eng, interview by Rob McLennan, *rob mclennan's blog*, Rob McLennan, March 7, 2014.

¹⁰¹ Eng, *Prison*, 63.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁰⁴ "I, / oh, / I, / can turn a gray sky blue / you see, I can make it rain when I want it to // to his call she responds // I, / I can fly like a bird in the sky" (74); "first things first, I'll eat your brain." (84).

¹⁰⁵ Eng, *Prison*, 61.

¹⁰⁶ As Eng's note specifies the first iteration of the lyric as: "Johnny Lee Moore with 12 Mississippi Penitentiary Convicts singing 'Eighteen Hammers' as recorded on Alan Lomax's Southern Folk Heritage Series." The survival of work songs across time and context insinuates the mere transfiguration of forced labor into chain gangs after emancipation, rather than its abolition, which transfigured again to contemporary prison labor. Though produced in response to oppression, work songs were historically used to help laborers coordinate and work in concert without hurting each other; they could even be used to coordinate escape plans. The prison work song registers a continuity of oppression without totalizing it or rendering it teleological, as strategies of resistance persist and transform too. See Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity*.

¹⁰⁷ Eng, *Prison*, 28, 90, and 97.

¹⁰⁸ The first instance includes a line characterizes the singer: "Well, I shot me a dead man, got / Got a hundred years," claims "Well, I'll be living when / When you be dying," and attributes the words to Johnny Lee Moore and 12 Mississippi Convicts (28). The second instance, sung by Carole, doesn't characterize the "I" beyond "raising up my hammer," and shifts the living subject to "they'll be living when / When you be dying" (90). The third instance, still sung by Carole, doesn't address "you" at all.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹¹⁰ I feel justified in this positioning of the reader given that the hammer belongs to the singer, who is, at least at first, Carole and not the reader. It would be productive to consider how a hammer and a spark might both be allowed to "drop on down."

¹¹¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. "explode."

¹¹² Other languages, such as Spanish and French, mark this difference with two different words which translate to "know" in English. This duality might also be thought through the verb "to recognize," often used to define "to know"—that which is to merely acknowledge the existence of vs. to be familiar with something.

¹¹³ Davis' quote continues, "It is rarely acknowledged that the fastest growing group of prisoners are black women and that Native American prisoners are the largest group per capita."

¹¹⁴ Moten, *In the Break*, 91.

¹¹⁵ It does not explain the prison industrial complex, because explanation is not the means of its explosion. The "complex" itself cannot be explained because, as the book lays bare, it is neither total nor totally coherent.

¹¹⁶ Ryan Fitzpatrick points out a comparable (de)stabilization in his reading of Eng's earlier work. He argues that "capitalist and colonial processes stabilize and destabilize the material relations that compose Vancouver in the twenty-first century and critiques "appeals to instability or fragility or temporariness as a condition for speculative experiment with potential resistance." He finds that Eng in her previous book, *Mercenary English*, employed "articulatory realism" through the writing of "new accurate maps" to show "that instability is actually a problem for certain bodies (now and historically)." Fitzpatrick concludes noting "a tension between stability and instability that depends on both the way the assemblage is coded and the subject position of the one navigating it." Ryan Fitzpatrick, "And Tomorrow, I'm Somewhere Else: Destabilization, Dispossession, and Dissolution in the Vancouvers of Lisa Robertson and Mercedes Eng," *Canadian Literature*, no. 236, (Spring 2018): 53-69.

Chapter Two

"when in a circle" Conjunction in Layli Long Soldier's *WHEREAS*

Layli Long Soldier published her first full book of poetry, *WHEREAS*, in 2017 with Graywolf Press. She had previously published a chapbook titled *Chromosomory* (2010) and poems in *The American Poet*, *The American Reader*, and the *American Indian Journal of Culture and Research*.¹ Long Soldier graduated from the Institute of American Indian Arts with her B.A. and from Bard College with her M.A. In 2012, she created a participatory installation titled *Whereas We Respond* on the Pine Ridge Reservation, from which she drew energy and inspiration for *WHEREAS*. She has exhibited poetic, sculptural, and interactive work at multiple venues and received several prizes.² Little further information is available about Long Soldier; a member of the Oglala Lakota Nation, she currently lives in Tsaile, Arizona on Navajo Nation land, where she has taught English at Diné College.

At the beginning of Part II, *WHEREAS* names its speaker as “a citizen of the United States and an enrolled member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe, meaning I am a citizen of the Oglala Lakota Nation.”³ The Lakota are part of the Sioux and the Oglala are a part—one of seven tribes—of the Lakota people.⁴ The Lakota people’s earlier homeland is mainly in contemporary Minnesota, but the population has been displaced several times and is largely associated with North and South Dakota today. There are currently about 70,000 registered Lakota members, but only about 2,000 people still speak the Lakota language.⁵ There are approximately 47,000 enrolled members of the Oglala nation, and the majority of the 18,850 people currently living on the Pine Ridge Reservation identify as Oglala.⁶ Pekka Hamalainen’s *Lakota America* offers an extensive history of the formation and fall of the Lakota empire, revising and filling in common American settler reference

points to the Lakota, including The Battle of Little Bighorn, Custer's Last Stand, the Wounded Knee Massacre, Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, and Lakota relationships to horses, buffalo, the plains and the "Black Hills."⁷

"*WHEREAS* explicates and clarifies"

Decidedly the most widely reviewed book of the three centered in this project, reviews of *WHEREAS* curiously tend to begin in the middle of the book.⁸ Perhaps this is because the book's title matches the title of its second part. The first part, named "These Being the Concerns," contains 17 poems of varying lengths, several containing multiple parts themselves. All besides the last of these poems, "38," are titled by one or two words, including some Lakota words. These poems are both imagistic and meditative, particularly over words and their meanings. Most are written in the first-person, describing experiences of miscarriage and motherhood, the writing process and the reception of one's writing, looking and light, learning the Lakota language, and feeling limited by what one does not yet know. The perspective of these poems often but not always seems, not quite caused, but affected by the subject's being: Oglala, a poet, and a mother.⁹ Across the book's two parts, Long Soldier arranges words on the page inventively; several pages are fully justified blocks of prose, some arranged in a thin vertical line down the page. One page turns words on their sides and upside down to form the lines of a square; words on other pages scatter down the page. Many poems play with erasure, displacement, and separation.

Part II, "Whereas," begins on page 57 of *WHEREAS*, with a page like a preface that sketches the history of the Congressional Resolution of Apology to Native Americans and includes Long Soldier's writing: "My response is directed to the Apology's delivery, as well as the language, crafting, and arrangement of the written document."¹⁰ Resonant with Mercedes Eng's structuring move with the Canadian Multiculturalism Act's mandated survey, Part II of Long

Soldier's book appropriates the structure as well as much of the language of Senate Joint Resolution 14 of April 30, 2009.¹¹ The section echoes the division of the resolution into three parts: Whereas Statements, Resolutions, and Disclaimer. The 20 "whereas statements" match the number of statements beginning with the word "whereas" in the resolution, while the "Resolutions" and "Disclaimer" sections copy and manipulate exact language from the document.¹² However, Long Soldier intervenes much more noticeably in her appropriated text with various spatial manipulations of its words.

While *WHEREAS* explicitly introduces only its second part as a "response," in beginning with and focusing on its second half reviews tend to position the whole book as if always concerning the Resolution. Even as the title of Part I in fact claims the "concerns" of the book ("These Being the Concerns"), to read the first 56 pages as responsive to the Resolution requires a re-reading or pre-informed (perhaps by a review) expectation of the book.¹³ Reviews also tend toward pedagogical interpretations of *WHEREAS*; in her 2020 article "Language to Reach With: Layli Long Soldier's *WHEREAS* Connects Words to Reality," Rachel Griffis observes that "reviews celebrate how *WHEREAS* explicates and clarifies the deceptive, impenitent stance of the congressional apology."¹⁴ Griffis, however, reads *WHEREAS* in excess of a direct reply.

Reading for explication might lead readers to judgments of their own which exceed the book itself. Without articulating *how* language *should* be used, Griffis' article allows *WHEREAS* to document an investigation or "exploration" without necessarily conveying its results to anyone. Seeking a "more responsible way of using and working with language," Griffis reads *WHEREAS* to highlight the (mis-)alignment of words with intention and effect.¹⁵ This responsible use of language, for Griffis, resists abstractions and engages affect.¹⁶ In this mode, Long Soldier's response unpacks the premises of US discourse rather than arguing with its conclusions.¹⁷

Implicitly interested in “responsibility” as a term of address, this chapter attends to recognition, separation, and materiality as terms of relevance to *WHEREAS*. These themes appear in *WHEREAS* as not just social but also subjective and linguistic questions that I focalize around the work of the conjunction *whereas* and other formal aspects of the book. Though I am decidedly *not* reading *WHEREAS* as a sociological argument or representation of “indigeneity,” I turn to Indigenous Studies for the field’s orientations toward these terms as political, theoretical, and literary concerns and in consideration of Long Soldier’s own centering of experiences marked as Native American—learning Lakota, interacting with Indian Health Services, feeling ambiguously addressed by the American Congressional Resolution of Apology to Native Americans. At the same time, both the scholarly thinking in Indigenous Studies that I find most pertinent and Long Soldier’s attention to these topics account for, even orient toward, the workings of these concepts also in settler logics *and* in literary theory not explicitly marked by an attention to indigeneity; *WHEREAS* cites *Circumfession* by Jacques Derrida and Long Soldier thanks Fred Moten in relation to her concept of “languageness.” My concluding discussion of Long Soldier’s use of irony—a slippery and extensively-theorized device that condenses a problem of language itself—will articulate implications of *WHEREAS* to literary theory in general.

The legal formalization of “recognition” in past and present American governmental policies of land, rights, and resources for indigenous people makes the concept uniquely relevant to Native Americans.¹⁸ *WHEREAS* thinks through the problem of the recognition or recognizability of not just human identity but of any meaning in written language, expanding into questions of recognitions of intention and feeling. While recognition in Indigenous Studies is closely connected to strategies of or resistance to incorporation within the American state or citizenry, *WHEREAS*

again invites a broader thinking of what it means to be “a part.” In this vein, the book repeatedly raises questions of separation and separability that extend beyond the social into the material.

Indigenous studies scholar Mark Rifkin turns to literature and seeks a new “project of reading” in *Speaking for the People: Native Writing and the Question of Political Form* (2021).¹⁹ Problematizing readers’ expectations of Native American writing “as expressions of ethnographic realness,” but likely due to his 19th century focus, Rifkin does not linger over textual addressees who are not settlers, nor possible purposes other than supporting Native American efforts of negotiation with the American state.²⁰ Though the 21st century undeniably constitutes a different political terrain for Native Americans, Long Soldier may likewise have assumed and even addressed white settler readers. Published by Graywolf Press, a nonprofit poetry press not particularly distinguished for its Native American publications or audience yet known for its publication of non-white writers and which asserts its interest in “transforming culture through literature,” *WHEREAS* may very well be read mostly by settlers sympathetic to pro-native changes to American policy and culture.²¹ Yet both the book and the independent press remain little-read and small compared to other American literary forms, making it somewhat more difficult to think Long Soldier’s—or any poet’s—sole or primary purpose in publishing poetry was to effect widespread socio-political change. Consistent with my larger project’s purposes, this chapter wants to attend to *WHEREAS*’s possible workings beyond the enlightenment of non-native readers, even as the book does in fact explicitly account for such subjectivities, inform, and perhaps call for action.²²

Though Rifkin suggests in passing that “ethnographic” reading still predominates today, my reading of others’ readings of *WHEREAS* suggest to me a slight shift. As Papa and Griffis’ most recent, scholarly articles reflect (Papa’s most explicitly), most of the few published readings

of *WHEREAS* seem to have moved on from 20th century understandings of collective identities as natural and contained within groups of people themselves. Perhaps as this recognition tensions the coherence of collective identity itself, readers and writers are more consciously critical of the idea of collective representation through literature even as the expectation persists in new ways.²³

The pertinent manifestation of this shift appears to me in the reviewers' focus with which this chapter opens, which read *WHEREAS* as a response to a Resolution rather than a recognition or representation of indigenous experience, even as Part I invites (perhaps in order to challenge) the latter reading in ways I will discuss below. Even in trying to shift from a reading of *WHEREAS* as representative of indigeneity to a reading of *WHEREAS* as an (implicitly totalizing) indigenous perspective on non-indigenous objects displaces the logic of representable identity onto a figure of the writer. Yet by drawing attention to the writer and the figure indexed by the *I*, and, by explicitly naming herself in a disclaimer that ends the book, Long Soldier complicates our ability to project readings onto the real Layli Long Soldier outside of the text.

A scholarly review of *WHEREAS* written by Crystal Alberts offers to me an example. This reading emphasizes the "multiple layers of meaning" made from Long Soldier's "visual form[s]." In distinction from other reviews, Alberts gives Part I sustained attention. Similar to my own reading, Alberts names Long Soldier's addressees as "presumably a non-Indigenous, US audience." Ultimately, in her attention to visual form, Alberts turns to metaphor and narrative to suggest that the third part of Long Soldier's first poem "invokes the boundaries of a reservation, implies the destruction of Indigenous cultures through the emptiness between the lines, [and] emphasizes the gaps in knowledge of 'you' that have helped to create this situation..."²⁴ Let's look at the poem Alberts describes:

"This is how you see me the space in which to place me"

Before reaching the part Alberts describes, *WHEREAS* first implicates recognition in naming in the part One of its first poem, “Ĥe Sápa.” Inaugurating this poem of five parts across five pages, Long Soldier’s first page corrects the back formation from English of “Black Hills” to “Pahá Sápa” rather than “Ĥe Sápa,” which communicates something closer to “black mountains.”²⁵ This correction critiques both the effects of power and authority on translation and the prioritization of language over ontology: “not a black hill not Pahá Sápa, by any name you call it.”²⁶ Long Soldier insists on the proper name yet ultimately emphasizes reality over “any name you call it” in any language. Trying to recognize subjectivity, we might notice that any grammatical index of the speaker (any first-person pronoun) comes only after other subject pronouns appear in this poem. A *one* and a *you* appear in part One while part Two names a *he*, a *they*, and one *we*. In Three, the speaker appears only in the object pronoun *me*, first the object of *your* seeing [see the attached Figure 1], and only in part Four does the “I” emerge through a negation.

The third part of “Ĥe Sápa”—the part Alberts reads—proliferates shifting phenomenologies of subjectivity. The arrangement of four lines pulls the English reader who starts top left-to-right from the first line down and around the page, tracing the shape of a square, and possibility requiring the reader to physically rotate the book in order to read every side. Extra spaces between words break the square at each corner and in the middle of the right and bottom lines. The text reads:

This is how you see me the space in which to place me // The space in me you see
/ is this place // To see this space / see how you place me in you // This is how to
place you in the space in which to see.²⁷

This first line confuses subject and place, sight and location by another. Though the object pronoun “me” appears only after “you see,” the qualification “this is how” subtly reasserts the authority of

the first-person writer to ‘see’ (how) *you*. If “this” refers to the shape or outline made of language on this page, the subject “me” is a material, paradoxically (in)visible space framed by language.²⁸

As a *how*, “this” refers to the figure of the square not as “me” but as a process of reading. Though every line mentions sight, this page is not imagistic; it is visual only to the extent that Long Soldier’s language itself is read visually. The bottom line asserts a possibility “to see this space” while the literal spaces on the page—as well as the “place” inside or of the words—seem invisible or at least linguistically unexpressive, perhaps not coincidentally because they are white and the ink is black. The only qualifications of “space” and “place” (twice made a verb) are *the* and *this*. Every line contains the deictic *this*, though its objects shift.²⁹ How are we to read *this*? This “this” indexes a speaker because it is only in relation to the speaker’s position that the deictic communicates. As will return in *Sympathetic Little Monster*, “this” indexes a speaker separate from yet close to her object of reference. Yet this page tells us almost nothing about who or where its speaker is, appearing here only as an object pronoun in relation to *you*.

When *this* is not (just) a figure (of “me” or of reading), but a method (“this is how”), “this” refers to the act of reading *this* particular page. If *this* is “how you see me” *and* “the space in which to place me”; if both *me* and *you* can be placed in “the space”; if it is the same space “to see” *and* “in which to see,” Long Soldier is creating a phenomenology that collapses method and place, subject and object, and object and method. If *this* is also this poem, poetry becomes a reading method, a place, a space, and a writing method in turn: “this is how you see me,” “this place,” “this space,” “This is how to place you in the space.”

If *this* refers either to (*the*) reading or (*the*) writing, both affect how the *me* is seen. In using the *me* and not the *I* on this page, Long Soldier splits her subject into both subject and object. Already the *me* is not only the speaker but also the speaker’s recognition of herself as an object.

Can the *me* also be the poem? If the *me* is the page's own self-reference, as we move clockwise through around the page the language of the poem echoes the shape of the page, its boundary. Long Soldier transforms the spaces between and within the lines into a place where the reader might be, but then again she suggests reading places a poem *within* the reader.³⁰ In the last line the *me* disappears, suggesting that the poem is ultimately neither about itself nor an objectified subject but the procedure: "This is how to place you in the space in which to see."

If we decide to read that *me* as the writer of this language, as Long Soldier, it is easy to index the *me* to Long Soldier as a racialized subject by attending to Long Soldier's identity in the world beyond the page. Even if we don't name Long Soldier as the *me*, *WHEREAS* itself doesn't discourage our reading of the *me* as Lakota; if there is a speaker in part One and that speaker is the *me* in part Three, we could extrapolate the speaker as Lakota via her knowledge of Lakota place and language in part One. To read the *me* as a racialized subject adds another valence to each line by requiring us to consider the difference race makes to intersubjective relation. Now the arrangement of language seems especially like a border and an attempt at containment that Alberts saw. Though I could extrapolate further on the implications of each line given a racialized *me*, again the *me* nevertheless leaves the final line and points its readers to consider their own location and orientation more than the *me*.³¹

As *WHEREAS* invites its readers to particular positioning, the book still *uses* specific social and state language and addresses underlying discursive logics. Like the texts Rifkin reads, *WHEREAS* appropriates a settler form—the Congressional Resolution—in order to leverage its language against itself. Rather than appeal to the Resolution's particular conceptual avowals of recognition and "resolution," Long Soldier meditates on the Resolution as nonperformative and even nonsensical and makes a point of the place of the Resolution buried in a 67-page

appropriations bill and that most Americans have no idea that it exists.³² *WHEREAS* extends its reflection on settler-state language when its writer grapples with the colonial origin of her English and her lack of access to her family's language, Lakota, and most specifically, Lakota spoken "the Oglala way."³³ This expansion of Long Soldier's focus from the language of the Resolution to the *English* language.³⁴

WHEREAS articulates the personal effects of language use through its first-person voice. The book grapples with a subject position simultaneously recognized and disregarded through constructions of grammatical, logical, and spatial divisions between the indigenous and the American nation-state illustrated in the logic of the conjunction "whereas." In her reading of *WHEREAS*, Dowling finds the book to "stage a gap, an aporia: in reading [the book] we confront the irresolvable disjunction between the prior and its replacement."³⁵ Though I follow Dowling's claim up to a point, particularly in relationship to the fact of loss in *WHEREAS*, I will argue that Long Soldier's appropriation of the Resolution primarily reveals a logic of separation *as a feature of settler discourse*.³⁶ In this chapter I turn to discuss how *WHEREAS* emphasizes continuity or nonseparability more than aporia or determinate, binary relations with its deictics, like the "this" with which I began, and by foregrounding writing as both spatial and tonal.³⁷

Long Soldier's spatial arrangements of words and lines visualize and break different forms of separability and containment resonant with the settler cartographic thinking that Mishuana Goeman critiques in *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations* (2013).³⁸ If mapping naturalizes spatial arrangements, Western maps legitimate Western conquest and ownership by representing indigenous lands as empty, abstract space within a single nation.³⁹ In twentieth-century Native American literature, Goeman instead finds concepts of place that exceed boundaries, traverse scales, and defy "definitions of self and community staked out as property,"

as well as “spatialized subjectivities.”⁴⁰ *WHEREAS* emphasizes space not only in its conceptualizations of place and land but constitutes its own maps through arrangements of language into boxes, tight spacings, erasure, and relocations. The book spatializes subjectivity in its attention to particular places, natural environments, and the space of dream. Poems regarding pregnancy and childbirth emphasize embodiment and subjective multiplicity while the place of a subject *in a poem* is also explicitly contemplated.

“Whereas sets the table”

Linking spatial and temporal figures of space and of subjectivity, Elizabeth Povinelli’s concept of the “governance of the prior” resonates with the first-person relationship to the conjunction “whereas” in *WHEREAS*. Resonant with Goeman’s readings, Povinelli names a settler concept of a “disembedded national subject” who “is situated in an earth whose fundamental cartological perspective is from the view from nowhere—with this view from nowhere interpreted as an objective rather than subjective framework” in her chapter in *Varieties of Sovereignty and Citizenship*, “Citizens of The Earth.”⁴¹ This notion of subjectivity is defined against a settler “figure of the indigenous (the first or prior) person” as strictly subjective and *before* the settler.⁴² The violence with which the temporality of ‘after’ leading to ‘now,’ if acknowledged at all, is imagined by settlers as a single complete event.

Both Povinelli’s and Long Soldier’s writings recognize that it is continually enacted and experienced.⁴³ Povinelli points to the past perfect tense as the grammatical logic of the indigenous prior: *they used to be*. The word “whereas” does similar work to both acknowledge and contain the past. “Whereas” is a subordinating conjunction: a conjunction which transforms the phrase of which it is a part into an incomplete idea as a dependent clause. The grammatical logic of a sentence with a *whereas* clause suggests that the essential meaning or fact of the sentence is its

independent clause, the other part of the sentence which could be separated from the dependent clause and still form a complete sentence. As a subordinating conjunction, *whereas* can simultaneously establish context and foreclose causality by rendering its clause trivial, or contradictory, to the other half of its sentence. *Whereas* disconnects the meanings of two statements as it re-connects them in the subordination of one to the other.

Long Soldier directly engages the grammar of *whereas* in one of her “whereas statements” which begins by summarizing the multiplicitous and contradictory effects of the conjunction. This statement also uses the *present* perfect tense in a way that challenges the working of the past perfect that Povinelli describes. This passage positions *whereas* as an addressing and addressable subject. The word arranges a table that holds “the dish being served.”⁴⁴ Though invited to the meal, the writer of this poem asserts that she is “in unholding.” Setting the table becomes a “setup” for the writer rather than a support or sustenance:

WHEREAS the word *whereas* means it being the case that, or considering that, or while on the contrary; is a qualifying or introductory statement, a conjunction, a connector. Whereas sets the table. The cloth. The saltshakers and plates. Whereas calls me to the table. Whereas precedes and invites. I have come now. I am seated across from a Whereas smile. Under pressure of formalities, I fidget I shake my legs. I’m not one for these smiles, Whereas I have spent my life in unholding. *What do you mean by unholding?* Whereas asks and since Whereas rarely asks, I am moved to respond, Whereas, I have learned to exist and exist without your formality, salt-shakers, plates, cloth. Without the slightest conjunctions to connect me. Without an exchange of questions, without the courtesy of answers. It is mine, this unholding, so that with or without the setup, I can see the dish being served. Whereas let us bow our heads in prayer now, just enough to eat;⁴⁵

The word *Whereas* is the first grammatical subject in this scene. The word is performative—it sets the table—and emotive—it smiles. This word has its own voice: it calls and asks.

Recognizing this subjectivity or these subject-effects in a conjunction which necessarily has no referent draws attention to the subject of *me* to which *whereas* relates intersubjectively. Six phrases in, the first-person subject appears only when she is called, and once again is at first only

indexed in the *object* pronoun. Though the entire passage is in the present tense, the agentive subject *I* appears in a sentence that shifts from the simple present to the present perfect tense: “I have come now.” Though it still references the present, this is the first sentence to register an action in the past; the agentive first-person subject indeed has a history and existed outside this scene before arriving to it.

