

**PHOTO-POETICS**

**DOCUMENTARY FORMS FROM WILLIAM WORDSWORTH TO ROBIN COSTE LEWIS**

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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
IN THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AT BROWN UNIVERSITY

PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND

JULY 2021

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This dissertation by Claire Grandy is accepted in its present form  
by the Department of English as satisfying the  
dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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## Acknowledgements

I owe a debt of gratitude to Ellen Rooney, whose close reading and incisive scrutiny of this project's arguments always pushed me to think more critically and to read more thoroughly whatever is before me. This project is deeply informed by the insight and advice of Jacques Khalip, whose mentorship over the course of my graduate career has been invaluable. I am lucky to have been one of the first advisees of Ada Smailbegović, who helped me to conceptualize and diagram the project and continually renewed my interest in poetic forms. I would also like to express my thanks to faculty members who have read, advised, and supported my work during my graduate career, particularly Timothy Bewes, Denise Davis, Daniel Kim, Kevin Quashie, Marc Redfield, and Ravit Reichman. My thanks as well to Lorraine Mazza and Ellen Viola, whose help and instruction I have frequently depended upon. I am grateful to the Cogut Center for the Humanities for the Graduate Fellowship that supported my writing during the year 2019-2020 and to the workshop participants who engaged with an early version of this work and provided meaningful feedback. Additional thanks are due to the Graduate School and the English Department for the various fellowships, teaching assistantships, travel grants, and conference funding they provided. I am appreciative of all the organizing and bargaining work undertaken by GLO, our graduate student union, on behalf of all present and future graduate student workers.

To my friends, cohort, and graduate student colleagues: I could not have done this without your endlessly generous support. Rithika Ramamurthy and Ali Madani have inspired and motivated my writing from start to finish, helping me work through arguments and find purpose in the project; they have provided friendship and encouragement in all things and for that I am

ever grateful. MJ Cunniff and Eleanor Rowe always offered kind words and helpful insights, often at the times I most needed them. My deepfelt thanks to friends and colleagues over the last six years: Danny Byrne, Matthew Ellis, Jeffrey Feldman, Laura Garbes, Michael Gastiger, Dennis Hogan, Irina Kalinka, Suzy Kim, Nicholas Pisanelli, Michelle Rada, Emily Simon, and Christopher Yates. To my lifelong friends who have always supported me, my work here benefited from your ongoing care and conversation. My thanks especially to fellow writers Amelia Schonbek, Cleo Abramian, Zi-Ann Lum, and Charlotte Cornfield. To my partner Issac White, I am grateful for hours of patient listening and encouragement over the years.

Finally, I am thankful for the support of my family. To my parents, John Grandy and Meg Salter, who never questioned the practicality of the work but encouraged my mind to wander. To my grandmother, Ann Elizabeth Carson, for her engagement with my writing and for our long talks. To my sister-in-law, Rebecca Reisler, for all her kindness and advice. Lastly, I am forever grateful to my sister and best friend, Jackie Grandy, for her boundless love and support.

## CONTENTS

|                                                                                                           |           |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <i>Acknowledgements</i>                                                                                   | <i>vi</i> |
| <b>Introduction</b>                                                                                       |           |
| Photo-Poetics in Context                                                                                  | 1         |
| <b>Chapter 1</b>                                                                                          |           |
| William Wordsworth and the Romantic “Desire to Photograph”                                                | 35        |
| <b>Chapter 2</b>                                                                                          |           |
| “The Documentary Decade”:<br>Charles Reznikoff and Muriel Rukeyser’s Archival Poems                       | 79        |
| <b>Chapter 3</b>                                                                                          |           |
| Bernadette Mayer’s Experiments in Self-Documentation                                                      | 143       |
| <b>Chapter 4</b>                                                                                          |           |
| “O Type accumulated”:<br>Iterative and Infinite Forms in the Poetry of Robin Coste Lewis and Dionne Brand | 190       |
| Works Cited                                                                                               | 244       |