This passage’s other present perfect phrase—“I am moved”—blurs the difference between an agentive and passive voice, of the agent’s presence or absence. Though the past participle “moved” again seems to reference a past before the writing, this word might also refer to an affect of indeterminate duration more than a single motion. Because the *I* might still be moved as a condition rather than a completed action, this phrasing raises a question of the origin of a feeling poetic subjectivity and that subject’s place within the temporality of writing. The prolonged explanation of the affect’s cause—“Whereas asks and since whereas rarely asks, I am moved”—suggests it is the processing and contextualizing of the question that causes *I*’s affection more than the question itself. The *I* is both in reflection on its affection and simultaneous to it. Similar to the work of the *me*, it is now as if this *I* is both participating in the scene and witnessing herself.

Even as the writer seems to be imagining herself in a necessarily metaphoric scene, the *I* is embodied: seated, fidgeting and shaking (her?) legs. Though the speaker is moved by *whereas*’s question, the question comes after two assertions that the speaker makes about herself: “I’m not one for these smiles, Whereas I have spent my life in unholding.” As if *Whereas* as an interlocutor hears itself named or addressed in this statement, the ‘word itself’ poses a question cited in italics. By making the non-referential “whereas” ask “What do you mean by unholding,” Long Soldier figures the *I* as addressee, perhaps thereby pushing readers into the position of the questioner.

The writer says in the first-person that her “unholding,” effected by an existence “without your formality,” “without the slightest conjunctions to connect me,” and without communication, allows her to “see the dish being served.” The speaker is denied linguistic means of connection and even form(ality). Asserting the undeniably causal conjunction “so,” the speaker says that it is ironically “this unholding,” rather than the place setting that we might expect, that allows her to see what she is expected to consume gratefully. Yet the ambiguity of “dish”—a synonym for the plate set by *whereas* but also a metonym for the food being served—blurs the conceptual distinction between the subordinate and the independent which the word *whereas* tries to make so clear. While the material difference of the plate and the food blur in the language of “dish,” Long Soldier’s speaker ultimately separates the abstract “setup” from the dish; with or without the trick of abstraction, the embodied speaker can see the material subsistence—just enough to eat—being offered.

Having articulated subjectivity, voice, and agency both within and in relation to a *whereas* clause, *WHEREAS* shifts to its next section to rewrite the passive language of the Resolution in the first-person. Long Soldier’s insistence on the first-person throughout Part II emphasizes the painstaking efforts to distance any agent from responsibility in the original Resolution, written anonymously “on behalf of” a country.⁴⁶ Even the concept of “resolution” as an act, comparable to “apology,” both insists on the performativity of language itself and designates unilateral subjective actions. Resonant with the ambiguous inflections of terms like “alleged,” “apparent,” and “revocation” in *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes*, definitions of “resolution” shift between the linguistic, the conceptual, and the effective to designate a mental intention, a written intention, the denouement of a narrative work, a solution to a problem, or a physical conversion, dissolution, or separation into constituent parts.⁴⁷ Just like the caveats “without prejudice” on the state’s letters

to Sue Dong Eng, the Congressional Resolution's Disclaimer ironically implies a fear that writing might have (uncontrollable or unintentional) material effect by attempting to ensure (ironically, also with language) that this resolution remains legally immaterial.

As the US Resolution names no agent, neither does it suggest any real addressee. Long Soldier notes that “[n]o tribal leaders or official representatives were invited to witness and receive the Apology on behalf of tribal nations.” She further complicates the Resolution's addressee in her speaker's dual citizenship. Where does a resolution that “apologizes on behalf of the people of the United States to all Native Peoples” position someone who is both an American citizen and an enrolled member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe? Long Soldier makes clear that these aspects of her speaker are both inseparable and constant with the preposition *in*: “in this dual citizenship, I must work, I must eat, I must art, I must mother, I must friend, I must listen, I must observe, constantly I must live.”⁴⁸ Recognizing herself addressed by the Resolution, the speaker lists all the things that she must do besides respond. In Long Soldier's introduction to this “Whereas” part of her book, the writing *I* neither emerges in nor chooses to engage in an interpersonal relation. Instead, she states explicitly that her “response is directed to the Apology's delivery, as well as the language, crafting, and arrangement of the written document.”⁴⁹ This is a response to an act rather than a person.

“if I read you”

While the Resolution claims to speak on behalf of the American “people,” Long Soldier's final whereas statement first addresses “the plural *you*,” “[*y*]*ou*,” as in all American citizens” but then deconstructs the totality of that plural “you” by addressing a single writing girl: “*You* didn't know that, I know.”⁵⁰ Differences of knowing break apart the collective subject. Other differences of knowing motivate this speaker's self-censorship in “want[ing] to be

correct in my languageness.” This whereas statement stages a conversation between a poet and her friend:

WHEREAS a friend senses what she calls cultural emptiness in a poet’s work and after a reading she feels bad for feeling bad for the poet she admits. I want to respond the same could be said for me, some sticky current of Indian emptiness, I feel it not just in my poems but when I’m on drives, in conversations, or as I lie down to sleep but since this dialogue is about writing I want to be correct with my languageness. In a note following the entry for *Indian* an Oxford dictionary warns: *Do not use Indian or Red Indian to talk about American native peoples, as these terms are now outdated; use American Indian instead.*⁵¹

This conversation begins with a paradoxical concept of “cultural emptiness.” The writer’s recounting of “cultural emptiness” as “what she [her friend] calls” emphasizes the term as linguistic and perhaps provisional. “What she calls” casts doubt over the friend’s meaning and suggests that the writer might interpret the friend to mean something other than what she says. Does the friend mean to pose “culture” as something either additive to, or at least removable from, a poem? Is the poet a pitiable subject because they have no culture or because they have failed to make their culture sensible in their writing? That the friend also “feels bad for feeling bad” ambiguously suggests that the friend feels guilty for holding the poet to her expectations, or that she feels she should feel something other than pity—maybe even anger at the poet, or something else entirely.

Though the friend’s comment is not about the writer, perhaps in an attempt to understand her friend the writer applies the comment to herself in wanting to say that an “Indian emptiness” “could be said” to run through her own work.⁵² But the writer hesitates to say to her friend both what she feels and what she wants to say by noting that “since this dialogue is about writing” she “want[s] to be correct with my languageness”—a formulation that blurs language (use) with personal quality and even ethic.⁵³

That the writer's reflection on her own "Indian emptiness" is prompted by a conversation with someone else locates both the sensibility and the legitimation of indigeneity with others. Rather than attempt to represent herself in her own words, the writer turns to the dictionary, grappling with the reference guide's unusual imperative to "use" one term instead of other "outdated" names for Native Americans that the entry nevertheless reproduces.⁵⁴ Resonant with the Canadian value of inclusivity, the dictionary prefers to assert a single shared nationality via the conjunction "American Indian."⁵⁵ Heeding this ironic "warn[ing]" of the Oxford dictionary, the writer adjusts her verbal response:

...But the term American Indian parts our conversation like a hollow bloated boat that is not ours that neither my friend nor I want to board, knowing it will never take us anywhere but to rot. If the language of race is ever truly attached to emptiness whatever it is I feel now has me in the hull, head knees feet curled, I dare say, to fetal position—but better stated as the form I resort to inside the jaws of a reference.⁵⁶

Regardless of whether the term she chooses makes this speaker "correct," and as the word "culture" finally yields "race," the "language of race" overwhelms the conversation. Any concept of emptiness "attached to" race refigures "race" into an empty and isolating container moving the speaker's body toward disintegration. The writer knows how she feels and only reaches for the language of race and the image of a ship in the case that—"if"—language is (used) to make a particular attachment of (linguistic) "race" to ambiguously conceptual and qualitative emptiness. The speaker notices that she is forced into the empty space of a metaphoric image, affected, and compelled into a particular bodily position when racial "reference" tries to consume her.⁵⁷

The writer again applies the friend's comment to herself in another whereas statement and again avoids "admitting to her what's in my work: this location. Where I must be firmly positioned to receive an apology the spot from which to answer."⁵⁸ This thought seems asymmetrical with the writer's earlier concern over emptiness in her poems by naming 'what's *in* her work.' Then again,

what's "in" the work is difficult to conceptualize as a containable object: "this location." The deictic *this* pulls the poem into the scene it describes—the location of the writer and the friend—while the next sentence describes *this* as the metaphorical place where the speaker must "be firmly positioned" in order to both receive and answer the Congressional apology to Native Americans. And then again, *this* also refers to the location of the book itself, and thus of the indeterminable reader.

Before reaching this line, the writer moves associatively from the smell of soap, to a memory of painstakingly scrubbing out a bird's abandoned pigeonhole, "aka a white hole the dictionary says. A white hole's known as the white space between words set too far apart in letterpress printing a term synonymous with pigeonhole we don't want it."⁵⁹ This undesirability suggests absence and loss in an empty space, or a simply frustration that pulls readers to 'fill in the gap' with their own meanings. To link the metaphoric pigeonhole of racial cliché to the spaces between words and visual 'blank' (white) spaces on a page suggests a risk to the writer of being projected into not only what she says but also what she does not say, between her words. Realizing that what she does say can be read figuratively and what she doesn't say can still be filled with stereotypes of her identity, the writer grows tired.⁶⁰

The speaker is likewise exhausted by "words and wordplay," beginning with the word "both" in a sentence from the Resolution that equates "unfortunate" settler violence with Native resistance. As the original *whereas* clause asserts: "both took innocent lives, including those of women and children," Long Soldier writes that she tires: "Both as a woman and a child of that *Whereas*."⁶¹ The reference to women and children that relies on their common discursive invocation as figures of special innocence and value is revealed as meaningless when their lives are rendered irrelevant by the work of the *whereas*. In identifying herself as a woman and a child,

the writer makes clear that those categories are real and lived, even as the sentence that invokes them renders them mere symbols of victimhood.

Laboring “to signify what’s real,” the writer searches a Lakota dictionary for the word for “tired,” but even her Lakota dictionary gives a different word for “tired” than her father, who shares her “family’s way—the Oglala way.” The writer concludes that it is “*the people*” who know best “what tired is.” She exhausts her languages, trying to get them to take her somewhere and speculating that she handles them with ironic dissonance between what she does and what she wants: “maybe I pull the reigns when I mean go.” This whereas statement ends in the desire to get “off” language and be free from the logic of reference that interprets, for instance, any metaphoric use of a horse by this writer as a “reference to [her] heritage.”⁶²

“I wanted to write”

Declaring this frustration with language itself, the writer nevertheless writes, and often of social scenes in which its writer must decide quickly how or whether to respond to something said about Native Americans. Whether the writer responds or not, she consistently feels frustrated by the outcome, either feeling guilty that she did not contest violent falsities or running against a “break” made palpable between her and the women who sweetly “engage [her] as comrades in a fight together.”⁶³ When the writer cannot resist responding in this scene, she quickly reaches “a full stop,” not only because it is time to catch a flight but “because to really speak to it [the question of why “we were never taught this in our schools?”] ever is, untimely.”⁶⁴ Not only because material exigencies preclude her, but also perhaps because certain anti-indigenous narratives and logics have been so extensively elaborated that to undo them will take a long time, or perhaps because she simply doesn’t see value or purpose in discussing certain harms that have become irreparable, the speaker disengages.

In contrast to these social instances of hesitance, regret, impulse, and foreclosure that *WHEREAS* frequently describes, in the space of *WHEREAS* itself the *I* repeatedly writes what she wishes she could have done in the social scenes that she restages within the book. She addresses a real person that she knows by the girl's writing online in response to an article in the *New York Times*: "Dear Fourteen-Year-Old Girl, I want to write."⁶⁵ This wanting registers that the writer knows her intended meaning seems unlikely reach its particular, intended addressee. Perhaps, the subjunctive mood of the sentence reverses the logic of "whereas" by insisting something could happen rather than that it did and is now of no consequence. And yet, Long Soldier *has written this in reply*; something did happen (writing), and this response exists (in writing).⁶⁶

Throughout *WHEREAS*, Long Soldier places her *I* in the position of a writer grappling with both her writing process and the capacities of language in and as address. Her poems both situate the *I* as a real writer in relation to other real writers by naming and thanking them (Zitkala Šá, James Welch) and use the *I* to reflect on the pronoun and symbol as such. "Diction" repeatedly doubles the *I* to blur its linguistic and material referents: "I to eye to I," "I cogitate I," "I separate I," and figures *I* as a vowel, a speaker, a literary narrator, a symbol for electric current, and ego. Another poem questions the relation or order of the writer's physical embodiment and linguistic presence: "If I'm transformed by language, I am often / crouched in footnote or blazing in title. Where in the body do I begin."⁶⁷ Long Soldier's lack of question mark suggests that the *I* unquestionably does begin in the body, but her writing also challenges the containment of the *I* within one body or the containment of one mind in the *I*, especially in the case of motherhood: "*are you looking at how I've become two?*"⁶⁸

The *I* of "Vaporative" pulls close to a real (social) person by connecting writing to social relationships: "When I want to write seriously I think of people like / dg for whom I wrote a long

poem for whom I revised...”⁶⁹ On this page, the writer writes not only in relation to others’ preexisting writing but *for* this specific other.⁷⁰ Yet this poem seems to turn away from the social when the poem within it gains its own life: “until the poem forgot its way back troubled I let it go...”⁷¹ Having let it go, the writer hopes for the poem’s return, planning to welcome it by preparing a meal if it does come back to her. The speaker describes a parental regard toward the poem marked by acts and offerings of love and care. While the previous poem had theorized about the textuality of what we use to designate our own human subjectivity (the *I*), Long Soldier’s writer now relates to her writing as itself agential, and subjective: seducible.⁷² When the poem becomes general—from *the* to *a* poem—the tone of the relationship shifts from devoted maternity to persuasion or even trickery. Ending in direct address to the poem: “poem eat and lie down full / poem rest here full don’t / lift a single l / etter,” the writer attempts to convince the poem to stay on the page while the line break of the letter “l” off the word “letter” ambiguously suggests the poem is either landing or already taking flight again.⁷³ In every case, this poem insists on an agency of the text itself which exceeds the wishes of its creator.

After an absence of the second-person for 14 pages, the second-person reappears on this same page of “Vaporative.” Having advised, “when / you love something let it go,” two pages later within the same poem appears a request of *you*: “*promise: // // // // if I read you / what I wrote bear / in mind I wrote it // // // // down only / so that / I remember*” [see the attached Figure 2].⁷⁴ In a left-justified vertical arrangement, separated into three pieces spaced at significant distance from each other, Long Soldier’s second-person address “if I read you what I wrote” both situates a writer in relation to a *listener* and writing—but perhaps *not* the writing *here*—in relation to a writer *and* reader. This page demonstrates the book’s preoccupation with trust in its call for a promise at the same time that it dedicates the writing to the writer or to an ambiguous *that*. To read

this page without accounting for its many line breaks or the italicization of *that* asks the reader to “bear in mind” that it was written for its writer to remember, not necessarily for the reader to remember or respond in any particular way. The isolation of the phrase “if I read you” also positions the *I* as reading *you(rself)* rather than reading *to* you. If the *I* is reading *you*, this page might assure that the writer’s intention is nevertheless only for her to remember and not to judge or change *you*.

The entire meaning of this page hinges on the origin and referent of *that*. To account for the distance between “so” and “*that*” as well as the italicization of *that* makes it very difficult not to read *that* as the object of memory rather than part of a conjunction. If the object of *that* remains on the page it could refer to “what I wrote,” or simply to the fact that “I wrote it,” or to the speaker’s experience of the writing process. Yet perhaps *that* is not on this page—is not *this*—and does not even refer to “what I wrote.” The isolated phrase “in mind I wrote it” places writing in the mind (first) rather than on the page, emphasizing the distance between the thought or intention and the writing and suggesting a possible difference between them. Once written *down*, the purpose of this writing becomes specific to remembering, but the object of remembrance is ironically only captured on the page as *that*. The isolation of the phrase “what I wrote bear,” suggests that what was written is a burden still being borne in the present tense. If what was written is what is borne, that the writer also wants to remember something suggests that what was written is not exactly what is already being carried. While *that* registers distance from both the speaker and the page, it is only the speaker who can know what *that* points to.

The next page suggests that it will clarify the writer’s purpose by offering an “*example*.”⁷⁵ In double spaced prose lines, this page describes the writer’s frustration with an inconsistency between the definition of the word “opaque” and *how* the word *sounds* to her. She explains her

associations with each sound of the word to explain her desire that *opaque* “mean see-through, transparent.” The writer wishes for a word that aligns with *her* sense, while the qualitative referent of the word also confuses the sense of a speaker’s word between the materiality of her perception and her meaning. Ironically asserting “opacity” as her own metaphor for truth, Long Soldier writes: “I understand the need to define as a need for stability. That I and you can be things, standing understood, among each other.” This “can be” suggests *I* and *you* are not or are not always, but perhaps can be, things. The line does not indicate the writer’s agreement or disagreement with this possibility, instead linking being-a-thing to a “need for stability,” which is connected (again, without critique or comment by the writer) to being understood. Perhaps being a “thing” can also be disarticulated from being a *definable* thing when Long Soldier only implies a definition of “opacity” through examples of its use: “To say, you don’t fool me for a second you’re opaque. To say, I’m partial to opaque objects I delight in luminosity.”⁷⁶

Moving between a material quality and a truth or honesty that may or may not be contingent upon being understood, the final lines offer one more example, dropping the “to” from “say” to become not only a hypothetical but an imperative: “Say I am writing to penetrate the opaque but I confuse it too often. I negotiate instinct when a word of lightful meaning flips under / buries me in the work of blankets.”⁷⁷ The slash in this line appears on the page as a slash, figuring a “cut[ting] through” that the writer earlier associated with the last sound of “opaque” (the sound of “K: cut through”). Paradoxically, the slash also makes possible a flip by creating two sides. Wishing for writing to be a means of penetrating, of breaking through something, the writer encounters a word (like the slash symbol) that does not stand to be seen through but instead flips or *can be flipped*.

WHEREAS demonstrates the immateriality of words of repair—resolution, apology, and reparation—but the book also demonstrates how much words do make sense (like sound). At the same time, the book resists the interpretation of feelings as indexical, or as writeable qualities, or as disembodied. Wary of misinterpretation, Long Soldier’s writer records her embodied reaction—“As I read I cry”—but also “must be clear my crying doesn’t indicate sadness.”⁷⁸ To refuse the interpretation of her embodied reaction as a nameable quality, the writer precludes further interpretations of a qualitative abstraction as a *cause for* anything: sympathy, pity, sadness, or even apology.⁷⁹ The ambiguity of the writer’s “regard” toward “how plainly the [other] writer imparts” a young girl’s lost and broken personal relationships, and abuse, as news, this writer withholds judgment of another writer’s choices.⁸⁰

In another scene the writer reacts to a different sentence that also seems plainly written—“the arrival of Europeans in North America opened a new chapter in the history of Native Peoples”—with laughter.⁸¹ Unlike the newspaper sentence, which described violence directly but neutrally, this sentence euphemizes violence. The writer does not explain why this sentence provoked her laughter or “the realization that it took this phrase to show,” leaving her readers to recognize the irony of calling genocide “a new chapter.”⁸² Though the source of this irony is not funny, the writer cannot control her bodily response, though she recognizes it as a strategy of self-protection *and* explicitly rejects the withholding or dissemblance of feeling. “[Hating] the act // of laughing when hurt injured or in cases of danger,” the writer on this page tells her injured daughter who tries to laugh off pain: “*If you’re hurting, cry.*” Sympathetic to the daughter’s reaction as both socially motivated and as an imitation of her own social withholding, the mother draws a separate, domestic space for her daughter: “*In our home in our family we are ourselves, real feelings. Be true.*”⁸³

“for the record”

Long Soldier’s speaker expects others to be physically honest and to communicate sincerity through physical acts, where the status of “writing” as a physical act remains paradoxical. She prioritizes “definite actions for admitting and amending wrongdoing.”⁸⁴ She prioritizes “not an object inscribed with words, but an *act*” as a means of memorial.⁸⁵ But the speaker is a writer, after all. *WHEREAS* problematizes language that operates through the logic of reference, which makes words stand in for abstractions, particularly for abstractions of race, as well as for feelings and intentions. But *WHEREAS* uses language differently, for memory.

Two prose paragraphs introduce Long Soldier’s Part II by specifying the day and date—Saturday, December 19, 2009—that President Obama signed “the Congressional Resolution of Apology to Native Americans.”⁸⁶ This is not quite true, but that doesn’t matter.⁸⁷ Long Soldier is careful to document, “for the record,” the day and date, politicians’ names, the numbers of months later that Senator Brownback read out the Apology, the number of tribal leaders he read to, and the number of federally recognized tribes in the US.⁸⁸ This abundance of numbers, along with two named agents and two instances of passive voice, make these sentences affectively flat and make its moments of vagueness glare; neither the names of the tribal leaders to whom Senator Sam Brownback read the apology, nor even the names of their tribes, are recorded.⁸⁹

Undermining the other sentences’ sense of simplicity, the middle sentence of this introduction contains both an “although” and a “though”: “President Obama never read the Apology aloud, publicly—although, for the record, Senator Sam Brownback five months later read the apology to a gathering of five tribal leaders, though here are more than 560 federally recognized tribes in the US.”⁹⁰ The conjunctions “though” and “although” are similar to “whereas” for their subordinating effect, but “though” suggests a binary contradiction between the two clauses that

“whereas” does not always require. Long Soldier’s use of these conjunctions suggests a toggling between final meanings by qualifying each preceding phrase in turn. With these qualifications the sentence never quite reaches a final meaning but rather implies the possibility of infinite qualifications.

Long Soldier’s ironic use of language that seems merely factual and affectively neutral in this Introduction recalls the poem which immediately precedes it and concludes Part I. The introduction to Part II seems to invoke the “record” ironically, but the extended poem, “38,” that concludes Part I is committed to memorialization. By withholding the number’s referent, the title invokes the certainty and measurability of quantity and perhaps withholds the identity—but not the materiality—of the people it refers to. Like the Introduction, Long Soldier’s drive toward quantification or measure seems like a drive to bring language closest to an indisputable physical reality.

“38” is about violence. The poem comprises a 5-page long list of complete sentences, each set off from the others by double line breaks. The first nine sentences of the poem read like a preface, setting certain terms for both the writing and the reading of what follows. Yet the writer says her “care” will be directed not toward the subject of her writing but toward the sentence, the first line asserting and demanding: “Here, the sentence will be respected.”⁹¹ Being respectful implies conformity to and legitimation of a social norm of behavior. Being respectful of “the sentence” suggests validating a sentence’s grammatical form and logic. If we read “sentence” as a legal punishment—which “38” is also about—to respect a sentence would seem to legitimize it as fair. The grammar of this sentence—as a command without a named addressee or a simple sentence in the future tense—applies to both the writer and the reader as intent or intended to proceed in this ‘respectful’ way.

This sentence soon becomes obviously ironic to anyone who does not in fact find the death sentence against the “thirty-eight Dakota men who were executed by hanging, under orders from President Abraham Lincoln” legitimate. “38” ironizes the notion of “the orderly sentence; conveyor of thought,” by registering thought or meaning beyond normative, grammatical, and referential language.⁹² Billy-Ray Belcourt picks up on Long Soldier’s critique of perceived simplicity and straightforwardness in his article for *Hazlitt*, “Fatal Naming Rituals.” Belcourt recognizes in Long Soldier’s term “languageness” a means to critique the recurrent figuration of indigenous writing or language and by extension, indigeneity or indigenous people themselves, as “plain.”⁹³ Clear that he values precision and other connotations of the simple or the plain, Belcourt asserts: “Simplicity is a mode of being in the world available to those enmeshed in white structures of feeling. Simplicity is an affect that motors the cultural imaginary of whiteness; it is an interpretive strategy.”⁹⁴ Simplicity is a method of obscuring violence.

While the first sentence passively (and insincerely) brings the writer and the reader together in common respectfulness, the writer pushes readers with certain expectations away when she speaks in the first person to assert: “I do not consider this a ‘creative piece,’” “a work of fiction,” or a “dramatiz[ation].”⁹⁵ When she states that she does not intend to compose “an ‘interesting’ read,” does she mean she wants readers to feel more than interested, or completely uninterested, in the violence she describes? Perhaps she envisions an uninterested reader—someone without any ethical or material commitments or motives in their reading—rather than an audience that might have their own ideas about her topic or expect to be moved by her work. Or perhaps she envisions a reader who will respond with an affect greater than mere interest. In pursuing “thought,” the writer seems to be attempting to avoid any intentional expression or transfer of feeling to a reader. The writer may not be addressing a reader at all; the thought pursued could belong to the writer as

much as any reader. When the writer says she will exercise care not toward her subject matter but toward the sentence form—its conventions of capitalization and punctuation—only, she undermines the significance of this thought to anyone. Yet the fact that she has written this poem of her own accord makes this claim ironic, and casts doubt on her avowed eschewal of “interest.”