## Introduction

### Photo-Poetics in Context

*[T]he province of the poem is the world.*

*When the sun rises, it rises in the poem*

William Carlos Williams

In her poetic essay, *Sorting Facts; or, Nineteen Ways of Looking at Marker*, Susan Howe writes about Chris Marker's montage films, ruminating on the nature of facts, images, poetry, and documentary, in relation to early cinema and the recent death of her husband. After her husband suffered a stroke, he could only communicate nonverbally; "Without words what are facts?" Howe asks (7). In the absence of words or certainty or survival, Howe gestures to the possibility of recording an experience without being able to fully cognize it or safeguard it from the broad expanse of time: "In the name of reason I need to record something because I am a survivor in this ocean," she explains (7). Poetry is the name she gives the communication of facts without their being spoken; it is the movement of blind knowledge, or "factual telepathy" (7). What is interesting about Howe's account is that it brings together poetry and the still image in its movement of montage or parataxis to theorize the arrival of facticity without visibility or legibility. In the spacing of juxtaposition arises "something at the margin between thought and sound," a "somewhere else" whose "message arrives as a departure" (61). "A documentary work," she writes, "is an attempt to recapture someone something somewhere looking back. Looking back, Orpheus was the first known documentarist: Orpheus, or Lot's wife" (50). In this

analogy, looking back is multidirectional, belonging to both the documentarist and their object of study; yet, in Orpheus's case, Eurydice disappears the moment she is glimpsed, and in the case of Lot's wife, when she turns to look back at Sodom and her daughters while fleeing the city, she is transformed into a pillar of salt. That is, documentary is a desire for reciprocal seeing that is annulled in the moment of looking itself, it is the erasure of recognition at the root of reading.

*Photo-Poetics* brings together the study of photography and poetry that works in or theorizes the documentary mode. It tracks a lineage of poets who adapt photographic forms to the poetic medium to examine the complex interplay of discursive and visual signification in various contexts. More specifically, it offers a new framework by which to interpret poetry that cites directly from other sources, reframing and fragmenting documents found in the world. Reading poetry informed by photography allows us to think about forms of documentation, capture, or looking back that are also estranging experiences of loss and absence.

Photo-poetics is thus related to, but not subsumed by, the genre termed "documentary poetry." Documentary poetry has been variously defined in critical discourse but tends to refer to non-fiction longform poetic texts that use fragments of archival or public documents to expose or critique issues of social, political, or ecological justice. To give a few examples: Layli Long Soldier's *Whereas* (2017) directly responds to the U.S. congressional apology issued to Native Peoples in 2009 by reciting the language and clausal structure of government documents pertaining to Great Plains Natives, from the mass hangings decreed by Abraham Lincoln in 1862 to Standing Rock in 2016; Mark Nowak's *Coal Mountain Elementary* (2009) incorporates testimony from West Virginia miners, the American Coal Foundation's curriculum for schoolchildren, and newspaper accounts of mining disasters in China; M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* (2008) is comprised exclusively of the records of the legal decision *Gregson vs Gilbert*,

the only publicly available record on the massacre of 150 enslaved Africans for insurance profit on the titular slave ship in 1781. Documentary poetry appropriates archival documents using a variety of practices involving research, curation, sampling, and erasure to paratactically incorporate verbatim text from public documents into verse or prose poems. Such works adapt lyric reading and the poetic tools of figurative language to generate a politics of citation, refracting what is often bureaucratic or official language to signify differently. Though these practices are not entirely new, in the last thirty years or so they have grown more widespread, and documentary poetry has become the recognized term for referring to citational poetic texts.

In the 1995 issue of the poetry journal *Chain*, titled “Documentary,” Jena Osman and Juliana Spahr use the term to name the relation between poetry and the “real” or “political,” the interplay between creativity and objectivity. As they put it, all the work in the issue “highlights the way we use language/image to cut up our experiential encounters so as to (re)see them. Ironically, documenting of the ‘real’ seems to rely on defamiliarization, a shift in the angle of perception/reception/expectation” (7). In other words, writers who appropriate an “objective” text or image and reframe it within a poetic form engage in their own work of documentation by staging new ways to perceive what is “real.” They remediate data to expose the non-neutrality of its original representation. At the same time, and the same place, Howe taught a graduate course called “Documentary and Poetry” at the University at Buffalo, focusing on the relation of poetry and experimental non-fiction film to facts, with works by Dziga Vertov and Chris Marker on the syllabus. In *Sorting Facts*, she states plainly, “I work in the poetic documentary form” (11). And as Jill Magi notes, academic articles in the late 1990s began returning to the depression-era poetry of Muriel Rukeyser, claiming her as a documentary poet. By 2007, the anthology *American Poets in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The New Poetics* was using the categorical term

“documentary poetry” without defining it, and poets from C.D. Wright to Mark Nowak were adopting it to name their own work.