“That said, I will begin” shifts focus from these preliminaries to the subject at hand and is followed by two sentences in direct address to a “you,” who “may or may not have heard about the Dakota 38.”⁹⁶ The next four sentences implicitly exclude an addressee who has heard of the Dakota 38 and suggest the previous sentence was perhaps sarcastic. These sentences contain no pronominal perspective, and their verbs are identificatory: “the Dakota 38 *refers to* [emphasis mine],” “this is,” “[t]he hanging took place on [date],” “[t]his was.” The sentences seem simple and complete, with no conjunctive clauses, following the writer’s pre-stated intention of “bringing the idea [of each sentence] to (momentary) completion.”⁹⁷ These momentary completions are reinforced by the space created by the double line breaks between each sentence, which also disconnect the sense of causal order that a horizontal sentence order would support.

The tone of these four sentences is pedagogical and unaffected. If we read these sentences as addressed, their addressee is positioned as someone who does not share the knowledge of the writer, who is teaching or informing. Shortly thereafter, when a hypothetical addressee asks why the Dakota 38 were “hung,” the responding voice attends in an aside to the grammatical error in “referring to the capital punishment of hanging” and corrects the term to “hanged.”⁹⁸ To devote an entire line to this correction places an arbitrary grammatical difference on the same level of significance as the other sentences—which are describing the context of the largest state execution in US history. This correction also suggests this history lesson is so comprehensive and precise that it cannot admit even a spelling error. But the writer actually refuses this comprehensiveness

and precision when she admits that she is “not a historian,” and that “details will not unfold in chronological order.”⁹⁹

The lack of subjective perspective that the third-person—and even the second-person—sentences of this poem seem to create is disrupted when the writer appears either explicitly in the first-person or implicitly in marks of voice—italicizations, parentheticals, and quotation marks. These marks of perspective create irony, which becomes most obvious in this early sentence:

“This [the hanging] was the *same week* that President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation.”¹⁰⁰

Though this sentence still uses the identificatory verb “was” and is written in the third-person, Long Soldier’s italicization lends this sentence a tone. Looking back, the two sentences that precede this one also subtly register a subjective emphasis, via quotation marks and dashes: “To date, this is the largest ‘legal’ mass execution in US history”; “The hanging took place on December 26, 1862—the day after Christmas.”¹⁰¹ The quotation of what is not clearly a quote, the pause and reinterpretation of the dash, and the emphasis of italicization each imply a voice and an intention. These three sentences together emphasize time by directing our attention to it both through the repetition of temporal language and via punctuation and formatting. This voice implies a significance, related to time, beyond what is written.

Irony is an indigenous aesthetic, as Hamalainen observes in his study of Lakota communications with colonial agents and traces across Tiyoskate, Black Bull, and Red Cloud to Vine Deloria, Jr.’s 1969 *Custer Died for Your Sins*.¹⁰² Jennifer Andrews’ *In the Belly of a Laughing God: Humor and Irony in Native Women’s Poetry*, emphasizes the usefulness of irony to contemporary indigenous women who, like Long Soldier, are exploring the said and unsaid, as well as the effects of colonial language on Native writing. Accounting for the effects gender has on the working of irony, Andrews claims that though “the power to establish and reinforce the

primacy of a particular perspective through humour and irony typically rests with” those who already normatively hold power, irony can also “enable otherwise marginalized groups to destabilize traditionally uncontested voices.”¹⁰³ Yet “those who employ humour and irony to articulate their typically neglected viewpoints risk being ignored, dismissed, or misunderstood.”¹⁰⁴ Though this risk is inherent to the use of irony, it is made greater when racialization and gender both lead readers to expect simplicity of indigenous women’s writing and lead indigenous women writers to views that do not reinforce the norms that often underwrite the legibility of irony.¹⁰⁵

But what exactly is ironic? Claire Colebrook’s *Irony* offers a comprehensive guide to the concept, which can designate: a doubleness of sense or meaning that exceeds language in the perception of events, a figure of speech, and an attitude toward all language. Before understanding irony’s linguistic context, the concept invokes a sense of “rightness” or at least predictable causality as cosmic irony: where there is an expected “course of human events and intentions” that is sometimes overcome by “another order of fate beyond our predictions.”¹⁰⁶ Cosmic irony often exposes an unexpected limit of human confidence and control. We could call it cosmic irony that the US government has set itself up for critique by someone it thinks it is apologizing to, via Long Soldier’s use of the apology itself.

Long Soldier’s sentence about President Lincoln would show cosmic irony if it shows a limit to human understanding—“that we do not see the effects of what we do”—that the President did not realize what he was doing.¹⁰⁷ But the fact that the sentence emphasizes—that the President did these things in the *same week*—by bringing the actions together in time undermines a reading of the situation as beyond the President’s recognition and intention. It is then dramatic irony that persists, if we judge the meanings of these two actions as incompatible. Yet that incompatibility is made recognizable by Long Soldier’s emphatic language. Dramatic irony and verbal irony are

blurred in this sentence, which implies through emphasis a distance both between events and expectation as well as what is said and what is meant. In verbal irony, meaning escapes a speaker, a listener, or language itself, marking the perception of a difference between what is manifestly said and what is meant, either by the speaker intentionally or in what the listener understands.¹⁰⁸ Colebrook concludes: “Recognising irony, therefore, foregrounds the social, conventional and political aspects of language: that language is not just a logical system but relies on assumed norms and values.”¹⁰⁹ Like Long Soldier’s appropriation, which “mires a text in contexts,” as Dowling argues, irony also shows that meaning depends on context.¹¹⁰ The aesthetic of irony demands a recognition both of the distance between speakers/texts and listeners/readers and that language is both addressed and received from particular places—including bodies.

When irony shows us that the determination of meaning is contextual and subjective, we might then think the meaning of *everything* said is open to *any* interpretation. If irony breaks open an imagined circularity between language and meaning, language and *being*, *WHEREAS* grapples with the consequences of irony and linguistic circularity across legal reasoning, historical accounting, and constructs of subjectivities. But Long Soldier’s sentences are not open to any interpretation precisely because they register intent. Though it is the italicization that makes us notice irony, Long Soldier’s subsequent sentence, which seems to state the obvious, claims the italicization for the *I*’s subjective purpose: “In the preceding sentence, I italicize ‘same week’ for emphasis.”¹¹¹ It is not just the italicization but the writer herself who draws readers’ attention to the near simultaneity of these events, encouraging us to make greater meaning of the fact even as she does not or cannot tell us exactly what meaning we should make. This writer’s intention is not up to readers to decide, but Long Soldier’s non-referential punctuation and formatting *materialize*

intention itself within the sentence. That intentionality, rather than the writer who it indexes, prompts readers to consciously make their own judgment.

There is always a writer of writing. When Long Soldier's writer explicitly claims a purpose, the pedagogical distance of the other sentences is undermined because the sentences no longer seem 'objective' or universally agreeable. As the purpose of emphasis itself implies another yet unstated purpose, again the pedagogical function of the sentences is weakened because they don't communicate their intended meaning in words. If readers think they know definitively a (writer's) intent, they are not adapting to a new context, not changing (themselves). Ironically, verbal irony "confirm[s] what we already know," and yet, as Colebrook also points out, the impulse toward an aesthetic of impartial, irrefutable facts in third-person or passive sentences suggests a discursive context and anticipates an audience that contests the speaker's meaning.¹¹² Even if she does not expect her sentences to teach or convince, Long Soldier's writer has a reason for writing them anyway.

Long Soldier's written account of history—necessarily partial in the details it leaves out—might be called subjective and *therefore* biased, and thus unreal or untrue. Perhaps in response to this, the writer distances herself from all 'positions' in these sentences: "Some say that Dakota leaders did not understand the terms they were enacting, or they never would have agreed" and "Even others call the entire negotiation 'trickery.'" ¹¹³ To avoid making her positionality explicit, she situates her voice outside of everything written. These sentences make it seem that every explanation and term for an event is part of a mutually exclusive discourse, and each discourse or interpretation seems, at best, to be represented by other discourses as equally true to others or, at worst, named false. As the writer becomes a skeptical ironist (one who recognizes and creates irony) her attention seems pulled away from what happened to the language used in the present.

Berel Lang characterizes the “skeptical ironist”: “Interpretation, on his terms, is always a ‘future’ revision of what appears in the present; and since the past, too, is accessible only by means of interpretation, also the past turns out to be no less contingent than the present or the future and thus equally open to ironic reversal.”¹¹⁴ The writer of “38,” however, moves past this perspective of skeptical irony in her subsequent lines.

The writer decides to escape from cycling through terms for what happened and simply get to the next event with the placeholder of “whatever-it-was.”¹¹⁵ When she cannot escape the necessity of language to her “want[ing] to tell,” and especially to tell *about language*, she again turns to a subjunctive formulation—“it could be said”—to manifest potentiality. In contrast, the next sentence makes a determination: “The previous sentence is circular, akin to so many aspects of history.”¹¹⁶ *WHEREAS* responds to the linguistic erasure of the violence that conditions and sustains the recurrent discourse of ‘exchange’ both by naming language as circular and by describing a consequent *material* circularity that spiraled the Dakota further and further into destitution under the cover of an abstract tautological logic.

In her perception of irony, the writer repeatedly struggles to find a place to begin. In “38,” the line “I want to tell you about the Sioux Uprising, but I don’t know where to begin” comes after the statement “I will begin,” which comes after one full first page and eight other sentences.¹¹⁷ Near the end of “38,” the writer remembers: “Yet, I started this piece because I was interested in writing about grasses.”¹¹⁸ The desire to write about the Sioux Uprising comes after the poem begins by describing the Dakota 38, the 38 men hanged as a result of the Sioux Uprising, and the poem comes into existence out of the writer’s desire to write about neither Native American history nor people so explicitly and pedagogically, but rather about grasses.¹¹⁹

Long Soldier breaks from both linearly progressive and circular logic: “Dakota people began to starve. // The Dakota people were starving. // The Dakota people starved.” Her writer’s attention shifts away from attempts to unravel confusing and confusable language to record the embodied, material experience of the Dakota. These sentences isolate the fact of starvation from any question of causality and render it timeless by expanding the temporality of starvation from the past futurity of “began to starve,” over the duration of the past continuous tense of “were starving,” and through the finality of the preterit “starved.” The repetition of these three lines emphasizes something other than irony. The writer makes explicit: “In the preceding sentence, the word ‘starved’ does not need italics for emphasis. // One should read ‘The Dakota people starved’ as a straightforward and plainly stated fact.”¹²⁰

Though previous lines explore how language creates discourses or ways to *explain*, Long Soldier refuses irony when she cuts language and temporality down to no other meaning or way to say *this*: “The Dakota people starved.” Even if these words could be conditioned or qualified or embellished for effect, the writer insists of her own language: “In the preceding sentence, the word ‘starved’ does not need italics for emphasis.”¹²¹ Yet does the existence of this sentence suggest that the writer expected at least some reader to read the statement otherwise, without “italics for emphasis”? The next sentence is then itself ironic in its explicit direction to read “a straightforward and plainly stated fact,” supposedly already conveyed by the sentence’s lack of italicization.

The tense of the Dakota’s starvation precludes the search for (or perhaps in fact finds) the origin and intention that the perception of irony seems to entail. Though the perception of irony leads “backward to a source or forward to a resolution,” the reality that grounds irony must be timeless.¹²² This view of irony then reads language “not at its word but obliquely—by what it does, not by what it says, and not even by what it says it does.”¹²³ The penultimate page of “38” likewise

turns away from language toward action in noting: “The memorial for the Dakota 38 is not an object inscribed with words, but an *act*.”¹²⁴ But this is not the end of the poem.

The speaker then remembers: “I started this piece because I was interested in writing about grasses.” The connection between grasses and the 38 is revealed by the reports of two acts: a trader’s “refusal to provide credit to Dakota people by saying, ‘If they are hungry, let them eat grass,” and the Dakota warriors’ response: stuffing the mouth of his executed body with grass during their uprising.¹²⁵ The speaker speculates that this act could be called a poem and notes its irony. She imagines the poem needs no words to work, but then remembers that the trader’s words “click the gears of the poem into place. // So, we could also say, language and word choice are crucial to the poem’s work. // Things are circling back again.”¹²⁶

Feeling pulled again into a circle of debate over poems as words or actions, real or not real, the writer definitively ends her respect for and abandons the sentence form. Following a final observation—“Sometimes, when in a circle, if I wish to exit, I must leap”—sentence fragments break horizontally down the page, pulling the eye in the swinging motion they describe:

And let the body	
	swing.
From the platform.	
	Out
	to the grasses. ¹²⁷

These lines force the reader to physically reproduce with their eyes the position of a witness to the hanging. Do these lines aestheticize violence, lulling readers like a pendant that hypnotizes, and thereby invite “the violence of a reading practice that makes a feast out of ‘a choreography of mangled bodies’” that Belcourt names?¹²⁸ Who is the witness?

“38” recalls Long Soldier’s epigraph: “Now / make room in the mouth / for grassesgrassesgrasses.”¹²⁹ Like the swinging lines, this epigraph makes readers physically perform

language, their mouth stuffed with grasses, or at least, a word-sound that mimics the sound of its referent brushing against itself. It thereby places readers in the position of the genocidal settler defeated by the Dakota. Or does it place them in the position of the Dakota? In any case, these are someone else's words rather than readers' own, and readers are told to agentively "make room," distinguishing them from either Myrick or the Dakota in that they are offered a choice.

At the end of "38," the writing *I* blurs with the thirty-eight executed men, making simultaneous the silence or exit of a speaking subject, the death of the body, and the end of (both circular and linear) reason. The speaking subject abandons both neutral language and the presence of voice by first agentively leaping but ultimately letting the body itself create a final movement. What remains is not a body hanging, but a body released from "the platform," the stage of its execution and its elevation as representative. No longer a representation of either resistance or punishment, or the Dakota people as a collective, a single body is let go to rest in the grasses. Touching grass connects the body to physical earth or ground, but the word "grasses" also echoes the sonic language in Long Soldier's epigraph "Now / make room in the mouth / for grassesgrassgrasses."

"Grassesgrassesgrasses"

"I always thought that 'the voice' was meant to indicate a kind of genuine, authentic, absolute individuation, which struck me as (a) undesirable and (b) impossible. Whereas a 'sound' was really within the midst of this intense engagement with everything."
— Fred Moten¹³⁰

The perception of irony requires a trust in unverifiable sense and registers a common ground that makes communication beyond reference possible. In Jacques Derrida's terms, this other, nonreferential aspect of communication "propagate[s]," and "transmit[s]" "a tremor, a shock, a displacement of force."¹³¹ However, in "Signature, Event, Context" Derrida rejects the

idea that this force of language precedes and prompts interpretation because the idea of “primary meaning” “appears more problematical than ever,” and because the concept of metaphor underwrites “the value of displacement, of transport” that is given to language’s non-semantic effect. *WHEREAS* might agree about the uncertainty of primary or “literal” meaning, but the physical effects of Long Soldier’s language and the embodiment of her speaker contests Derrida’s second claim. *WHEREAS* literally moves readers’ eyes in noticeable directions; the term *grassesgrassesgrasses* materializes in the mouth.

Though *WHEREAS* problematizes and moves away from the determination or determinability of a beginning, it is more interested in theorizing cause, agency, and ultimately responsibility. Long Soldier articulates an ironic agency in the poem “Irony,” where the speaker concludes that she is “bent down / shameless / face to plate to / some origin(al) / hunger aware / that I’m alone / and I alone am / the one → pushing / the head / to eat.”¹³² “Irony” suggests the only way for the writer to survive within this tiny margin that the *I* is forced into by frequent line breaks is to consume the “stew” she makes of “half-chewed” “chunks.”¹³³ Yet to do so requires force and degradation, and it is not clear who has already chewed the writer’s ingredients. The writer feels “alone” in “Irony,” but the poem on the next page considers collectivity. “We” begins with a causal preposition: “Because of our breath, a troop of marching ants blows from the page.”¹³⁴ The present-tense sentence addresses someone who is with the writer. Both the writer and her addressee are outside of the “page” that they might read or write upon together. Their combined breath has a material effect on not only the page, which clears for easier reading or writing, but also a line of ants, which is thrown off course. A formerly linear progression is disrupted.

The next sentence—“We did this together yet / she doesn’t like my use of *wē*, the presumption.”—turns away from the one who shares the breath to tell someone else about this

moment, or toward the writer in reflection. While it was “our breath” before, this sentence distinguishes human agents: *we* and *she*. These subjects are distinguished by a conflict or disagreement over the writer’s use of language. The next line interprets ‘her’ complaint as against a “rude inclusion,” suggesting she objects not to the fact that something was done but rather to being a part of an agentive “we.” Perhaps “she” feels she is not (equally) responsible for the displacement of the ants. Though the conflict is at first written as a conflict of taste—she simply “doesn’t like,” the poem becomes full of words of judgment: “[i]ndeed, the rude inclusion,” “shouldn’t,” “right,” “correct.”¹³⁵ The writer recognizes an ethical consequence to her linguistic formulation of collectivity itself, while what was done together remains undefined as *this*.

The “rude inclusion” seems to violate “the line in a poem // I shouldn’t overstep.”¹³⁶ This line suggests that, even if a poem might be able to, the figure “I” “shouldn’t” be presumed to include and speak for its readers. Neither should the “I” be expected to speak *as* its readers. An actual vertical line then appears immediately after the words “this line in a poem” [see Figure 3]. This line, which recalls the center crease of a book, bisects the remaining words on this page. The lines of text it separates make some grammatical sense if read as separate pages, but horizontal reading across the two ‘pages,’ makes most grammatical sense.

To “address you as *you* so as to center myself” forces the writer to “retrace myself back,” by literally walking herself backwards and walking back her sentence. The loss of the *we* also forces the writer into the center position of the partition, an “upturned / horizon” without space and time. The poem “We” concludes with a sacrifice: “And for you I have forgotten why // ants in a line dispersed from a singular breath.”¹³⁷ This line silences the question of cause or motive even as it rearticulates the shared breath as also “singular.” The revision of the event to the past tense “dispersed *from* [my emphasis]” rather than “by,” suggests a continuity between the breath and

the ants, as if the breath was ants' origin rather than their separation. Yet to read only on one side of the dividing line asserts that "You and I are not / ants in a line dispersed from a singular breath," and generalizes "for you I have forgotten why," denying any common origin between *you* and *I*. Or, if "We" 'really' ends with "ants in a line dispersed from a singular breath," the poem 'actually' leaves 'us' with an image and memory.

Using similar language of a subject following a (twisted) line, the writer of "38" is consoled: "Although I often feel lost on this trail, I know I am not alone."¹³⁸ *WHEREAS* conceptualizes agentive being—not exclusively human—that is both apart and a part. The book *also* records memories and embodied experiences. Circling back to the book's first poem, "Ĥe Sápa" theorizes being both in language and materially. The assertion that "Ĥe is a mountain as hé is a horn that comes from a shift in the river, throat to mouth" line draws attention to the shift in the body required to distinguish one meaning from another—from sounding in the throat to sounding in the mouth.¹³⁹ That ĥe and hé use the same letters but different written *marks* locates their difference in the manifest—writing and especially the spoken—rather than the referential alphabetic.¹⁴⁰

The poem enumerates things that Ĥe Sápa is *not*—"not a black hill not Pahá Sápa, by any name you call it." The being of the mountain is grounded in its relation and similarities to but determinate difference from another object defined by its color and its form. Though the writer honors Ĥe Sápa's name, this line insists on its being beyond of language. The capitalization of Ĥe Sápa like a proper name brings subjectivity to the mountain at the same time that the poem clarifies what the mountain "did not" do—lead, decoy, or ambush—distinguishing (its) life from (human) actions. The name Ĥe Sápa affirms the mountain's singularity while, paradoxically, the poem implies it is placed in a hierarchy (being ranked) and suggests it is a material instance of concept

(“a” rather than “the” mountain): “Its rank is a mountain and it must live as a mountain, as a black horn does from base to black horn tip.”¹⁴¹ This sentence asserts the mountain’s totality of being through the total color and indivisible physicality of an object that it is not. Totality is paradoxically constituted in relation to or at least understandable by way of the totality of another thing.

The use of “as” rather than “like” transforms Ĥe Sápa’s being from the stability and comparability of rank and instance into something performed or lived; the simile of “like” only appears in relation to memory: “To remember it, this is like gravel.”¹⁴² The ambiguity of this concluding sentence allows *this* to gesture toward both the act of remembering and Ĥe Sápa itself. If Ĥe Sápa is dynamic, perhaps it cannot be remembered as a form. It slips through shape like gravel yet remains sensible in its texture and movement.¹⁴³ It is like an unquantifiable plurality of things or pieces. Thinking with the metaphor of gravel, these pieces might share a mode of being but not identical nor determinate forms.

Instead of being a single “thing” as articulated in “Opaque,” the writer later describes a desire to be “some but not all of something”:

Whereas I did not desire in childhood to be a part of this but desired most of all to be a part. A piece combined with others to make up a whole. Some but not all of something. In Lakota it’s hanjké, a piece or part of anything.¹⁴⁴

Being “a part of this” invokes a series of actions, a program or scheme. *This* is what is; the writer wanted to be a part of something else. The perception of irony seems to require a distance from language, and the writer often seems situated outside of language both temporally and spatially. But the writer is not just a witness, as her project is also one of response, and this response is in writing. Perhaps the writer exists somewhere before or after her writing, and her writing exists in the subjunctive tense of desire. All of this emphasizes the noncoincidence of writer and reader and confuses the place of the writing itself.

“This” writing *is in a place*. Long Soldier describes poetic pages as a space throughout *Whereas*, but this space is ambiguous or virtual, distinct from both the private and the public spaces and relationships that the writer describes. Sometimes the writer treats the page as private and records her thoughts. Sometimes the writer uses poetry to speak to someone absent, like a room with a doorway from which she speaks to her unborn child.¹⁴⁵ Sometimes the book is written as if it knows a stranger will look upon it. When the book gestures toward meanings that it withholds, it could trust the reader to understand the meaning without its explicit writing, might not trust the reader with the meaning, or might not know the meaning itself. Writing poetry also requires the writer be in certain spaces and even physical positions of the writer: facing left, or right, lying down.¹⁴⁶

If “Pages are cavernous places, white at entrance, black in absorption. // Echo,” whose voice is echoed?¹⁴⁷ *WHEREAS* seems to absorb much more than the writer, including the material world. Poetry and the material world overlap in “Steady Summer” when:

at the bottom of trailer steps
 grasshoppers power up
 plate bodies jet wings
 knock knock high
 speed thru a swaying
 green page a single-spaced
 blades bold hollow
 stems *air italics*¹⁴⁸

As the letters started to lift from “Vaporative,” poetry again exceeds the page, this time entering the writer’s physical world. This materiality is most clear in the appearance of nonreferential linguistic forms in the world, as well as in the sound that Long Soldier insists upon by writing out punctuation like “comma” and “italics.”

WHEREAS locates the most authentic ‘performance’ of subjectivity in sound rather the words or even voice—“I admit I perform best to the music in-between the rise and fall of the

Figure 1

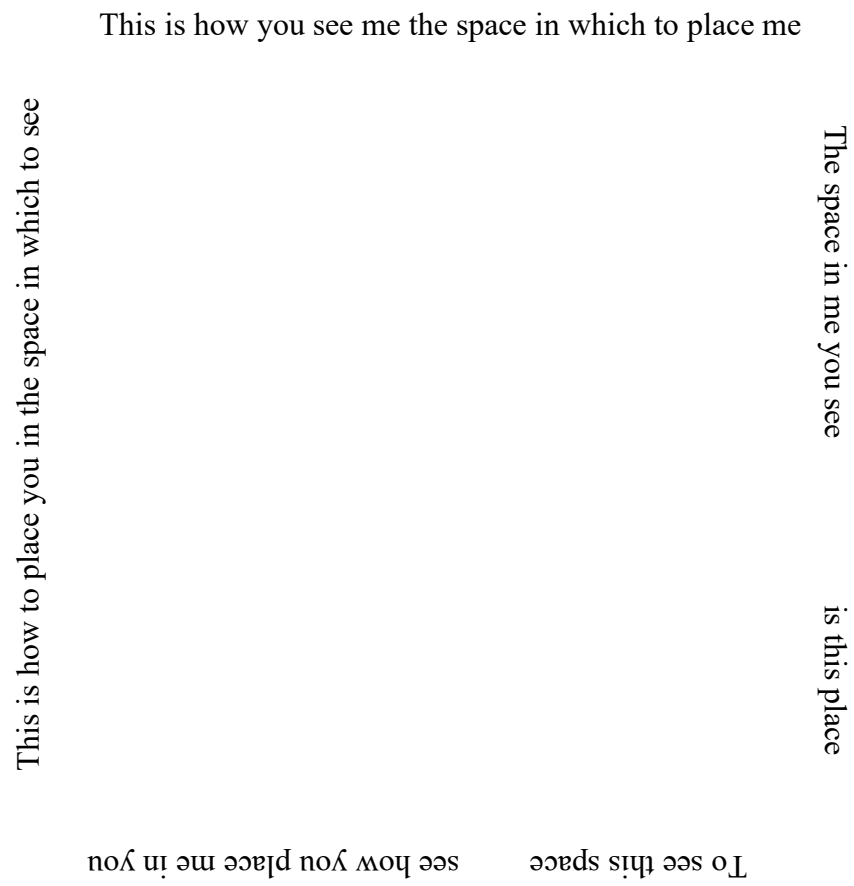


Figure 2

promise:

if I read you
what I wrote bear
in mind I wrote it

down only
so *that*
I remember

Figure 3

Because of our breath, a troop of marching ants blows from the page. We did this together yet she doesn't like my use of *we*, the presumption. Indeed, the rude inclusion, the line in a poem

I shouldn't overstep. Black vertices, upturned address you as <i>you</i> so as not to center myself to my steps toe to heel to toe, counting the lengths <i>we</i>, correct. And for you I have forgotten why	horizon, partition marked as center. Now I right and to follow the line comfortably I pace I go to retrace myself back. You and I are not ants in a line dispersed from a singular breath.
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¹ *Chromosomory*, "a hand-sewn paperback chapbook, with an unusual layout (calendar style)" according to the book dealer Arundel Books, was published by Q Ave Press, in a run of only 30 copies. The only copies I was able to locate are at Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library and in Denison University's archives. Since *WHEREAS*, two of Long Soldier's poems were published in the 2018 edited collection *New Poets of Native Nations*. In a 2018 interview, she stated that she was working on a new "book of collaboration," tentatively titled *WE*. Layli Long Soldier, "Interview with 2018 NBCC Poetry Award Finalist Layli Long Soldier," by Melanie Odelle. *Brooklyn*, Mar 12, 2018.

² Including the Heritage Center in Pine Ridge, Racing Magpie in Rapid City, South Dakota, and in Toronto. See Layli Long Soldier, "Profiles in Poetics: Layli Long Soldier," *Women's Quarterly Conversation*, 6 March 2013 and "Responsibilities and Obligations: Understanding Mitákuye Oyás'í" Curated by Clementine Bordeaux, Mary V. Bordeaux, and Layli Long Soldier," *Racing Magpie*, <https://www.racingmagpie.org/mitakuye-oyasin-exhibit>. The Native Arts and Cultures Foundation awarded her the National Artist Fellowship, and she has received a Lannan Literary Fellowship for Poetry as well as a Whiting Writer's Award. *WHEREAS* was a finalist for the National Book Award and won the National Book Critics Circle award for poetry.

³ Layli Long Soldier, *WHEREAS*, Graywolf Press, 2017, 57.

⁴ The Sioux encompass Lakota and Dakota people, and the Lakota people include the Oglala. I discuss Lakota rather than Sioux or Oglala history directly because Lakota history is more specific than Sioux history. The term "Sioux" is in fact contested among Oglala people because it may be an exogenous and originally derogatory term, and the official name of the "federally recognized tribe" is now "Oglala Lakota Nation." I discuss Lakota history because it encompasses the figures and events concerning the Oglala that are iconic to settler America, which predominate over representations and settler associations with the Oglala specifically. I was also unable to find an Oglala history as comprehensive as Hamalainen's on the Lakota.

⁵ The town of Pine Ridge in the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota is the Oglala tribal headquarters. Though Long Soldier in *WHEREAS* troubles the sense of "poverty," Pine Ridge is famous for its economic poverty: the reservation's county is among the top 0.7% of the poorest counties in the United States. Thirty-eight percent of the population does not have any health insurance, and the employment rate is 37%.

⁶ The town of Pine Ridge in the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota is the Oglala tribal headquarters. Though Long Soldier in *WHEREAS* troubles the sense of "poverty," Pine Ridge is famous for its economic poverty:

the reservation's county is among the top 0.7% of the poorest counties in the United States. Thirty-eight percent of the population does not have any health insurance, and the employment rate is 37%. These numbers should not be taken for evidence that most Oglala or most Native Americans presently live on reservations; the 2020 US Census found that almost 87% of people who identify as "American Indian" or "Alaska Native" live outside of designated native lands.

⁷ I cite this book in particular because it strives to "detach" Lakota history "from the mainstream historical coordinates, which have reduced them to a foil of the American condition" (2). Pekka Hamalainen, *Lakota America: A New History of Indigenous Power*, Yale UP, 2019.

⁸ Alberts, Diaz, and Kane. Emilia Philip is an exception, describing the book more broadly in her first sentence as "a collection of poetry that makes known the systemic violence against and cultural erasure of native tribes in the United States."

⁹ Papa goes farther than Griffis by centering "Long Soldier's unpredictable aesthetic choices as she translates her experience of motherhood, daughterhood, and womanhood through a subjective female lens, which equally emphasize the gravity of this unapologetic federal document."

¹⁰ Long Soldier, *WHEREAS*, 57.

¹¹ "S.J.Res.14 - A joint resolution to acknowledge a long history of official depredations and ill conceived policies by the Federal Government regarding Indian tribes and offer an apology to all Native Peoples on behalf of the United States," Senate-Indian Affairs. Congress.gov, <https://www.congress.gov/bills/111/111th-congress/senate-joint-resolution/14/text>.

¹² *Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2010*, Public Law 111-118, December 19, 2009, <https://www.copyright.gov/legislation/pl111-118.pdf>. This resolution, which contains the "whereas" statements, was never passed as such. The language of the resolution after its whereas statements—the "Acknowledgement and Apology" section along with its legal disclaimer—was passed by Congress as part of the Department of Defense Appropriations Act of 2010. The language is buried deeply under "Title VIII—General Provisions" under section 8113. The "whereas" clauses are gone. This disappearance amplifies the minimizing work that the word "whereas" performed in the draft Resolution to the point of meaningless decontextualization.

¹³ Long Soldier, *WHEREAS*, 57.

¹⁴ Rachel B. Griffis, "'Language to Reach With': Layli Long Soldier's *WHEREAS* Connects Words to Reality," *Studies in American Indian Literature*, vol. 32, no. 1-2, Spring-Summer 2020, pp. 52.

¹⁵ Ibid. While I share Griffis' interest in the book's theorization of "responsible modes of speaking and writing about," I postpone Griffis' specification of the writing as "about forms of individual and communal tragedy." Griffis, "Language to Reach With," 53. Griffis' full sentence is: "By struggling against manipulative language and attempting to use it herself, Long Soldier exemplifies redemptive ways to work with words that counter oppression and promote responsible modes of speaking and writing about forms of individual and communal tragedy."

¹⁶ Abstraction becomes dangerous by eliding material realities, while affect becomes productive as a mode of conveying truth that is un beholden to colonial logic. A poetics of "concrete" and paradoxically "tangible signs" creates this different "mode of communication." Ibid., 62.

¹⁷ Stephanie Papa, "Somatic Communication: Motherhood and Transference in Layli Long Soldier's Poetry," *Women: a cultural review*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2022, pp. 396.

¹⁸ Grappling with recognition as an explicitly political issue—a matter of (nation)/state(s)—marks much Native Studies scholarship, as, most cursorily, scholars debate the strategic benefits and risks of seeking state recognitions of indigeneity. Most obviously, recognition underwrites the legal category of "federally recognized tribes." Recognition implies a notion and evaluation of authenticity at root, but the fraught notion of the authentic or the real is ironically often transformed into a matter of what is recognizable. See, in addition to Rifkin's *Speaking for the People*, where political strategy plays a major role in his argument, Glen Sean Coulthard's influential *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, as well as Elizabeth Povinelli's *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism*, especially Chapter Two: "The Brackets of Recognition."

¹⁹ *Speaking for the People* emphasizes 19th century indigenous writers' appropriations of settler-state language forms into their literary works. Rifkin challenges binary thinking of Native texts or Native orientations in general as binarily either for state recognition and political incorporation or for a more radical "resistance" and sovereignty. The book articulates a dialectical relation between such reading expectations and a shift in the register of Native American writing toward the "anthropological" and away from the "diplomatic." Rifkin does also note that if "the kinds of political forms cited and circulated in what appear as calls for recognition might [ultimately also] be functioning as part of Indigenous dynamics of change and transformation" that exceed recognition as a

political goal. Mark Rifkin, *Speaking for the People: Native Writing and the Question of Political Form*, Duke UP, 2021, 21, 222.

²⁰ Later in his Introduction, Rifkin does ask us to “consider the extent to which texts seek to create a sense of accountability to Native people” and their “sense of political legitimacy” to Native Americans (26). His first chapter also, in considering a text that “aims to justify the choices made by him and the other members of the Treaty Party, who signed the removal treaty Cherokee officials had rejected,” suggests a Native American *addressee* even as the text poses settler logic as most “realistic” for the Cherokee’s survival (30).

²¹ “About Us,” *Graywolf Press*, <https://www.graywolfpress.org/about-us>.

²² I am trying to avoid the project of interpreting the social dynamics of reception into knowable political motives and predictable political consequences, while still recognizing potential political implications in the workings of *texts themselves*.

²³ Perhaps contemporary readers are more consciously avoidant of the logic that literature can represent a collective people and newly aware that people exist in relation to logics and arrangements not of their own making.

²⁴ Crystal Alberts, “Rev. of *WHEREAS* by Layli Long Soldier.” *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2018, 118.

²⁵ Sarah Dowling makes the point that this back formation “minimize[es] the scale of the sacred site.” “Property, Priority, Place: Rethinking the Poetics of Appropriation,” *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 60, no. 1, Spring 2019, pp. 115.

²⁶ Long Soldier, *WHEREAS*, 6.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁸ Is the ‘empty’ space here ‘real’ or not?

²⁹ from “how,” to “place,” to “space,” and back to “how.”

³⁰ Because “the space” and *me* are always figured in a spatial relationship, if we read the *me* as a poetic subjectivity, this page suggests poetry constitutes neither wholly a subjectivity or solely an empty space for the reader’s occupation.

³¹ Crystal Alberts’ review of *WHEREAS* makes both points about the invocation of reservation lines and the disappearance of the *me* on the left side line.

³² The mere incorporation of the Resolution’s legalese, even before Long Soldier’s manipulations, might reveal a discourse that her readers do not quite recognize.

³³ Long Soldier, *WHEREAS*, 74.

³⁴ It would be complicated, though perhaps worthwhile, to argue that Long Soldier “appropriates” the English language itself, her first language.

³⁵ Though Dowling seems to be highlighting *WHEREAS*’ concern with the fact of loss, she subsequently articulates this aporia as a gap between settler and indigenous epistemologies which persists in the present. It is difficult to know exactly what Dowling means in this conclusion, and Rifkin might take issue with her strict separation of before and after, Native and non-Native. I am not sure what Dowling means in her subsequent examples: “In this aporia between original text and appropriation-based poem, we might read the distance between law and justice in the settler colony. We might limn the gap between personhood and human life. We might confront the foundational cleavage between land as alienable property and land as lived relation. This is a gap in which we are all endlessly implicated; it is the gap that we are living in, though some of us may choose to forget or ignore it.” *Ibid.*, 122-3.

³⁶ *WHEREAS* emphasizes an aporia between loss and reparation in Long Soldier’s final “Whereas Statement.” This statement responds to a 14-year-old girl’s petition to the White House “for the US to formally apologize and pay reparations to the Native American people.” In concluding—“My tooth will not grow back. The root, gone.”—this final whereas statement is the only to end in a period, reiterating the absoluteness of the root’s destruction. The root no longer materially exists, so it cannot be repaired with any amount of belated funding or apologetic attention. The material absence between what was and what is in the case of a tooth must be distinguished from the discursive positioning of Native Americans themselves within settler discourses of indigeneity: *WHEREAS* marks the absence of the tooth while it resists discursive attempts to absent Native Americans from not just the present, but space and time itself. The book confronts the figuration of indigeneity as spatially and temporally separated from the settler here and now, relegated to bordered reservation lands and conceptually trapped in a past radically broken off from the settler present. Long Soldier, *WHEREAS*, 84.

³⁷ Sarah Dowling’s “Property, Priority, Place: Rethinking the Poetics of Appropriation” ultimately reads Long Soldier’s appropriation of the Resolution as a method of contrast. Dowling argues that poetic appropriation “is uniquely attuned to questions of place and priority” because “appropriation specifically consists in re-placing a text that is marked as ‘original’ and as belonging in and to a specific location.” The article exposes how notions of property

attend the logic of poetic appropriation. At the level of the social, Dowling points to the logic that a work of poetic appropriation belongs to or is the property of the appropriating writer (This perception stems from Lockean (and perhaps Marxist) logic that the one who “mixes” their labor with passive materials (the land, the extant text), is then entitled to the product of their “work.”) Following this logic, poetic appropriation demonstrates language’s accessibility and resistance to ownership. Dowling then points out the apparent irrelevance of a writer’s identity to their supposedly universal “right to appropriate” within the critical discourse her article reviews. The aesthetic of appropriation can be marshalled into a Liberal fallacy that identity has no effect on one’s power or “right” to take for one’s own any material products as well as land. Dowling does not use the term Liberal, but I believe this is most accurate in light of Elizabeth Povinelli’s work on Late Liberalism and “the autological subject,” which Dowling cites. This logic of appropriation ironically then reflects the longstanding entitlement to dispossess native people of their land that white settlers have assumed for themselves under the discourse of universal rights, alongside the ironic legal prohibition of theft which is selectively applied against non-white people much more than it is applied to white people. Sarah Dowling, “Property, Priority, Place,” 101. See Povinelli, “The Governance of the Prior” interventions Vol. 13(1) 13-30 and Povinelli, “Citizens of the Earth: Indigenous Cosmopolitanism and the Governance of the Prior” in *Varieties of Sovereignty and Citizenship*, edited by Sigal R. Ben-Porath, and Rogers M. Smith, U of Pennsylvania P, 2012.

³⁸ Mishuana Goeman, *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations*, U of Minnesota Press, 2013, 2.

³⁹ Ibid., 18, 31.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 10, 11.

⁴¹ Elizabeth Povinelli, “Citizens of the Earth: Indigenous Cosmopolitanism and the Governance of the Prior,” in *Varieties of Sovereignty and Citizenship*, ed. Sigal R. Ben-Porath and Rogers M. Smith, U of Pennsylvania Press, 2012, 219.

⁴² Not only “spatially, socially, and temporally before it,” indigeneity is “projected” by the settler imaginary “in the double sense of *before*—before it in a temporal sequence and before it as a fact to be faced.” Povinelli, “Citizens of the Earth,” 214. Law-making violence (in the Benjaminese sense) effects this break as it “resets the grounds and languages of legitimate violence” (216). Recognizing indigenous and nation-state claims to sovereignty to thus talk past each other even as they ironically both rely on claims regarding a shared past, Povinelli theorizes the “governance of the prior” as a “mode of political imaginary,” and a “formation of power.” Elizabeth Povinelli, “The Governance of the Prior,” *Interventions*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2011, 14, 15. Povinelli, “Citizens of the Earth,” 214. Johannes Fabian’s *Time and the Other* elaborates a similar concept more fully while Povinelli’s earlier concept of “the governance of the prior” engages indigenous critical theory more directly. Povinelli, “The Governance of the Prior,” 15, 19.

⁴³ Acknowledgement becomes a particular problem for the settler imaginary; compelled by its own history to confer rights based on the priority of the prior, it must find a way to annul its own rule in relation to Native Americans. Because the governance of the prior appeared in English common law before the invention of settler colonial nation-states, Povinelli argues, this pre-existing power structure compelled the new American state to both acknowledge and to annul the priority of the prior. In order to acknowledge (perhaps without recognizing) the priority of the prior, settler Americans found a way to imagine *themselves* as the prior inhabitants of North America, elevating their priority over the European metropole. Povinelli, “The Governance of the Prior,” 17.

⁴⁴ This *whereas* statement resonates with Joy Harjo’s poem “Perhaps the World Ends Here.” When Harjo writes: “The world begins at a kitchen table. No matter what, we must eat to live,” Long Soldier complicates the image by highlighting the influence of a colonial *whereas* over that table.

⁴⁵ Long Soldier, *WHEREAS*, 79.

⁴⁶ “S.J.Res.14 - A joint resolution to acknowledge a long history of official depredations and ill conceived policies by the Federal Government regarding Indian tribes and offer an apology to all Native Peoples on behalf of the United States,” Senate-Indian Affairs. Congress.gov, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/111th-congress/senate-joint/resolution/14/text>.

⁴⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “resolution (*n.*).”

⁴⁸ The preposition “in” citizenship rather than “as” a dual citizen separates the speaker from her national identities to render them locations or containers, rather than a temporal identity or simile. Long Soldier, *WHEREAS*, 57.

⁴⁹ Long Soldier, *WHEREAS*, 57.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 84.

⁵¹ Ibid., 62.

⁵² The speaker on this page begins her response by writing not what she says but what she *wants* to respond. Long Soldier paradoxically materializes such “emptiness” as a “sticky current” and a later a “burden.”

While the friend's comment seemed to mean that a *poem* lacked "culture," the writer's interpretation of "Indian emptiness" as something felt beyond her poems suggests an emptiness with an "Indian" particularity, or even a concept of indigeneity *as* an emptiness. Ibid.

⁵³ The suffix "-ness" in this neologism echoes the descriptive logic of "emptiness" and situates language as a personal quality or attribution. The writer then attributes a value to languageness, a correctness that paradoxically implies a control over her being (rather than use of) language.

⁵⁴ To continue thinking about the dictionary in poetics, see Harryette Mullen's *Sleeping with the Dictionary*.

⁵⁵ What does the concept of "indigeneity" really refer to? Povinelli argues that early American colonists had to invent an abstract concept of the "indigenous" to provide a "name for prior being." In an ironic reversal, this term ultimately allowed settlers to claim 'first being' for themselves as legitimation of their state formation and ongoing violent possession of resources and land. The figures of primitivity and childhood supplement this project, and the past perfect tense, as I have mentioned, also proves useful in this paradoxical construction. Settler logic also figures the indigenous as a collective bound by "abstract rights of inclusion"—identity and "blood"—rather than material practices of obligation between land and people. Meanwhile the settler is figured as a free, self-determining individual. Recalling the book's first poem, "He Sápa," the settler concept of subjectivity itself then has epistemic and ontological ramifications, as: "What the soil is, what the territory, the sky, and the land are, cannot be disembedded from the obligations of belonging that are incommensurate with the disembedded 'free' citizen-subject." Povinelli, "Citizens of the Earth," 221-2.

⁵⁶ Long Soldier, *WHEREAS*, 62.

⁵⁷ It was difficult for me not to read the image of a body in the hull of ship as a *reference* to the Atlantic slave trade; to do so might conflate one material experience with reference to another.

⁵⁸ Long Soldier, *WHEREAS*, 71.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ This exhaustion is reiterated in another whereas statement that concludes with the desire to be "[l]et loose from the impulse to note: *Beware, a horse isn't a reference to my heritage.*" Ibid., 74.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 77.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 84.

⁶⁶ Though on this page the writer finds words and achieves a form of the letter she wanted to write to that particular girl, the writer struggles more when in address to someone unknown.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 61.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 61, 10.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 24.

⁷⁰ dg likely refers to dg nanouk okpik, an Inupiaq-Inuit poet raised in Anchorage, Alaska by an adoptive Irish German family who also taught at the Institute for American Indian Arts.

⁷¹ Long Soldier, *WHEREAS*, 24.

⁷² "seduce a poem into believing / I can home it I can provide it..." Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 26.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 27.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.. The slash in this line is not my mark of a line break, but rather appears on Long Soldier's page, dividing the phrases on its either side horizontally.

⁷⁸ Long Soldier, *WHEREAS*, 84.

⁷⁹ See Denise Ferreira da Silva's critique of rendering racial *quality* as causality in "1 (life) ÷ 0 (blackness) = ∞ - ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value." *e-flux* 79 (2017). n.p. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/79/94686/1-life-0-blackness-or-on-matter-beyond-the-equation-of-value/>

⁸⁰ Long Soldier, *WHEREAS*, 84.

⁸¹ Ibid., 66.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 92.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 52.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 57.

⁸⁷ Obama actually signed an act “[m]aking appropriations for the Department of Defense for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2010, and for other purposes,” according to the legislation itself, which contained the language of a Senate Resolution of apology that did not pass on its own. US Congress, *111th Congress Public Law 118*, December 19, 2009, 3409, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-111publ118/html/PLAW-111publ118.htm>.

⁸⁸ Long Soldier, *WHEREAS*, 57.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ “President Obama never read the apology aloud, publicly—although, for the record, Senator Sam Brownback five months later read the Apology to a gathering of five tribal leaders, though there are more than 560 federally recognized tribes in the US.”

⁹¹ Ibid., 49.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Billy-Ray Belcourt, “Fatal Naming Rituals,” *Hazlitt*, July 19, 2018, <https://hazlitt.net/feature/fatal-naming-rituals>.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Long Soldier, *WHEREAS*, 49.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 50.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 49.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Hamalainen, *Lakota America*, 10.

¹⁰³ Andrews, Jennifer. *In the Belly of a Laughing God: Humour and Irony in Native Women’s Poetry*. U of Toronto Press, 2011, 18-19.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 19.

¹⁰⁵ See also Allan Ryan’s *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Arts*

¹⁰⁶ Claire Colebrook, *Irony*, Routledge, 2003, 13.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Colebrook, *Irony*, 15.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Dowling, “Property, Priority, Place,” 120.

¹¹¹ Long Soldier, *WHEREAS*, 49.

¹¹² Colebrook, *Irony*, 17. Colebrook reflects this when she writes, “To assert that something is the case is only a forceful speech act in a context where one could or would assert that it is not the case” (162).

¹¹³ Long Soldier, *WHEREAS*, 50.

¹¹⁴ Berel Lang, “The Limits of Irony,” *New Literary History*, vol. 27, 1996, p. 579.

¹¹⁵ Long Soldier, *WHEREAS*, 50.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 49, 50.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 52.

¹¹⁹ While the objects of grasses and the Sioux Uprising appear in “38,” no preceding context nor object of writing, even *about*, is given when part Four of “Ĥe Sápa” begins: “*But* / is the small way to begin. // But I could not.” To begin with the belated conjunction *but* implies a preceding, conflicting idea, unwritten or not written here. The word can also indicate a mereness or a singularity (nothing but). “To begin” becomes paradoxically to write the response or contestation that is communicated by the word *but*, italicized by Long Soldier to emphasize the word as language. That the writer could not begin with *but* might at first suggest that what precedes her precludes her response, but the writer explains the limitation otherwise: “As I am limited to few/ words at command, such as *wąȳbli*.” The writer worries she cannot begin not only as an action but *as the I*—“But I could not.” This first *I* of the entire book, usually the index of a subject and origin of action or being, emerges only in the negation of capacity because she does not have access to or control over enough language.