But the term has its antecedents. In 1976, Ed Sanders’ influential “Investigative Poetry,” a lecture delivered at the Naropa Institute and published by City Lights Books, advocated for a new historical poetics that used research and appropriated public documents. He praised, for instance, Charles Olson’s *Maximus Poems*, Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl*, and William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson*. His Shelleyan manifesto proclaimed, “the content of history will be poetry” and called for a collage-style poetics that begins “with a voyage into the description of historical reality” (7) “to describe every aspect (no more secret governments!) of the historical present, while aiding the future, even placing bard-babble once again into a role as shaper of the future” (11). His ideal poet-cum-computer would “discharge data as if scanning / eye-brains were passing across a high-energy grid” and replace the stanzaic structure with that of the grid, as though to mimic scientific and bureaucratic forms of representing facts (21). In an odd mix of technology and Beat aesthetics, Sanders underscored the materialist bent that runs through much documentary poetry criticism: the poet works “to unpeel the data clusters (to get to the Big D) as well as to fashion them into skeins of syllables and vowel-melodies and poesy” (25). Rather than creating a poem *ex tempore* conceived by the imagination, the poet researches and harvests data, cuts it up and reshapes it into linguistic matter. Kristin Prevallet has made the point that much experimental poetry of the 1990s was informed by both the methods of investigative poetry and the post-structural critiques of Language poetry; appropriation and erasure operate less as a form of collage, she argues, than as a “sampling [that] allows the seams, and the points of convergences with other references, to show” (125). She offers, as examples, the work of Juliana Spahr, Alan Gilbert, and Lisa Jarnot. And Joseph Harrington’s definition of contemporary

“documentary/historical/investigative poetry” in his introduction to the 2015 collection, *Tracking/Teaching: On Documentary Poetics*, reiterates the connection between poetry and history that Sanders insisted upon.<sup>1</sup>

Contemporary poets have also taken up the activist strain in Sanders’ manifesto, his claim that “Investigative poesy is freed from capitalism, churchism, and other totalitarianisms; free from racisms, free from allegiance to napalm-dropping military police states” (11). Mark Nowak and Susan Briante, in particular, stand out for their commitment to activism through documentary poetics. In her 2020 book, *Defacing the Monument*, Briante aligns herself with poets working in archives, writing that “documentary poetries offer a tradition and a space in which a writer can situate events or experiences within broader histories and fields of reference” (26). But she urges an engaged, practical and political poetics as well, one based in the particular context of a place. She gives as an example Amy Sara Carroll’s “The Desert Survival Series,” poems meant to be shared with migrants via an app called the Transborder Immigrant Tool, which provides GPS coordinates to water stations in the deserts of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. The poems offer “aid in the ‘emotional and mental well-being’ of migrants as well as provide information on how to withstand a variety of desert conditions,” information she gathered from military manuals and migrant aid organizations (Briante *Defacing* 83). Briante affiliates the poems with the bullet hole-ridden sign marking the Maestro Mauricio Farah Gebara Water Station for migrants, set up by the nonprofit Humane Borders, which “shows the Big Dipper overflowing with water, [and] acts as a guide star for those migrants who might find it in the desert of southern Arizona” (83). As Briante puts it, “the sign serves as notice and map, art and

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<sup>1</sup> In the same collection, Allison Cobb and Kaia Sand write of preferring the term “investigative poetry” to documentary, as it means literally “to be in the footprints, to follow the track” (49). For many poets working in the field, the notion of indexical trace is critical.

orientation” (83). She argues that this ought to be the work of poetry: “I want those poems and that code, the flag and the sign at the Maestro Maricio Farah Gebara Water Station to serve as models for our documentary work” (84). The poet in this instance does not merely engage with documents but creates them, making “monuments, memorials, rituals, shrines, and protests” to foment new ways of seeing and navigating a politically fractious terrain (Briante *Defacing* 85).