Not only does the speaker feel she does not know enough words, even the words she does know do not adequately convey certain of her meanings. Even when she wants to begin “with the little / I know,” the speaker fails to communicate her “imagining” of what *wąȳbli* means to her because “this eagle / of my imagining is not spotted, bald, / nor even a nest-eagle.” What the speaker means by *wąȳbli*, the Lakota word that translates to “eagle,” is not an

American figure of an eagle, perhaps not a bird at all. Long Soldier also asserts her use of the word is not a Lakota figure: “by definition, not ever the great Golden Eagle.” The meaning of *waybli* cannot be equated to any reference, can be defined neither by its English translation to eagle or to the Anglicized figure of a Lakota Golden Eagle. The writer’s meaning is perpetually separate from her word, both its connotations and its denotation in English, and perhaps also its definition in Lakota. Ibid., 9.

¹²⁰ Long Soldier, *WHEREAS*, 51.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Lang, “The Limits of Irony,” 582.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 52.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 53.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ citing his debut poetry collection. Ravit Reichman gave me the irresistible pendulum analogy.

¹²⁹ Long Soldier, *WHEREAS*, 5.

¹³⁰ “with all the noise that you’ve ever heard, you struggle somehow to make a difference, so to speak, within that noise. And that difference isn’t necessarily about you as an individual, it’s much more simply about trying to augment and to differentiate what’s around you.” Fred Moten, “Fred Moten’s Radical Critique of the Present,” by David S. Wallace. *The New Yorker*, April 30, 2018.

¹³¹ Jacques Derrida, “Signature, Event, Context” in *Limited Inc*, Northwestern UP, 1988, 1.

¹³² Long Soldier, *WHEREAS*, 46.

¹³³ Ibid., 45.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 47.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 50.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 6.

¹⁴⁰ Furthermore, not only does the ĥ grapheme not exist in English, but neither does its sound. And, the sound is “voiceless,” meaning it does not use the vocal chords.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ This ‘slipping’ reminds me of Eng’s figure of Carole.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 64.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 37.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 25.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 61.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 32.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 44.

¹⁵⁰ Long Soldier, *WHEREAS*, 44. The only source I could find that uses a term like language poor was a Christian nonprofit called SIL: “[W]e can add one more label to the taxonomy of poverty: linguistic poverty....In some cases a linguistically poor community is deprived of opportunities by being confined to a monolingual repertoire which is inadequately developed to meet their current needs and desires.” “SIL’s core contribution areas are Bible translation.... Our services are available without regard to religious belief, political ideology, gender, race or ethnic background.” M. Paul Lewis, “Language and Poverty,” *SIL*, June 1, 2023, <https://www.sil.org/blog/language-and-poverty#:~:text=In%20light%20of%20the%20above,and%20aspirations%20of%20the%20community>.

¹⁵¹ Long Soldier, “Interview with 2018 NBCC Poetry Award Finalist Layli Long Soldier,” by Melanie Odelle. See also Stephanie Papa’s theory of Long Soldier’s poetics as “kinetic,” which “unanchor the notion that bodies—and the bodies of poems—are fixed entities. Both carry, release, transmit, and reach beyond themselves; they are, as Mishuana Goeman attests, ‘uncontainable’ expressions.” Stephanie Papa, “Somatic Communication: Motherhood and Transference in Layli Long Soldier’s Poetry,” *Women: A Cultural Review* 33, no. 4: 397. Goeman, *Mark my Words*, 106.

Chapter Three

"Let's get the obvious out of the way" Apostrophe in Cameron Awkward-Rich's *Sympathetic Little Monster*

In Chapter One, I read Mercedes Eng's book *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* to address appropriation and figuration. I argued that Eng's book invites the reader both to deconstruct conceptual language, attend to material and personal loss, and grapple with the tension between figuration's potential for appropriation *and* deconstruction. Chapter Two studies Layli Long Soldier's response to the American government's Resolution of Apology to Native Americans with a critique of the grammatical conjunction "whereas" and the *non*-performance of language. I also remind readers to attend to Part 1 of *WHEREAS*, where Long Soldier grapples with irony, responsibility, sound, and materiality. I read both of these books in response to expectations for conceptual communicability, representation, and resolution.

Chapter Three continues to read for poetics of address, this time by fully suspending the question of what (where or whom) a poem addresses to linger in attention to *how* it addresses. Cameron Awkward-Rich's *Sympathetic Little Monster* (2016) extends time and space for this suspension in several ways. By *claiming* multiple genres, the book both demands particular reading modes and confuses readerly expectations of generic *form*. From this (dis)orientation toward/of genre, I turn toward Awkward-Rich's poetics of first-person address. By now *displacing* (personal) names rather than claiming them, Awkward-Rich's addressees become subjective but not responsive themselves. Still grasping for what has now become the *addressee* of a speaker who claims "I could give her a name" I turn to the book's impatient, explanatory, and ambiguously mournful *tones* for guidance.

I also confront the figuration of a little girl who haunts the speaker from the beginning to the end of the book. Recognizing that the figure represents the (trans) writer's childhood self, I will discuss the effect of writing *about* this figure not only or primarily to the reader but *to the writer*. The writer seems conflicted in his accountability to this figure; he doesn't allow her *to write*—or at least, not as the girl—and only alludes to what she “told” him. Because she is figured to the reader, *Sympathetic Little Monster* ultimately makes a demand *upon us*: that we “pay attention,” and, I will argue, that we constitute the middle body in a relationship of sympathy: the point of contact (like a tissue that touched a wound) made site for sympathetic effect (the wound's healing via the application of powder *to the tissue*). I hope that, by the end of this chapter, you will be convinced that poetic address is inextricable from poetics of self-address, and that reading for poetics of address likewise implicates the reader's self-reading.

“Trans, Queer, Black, and American Letters”

Cameron Awkward-Rich is a poet and scholar.¹ With both his scholarship and his poetry, Awkward-Rich contributes to and intervenes in “trans/feminist/queer theory,” black studies, disability studies, and transgender aesthetics.² In 2019, he published his second full length book of poems, *Dispatch*, with Persea Books.³ His first academic book, *The Terrible We: Thinking with Trans Maladjustment*, was published in 2022 and guides my reading of (trans) lyric aesthetics. Awkward-Rich's poetry has also been anthologized in *African American Poetry: 250 Years of Struggle & Song: A Library of America Anthology* and *We Want it All: An Anthology of Radical Trans Poetics*; he is black and trans.

Guided by Shockley, to read black trans aesthetics in *Sympathetic Little Monster* is to acknowledge that the book confronts “competing expectations or desires for whether and how race [and gender] will function,” and exists within a context of antiblackness.⁴ My attempts to articulate

in greater detail the book's navigation of social identity has produced a set of illuminating readings that I will not elaborate here beyond these few points: Frantz Fanon's account of antiblackness as a mode of address that names blackness as an object only indirectly, but which is experienced by the black subject as self-alienation is relevant to consider in relation to figures of embodiment in *Sympathetic Little Monster*; Sylvia Wynter's critique of Man as genre, of course, is relevant here; and C. Riley Snorton's argument in *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (2017) that "trans—in each of its permutations—finds expression and continuous circulation within blackness, and blackness is transected by embodied procedures that fall under the sign of gender" brilliantly un-figures identity and human being in a way that resonates with the work of *Sympathetic Little Monster*.⁵ Because *I* do not want to refigure blackness or transness in this writing, in this chapter I focus on *modes* of address other than antiblackness, except for when I return briefly to antiblackness as it is *directly addressed* by Awkward-Rich's book.

I also read *Sympathetic Little Monster* as an extension of the postlyric black aesthetics that Anthony Reed traced in Claudia Rankine's first *American Lyric*, prescient of her subsequent work to this effect. I briefly discuss Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* in recognition of that book's exceptional impact on American poetics and example of poetics of address. In similarity and contrast to *Sympathetic Little Monster*, Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* and subsequent *Citizen* both claim the *American Lyric*.⁶ Both "American Lyrics" solicit yet render themselves difficult to read according to lyric genre expectations.⁷ Each represent personal experiences, but each also stretches the lyric's formal boundaries by incorporating reproductions of art of various media and citations of contemporary events.⁸ These juxtapositions generate a "genre indeterminacy" that Shockley observes in her contribution on *Citizen* for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*.⁹ While *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* uses the first-person, invoking if not reproducing the *I* that classically

marks lyric, *Citizen* and its radical *you* especially provokes a rethinking of the lyric through its subsumption under that particular, historic, normative lyric *I*.¹⁰

Sympathetic Little Monster ultimately aligns with the mission of its publisher, Ricochet Editions, to print “trans-genre, and/or genre-less works.”¹¹ That said, *Sympathetic Little Monster* is perhaps most likely of the three books discussed in this project to be read as lyric, because *Sympathetic Little Monster* does not obviously incorporate any previously published material, is often written in the first person, and often seems to express the feelings of that first-person ‘speaker.’ Refiguring “lyric” as a kind of poetic *work* in their back cover blurb, Danez Smith ultimately describes Awkward-Rich’s book as “a collection breaking new ground in Trans, Queer, Black, and American Letters.”¹² This formulation simultaneously recognizes the relevance of Awkward-Rich’s poetic (black, trans, lyric) *aesthetics*, registers the inadequacy of the Lyric *genre* to describe the book, and describes the book *in letters*: addressed to and from Trans, Queer, Black, and American readers and writers. Though *I* want to read it as a form or forms of letters, the book itself ironically *claims* to contain several distinct genres of writing. *Sympathetic Little Monster* *figures itself* across a range of genres with titles designating: essay, theory, argument, poetics, *ars poetica*, monologue. Though its back cover lists the book as “poetry,” no title names itself a “poem” or “lyric,” which perhaps paradoxically leaves those terms open for readers to attribute to the book themselves.¹³

The book names and renames itself with generic terms that fail to determine the forms of writing to which titles are ascribed. Generic norms are destabilized as the writing that the generic terms supposedly name is only ambiguously recognizable as such.¹⁴ For instance, none of Awkward-Rich’s “essays” are such in an academic sense (a few pages of argument or exploration in prose), but they do read as “attempts” in accordance with the formal definition of an “essay.”

These titles refer and become referents to the writing that follows them and subsequent titles. They become cross-referential in modified repetitions of topic and especially of grammatical form (“What Remains”; “What’s Lost”; “What Returns”). The revisions that these repetitions also imply, as well as marks of incompleteness like a colon followed by a blank space or a blank ____, also undermine the sense of the book as determinably complete to ultimately raise questions of its achievement of any generic effect.¹⁵ In both bringing these generic *names* together in one book and attributing them to writing that deviates from their normative appearances, *Sympathetic Little Monster* both invokes and disassociates writing from its implicit forms, purposes, speakers, and addressees.¹⁶

“I could give her a name”

Staying with the function of naming, *Sympathetic Little Monster* begins with a first-person subject speculating over its writerly (and paternal) powers, claiming: “I could give her a name.”¹⁷ Though this *I* might be enough to invoke lyric (reading), this phrase seems to immediately parody certain academic critiques of lyric (reading) for characterization and narrative. Jonathan Culler articulates academic *hopes* for lyric as motivated *against* the reduction of (even nonliterary) experience and perception to figures of character and narrative logics of causality. Instead, Culler wants to restore a mode of lyric reading that need “not make much sense in an empirical frame,” giving lyric chiasmus as an example which reverses attribute and object to “meld[] the two elements as part of a process.”¹⁸ If these lyric aesthetics exceed an “empirical” frame, is there another way to frame them?

Culler himself leaves space to distinguish between naming and characterization when he highlights lyric aesthetics of “ritualistic repetition” which “mark[s] the belief that language can sometimes make things happen, through acts of naming, highlighting, and reordering, as well as

through the instigation of poetic forms that will repeat as readers or listeners take them up and articulate them anew.”¹⁹ But can a form be “articulate[d]” without being ‘characterized’? Is to articulate a form to *name* it? Neither does Awkward-Rich wholly dismiss *lyrical* naming when *The Terrible We* figures lyric paradox “into *something like an identity*” through “catachresis, simile, collapse of discrete moments into something like a whole; all the stuff of which lyric speech is made.”²⁰ Both Awkward-Rich and Culler figure language as a given material that, for Awkward-Rich, *makes* speech and, for Culler, can be “linked not only to structures of identification and displacement before the consolidation of subject positions but especially to rhythm and the bodily experience of temporality, on the one hand, and to the formative dwelling in a particular language, on the other.”²¹ How can this reconceptualized ‘lyric’ naming resist the subjection of both lyric ‘form’ and racial and gendered experiences’ nevertheless to narrative reading? Does lyric naming differ from social identification?

“I could give her a name.” But this speaker never gives “her”—“the girl”—a ‘proper’ name nor do they ever name themselves in the first person (I am, my name is...). *Both* the *I* as subject *and* the grammatical object *her* exist *only* in the speaker’s spatial references. Though “the girl” and “the boy” who appear in writing don’t have to be *there* with the speaker. But wait, is there a “speaker” there in that “I”? Look how easy it is to fall back upon the figure of “the speaker” despite

I could give her a name / I could / cross out this story / cut the
sentence short / & her knees are wet / with nothing / but dew
/ I could close / the zipper / I could plant a long stemmed rose /
between his thighs / trade her throat for a wasp nest / let them
/ both leave / the story / wrecked / erase enough / the girl’s black
ink / incased in snow / she could freeze there / I could / change
the ending / *daffodils.* / *marigolds.* / what better place to start /
brought to her knees & crowned with gold / I’m sorry / I have to
unlock the room now / let the boy play / his favorite song / split
the girl / from her shadow / give him a story / of his own / feel free
to sing along / you know the words. (1)

Culler's critique. Without foreclosing the reading of the first-person pronoun as a "speaker," *Sympathetic Little Monster* immediately figures its speaker as (at least *also*) a writer:

Though it might choose or decline to name, this *I* itself appears *only* its *writing*. Without figuring this *I*—and how could I without figuring Awkward-Rich?—reading for poetics of address can still ask about this *I*'s figuration, and especially about this *I*'s relative position *on the page*. As we've already seen, the *I* relates to a *her* that, now that we recognize *her* as written, need not be on the page with the *I*. "The girl" and "the boy" can each escape the writer's orbit, and so can *you*—at least, if you stop reading.

The power of the lyric *I*—before we recognize it definitively as the writer—quickly expands to possibility in general, but as soon as it is figured as a writer it's power immediately narrows, and perhaps this *I* would most accurately be named an editor rather than a writer. They confront an existent story. Perhaps, this story has been given as quickly as the poem's title. A complete sentence ending with a period—written in the passive tense in distinction from the subjunctive and present tenses of the body of the poem—reads: "The Girl is Brought to Her Knees in a Field of Glass." Not just subject to someone else's naming, the girl in this title is physically subjected.

If the girl is *in* "this story," is the writer too? The deictic pulls the story into the writer's presence while separating the writer from it. Now what is on the page? If the deictic originates from the *I*, *this* locates the story on the page. But the writing *I cannot be* "the writer." Awkward-Rich inserts slashes which perform the cutting short that writing *I* or written 'speaker' considers, displacing the 'actual' writer away from the written *I*, off the page. The first writing (mark?) of the slash separates the written *I* from any object ("I could" *what?*) and then from action ("cross out this story"). Coordinated to but indeterminable by the identity and position of the writer of *this*—

whether as or not as the *I*, whether the *I* as a *speaker* or as a writer of *this*—“this story” is both past, present, and potential, crossed out or cut off, on the page and off of it.

Along with its ambiguous existence and nonexistence, presence and absence, the ‘story’ is aesthetically surreal. Rather than a linear narrative, we are asked to read a series of phrasal fragments. These slashes complicate causal grammar and create pauses that highlight the unpredictability of the next phrase.²² Slashes make ambiguous to which objects the verbs and adjectives refer. When Awkward-Rich writes “let them both leave / the story / wrecked,” the separation of “them,” “the story,” and “wrecked” confuses whether the writer’s permission would wreck the story, or wreck them, or if they were already wrecked by something else.

This story is more like an image that the writer considers recomposing with other, displacing or covering images. Changing one letter in “field of grass” both invokes a familiar pastoral image, with its literary associations with freedom and beauty, and forces us to revision and consider how *that* particular image and its associations could become a field of *glass*. How could a *rhyming* scene figure such danger and harm?²³ We know there is a girl in this field, and after four lines a figure of masculinity appears behind a “long stemmed rose / between his thighs.” By recontextualizing familiar images, this scene visualizes without representing a scene of violence and generates affect in its visual *allusions*. The displacing images become almost *citational* of lyric poetry when “I could / change the ending / *daffodils*. / *marigolds*. what better place to start /.”²⁴ To position Wordsworth’s famous golden daffodils as either a beginning or an ending to a *story* reopens “I Wandered Lonely As A Cloud” from a static, Romantic, past image to indeterminacy, in its ‘own’ meaning but especially as a material for other writing. If the story’s ending could change into flowers, can its beginning be refigured as a coronation?

Having thoroughly confused the story's visual status—as text (to be written or crossed out), or as images (of displacement)—the writer's attempt to refigure the title is the last revision of the story. Instead, the writer abruptly turns away, making an apology:

I'm sorry / I have to unlock the room now / let the boy play / his favorite song /
split the girl / from her shadow / give him a story / of his own / feel free to sing
along / you know the words.

The tone shifts from a writer's speculations—likely self-directed—to a direct address. What is this apology for?²⁵ Should we read this 'apology' as one of those expressions of sympathy—I'm sorry that happened to you—or does this expression of sorrow perform an obligation of the speaker to the addressee? To whom is this apology addressed? The subject of the most definitive violence in this scene is the girl. Assuming for now that the apology is directed to the girl in reference to what came before it, we could also read it as a preemptive apology for what comes after: the writer's unlocking of the room, and possibly also for the splitting of the girl from her shadow and for giving the boy a story. But is there harm in this part of the writing?

Until this point in the poem, the repetition of the phrase "I could" implied that this writing was self-directed, only a matter of the writer's consideration and not a matter of his decision or doing. But the logic of apology requires an addressee other than the writer or, if strangely self-directed, splits the writer. As a reader, the writer's turn away from voicing subjunctive possibilities to "I'm sorry" feels like a turn toward *me*. But have I been harmed? Should I be disappointed by the inconclusiveness of the girl's story? Is the writer's assumption that his reader is disappointed by the story enough to make the writer owe an apology—for having written it? In any case, there is no choice; they "*have to* [emphasis mine] unlock the room now." Another slash confuses whether this unlocking of the room is *required* to "let the boy play," or if this "let" is a request to the reader.

Likewise, does the writer “split the girl / from her shadow,” or is this also a request *to me*? This moment inaugurates many figurations of the girl throughout *Sympathetic Little Monster* in relation to light and shadow. Here, to split the girl from her shadow seems to preserve “the girl” and to preserve *something of her* that makes the shadow, a shadow that presumably indexes both something opaque and a light behind it. But if the girl is in one place and her shadow another, where is that ‘something of her’ that makes the shadow? And what is the source of the light that (not-)she blocks?²⁶

The implied second-person addressee of “I’m sorry” appears in this poem’s final phrase: “you know the words.” Well, *I* don’t know the words, unless they are the words that appear on this page. The closest spatial subject to this you is “the girl,” but if the addressee knows the words, *you* could only definitively be *the boy*, who chose the song. If ‘letting the boy play’ has cost the girl something, is this an invitation for her to join the new scene? And how does the writer *know* that *you* know?

The writer’s control over the addressee, and this scene by extension, becomes paradoxical in final invitational imperative to “feel free.” The addressee of the invitation also faces a paradox of feeling free and freedom, freedom and command. We might now revisit all the actions from which the *I* has been separated in the girl’s story: “cross out this story,” “cut the sentence short,” “trade,” “let them,” “erase,” and “change the ending.” These phrases are all imperatives and infinitives waiting for an agent. Almost all of the verbs require movement, except for the passivity of “let,” which also allows that “they” might move themselves. In another paradox of location, the possibility of the writer’s letting “them” leave the story shifts to a representation of “the girl’s black ink / incased in snow”: “in[k],” in[cased] in.” The girl *could* be frozen along with her “ink,” but the writer never decides on this page.

This poem makes the subjects of writing and violence blurred and ambiguous. As the writer could name a character or cross out an existing story, the girl herself has ink to write, yet the writings of either could be erased or frozen; the boy plays a song but is “give[n] a story,” yet the story is also “his own.” Awkward-Rich’s slashes and lack of periods also allow several phrases to ambiguously refer to the preceding or following phrase; the daffodils and marigolds which invoke Lyric history could end the story and/or offer a place to start. As the beginning and end of the girl’s story are confused, the order of Awkward-Rich’s last lines also pivot between the boy’s song and his story. The writer “let[s] the boy play / his favorite song,” and *you* are invited to “sing along,” positioning the *lyrics* between the boy and *you*. Is this *lyric* poem after all the song that “you know the words [to]”? It is also possible to read the object of “sing[ing] along” as *the story*, the nearest object to that phrase. Are *you* then invited to (lyrically) sing along to the boy’s story? Is it possible for *you* to refer to the reader *and* the writer *and* the boy *and* the girl all at once, while at the same time the writing *I* never *is* you, the boy, or the girl?

This shift from the girl and her story to the boy and his song, this reference to a boy ‘in the closet,’ all suggest a trans subject. Subsequent poems also support our reading of the girl as a black trans child, and as the writer’s former embodiment. Take the sixth poem, which begins “when she is a child” but soon addresses “you” as “having once been / your father’s girl” and ends with a speculative repetition “*When I am a child. // When I am a child. Over & over. As if.*”²⁷ As if the writer could tell this story in the first person, but can’t. What can the girl do? Barbara Johnson’s “Apostrophe, Animation, Abortion” is illuminating in this trans context. Johnson writes: “Apostrophe is a form of ventriloquism through which the speaker throws voice, life, and human form into the addressee, turning its silence into mute responsiveness.”²⁸ Johnson, and Virginia Jackson after her, problematizes any projection of personhood that cannot actually speak back.

Jackson rearticulates the “intersubjective expense [of apostrophe], since apostrophic intersubjectivity can only be a fantasy that constitutes ‘an image of self’ rather than a conversation.”²⁹ Following their own purposes—a critique of discursive figures of abortion and a critique of unracialized universal subjectivity—neither Johnson nor Jackson consider whether the speaker could instead recognize their addressee—whether of self or of other—*as an image*.

Before Johnson turns to the social and political consequences of apostrophic personification, she reads Baudelaire and Shelley where “what is at stake in both poems is, as we have seen the fate of a lost child—the speaker’s own former self—and the possibility of a new birth or a reanimation.”³⁰ Though Baudelaire and Shelley idealize their childhood as a condition of freedom, where might a black and trans apostrophic speaker see freedom in their childhood image? When the girl in *Sympathetic Little Monster* “drops an O into the slit,” she drops a written letter through or into some body or some thing and “out falls the world, sweet / and tacky...”³¹ The girl pays with that lyric, hailing “O of the pure vocative, Jakobson’s conative function, or the pure presencing of the second person” to receive the world like a piece of gum for her to chew. But who *wrote* (and gave her) that letter that also looks like an empty circle on the page, and that also sounds like “the ‘oh,’ of pure subjectivity, Jakobson’s emotive function, or the pure presencing of the first person.”³² In any case, the girl is separate from the circle of the world, even if her shadow falls upon it and even if she swallows it.

Though I have argued that the speaker of *Sympathetic Little Monster* determinably does not address the girl directly, and though I will insist the speaker does not identify himself as a mother, the little ghost girl seems too similar to the figures of dead children addressed in the Gwendolyn Brooks poem that Johnson turns to study. Though Johnson writes in the context of abortion, I would extend her argument that any speaker of an apostrophe figured as a *mother* is

sure to be read as responsible—and likely also to feel (responsible)—for the addressees.³³ Johnson reads the speaker in Brooks’ “The Mother” as someone unsure how to distinguish the “dead/never made” but who’s “control [not as speaker but] as a subject” requires that determination.³⁴ Johnson’s reading shows that a speaker’s determining ‘control’ is already displaced—if it ever was at all—when confronted with a binary choice, which is in this case whether to bear or not bear another (figure of) life).³⁵ Awkward-Rich’s speaker, however, by not addressing the little girl directly, does not figure her as a speaker whatsoever nor her existence as wholly dependent on him. The little girl *is*—and at least sometimes wants to be—mute and simply allowed: “To join the mute divinity of things.”³⁶ Not quite a thing, Awkward-Rich’s references *to the girl* in first-person address to another situates her being and doings at a distance and unlocatable.

“You already know the story”

As I have explained, to reasonably assume Awkward-Rich to be a writer “actively working out a poetics in the context of a racist society” would qualify the aesthetics of *Sympathetic Little Monster* as ‘black’ in Shockley’s terms, but here I am interested in how the book itself also tends to and dislocates aesthetics of blackness. By invoking the author’s own name, rendering “Awkward” an attribute logically distinct from but textually parallel to “black,” and ambiguously positioning each descriptor paradoxically *of* and interchangeable *with* an object, “Essay on the Awkward / Black / Object” aestheticizes the author(‘s name) as the writer’s object, blackness as the author/writer’s object, and the author(‘s name) *as* a black object.³⁷ The poem first locates its interest in reference to the story of Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which it assumes we will recognize by the name “Harriet” and allusion to a scene in the book, to pose the question: “once made into an object-for-the-other, how can the thing-for-itself survive?”³⁸ The writer responds to their own allusion to a particular, historical black person’s experience by

pivoting away from the scene and asking an abstract question of objectification and self-orientation.

Though it assumes you know who “Harriet” is in its first stanza, the second stanza of “Essay on the Awkward / Black / Object” describes *you* in an experience of objectification, where you are flattened “in the frame of their looking” at you as your face as your ID photo without specifying any difference and without “know[ing] what has caused the moment,” though we might not imagine this to be the experience of someone who looks like a white man in both photo and face. The third stanza is the first to write in self-reference: “Everyone wants to know the story of my name. Everyone.” But it’s a “joke, you know. You already know the story. A man is made into a thing & sutured to it. The name.”³⁹ But who wrote this story and who, if anyone, is its subject, if *everyone* wants to know it, *you* know it, and it is the story of *my* name? And if the addressee already knows, why are we being told? The dismissal of the joke as one of an antiblack type that *you* (should have) already recognized implies a critique of everyone’s, including *your*, desire for the repetition of what is already known.⁴⁰ However, there is also a paradoxical space made between the “everyone” who “wants to know” and the “you” who “already know[s].” Where is the reader here?

While there is a space here to distinguish the *you* from *everyone* through *your* particular knowing, the stanza concludes with an explanation anyway: “A man is made into a thing & sutured to it. The name.”⁴¹ Yet again, there are spaces here between “a man,” “a thing,” “it” and “the name,” as well as a difference between being “made into” and “sutured to.” All of these nominative leaps leave room for a reader to critique the story’s elision of differences between name and thing, thing and man. Then we are immediately given “another option. It’s not the truth, though it might be, which is, in the end, what matters.”⁴² Materializing possibility rather than truth, the alternative

makes use of the gaps between “the thing, “he,” and “its body”: “Now, when the thing is made to do dangerous work, he flings its body from the low rungs of a ladder. Limbs akimbo & fluttering & still alive.” Separating the man from ‘its body’—blurring this ‘body,’ with ‘the thing’ and ‘the name’ in the story—“he flings” the body into suspension. Read carefully, this tossing of an objectified body not even subjectively possessed (not his—its) might be less violent than it seems in the lowness of its position on the ladder and the diction of being ‘flung’ “akimbo & fluttering & still alive.” This strictly poetic, explicitly untrue act reimagines a body as one that might be cast off in the lyric temporality of “now” and separated from the agentive yet elsewhere “he.”⁴³

A few stanzas later, the speaker sets up without finishing two jokes of the same category grounded in antiblack negation before reading the joke of the antiblack slur “named for its inability to function. To work.”⁴⁴ In a tone ambiguously both confident and unsure of what exactly *you* know, Awkward-Rich’s speaker asks, “You get the joke, right?”⁴⁵ He explains, in case you don’t: “*Awkward* as both punishment & method. The unending flight from *you* to *I*.”⁴⁶ This explanation problematizes the location of the speaker and the subject not just of naming but of meaning. Perpetually evading the position of objectification, here by addressing *you*, the *Awkward* speaker can never quite reach the position of an asserting and addressing *I*. While the attribution of *awkwardness* to an inability or *refusal* to “function” according to social norms of capitalist labor might mark the subject for social isolation, to *perform* or solicit awkwardness itself as method—if only from the position of the unreachable *I*—could be a method of refusal to “work” according to social (and capitalist) norms.

Having ensured that we understand the violent, objectifying hailing of antiblackness to the best of its explanatory ability, Awkward-Rich’s speaker yields to undecidability in the final stanza: “We haven’t made it to the punch line. / Everyone is waiting. Everyone wants / resolution, for the

poem to click shut. Who / gets the last word? Who, in the end, dictates / the story? I'm sorry. I really don't know."⁴⁷ Referring back to the story of a name that everyone knows was created as a joke—a form that depends on shared affect—the poem suspends an ambiguous *we* before the joke's violent ending: "we haven't made it." This "we" gestures to a collective before or beyond the determinant closure of antiblackness, but the poem acknowledges that this suspension is not comfortable for the "everyone" who wants closure. In these last lines the lyric *I* appears for the first time in this poem to apologize and confess its limitation. This *I* cannot control or even predict who will "dictate" and end "the story."⁴⁸

"Let's get the obvious out of the way"

Dislocating poetics of address, especially as a black aesthetic, complicate the terms of readers' possible identifications with any figure or voice of the lyric speaker without foreclosing the possibility of hearing oneself speak—not another's voice, just another voice. Readers of the dislocating *you* in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* cannot simply subsume their identity in or with what is now their more obviously projected sense of the speaker/writer. Ironically drawing the reader *into* the poem as *you*, "the second person for me disallowed the reader from knowing immediately how to position themselves," explains Rankine.⁴⁹ Instead of amounting to a "minstrel performance," as Jackson reads the ventriloquization of racialized yet abstract lyric speakers, Shockley suggests for the *Los Angeles Review of Books* that "Rankine here seems to offer representational writing and to invite — almost demand — white cross-racial identification. What results may be less a challenge to the coherence of the lyric speaker than to the coherence of many readers."⁵⁰ *Citizen*'s repetitions of confrontational racialization via address force readers into racialized positions that might make them feel uncomfortable, rather than inviting them into a

liberating or voyeuristic freedom in relation to their abstraction of race (or blackness in particular) as unfreedom.⁵¹

Here is one example of poetics of address in a moment of *Citizen* that also reflects on the effect that the book also reproduces:

A friend argues that Americans battle between the “historical self” and the “self self.” By this she means you mostly interact as friends with mutual interest and, for the most part, compatible personalities; however, sometimes your historical selves, her white self and your black self, or your white self and her black self, arrive with the full force of your American positioning. Then you are standing face-to-face in seconds that wipe the affable smiles right from your mouths. What did you say? Instantaneously your attachment seems fragile, tenuous, subject to any transgression of your historical self. And though your joined personal histories are supposed to save you from misunderstandings, they usually cause you to understand all too well what is meant.⁵²

Precisely *unable* to imagine themselves free (from racial position), readers of *Citizen* might notice that the affect transferred by Rankine’s scenes varies across readers. *Citizen* also addresses racialized subjects differently than it addresses agents of racialization. While the book describes unspoken thoughts and feelings of racialized subjects, *Citizen* directly confronts the agents of racialization with the repeated question: “What did you just say?” This question appears four times in *Citizen*, and additional related questions appear throughout.⁵³ Still, Rankine’s *you* remains open. If readers identify with the *you* through the end of the scene they will feel differently than if they suddenly disidentify with a blackened subject, or with an agent of racial harm.

Though I read *Citizen*’s force to be in its representation of social repositioning, with *Sympathetic Little Monster* I would like to linger with *lyric* subjectivity.⁵⁴ Even while Reed suggests *Citizen* might, he “do[es] not wish to question the solidity of the phenomenological subject on which the fiction of the lyric rests.”⁵⁵ I am wondering about the possibility of a particular lyric phenomenology of subjectivity that dislocating poetics of address might generate or heighten.⁵⁶ More than enact a multiplicitous black subjectivity that is both private and social,

dislocating poetics of address could perhaps change the phenomenology of blackness as such, by rendering a black poetic subjectivity that paradoxically exceeds its locatability both in the field of racial representations and in time.

I trace this lyric phenomenology of subjectivity in the dislocating, nonnormative yet relational possibilities of lyric address as well as the apostrophic simultaneity of (spatial and temporal) presence and absence that has historically characterized lyric.⁵⁷ I also follow Awkward-Rich's observation in *The Terrible We* of the possibilities of "a lyric subject" for representing (aesthetically *and* politically) trans subjectivity in particular:

This [Michael Dillon's] form of representing subjectivity, which simultaneously captures both the self, formed in relation, and the withdrawn self, but which does not or cannot call them by the same name, is clearly identical to neither the immutable subject of the wrong-body model nor the willful subject of the gender freedom model nor the purely resistant subject of queer trans theory. We might call it a lyric subject, a subject defined—as lyric traditionally has been—by a curious simultaneity of absolute interiority and publicity.⁵⁸

While Rankine's *American Lyrics* crucially make more perceptible (to some readers) historical, systemic racism, especially as made manifest in interpersonal relation, *Sympathetic Little Monster* centers a phenomenology of subjectivity *still working out* its relations with others who are dislocated in the *I*'s time and presence. Awkward-Rich's dislocating poetics of address dislocates the subject both in relation to socially shared (historical) time and even a *personal* history. *Sympathetic Little Monster* generates and even comments on a particular lyric phenomenology of self-reflection in relation to but separate from the social, public self, and that is ephemeral more than "solid."

“Essay on the Theory of Motion” begins with *you*:

You remember reading a poem about a
boy driving his grandmother to the
library across town. Someone said that
the car is a perfect device for giving a
poem the feeling of motion, though you
think the two must end up back at the
grandmother’s house eventually, must
walk hallways lined with family ghosts,
all smiling through the window of a
photograph & is that *motion*, really? This
tendency to cross & recross the small
terms of our own lives? (6)

Though the first sentence of this poem grammatically constitutes an address, it is made less noticeable by the verb “remember.” To remember seems not to be commanded but rather observed, and the memory is specific enough to minimize its relatability. While specific, the memory is also *vague* enough to suggest that the one remembering remembers the reference beyond what is written. This seems like a self-address, creating a subject *you* who “remembers” and “thinks” who is both an agent and an object of address. Because the speaker names the subject’s remembering and reading but does not describe the poem itself or the subject’s experience of reading, the subjectivity of *you* is dislocated both within and outside of the language of the poem/address.

These lines nestle a poem within a memory within a poem yet also situate that poem as an object of discussion and unspoken disagreement in the social world. Awkward-Rich’s speaker skeptically grapples with the promises and limitations of poetic effect, contemplating a “feeling” within a poem that might not be sustainable in the social world to which the poem refers. The speaker’s sense of the passing yet recursive time of life—the pair arrive back where they started—ironically insists on a stability, predictability, and pragmatism within the social world which contrasts with the possibility of perpetual motion within lyric’s signature temporality of the present, or perhaps the perpetual movement of a poem itself through the social world.

Later in “Essay on the Theory of Motion,” Awkward-Rich inserts a parenthetical aside:

(Let's get the obvious out of the way—you were a girl & then you weren't. You moved into a boy & the girl moved into misplaced language, into photographs.)⁵⁹

This apostrophe complicates the initial sense of this poem as a self-address. “Let’s get the obvious out of the way” interjects in the middle of a poem called “Essay on the Theory of Motion,” an early poem in Awkward-Rich’s collection. Especially in the frame of an essay, we could read this phrase as self-addressed, like a note to self. But “let’s get the obvious out of the way” seems also to express consideration of an other—an eventual audience if not an immediate addressee. Yet “Let’s” is a direct address; the speaker knows (something about) the historical *you*.

Turning around from my reading of the obvious in conjunction in *WHEREAS*, I read “let’s get the obvious out of the way” for its impatience and even sarcastic in tone. The phrase suggests not only that the speaker knows the addressee but that each is familiar with the other. “You” either paradoxically really don’t know “the obvious,” or, “you” are being called to acknowledge something that “you” do already know. Aligning addressor and addressee in its contracted *us*, *let’s* remains invitational along with its impatient tone and suggests not only a *you* in distinction from an *I*, but also a *you* and *I* distinct from *them*, recalling that previous, expectant *they*. Is the call to “get the obvious out of the way” then for *us* or *them*? Because the relation within the *us* may be one defined either by shared or unshared knowing, it is unclear who might be outside of *us*. The ambiguity of the contracted *us* with its implicit *you* and *them* both draws into relation and distances addressees and addressors within and outside of the poem; these pronouns displace their subjects.

This history is not actually an “obvious” one, at least not to readers. When the *you* is addressed—now separate from the speaker—the obvious turns out not to be a third-person

statement or first-person admission, but rather an ascriptive gendering in address. This gendering address both personalizes and dislocates the addressee in relation to readers. Now that *you* are particularized by a specific history of and relation to gender seems to foreclose the possibility of universal identification with the pronoun. When directed toward readers at all, this dislocating address is directed toward indeterminate readers again made particular by what they already know. Though Awkward-Rich's readers are still grammatically hailed by these lines' direct address, the direct address without the *I* ultimately suggests this addressee is (also) familiar within or even *to* the poem itself.

If *you moved* "into a boy," this diction of movement—rather than a diction of ontological being—retains a possibility for *you* to continue moving into or through gender. This logic becomes more explicit in the last lines of the poem, which say: "*Get it?* Gender is a country, a field of signifying roses you can walk through, or / wear tucked behind your ear."⁶⁰ This italicized *get it*—another address tinged with uncertainty, perhaps both caring and impatient—seems to turn toward an addressee who really did not get it until now (yet perhaps should have), offering an explanation along with options. Gender is conceptualized as a navigable field in anticipation of Snorton's formulation in *Black on Both Sides*. The final stanza is written in a simultaneously future and present tense: "*eventually* the flower *wilts* [my emphases]" and ends with the offering of possibilities: "& you can / pick another, or burn the field, or turn / & run back across the tracks."⁶¹ Perhaps none of these choices are obvious—certainly none are binary or necessarily preclude the others—but each is realistic in the scene figured by the poem. Even if lyric is an appeal to an absent other and communicative not of fact but of feeling, the subject here hopes to successfully communicate a sense of gender to someone who will understand the speaker's explanation.⁶²

"Pay attention."

Let's give Jackson's critique of apostrophe a fairer hearing. *Does* apostrophe come at a cost—an “intersubjective expense”?⁶³ *Before Modernism* argues against the “intersubjective expense [of apostrophe], since apostrophic intersubjectivity can only be a fantasy that constitutes ‘an image of self’ rather than a conversation.”⁶⁴ What then is the currency of the intersubjective? Is “an image of self” certainly ‘worth less’ “than a conversation,” and does “an image of self” really cost conversation at all? If ventriloquization obliterates the otherness of the other by splitting the subjectivity of the speaker under the illusion of difference, is there any *body*, though mute, that a reader could apostrophize—but not quite *ventriloquize*—without “intersubjective expense”? A book? *A Sympathetic Little Monster*?

Because Jackson theorizes apostrophic ventriloquization also as a mode of *constituting* the self, Jackson suggests that to make this ventriloquization imaginable also makes possible the logical leap that “no identities are chosen and yet, in the impersonally personal lyricized genre that poetry has become, all may be.”⁶⁵ Comparable to Johnson's concerns for the consequences to real women, Jackson is entirely right to worry over the danger of this thought when it is transmuted outside of the poem into the social conditions of the world, raising questions of the violence of appropriation and the elision of historical and material difference in an ongoing context of racial and gendered exploitation.⁶⁶ Jackson's reading of this structure of address presumes determinate subjectivity projecting into determinate objectivity; the structure of ventriloquy could perhaps be read otherwise, if subjectivity is not reducible to voice and objectivity is not reducible to embodiment. Perhaps this structure is especially possible in the case of lyric, which offers a body of text that a reader might hear in their own voice as a nevertheless disorienting, not entirely self-identical self-address. In fact, Jackson herself reads the use of apostrophe to poet Ann Plato to

effect “the specter of a person alienated from her own voice, a poet displaced within her own poem.”⁶⁷

Returning to the stanza of “Essay on the Theory of Motion,” where *you* “were” and then “weren’t” a girl before moving *into* a boy, where did the girl go? “The girl”—that specific girl—retained a singular and specifically gendered subjectivity and “moved into misplaced language, into photographs.”⁶⁸ “Essay on The Appearance of Ghosts,” near the end of *Sympathetic Little Monster*, elaborates on the phenomenon of “the little girl [who] dies & / becomes an image.”⁶⁹ This poem is written across twelve pages, one justified block of text per page, almost like a reel of photos or film. Though the first stanza is written in the third-person present-tense, the *I* and *you* return on the second page, in past tense. Though disembodied, the girl that becomes an image insistently retains her voice: “You could say I / threw her down a well but she refused to be / shut up.”⁷⁰ The line break’s isolation of “shut up” gives us time to read the expression more expansively, as the girl’s refusal to be contained, or even as a command. The girl’s refusal to be shut up recalls the first poem, where the writer imagines both letting the girl “leave” or letting her “freeze” in the snow, but perhaps is unable to accomplish either.⁷¹ To qualify the *I*’s action with “you could say” emphasizes the discursivity of the action, while the line break after *I* places even the subjectivity of the agentive *I* in language.

“Essay on The Appearance of Ghosts” considers the history of recording, from photography to phonography and film and all the way back to “the first writing [that] was image.”⁷²

Awkward-Rich shifts out of the first person to past passive and infinitive tenses:

Language was invented; who knows when. But
it’s true the first writing was image. A picture of
a slaughtered animal standing in for the animal.
Such melancholic technology—mark a loss &
therefore avoid it. Remake the world as wreckage
& leave it somehow unchanged. Pay attention.

What is an alphabet but a way to give sounds little bodies? What is writing but the preservation of ghosts?⁷³

In the shift from image to alphabet, we stopped reading language as image, and the alphabet matched what remained of language's images to *sounds*. Letters became the visual *embodiments* of sounds. The command to "pay attention" followed by two questions hails readers asks to attend more fully—to try to *see* and otherwise *perceive* everything that we can of the language on this page. The addressee is figured in debt—we *owe* our attention—while the syntax of the questions both conveys a tone of givenness or obviousness *and* allows for a different response. With Johnson, we could read "[t]he rhetorical question, in a sense, [to] leave[] the poem in a state of suspended animation" and consider that 'state,' as Lyric poetry like Shelley's may have in the past, "the state of maximum potential."⁷⁴ There is no speaker indexed by the *I* on this page; it is as if this address comes from the ghosts inside language themselves. "Essay on The Appearance of Ghosts" theorizes writing as a re-self-embodiment of what once could but can no longer be seen outside of language and image—because it is dead, killed, or maybe just not here with us.

The speaker comes back into the essay on the next page, reflecting: "When *The Ring* came out, the little girl on film / shared a name with the little girl in my phone. / One letter difference. One little black body."⁷⁵ Awkward-Rich now links *black embodiment* with language at the level of the letter and locates *subjectivity* in the voice(mail). To make a letter a "black body" renders black embodiment an inhabitation of language's visuality and aligns with Hortense Spillers' theory of "hieroglyphics of flesh" which, according to Spillers, can tear apart the "primary narrative" of subjectivity as undivided and wholly agentive.⁷⁶ But to conceptualize a black body as a letter also conceptualizes black embodiment as the index of a sound that is specific (not just any sound) yet open to any voicing (ventriloquy) and tone. And, as a letter, black embodiment is an address. If

letters are also changeable parts of words, what happens when a poet changes a letter, or if a little girl does and thereby recognizes her name in another's?⁷⁷ Though the words that make the "word ladder pair" might mean entirely different things, might have no logical connection, they remain visually similar and might even *sound* the same. The difference, though, thinking back to the field in which we began, might be in connotative association and tone.

As the essay progresses, Awkward-Rich sets aside any question of "real" bodies by pointing out the capacity of linguistic bodies or images to "have worlds that do not refer to our own." When language is not always referential, it can (if we have decided to read it that way—since the 1980s let's let Awkward-Rich say) "reach through" and "touch" its addressees:

It isn't until the 1980's that the ghosts catch up with us. When we begin fashioning bodies with no reference to a real, suddenly it seems that images might have worlds that do not refer to our own. Might be able to reach through their screens. Might be able to touch.⁷⁸

Touch what? whom? how? I really don't know.

Having situated the little girl as a ghost in language and photographs, and recognized her identification with and as a monster, Awkward-Rich turns to situate "the real girl behind the camera."⁷⁹ Now the girl is no longer *in front of* but rather, like a director, *behind* the camera (like the light?) which paradoxically also captures her image.⁸⁰ Later in the essay Awkward-Rich observes: "The image distorts the lives of everyone who looks."⁸¹ Did the girl make this image, if "we" made her, and she also "lives on *as* [my emphasis] an image"?⁸² For the image itself to "distort" situates those who look as if they look *through* the image and *live through* the image. In asking "[i]sn't that [also] how [capitalism] works?" Is this the same abstraction of people into things or images that become exchangeable at the expense of their bodies? Does one have to pay to play the film?

Does recording also come at a cost? If writing began as “a picture of a slaughtered animal standing in for the animal,” is the unspeaking, unwritten, ‘real’ animal alive or dead? Where and when? If the animal was “slaughtered,” its representation in static image, alone, conceals its killer and almost lets us pretend the animal is alive. Awkward-Rich points out that the invention of the phonograph instrumentalized “the ear of a stolen corpse.”⁸³ Did it have to? If the recording—including lyric writing—of sound makes “the voice[] float free of the body it signifies. But go back far enough & you’ll always find a skeleton...,” both the voice and its recording retain their connections to a particular human body, one who made the voice or who made the recording device.⁸⁴ If “[t]he dead walk into the room, whisper in your ear: *How do you think we got here? How do you think it’s going to end?*” what is the answer? Do record or stop recording? Though you’ll die anyway, are you scared to death, are you possessed by the ghosts, or do you just share the space in the meantime? What do the ghosts that look like monsters want? “Sympathetic little monster moves into the body of your child. Demands: *Love me.*”⁸⁵

“Let her coat your pink tongue.”

But for how long can we really stay here, in lyric? Can a figure of a little girl stay there? Awkward-Rich’s speaker claims: “In the poem, the little girl grows up to be a / little girl & also a bat & also a boy & also a shadow, / a pure effect of language (or light) passing through / another body.”⁸⁶ As an *effect*, the girl becomes multiple, mobile, perhaps sonic images.⁸⁷ Though the shadow could be a metaphoric product of an immaterial “obstruction” (to a logic, a norm) shadows are also outside of us. The writer looks out his window to see: “there’s just one girl, one solitary girl // racing her shadow across the blacktop.”⁸⁸ This poem, “Girl, With Flowers,” is the only poem that Awkward-Rich positions geographically: “*in Oakland, CA.*” This specificity of location

confers reality to the poem both by locating the speaker—and the poem—in the ‘real’ world as well as citing a location that readers could also know or inhabit.

In this penultimate poem Awkward-Rich also observes:

There are always flowers blooming in this city, a kind of cruelty
after all how do you know when it's time for tears? For carving
a hole beneath a snow bank & living there, for just a while?
A girl ends & still there are roses. A boy is carried off & roses

The speaker rues the stubborn persistence of beauty, or the world, despite—as if in indifference to—death. Though this poem recalls the very first, where a writer tries to cover over violence with a rose, here there is death & roses. Awkward-Rich *always* uses ampersands rather than the word ‘and’ throughout *Sympathetic Little Monster*. To make the word ‘and’ into an image reverses the supposedly historical order of image (primitive, not-language) to alphabet (language). But “&” isn’t a *representational* image, it’s a symbol; there was no visible ‘&’ before its writing, though & now does invoke both a particular sound attached to an idea of plurality and simultaneity. A ligature of ‘e’ and ‘t,’ the glyph visually renders letters mute in their combination. And “a symbol which by itself stands for a word,” the *word* for the symbol—“ampersand”—*also* blurs multiple words in a corruption of the phrase “& per se and.”⁸⁹ “Per se,” in turn, means: “A letter which by itself forms a word” and “*allusively*: a unique or incomparable person or thing” and “By or in itself, themselves, or (now *rarely*) himself or herself; without reference to anything (or anyone) else; intrinsically.”⁹⁰ & generates a simultaneity of and blurs the difference between word, sound, image, symbol, letter, and idea, with no clear causal order. So when “[a] girl ends & still there are roses,” the & blurs the being of the girl and the being of the roses, in language and in life.⁹¹

The writer is watching through his window “one solitary girl // racing her shadow across the blacktop.”⁹² For the girl to “win” this race, to surpass the negation of her image, would allow the poet to “be finished with poems / where, in the end, a girl disappears from the story, even if

this morning / she does.”⁹³ For now, she has to disappear to escape a ventriloquization read onto real black girls. Yet the writer “know[s]”—or at least claims to know, in writing—that the girl will win and have her story, shared.⁹⁴ And that line break, again, also lets us read: she does.