In his recent book *Social Poetics*, Mark Nowak likewise makes the case for activist and class-conscious poetry. He defines a social poetics “for and by the working-class people who read it, analyze it, and produce it within their struggles to transform twenty-first-century capitalism into a more equitable, equal, and socialist system of relations.” Like Briante, he understands his own writerly practice to be informed by organizing and outreach; Nowak has adapted the format of the poetry workshop to various community centers, prisons, and schools, to produce anti-capitalist works striving for social transformation. As he puts it in his essay, “Panthers, Patriots, and Poetries in Revolution,” the ultimate goal of radically democratized social poetics is to recover from the past and produce for the future a “people’s history,” or a poetics that documents the most pressing material issues of the time. This populist strand of documentary poetry sets poetry to use in political struggles, reshaping how poems can serve as instructive documents or how they might reconstruct history itself.

In many of the works I consider in the following chapters, poets appropriate data and documents pertaining to issues of exploitation, violence, and gendered and racial coding, using poetry to reorient how we think the long history of racial capitalism. They work with archives of knowledge to pull out their mutability, to unravel the iterative work of ideology as it weaves into everyday documents, from museum catalogs to legal files to the television news. They remind us that archives are not simply containers of historical facts and values, but imaginative and figural

ways of seeing that remain readable because they are continually retranslated into a seeable future.<sup>2</sup> Joseph Harrington writes in his essay, “Docupoetry and Archive Desire,” that documentary poets try to concretize “the invisible archive of ideology” by continually extending the boundaries of the archive itself, refusing the distinction between poetry and reportage. As Susan Briante puts it, “the poet forges alternate modes of perception gleaned from placing her head against the asphalt or soil to record colors and textures” (Briante, *Defacing* 85). Activist or social poetry overlaps with documentary poetry insofar as it uses indexicality—the bullet holes in the Maestro Mauricio Farah Gebara Water Station sign, for instance—to evoke, contextualize, and critique the myriad ways in which people are made to suffer for how they signify within dominant archives.

An indexical connection to reality is of central importance to photo-poetics, whether it pertains to contact with the present or distant past. As classified by Charles Sanders Peirce, indexical signs “show something about things, on account of their being physically connected with them,” as opposed to icons, which exhibit a likeness or imitate a thing, and symbols, which are associated with the thing through meaning and usage (6). Though photographs would initially seem to be likenesses, Peirce writes that they actually “correspond point by point to nature” through “physical connection,” and so are indices (7). As the results of light differentially reflecting off of surfaces in the world, photographs are categorically linked to “documents, remains, survivals, ruins and edifices, fossils—in short, indexical traces that attest to a past by emerging into the present from it” (Rosen 115). And as Philip Rosen points out in his study of cinema and historicity, indexical traces pose a problem for historians who seek an “internally unified sequence” of events because the selection of what survives can seem random,

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<sup>2</sup> Here I’m partly paraphrasing a point made by Shiqi Lin in the essay, “Archives of the Future: Documentary Impulse in a Time of Crisis” in *Episteme*, Issue 2.

disjunctive, and contingent on non-logical or non-narrative factors (116). What poetry is able to tap into, I suggest, is precisely this paratactic and fragmentary form that distinguishes the index from historical narrative.

In his edifying new book, *Contested Records: The Turn to Documents in Contemporary North American Poetry*, Michael Leong uses “documental,” a portmanteau derived from Erwin Panofsky’s terms “document” and “monumental,” as an umbrella term for documentary, conceptual, and investigative poetry. Panofsky’s “document” and “monument” roughly map onto the distinction between secondary and primary material, which shifts depending on disciplinary imperatives or modes of attention. As Leong puts it, Robert Lowell’s “For the Union Dead” may be a monument of American poetry but a document for a Civil War historian (11). Documental poetry “does its work by rhetorically toggling the polarities of our cultural memories,” that is, whether something is considered a monument or a document, “to highlight how contemporary poets argue over the urgency of past, present, and future meanings, which are always at risk of being forgotten or fetishized” (Leong 41). Broadly understood as a “poetics of citation,” documental poetry subsumes what Leong understands to be documentary’s more socio-politically grounded projects, as well as conceptual poetry’s interest in formal principles, of which he takes the works of Vanessa Place and Kenneth Goldsmith to be examples (36-37).<sup>3</sup> He