For now, in the final poem the little girl grows wings. “The Little Girl Grows Wings” begins—not quite by ventriloquizing but by transcribing an interviewer:

The interviewer’s favorite question: *Does it ever feel like you/your daughter/ your son has died?* Like mourning a girl that will not leave? & what if I said *Yes*? What if—do you know where a child goes when some new thing moves into her body? A boy or a bullet & does it matter if once the cut is made she falls through like sand in an hourglass? & where does all that time go? & who are you with all the answers? Once, I ransacked my own mute skin, searching for an exit. All I found was this palmful of dust. Here. Take it. Throw her to the sky. Let her scatter & drift down. Let her coat your pink tongue.⁹⁵

Shifting out of the italics that mark discursivity, Awkward-Rich changes the question. Because there is no *I* until the speculative answer that comes next, the voice and origin of this second question is ambiguous until it seems retrospectively to be the addressee’s interpretation of the question. Now in the first-person, the writer imagines the consequences of replying *yes*. But Awkward-Rich breaks the grammatical, logical linearity of this consequential line of thought with a dash, leaving the question of possibility and a visual direction or bridge to what is next: “What if—” before the dash pulls readers directly into an abrupt new question: “do you know where a child goes when some new thing moves into her body?” The position of *you* ambiguously both inside and outside this scene mirrors the uncertain position of the girl. The ambiguity of *you* is heightened by the speaker’s ambiguous tone, which could be sincerely asking who has all the answers, or ridiculing *you* for pretending to have all the answers. Though *I* or the interviewer might hear this line as a tonally confrontational refusal of the question, we could also read the question as exasperated, maybe mournful, and sincere: who are you?

Returning to the first-person, the writer recalls a desire for a way out—a dislocation—from their skin, and is frustrated that their skin refuses to answer them in words (is “mute”). All the poet finds inside their skin is “this palmful of dust,” an amalgamation of particles out of the air, or a bit of dried ground, worthless, and again ambiguously on or close to the page.⁹⁶ The ungendered nothingness of dust becomes “her” in the writer’s address—which both hands her over to the addressee and relocates her within the poem: “Here.”⁹⁷ Again blurring the voice of the writer with the book itself, Awkward-Rich writes four imperatives, only addressing *you* in particular in the last: “Let her coat your pink tongue,” indexing to you a living tongue: both a part of you and your language. To “let” the girl do this both allows her will and makes us responsible for her, if she is also that which coats “your tongue” she both paints and rests upon the long. She mutes you.

Sympathetic Little Monster asks its readers to allow a black girl into a space ambiguously inside and outside of both *a & your* body & language. She is released within and from the poem. Her painting of the tongue suggests ritual and the magical logic of sympathy.⁹⁸ We are asked to swallow or carry her, or to taste or feel her, or to be muted by her, *maybe* to speak with or through her, but perhaps above all to let her magically transform us. We are asked to enter into a sympathetic relationship with her—a relationship which blurs the directionality of affect and the separation of bodies. Across the book, ghost-girl, monster, writer, and reader are all here; who is sympathetic to whom? Though not its most normative contemporary use, the first definition of “sympathetic” in the Oxford English Dictionary is the adjectival form of sympathy—sympathy first defined as: “A (real or supposed) affinity between certain things, by virtue of which they are similarly or correspondingly affected by the same influence, affect or influence one another (esp. in some occult way), or attract or tend towards each other.”⁹⁹ Sympathy connects two objects through their (temporally and spatially distinct, but tangible) contact with one third, tangible

vehicle: “a powder [is] supposed to heal wounds by ‘sympathy’ on being applied to a handkerchief or garment stained with blood from the wound.”¹⁰⁰ While its early, alchemic definition blurs the distinction between affectable ‘things,’ “sympathetic” in contemporary usage blurs the distinction between subject and object. “Sympathetic” can describe either the one sympathizing or the one receiving sympathy.¹⁰¹ Awkward-Rich’s title attributes “sympathetic” to an already tonally paradoxical “little monster.”¹⁰² Supposedly threatening—if only in its nonnormativity—and thereby frightening, this “sympathetic” monster both sympathizes with you and demands your sympathy.¹⁰³ The writing *I* in this book also gains a space to sympathize with a ghost of his self.¹⁰⁴ While the girl might pass through the reader, the lyric *you* ensures that *Sympathetic Little Monster*, the book itself, also retains the sense of its own voice. To let the girl coat *your* tongue ambiguously brings *you* into the poem and allows the poem to exceed the book, on *your* tongue.

Beginning with *I* but quickly turning toward *you*, *Sympathetic Little Monster* attempts to share what is given with an addressee that may or may not ‘get it.’ Then, the writer stops explaining the given to tend to the figure of the little girl, who “touches,” but is determinably neither speaking nor *you*, and ultimately gives her over to the poem and the responsibility of others. *Dislocating poetics of address* brings addressees and addressors into relation but renders those relations indeterminable. This indeterminability engenders a particular lyric phenomenology of subjectivity as itself indeterminable yet perceptible or traceable. While acknowledging the racialized conditions of both social subjectivity and poetry, this indeterminable poetic relationality becomes possible in lyric time and space, which is both here and now and not. Awkward-Rich’s black trans masculine aesthetic retheorizes blackness and transness (and masculinity) beyond identity and representation, as conditions of being and knowing. *Sympathetic Little Monster* invites “a readerly inhabitation of transness as a form of generative maladjustment to the given,” in Awkward-Rich’s

own words.¹⁰⁵ This theorization suggests a reconceptualization of subjectivity as indeterminable within traces of specificity, but ultimately deconceptualizes subjectivity.¹⁰⁶ I *Sympathetic Little Monster* responds to and revises the lyric genre not quite by refiguring the lyric subject, but rather by reappropriating lyric *identification* to an aesthetic of *self-revision*.

¹ An associate professor of Women, Gender, Sexuality Studies at the University of Massachusetts – Amherst. *Sympathetic Little Monster* grew out of Awkward-Rich’s previous collection, *Transit*, published in 2015 with Button Press, a small press which began as a project of filming poetry slams around the United States. Resonant with Awkward-Rich’s participation in slams, *Sympathetic Little Monster* offers complex aesthetics of voice.

² With the work of trans studies scholars including Hil Malatino and C. Riley Snorton, Awkward-Rich’s scholarship is lingering with complex trans feelings and reconceptualizing trans phenomenology. Particularly relevant to this chapter is Awkward-Rich’s scholarship on “reading like a depressed transsexual” and commonality in the pronoun *we* (though that pronoun rarely appears in *Sympathetic Little Monster*). See Chapters 2 and 3 of *The Terrible We*. The frequency of “we” increases as the book progresses, appearing on pages: 24, 33, 34-5, 47, 49, 51, 57, 69, and 72.

³ An independent press running since 1975. *Dispatch* continues Awkward-Rich’s interest in poetic space and perhaps turns more toward social collectivity. Awkward-Rich also co-edited *The Dead Animal Handbook: An Anthology of Contemporary Poetry* with Sam Sax and was poetry editor for *Muzzle Magazine*. He has received fellowships from Cave Canem, the Lannan Foundation, The Watering Hole, and the American Council of Learned Societies.

⁴ See my Introduction and Evie Shockley, *Renegade Poetics*; Virginia Jackson, *Before Modernism*; and Anthony Reed, *Freedom Time*. Reading with Philip Brian Harper, Jackson links the abstraction performed by lyric reading to the abstraction necessary to the reconceptualization of racialized people as enslaveable, commodifiable objects. For a compelling comparative argument regarding the concept of fictional “character,” see Ian Baucom’s *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*.

⁵ C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*, U of Minnesota P, 2017, 2.

⁶ It becomes newly significant that her third book becomes an *American Conversation*.

⁷ Both books, *Citizen* perhaps more than *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*, do invoke a shared political situation in their incorporation of news media, complicating Reed’s introduction. Reed’s introduction resonates with Philip Brian Harper’s *Abstractionist Aesthetics*, but Rankine’s work perhaps doesn’t quite amount to abstraction. A public conversation between Claudia Rankine and Kevin Quashie at Brown University on November 14, 2024 highlighted the *dimensions* of the book *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* itself. These dimensions—much longer vertically than horizontally—break from the dimensions we expect of books, and especially of poetry.

⁸ As it reproduces media discourse and both public and private scenes, the book effectively exposes racist address—a racist relationality and directionality of sense-making—in both indirect, social scenes and direct, interpersonal scenes of address. These short scenes of interpersonal racialization shift to more abstract reflections on the racial formation of subjectivity and experiences of racialized subjectivity in exhaustion and injury.

⁹ Evie Shockley, “Race, Reception, and Claudia Rankine’s ‘American Lyric,’” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, January 6, 2016.

¹⁰ Published in a moment of great attention to interpersonal racial aggression (“microaggressions”), *Citizen* renders racialization in address as a phenomenon both within and beyond the interpersonal. With Jackson’s theory of the Lyric subject in mind, *Citizen*’s poetic subjects rendered not only in the second person but also in racially ambiguous positions effectively display and maximize the affective impact of being a *socio-historical* subject within a relation of antiblackness; *Citizen* dislocates to ultimately locate its lyric subjects. This use of dislocating poetics of address in order to reproduce the experience of being thrown into a racial position reproduces not just the fact but also the affective weight of racial violence. Yet Rankine cuts her scenes without describing any aftermath and without describing the affect produced, leaving readers to determine what they feel and what they feel should or could happen next. Rankine calls this social subjectivity the “historical self,” which contrasts with the “self self.” This passage offers a way to read *Citizen*’s interpersonal scenes: “A friend argues that Americans battle between the

‘historical self’ and the ‘self self.’ By this she means you mostly interact as friends with mutual interest and, for the most part, compatible personalities; however, sometimes your historical selves, her white self and your black self, or your white self and her black self, arrive with the full force of your American positioning. Then you are standing face-to-face in seconds that wipe the affable smiles right from your mouths. What did you say? Instantaneously your attachment seems fragile, tenuous, subject to any transgression of your historical self. And though your joined personal histories are supposed to save you from misunderstandings, they usually cause you to understand all too well what is meant” (27). I am arguing that poetry opens a possibility that *we do not know what is meant*.

This note is not the first to discuss *Citizen*’s “reconfigured lyric subject,” as Kamran Javadizadeh puts it (486). For an extended discussion of lyric reading and address in *Citizen*, see Nikki Skillman’s “Lyric Reading Revisited: Passion, Address, and Form in *Citizen*.” Skillman writes that one Function of Rankine’s lyric apostrophe is to “suggest[] the inhumanity of the indifferent or inured reader and longingly confers the potential for vital (ethical) responsiveness where it does not yet exist” (440). And even in the case of *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely’s I*, Reed argued that Rankine’s postlyric voice—for him, a voice “suspended between ‘I’ and ‘we,’ centered and diffuse at once”—could still “break [that] hermeneutic circle of lyricized and racialized reading” (Reed, 97). *See also* Heather Love’s “Small Change: Realism, Immanence, and a Politics of the Micro” for a discussion of how “*Citizen* blurs the line between spectacular and quotidian violence” to turn Rankine’s realist “exactitude” to political consequence beyond the conservatism that has been historically attributed to realism (436, 441).

¹¹ A press run by graduate students in the University of Southern California’s Creative Writing and Literature Ph.D. program. The press’s “mission is to publish innovative, non-traditional, trans-genre, and/or genre-less works that have a hard time finding homes in journals, competitions, and with other publishers.”

¹² Smith’s blurb describes “the poet’s sometimes spare, sometimes wild, always skilled lyric.” In her very brief review of *Sympathetic Little Monster* for Maudlin House, Laura Knicklebine also finds the book “lyrical.”

¹³ Ironically, because the term “lyric” so diffuse, its explicit appearance might both authorize and deauthorize lyric reading expectations, depending which lyric specificity (if any) the reader associates with the term. “Faggot Poetics” and “Ars Poetica” invoke the poetic, but are distinguishable from a grammatical designation like “poem on...”

¹⁴ As these norms are reified back into the idea of genre, ‘genre’ is abstracted into types of *address* through the same abstracting logic of (the implicitly *addressing*) subjectivity either into racial type or universal lyric speaker.

¹⁵ Like those that begin with “The Little Girl” and the four “Theor[ies] of Motion.” Repetition is another lyric aesthetic to consider in *Sympathetic Little Monster*.

¹⁶ The full-sentence titles suggest narrative character development and closure. Essays invoke a particular writer’s unfinalized argumentation or exploration. Monologue suggests the performance of a single speaker expecting neither interruption nor response. Awkward-Rich’s titles are also internally contradictory in their associations: “The Little Girl Is Not Certain About Ontology.” signals narrative closure with its period but remains in present tense, and attributes theoretical diction unrealistically known to a child.

¹⁷ Cameron Awkward-Rich, *Sympathetic Little Monster*, Ricochet Editions, 2016, 1.

¹⁸ Jonathan Culler, “Why Lyric,” *PMLA*, vol. 123, no. 1, Jan 2008, 203.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 203-4. Culler also contrasts lyric with dramatic monologue, where dramatic monologue might offer an alternative to narrative aesthetics of experience bound to linear time, but still characterizes its speaker and situates their speech in address to a present listener.

²⁰ Cameron Awkward-Rich, *The Terrible We: Thinking with Trans Maladjustment*, Duke UP, 2022, 137. Awkward-Rich quotes Bobbly Noble’s phrase “*something like an identity*.”

²¹ Culler, “Why Lyric,” 205.

²² *See* Brian Massumi’s “The Autonomy of Affect,” for a compelling affective reading of narrative breaks, including “the deployment of narrative in essays about the break-down of narrative” (100) comparable to Awkward-Rich’s aesthetic (*Cultural Critique*, no. 31, Autumn 1995, 100). *See also* Ron Silliman’s “The New Sentence” in *The New Sentence*, which articulates a conception of linguistic breaks associated with Language poetry that Lyn Hejinian also considers in her essay “The Rejection of Closure” in *The Language of Inquiry*.

²³ As title, this sentence casts authority over the significance of the body of the poem, so that the otherwise ambiguous “& her knees are wet / with nothing / but dew /” implies the blood of knees cut with glass even in its transformation through “nothing” to the innocence of dew. The OED lists the figurative significance of “dew” as “falling gently, vanishing, as the dew,” and “innocent and trusting, naïve.”

²⁴ Awkward-Rich, *Sympathetic Little Monster*, 1.

²⁵ An apology, as we see with *WHEREAS*, is an assertion of a feeling similar to or even linked to sympathy. But if an apology is supposed to also *resolve* bad feelings, perhaps an apology actually ends sympathy. Does an

apology also itself assert power (even if as responsibility) of the one apologizing *over* the one receiving the apology? Does the power of assertion preclude the evenness of feeling between the apologizer and recipient?

²⁶ The girl's story might "lay the groundwork for understanding trans/gender embodiment in relation to the kinds of violence that inflect black and trans life, only one of which is the violence of erasure, and for which that erasure is about not an absence but a persistent and animating presence" as Snorton suggests of shadow figures in the "archives of transsexuality." *Black on Both Sides* 144 But it is not Awkward-Rich's task to write or continue that story in *Sympathetic Little Monster*.

²⁷ Awkward-Rich, *Sympathetic Little Monster*, 9-10.

²⁸ Johnson, Barbara, "Apostrophe, Animation, Abortion," *Diacritics*, vol. 16, no. 1 (Spring, 1986): 30.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 70. Jackson takes "image of self" from Lauren Berlant.

³⁰ Johnson, "Apostrophe," 32.

³¹ Awkward-Rich, *Sympathetic Little Monster*, 29.

³² Johnson, "Apostrophe," 31.

³³ The question of whether the mother is or should "really be" responsible is already displaced.

³⁴ Johnson, "Apostrophe," 33.

³⁵ My reading of Johnson would modify her diction of the binary choice between "simple" or "complex, less determinate" violence.

³⁶ Awkward-Rich, *Sympathetic Little Monster*, 39.

³⁷ See Käte Hamburger's "The Lyric Genre" in *The Logic of Literature* for a compelling theory of lyrical language's orientation toward reality.

³⁸ Awkward-Rich, *Sympathetic Little Monster*, 16.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴⁰ Snorton notes that to make someone into a joke is to indicate their triviality or even disposability. *Black on Both Sides*, 145.

⁴¹ Awkward-Rich, *Sympathetic Little Monster*, 18.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴³ See Nuar Alsadir's *Fourth Person Singular*: "Thing theory: an object becomes a thing when it no longer works for us, when it breaks down and we can no longer simply use it. What was formerly a mere object becomes an object-to-subject relationship, lyric" (13).

⁴⁴ Awkward-Rich, *Sympathetic Little Monster*, 23.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 23. The tone of Awkward-Rich's "right" here echoes the tone of the speaker in the fourth iteration of "Theory of Motion": If I have to tell you, well, here's a gate / opening in the poem. Here's an exit. // Walk through." This invitation to "walk through" seems to invite the reader who doesn't know what Awkward-Rich means to walk through the gate and out of the poem, but the double line break before the imperative "walk through" could invite them to walk *through the poem* and find out (57).

⁴⁶ Awkward-Rich also observes: "A man is made into a thing & sutured to it. The name" (18). Yet there is space between "a thing," "it" and "the name," as well as a difference between being "made into" and "sutured to." All of these gaps leave room for the story to break down as they make room for differences between language and thing, thing and man. Awkward-Rich turns from this story of racialized naming: "There's another option. It's not the truth, though it might be, which is, in the end, what matters" (19) Could this be a potential, lyrically subjective 'truth,' which might eventually materialize beyond the poem? The alternative is rendered in another proliferation of gaps between "the thing, 'he,' 'it' and 'its body': "Now, when the thing is made to do dangerous work, he flings its body from the low rungs of a ladder. Limbs akimbo & fluttering & still alive." Read carefully, this tossing of the body might be less violent than it seems in the careless diction of "fling," "akimbo," and "fluttering." The body belongs not to "him" but to "the thing," and remains alive. This strictly poetic, explicitly untrue act reimagines a body as one that might be cast off in the lyric temporality of "now" and separated from the agentive yet elsewhere "he."

⁴⁷ Awkward-Rich, *Sympathetic Little Monster*, 24.

⁴⁸ The story also remains ambiguously a personal story of a name and a socially shared story.

⁴⁹ Rankine elaborates further: "there are ways in which, if you say, 'Oh, this happened to me,' then the white body can say, 'Well, it happened to her and it has nothing to do with me.' But if it says 'you,' that you is an apparent part of the encounter." Claudia Rankine, "Claudia Rankine on Blackness as the Second Person," interview by Meara Sharma, *Guernica*, November 17, 2014.

⁵⁰ And yet, Shockley notes that *Citizen* was largely received and celebrated as "an unmediated access to a recognizable truth." In my reading, this is because Rankine's poetic subjects often ultimately become socially recognizable, though this happens less often the farther one reads of the book. Yet if lyrical language invites us to set aside the question of truthful representation and turn toward affect and aesthetics, we can recognize a plurality of

senses in this scene. If *Citizen* is also a collection of memories, the affect they generate is also simultaneously past and present.

⁵¹ See Virginia Jackson's *Before Modernism: Inventing American Lyric*, 46.

⁵² Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014), 27.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 14, 43 and *passim*.

⁵⁴ Awkward-Rich in *The Terrible We* might want to call this an antisocial subject, but I prefer to keep a lyrical being open to social possibility.

⁵⁵ "I do not wish to question the solidity of the phenomenological subject on which the fiction of the lyric rests (Rankine and Kearney address this concern by, in different ways, pluralizing the subject or emphasizing the obscure moment of expression) but want to put pressure on the presumed "objectivity" of lyric's subjective presence as a mediation of the general and the particular as it is usually read." Reed, *Freedom Time*, 97.

⁵⁶ Reed's use of the term "fiction" reflects his disinterest in a specific poetic phenomenology.

⁵⁷ See, in particular, Henry Rubin's "Trans Studies: Between a Metaphysics of Presence and Absence." For a comprehensive review of Lyric Theory, see Jonathan Culler's *Theory of the Lyric* as well as Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins' *Lyric Theory Reader*.

⁵⁸ Awkward-Rich, *The Terrible We*, 135-6. Awkward-Rich specifically discusses the voice that Michael Dillon creates in his 1946 *Self: A Study in Endocrinology and Ethics*, a book "disguised as a treatise on medical ethics, [yet at its core] a 'hidden manifesto . . . plead[ing] on behalf of transsexuals'" (132).

⁵⁹ Cameron Awkward-Rich, *Sympathetic Little Monster* (Ricochet, 2016), 7.

⁶⁰ Awkward-Rich, *Sympathetic Little Monster*, 8.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Käte Hamburger's *The Logic of Literature* makes a compelling argument for lyric language defined by its non-communicative function. Hamburger describes reading lyric as a recursive practice that perceives a "statement of a genuine statement-subject, which can be referred to nothing but this subject itself" and perceives the lyric as an object that requires us to "consult ourselves if we will understand the poem" (271).

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 70. Jackson takes "image of self" from Lauren Berlant.

⁶⁴ Jackson, *Before Modernism*, 70.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁶⁶ Jackson also cites Barbara Johnson's point in "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion" that animating objects that are (or perhaps should be) inanimate through address can create a weapon or risk.

⁶⁷ Jackson, *Before Modernism*, 107.

⁶⁸ Awkward-Rich, *Sympathetic Little Monster*, 7.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 63. Another poem notes "The Little Girl Will Never Tire of Confession."

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 65.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Johnson, *Before Modernism*, 32.

⁷⁵ Awkward-Rich, *Sympathetic Little Monster*, 66.

⁷⁶ Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 67.

⁷⁷ If one name is transformable to another either with the displacement of a single little black body (one letter), Awkward-Rich still conceptualizes a single name "shared" between the two little girls—maybe the name by which they are called (and not just on the phone). Awkward-Rich's syntax also allows us to read both names, or even both girls, as "[o]ne little black body."

⁷⁸ Awkward-Rich, *Sympathetic Little Monster*, 68.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 69. Awkward-Rich seems to refer to the girl in *The Ring*, but I am trying to complicate the logic of reference.

⁸⁰ Both the girl and the image are real in their monstrosity: "the girl is as monstrous as her image." Perhaps "the girl is as monstrous as her image" only "[i]n the end" of *The Ring*, which advises its viewers: "Don't / sympathize with monsters, unless you want to / become one. Even if we made them. Even if / they are little girls." Grammatically, this "we" spoken by the film includes both the film and the reader or viewer. Though the monsters are "made," the separation of the period and line break as well as the present tense of "they are little girls" confers a degree of independence and reality to "them," who are multiplicitous, perhaps partially autogenic, girls (69).

⁸¹ Awkward-Rich, *Sympathetic Little Monster*, 70.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁸⁴ Ibid. In *The Ring*, to put the body to rest makes the ghost *more* powerful.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 73.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 64. In “The Little Girl Will Never Tire of Confession”: “She says she grew a new furred body. She says she hung from the rafters, a girl with glass wings. Having spoken to or at least with the writer about herself, the girl pulls the moon from her pocket and: ‘She drops it in my throat. I swallow. I do. & she waits & she waits & doesn’t say anything after that.’ She waits, perhaps, because ‘[s]he wants a story’ (49).

⁸⁷ As an effect of light, Snorton would note that she “appear[s] by way of obstruction” and might compare her story to the metaphoric “shadows” of trans history: “narratives that disrupt the teleology of medicalized transsexuality as corporeal freedom.” *Black on Both Sides*, 143.

⁸⁸ Awkward-Rich, *Sympathetic Little Monster*, 74.

⁸⁹ According to Keith Houston’s *Shady Characters: The Secret Life of Punctuation, Symbols & Other Typographical Marks*: “During the nineteenth century, the ampersand was routinely taught as the twenty-seventh letter of the alphabet. In common with those other letters that form words by themselves—A and I, for example—when spoken aloud, & was prefixed by the Latin *per se*, or ‘by itself.’ Schoolchildren would recite ‘X, Y, Z, and *per se* and,’ with the second ‘and’ being the name of the &.” Students slurred and created an array of slang terms for the syllable, including “am pussy and.” Houston also notes, “The ampersand’s position at the end of the alphabet led not only to its name but also to its contemporaneous double meaning of ‘the posterior,’ or ‘bottom.’ (117, 119).

⁹⁰ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. “&,” Oxford UP.

⁹¹ This recalls the fourth iteration of “Theory of Motion (4), Nocturne,” which attends to the deaths of black children and black bodies and offers itself “*for them all*.”⁹¹ This poem returns to the question of narrative, writing, and life: “I’ve tried not to write about these ghosts. / As if this too does not turn a child // to narrative,” and it uses the & to insist: “Now imagine she lived / & she lived.” Awkward-Rich, *Sympathetic Little Monster*, 57-58. See also Darby English’s second chapter, on Pope.L’s *Skin Set Drawing* project, “Differing, Drawn,” in *To Describe a Life: Notes from the Intersection of Art and Race Terror*. English discusses a particular “word’s weight” in “drawn writing” and “the tension between its role in a verbal message and its visual condition of being-for-itself” (46). In a reading or looking mode toward artworks like the *Skin Set Drawings* which “make a show of change, though not their own changes so much as changes to the personality motivating the hand that executes them,” English reaches for “the point, in a process of thinking, at which difference gives way to differing without ever returning to that prior state” (65).

⁹² Awkward-Rich, *Sympathetic Little Monster*, 74.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 75.

⁹⁶ Though first ungendered as “it,” the dust becomes “her.” Perhaps the dust can be gendered only in relation to another?

⁹⁷ See also Rankine’s “here” in *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*. Could we read this as “the vast space between the said and the unsaid, the enacted and the undone, where those for whom speech is always a response persist” that Asma Abbas figures? Asma Abbas, *Liberalism and Human Suffering: Materialist Reflections on Politics, Ethics, and Aesthetics* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 12.

⁹⁸ Culler’s *Theory of the Lyric* also emphasizes the centrality of repetition and ritual to lyric aesthetics.

⁹⁹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. “sympathy,” Oxford UP.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ This reversibility contrasts with the similar word, empathy, a more general concept meaning “The ability to understand and appreciate another person’s feelings, experience, etc.,” implicitly *not* sharing the affect, only *understanding* it. The OED also lists a “rare” definition of empathy as a projection into objecthood. Empathy: “the quality or power of projecting one’s personality into or mentally identifying oneself with an object of contemplation, and so fully understanding or appreciating it.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. “empathy,” Oxford UP.

¹⁰² The invocation of the monstrous also recalls Kant’s posing of the monstrous as a kind of failed sublime, an excess which destroys the purpose of its concept.

¹⁰³ Awkward-Rich, *Sympathetic Little Monster*, 49. In her conference talk “Home,” Toni Morrison distinguishes the American racial “house” from a “home,” which she imagines through writing. Morrison’s language echoes Awkward-Rich’s own spatial language: “The little girl sits in the center of the poem, as if the poem is a room we share.” The language of house and home also invoke structure, perhaps allowing us to reconceptualize the structure of address as habitable place itself. I am hoping that *dislocating poetics of address* could be an aesthetic of

“how to be both free and situated,” and an example of “figuratively logical narrative language that insists on race-specificity without race prerogative,” where we might reconceptualize narrative also as a poetics. Morrison explains her search for this aesthetic “is the work I [she—but I keep the *I* to preserve the power of the first-person pronoun] can do” toward “eliminating the potency of racist constructs in language.” Toni Morrison, “Home,” in *The House that Race Built*, edited by Wahneema Lubiano, 3-12. New York: Pantheon Books, 1997.

¹⁰⁴ If a poem might be a room, could it also be a world? Kevin Quashie's *Black Aliveness* helps us distinguish between the antiblack social world and the world of a black poem: a world where race does not matter because, in this world, “every human question and possibility is of people who are black.” *Sympathetic Little Monster*'s “(Vagina Monologue)” explores the relation between the world and the lyric subject through figures of incorporation, reversing the social relation of person-within-world: “Here, the world vanishes inside him & never again the other way around” (33). This poem imagines a subjectivity that exceeds the bounds of the world. This subject then seduces “the man” (or Man?) to drown, to yield his life to a material fluidity that crosses the boundary of the body. Quashie, *Black Aliveness*, 2. This not “mattering” is Morrison's elucidating word.

¹⁰⁵ Awkward-Rich. *The Terrible We*, 35.

¹⁰⁶ I distinguish this work from Shockley's reading of black aesthetics which “respond to and revise the genre of epic poetry,” by changing, expanding, and complicating *the* [epic] *subject* (as common, collective, and polyvocal).

Answering – Responding – Addressing

“What you’ve got to remember is what
you’re looking at is also you. Everyone
you’re looking at is also you. You could be
that person. You could be that monster, you
could be that cop. And you have to decide,
in yourself, not to be.”

-James Baldwin¹

Poetics of address designate modes of response to what is given in language. What is given, however, is indeterminably determinable. I do not know what, then, the question is, but ‘answering,’ ‘responding,’ and ‘addressing’ model a range of aesthetic modes of (re)producing and figuring objects of address that might turn into questions. Though none of these terms are exclusive of the others, “answering” helps me frame the work of *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* as it poses responses to *given* questions. But this most clear form of response (answering) fails to capture the total working of Eng’s book, which also reflects (on) labor, resists containment, and forms a memorial for specific people (Sue Dong Eng and Carole).

Layli Long Solider designates part of her *WHEREAS* as an act of “response” to *the writing and delivery of* a particular Congressional document, but this particular response to the given is contextualized by and positioned after another set of “concerns.” In Part II, the object of Long Soldier’s response is only *partially* given; the reproduced language of the resolution is broken apart and rearranged as the book exceeds its object of response in its call for responsibility. With *Sympathetic Little Monster* I tried to most fully theorize a poetics of “address” that doesn’t have to explain (to) its addressee, nor determine any ‘object’ to which it responds at all, yet which still figures subjectivity and ultimately hands over or “lets go” of something in offering (or reattribution) to a reader.

This project is advocating for an attention to the orientations of our reading, and it is interested in relations other than oppositionality. Poetics of address suggest modes of turning away, holding contradictions, and making decisions in account of indeterminacy. The most exciting result of this project to me was believing that I had actually sensed what I will call Awkward-Rich's "&"—something like a subjective simultaneity of language, image, and materiality. But I want to exercise caution in reading experiments that figure the blur of appearance and reality, because I am concerned over how not to forget history, place, and accessibility in that blur. Even if I deviate from Stephen Best's reading of El Anatsui's *Fading Cloth*, the possibility that he implies of holding together perceptions and especially determinations of beauty and trash, history and immanent materiality, is important to me. My question remains, of course, what to do about it. I am compelled by Eng's *let* "it drop down" and Awkward-Rich's *let* "her coat your pink tongue," but I haven't quite reached a clear articulation of what those ideas might mean for me and my physical body. I agree when Long Soldier says: "People are poems, in themselves." But I don't think poems are people, and I think people are more than poems.

Along these lines, thinking together with these three books, I also notice a recurrent question of the *site* of determination that sometimes indexes *who* decides and often marks a temporal origin. *WHEREAS* is particularly generative in thinking about what has already been decided or what decisions are precluded by 'the' current question.² I am still grappling with Denise Ferreira da Silva's studying of *self*-determination. Silva contextualizes her *Toward a Global Idea of Race* "[a]gainst the assumption that the historical constitutes the sole ontological context" and in critique of a Subject imagined to be self-determining only via the elimination of its "others."³ Despite its 'cultural' status in aesthetic theories, I recall that "taste" is a term of sensation—does that sensation always produce a desire *to consume*? Can we retheorize 'consumption'—and

‘use’—out from under racial capitalism? Could a *return* to aestheticization and expression also be a part of making a different ‘public’? Do tones of sincerity matter? Anita Sokolsky once suggested that “unabashed sentimentality” could be read “not as a search for an encompassing substantial unity, but instead as an attempt to render unintelligible both this search and the counterargument that one must fail to be adequate to oneself.”⁴

Is it true, as Boyer writes, that “there is no such thing, really, as the public ever again?” In future work, I would like to turn more directly toward the concept of the “political” as it relates to the “poetic.” This writing attends to poetics written in a no-longer contemporary socio-political era, though only ten years before today. In future work, I would want to more thoroughly trace the history and potentialities of poetry’s relationship to American ‘political’ discourse and acts that exceed the discursive.⁵ This is not to advocate for being or ‘going’ public at this particular historical juncture or in general. But I do worry and wonder where the locus of power shifts according to who is speaking in public. At the same time, I am compelled to think more with Asma Abbas’ critique, in *Liberalism and Human Suffering: Materialist Reflections on Politics, Ethics, and Aesthetics*, of a sensorium that reduces (material, affective) “voice” to (legible) “speech” and orients around the representation of suffering—made speakable via objection—as an experience to be excluded if not destroyed from the political body. I agree with Abbas: “We must problematize not only who speaks and what is said, but also who demands certain presences and absences and why.”⁶ I wonder if we might refigure suffering as sensible to the subjects who think they are merely “listening” to the speech of “victims,” and I wonder about aesthetics that might somehow minimize or manage experiences of fear.

Though in Chapter Three I try to separate my reading context from social context, I hope in future work to better account for the social *in* the poetic. I also still believe my own advice to

“be careful with your we’s.” Yet new work like Evie Shockley’s *suddenly we* (2023) and Dionne Brand’s brand-new nonfiction book *Salvage: Readings from the Wreck* (2025) have made visible and reposed the question of “we” in ways that have reignited my interest in the pronoun. *Salvage* in particular reoriented me to my present: “Whoever ‘we’ are, the passage of this time, these past few years, has been like walking deeper and deeper into a *space* [emphasis mine] whose full contours we are still *making out* [my emphasis]. We have run *into* [mine] something. What? And who is ‘we’?”⁷ As the sense of “a strange new landscape,” as Fredric Jameson put it in *Postmodernism*, is really not new, I read Brand’s gesture to “these past few years,” not as the demarcation of a period but an ambivalence toward periodization and an emphasis on present and memorable experiences of alienation.⁸

Still excited to orient my writing toward poetic forms, I am especially interested in exploring further the aesthetics of grammatical miscellanies like deictics, prepositions, conjunctions, and typography. I am curious about sense in color, space and place, and I know at some point I will have to address time.⁹ I remain ambivalent about whether I want to be the one who draws a circle around myself, though I have increasingly come to appreciate the need for self-defense. The idea of form and/as “limit” still seems rich for my thinking, and I continue to wonder about the poetic possibilities of forming images or perhaps figuring invisibility.¹⁰

To begin to address arguments and constructs of temporality, I am most excited by ideas of possibility “now” rather than promises of what might have been or might be, even as I understand the utility of those figures for the imagination of the now. When Anthony Reed reads a book to “address[] itself to an encounter with audiences not yet known or imaginable,” I want to reformulate poetics of address “to an unknown audience and imaginable addressee.”¹¹ I am also interested in shifting from the work of trying to explain toward the work of pointing out *what we*

already know, at least as an unaccounted or “unthought known,” following Nuar Alsadir’s *Fourth Person Singular*.¹² Does noticing one thing make other things disappear? And what should we remember? Though I still struggle to account for and have thus often avoided the personal in my writing across these chapters, parts of each book function as memorial: of a father, a massacre, a little black girl.

I have positioned *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes*, *WHEREAS*, and *Sympathetic Little Monster* to ground and ultimately stage my own readings of what I decided to call “poetics of address.” There is no way to deny that I have made these books representative of my own arguments, even as I have not wanted to argue or represent the books themselves. Though I recognize the intervention of scholars like David Lloyd in our concepts of representation, I (and I think Lloyd would agree with me) am not sure how to communicate or even to imagine—to figure (anything out)—without it. *I*, at least, feel that I *need* figures to address, to orient myself toward, yet I want to allow those figures to shimmer and blur, change and move. I hope this writing will not be read as a representative of ‘contemporary American poetry’—a category that I don’t really believe in. Though I question my own authority, and while I am terrified of being misunderstood or misquoted, I think I should admit that no one will make me as authoritative as I don’t want to be. I think I should be more assertive of the ideas that arrive from my reading and experiencing. I think we have to choose and try to articulate not only our guiding values but also our acceptable assumptions: mine here and now are that people make things together and trying both to understand ourselves and to communicate remains important. Of course, other definitive ethical claims guide my work, but my sense is that articulating them in terms prone to reification, like “anticapitalism” and “antiracism,” is not only insufficient but possibly counterproductive.

If I need figures of or for subjectivity, can I (re)figure “the poet”? Like Boyer’s “Questions for Poets,” could I address but refuse to identify “poets”? Could I take as my question Audre Lorde’s own: “And who asks the question: Am I altering your aura, your ideas, your dreams, or am I merely moving you to temporary and reactive action? And even though the latter is no mean task, it is one that must be seen within the *context* [emphasis mine] of a need for true alteration of the very *foundations* [emphasis mine] of our lives.”¹³ Addressed to the readers of *Chrysalis: A Magazine of Female Culture*, where the essay was first published, Lorde specifies further who “we” might be in her third paragraph: “each of us as women.”¹⁴ Though this phrase might seem to restrict Lorde’s address to women, and though we might (but can only) assume Lorde was intentionally writing *to* women, a close attention to her grammar is crucial to my reading. “Each of us,” disaggregates the “we” into every distinct member. Lorde’s “as” then allows any one of “us” to be women but not only women, not identical to “women.”

In developing this project, the concept of subjectivity has been both crucial and inadequate. Though I am ambivalent even about the terms “subjective” and “subjectivity,” they have helped me account for the effects of power and (mis)perception as well as my interest in ‘voice’ and ‘tone.’ In my own ways I have noticed the fact of ideology that Gayatri Spivak recenters in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and follow Spivak’s critique that the concept of an “unnamed Subject” or an “undivided subject” underwrites the Western concept of “knowledge” itself.¹⁵ In the extreme, this suggests that the attachment of any subject’s name to any language undermines that language’s status as legitimate *knowledge*, but more to my point here is the effect of *naming* an *author* on the status of their writing. If an author’s name both removes their writing from the status of (universal, objective) knowledge *and* is conflated with racial and gender conditions, race and gender become paradoxically excluded from the knowable *and* (ideologically) “knowable” as such.

To stay with the poet as an *author*, I emphasize Foucault's concept of the "author function" of *discourse*: a function that limits *meaning*—and not just of "the work," a term for a "unity" that also proves indeterminable.¹⁶ While the attachment of an *author's name* to language ("discourse") frames that language as "not to be immediately consumed and forgotten," when names become representative work is reified.¹⁷ I am arguing that not just the naming of authorship (or not), but the naming of *who says* ideologically determines the degree and manner of attention to any given language, where language said by "no one" is most authoritative, most "true"—simply knowledge, the most "immediately consumed and"—perhaps not forgotten but rendered given.

While Foucault displaces the Subject with reified Name or Discourse, in this project I have asked to distinguish a poet from discourse, maybe as a 'subject': as the one who makes decisions, arranges words, writes, and *does* limit meaning, if only to that 'subject,' the poet-as-reader, herself. To recognize *meaning* as determinable only by oneself might leave room for or even open a reconceptualization of *knowledge*—that which is true and shared—to "manyness, maybeness, emptiness, and everythingness," as Leela Gandhi describes Bimal Matilal's *kevala jñāna* epistemology in her "Invisible, Inc."¹⁸ If one can orient toward "a position of epistemological pluralism," the criteria for validity might shift from "who says" to account for "rival possibilities and contradictory predicates."¹⁹

WHEREAS complicates the Platonic Western notion that poets lie by holding language accountable; at the same time, *WHEREAS* also recognizes the complexity of communicating truth. But we already know, because we can feel: "There are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt—of examining what those ideas feel like being lived on Sunday morning at 7 A.M..."²⁰ The work of a poem isn't to inform or explain, but to move us and to invite us to face it.²¹ Poetry insists on remaining with particularity.²² Poetry is like light: a perception and the object

of a perception: a reflection, and “It’s the light that provides the structure.”²³ A *poem* does not *know* anything. A poem does not lie to you.²⁴ But we have to decide who to trust.

Fred Moten writes *In the Break*:

That which appears on the page is not the poem but a visual-spatial representation of the poem that would approximate or indicate its sound and meaning, form and content, and the particular sculpted manifestation of language as their interanimations, the orchestration or arrangement of the body: voice and eye, the instrument upon which that music is played, the locus of the senses that must, in the face of all pressure, not allow itself to be reduced either to eye or voice and that must not allow the occlusion of the other senses and the correspondent exclusions that would follow.²⁵

If a reader could access Moten’s figure of a poem, it would be an accessing only of a *self-referential* “visual-spatial representation.” An embodied reader remains physically outside of the poem, yet we can *hold* poems and poems can *touch* us. If the poem itself exists off the page, the reader’s presence on the page does not displace the poem, but a reader can orient themselves in relation to the material page (for instance, we can turn *WHEREAS* upside down to read it better). Returning to Harper, reading could be an experience of thinking, feeling, or otherwise sensing, from within (a place), that must be, if both representational and accessible, *sharable*.

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I have learned and keep learning how to read with poems and personal conversations. My work has made me more attentive to the language that saturates my life. It has made it easier for me to respond. The discourse that I encounter as my personal ‘public’—from people with whom I have no personal intimacy, from the media—seems increasingly transparent to me. I am not sure to what degree this transparency is a result of my reading or of the quality of the discourse itself. In any case, it seems easier than ever to respond—at least in language. The issue is no longer what I want to say or even how, but to whom, and what I want to *do*.

¹ “Love has never been a popular movement. And no one's ever wanted, really, to be free. The world is held together, really it is held together, by the love and the passion of a very few people. Otherwise, of course, you can despair. Walk down the street of any city, any afternoon, and look around you.” *Meeting the Man: James Baldwin in Paris*, directed by Terence Dixon (1970; United Kingdom, France).

² I am thinking with Barbara Johnson's “Apostrophe, Animation, Abortion.”

³ Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, xii-xiii.

⁴ In acknowledging our sentiments, we might better perceive that the “heterogeneous configuration of investments which is the self is all that we have to work with. If that configuration is the self, then we have lost not only the self which would guarantee that these configurations belong to a single subject—and which thus underwrites the aesthetic education—but also the conceptual means to describe this loss as a loss.” Anita Sokolsky, “The Resistance to Sentimentality: Yeats, de Man, and the Aesthetic Education,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Fall 1987): 86.

⁵ See also Michael North's *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature*.

⁶ Asma Abbas, *Liberalism and Human Suffering: Materialist Reflections on Politics, Ethics, and Aesthetics* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 91.

⁷ Dionne Brand, *Salvage*, 7. In resonance with my reading of Boyer, Brand reads the work of early English novelists as a response to their society's shifting (political, capitalistic) interest in determining “what is a person,” transforming “the middle-class person” (perhaps “the person” that the writers were or wanted to be) into “the [perhaps not just literary] formal subject” (71). If canonical novels then recorded “attempts to become that middle-class person,” the most represented, most canonical “characters” [with whom their writers may or may not have identified] were paradoxically attempting to become both “middle-class” and to become a “person” (71). Brand also attends to the *grammar* of descriptions which bury the fact of slavery “so deep that it is indistinguishable, illegible, unintelligible” (73) and the effects of voicing demands for freedom such that slavery remains naturalized and freedom only an individual's demand (86). To state the obvious gaps in this logic: characters cannot *become people* even if people identify with them; people might have goals other than being “middle-class”; and people are always already people.

⁸ Jameson, unsurprisingly, is much more concerned with historical periodization, if not historical origins: He claims that “the economic system and the cultural “structure of feeling,” which “disclose” this “strange new landscape,” were “somehow crystallized in the great shock of the crises of 1973” (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, xix-xx).

⁹ Tonya Foster's “as” and her grammars of “waking” and “walking” in *A Swarm of Bees in High Court* are particularly exciting to me.

¹⁰ Visual art critics who study blackness have been particularly relevant to my conceptualization of reading modes and expectations. Darby English's *To Describe a Life: Notes from the Intersection of Art and Race Terror* was influential to my early thinking for its understanding of “realness” as referent not the world beyond or outside an artwork, nor “to some quality we might say [an artist] captures in his subject matter, whatever that is,” but rather to “pictures and their madeness,” where “[a]rt here is no longer an aloof occupier of space, but a material contributor to the symbolic construction of space in the interplay of differently scaled relations of representation. Darby English, *To Describe a Life: Notes from the Intersection of Art and Race Terror*, Yale UP, 2019, 35. See also Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*, U of Chicago P, 2011.

¹¹ Reed, *Freedom Time*, 9.

¹² Nuar Alsadir, *Fourth Person Singular*, Liverpool UP, 2017.

¹³ Lorde, “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” 36, 38.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988, 271–313.

¹⁶ “A theory of the work does not exist...” (207). Michel Foucault, “What is An Author?,” in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion, The New Press, 1998, 211.

¹⁷ Foucault differentiates *manners* of both “discourse” and “reception,” where the effect of “the author's name serves to characterize a certain mode of being in discourse” (211).

¹⁸ Leela Gandhi, “Invisible, Inc,” *ELH*, vol. 88, no. 2 (Summer 2021): 430.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 431. Gandhi writes: “The kevalin sees everything at once. More so, and this is salient, she sees that everything is true (a step up from the perception that everything is real). Minimally, this is a position of epistemological pluralism that grasps the cogency of all perspectives. It includes the view that propositions must incorporate rival possibilities and contradictory predicates in order to be valid.” I would qualify if not disavow the “cogency of all

perspectives” and prefer “accounting for” rather than “including” contradictions. If an author is a limit, reading a *poem* can nevertheless exceed that limit and perhaps gesture toward “a position of epistemological pluralism” which also accounts for affect. To pluralize “meaning” in this position might pluralize causality without renouncing cause as unknowable. An affective epistemology might remind a reader of both their singularity and their immanence.

²⁰ Lorde, “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*. Crossing Press, 2007, 39.

²¹ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 65.

²² Lloyd follows the aesthetic “toward a domain that exceeds representation as it is historically structured”: “Where art turns its face away from the progressive narrative of reason and enlightenment, its resistance to the domination always secreted in rationality resides in its refusal to enter into the system of representation, its insistence on remaining with the particularity and materiality that operates through difference and metonymy rather than identity and similitude.” While Lloyd argues that “the mimetic element that remains to [art] is the repetition of the inaugural circumscription by which the work excises itself from the world,” I am interested in ways that art troubles this circumscription. I am interested in how art might refuse its world without drawing any circle around itself. I am interested in what Stephen Best articulates as a work’s shimmering; what I read as one’s perception of simultaneous materiality and immateriality, simultaneous past and presence (Lloyd, *Under Representation*, 153, 155, 157).

²³ Renée Gladman describes in *Calamities* a pedagogical moment: “I was going to try to draw a grid of light, as if one were looking down upon it, a grid that extended across an opaque surface, then draw, a good distance below that, a container, inside which were symbols. From the lower container, I wanted to draw lines that reached the opaque surface then became the actual lines of the grid. I would call those lines emanations. Without being essentialist, or perhaps being only momentarily so, I wanted to say, Often when reading poetry, it’s the grid you’re experiencing, and the grid is not the same thing as that subterranean container, where some meaning might lie, the actual story of the poem, rather it’s the shape of the emanations refracted through language and feeling (though many contemporary poems have no feeling) that you’re reading” (Renée Gladman, *Calamities*, Wave Books, 2016, 34).

²⁴ See Björk talking about her TV.

²⁵ Moten, *In the Break*, 96-7. Here is where Moten writes in resonance with Kant’s theory of form, just before the language I have quoted: “The relation between a musical score and the music is like the relation between the page and the poem.”

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