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<sup>3</sup> One reason I frame photo-poetics in relation to documentary poetry and largely disregard conceptualism, and so exclude poets like Goldsmith and Place from this study, is because the latter is overly affiliated with the constraint-based writing of Christian Bök, Robert Fitterman, Craig Dworkin, and others. Conceptual poetry as it is understood in this context is a procedural genre derived from Oulipo, which focuses more on the concept of appropriation than the poem as such. (Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Day*, for instance, is a verbatim retyping of the September 1, 2000 issue of *The New York Times*.) Its central tenet is that “pure conceptualism negates the need for reading in the traditional textual sense—one does not need to ‘read’ the work as much as think about the idea of the work” (*Notes on Conceptualisms*). Other forms of appropriative and citational poetry that tend to be classified as documentary, on the other hand, focus on the implied frames, ethical implications, and complex mediations that various scenes of reading entail; they read documents lyrically and deploy figurative language to reframe given structures of perception. In other words, they are deeply invested in the need to read. The racist appropriative works of Goldsmith and Place (“The Body of Michael Brown” and a twitter account only reproducing racist dialogue from *Gone with the Wind*, respectively) speak to this disinterest in reading power structures in language.

sees investigative poetry deriving from Sanders's lecture as more invested in fieldwork and research than in archives; as Leong puts it, "citing or reworking extant documents is not the same as uncritically relying on them" (38). The difference he finds between documentary and conceptual poetry, on the one hand, and investigative on the other, is that the former repurposes documents in order to critique their frames of reference, while the latter uses them as historical backdrop. Leong gives as examples Brenda Coultas's "The Abolition Journal (or, Tracing the Earthworks of my County)," a poem composed out of the author's investigation into physical remnants of the underground railroad in her home state of Indiana, and C.D. Wright's *One Big Self: An Investigation*, a long poem drawn from interviews with incarcerated individuals during visits to Louisiana prisons and a collaboration with photographer Deborah Luster, who invited the inmates to have their portraits taken. According to Leong, "the limitation of Coultas's and Wright's investigative projects is that they underestimate the affordances of doing work 'on material documentation' and ignore the 'discursive 'site'' of their objects in the name of fieldwork (39). This line of argumentation suggests that investigative poetry that does not use direct citation of a public document is inadequately "documental," with the implication that it is overly connected to the poet's voice and too lyrical: Leong writes that "Wright privileges lyric address over documental research" and he dismisses the paratextual reading list she offers at the end of *One Big Self* as underutilized (39).

The problem with this distinction is that it limits citational poetics to the repurposing of literal documents, disregarding how poetry, through sampling and redirection, can expose the ways in which figuration attaches to people, who are made to signify as documents of unwanted histories into which they are thrown. Poetry that attends to this figuration does not reveal people as such, but the ways in which they are read. I think Leong misses the complexities of Wright's

poetry in particular, the way she reorients the lyric voice into a multivocal and nonlinear series of captions to Luster's photographs, because he does not consider the photographs at all.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, I argue that critics of documentary poetry in general have overlooked the central importance of photographic forms, including indexicality, fragmentation, and reframing, to the poems they study. Examining documentary poetry and photography together allows us to grasp that these poems do not all rely on official or public documents; some, like Wright's, incorporate decontextualized indices of her visits to prisons, including overheard conversations, orders from guards, and signs from within the facilities and from the rural areas without. Moreover, Wright's poetry attends to a pivotal aspect of the documentary mode more broadly: the ways in which images of people are made to stand in for social problems, or how people are themselves rendered discursive sites.<sup>5</sup> Leong suggests *One Big Self* is inadequately documental for focusing too much on Wright's fieldwork in prisons, even as the portraits in the book (black and white tintypes in which the subjects often avert their faces, wear masks or costumes, or exhibit tattoos or objects) acknowledge and challenge their own signification as figures of incarceration.

It is surprising that Leong misses Wright's creative use of the lyric voice to challenge this desire for easy figuration, given his astute reading of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*. He understands Rankine's citation of racist "micro-aggressions" and use of the second person apostrophic address to register "the intractable facticity of racialized embodiment" by

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<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed account of my argument regarding the interplay between Luster's portraits and Wright's poetry, see "The Documentary Photo-Poetics of C.D. Wright and Deborah Luster" (*Contemporary Literature*, 60.2, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> I'm drawing on the definition of "image" that WJT Mitchell elaborates in *Picture Theory*, when distinguishing between a picture and an image. He writes that the difference is between "a constructed concrete object or ensemble (frame, support, materials, pigments, facture) and the virtual, phenomenal appearance that it provides for a beholder; the difference between a deliberate act of representation ('to picture or depict') and a less voluntary, perhaps even passive or automatic act ('to image or imagine'); the difference between a specific kind of visual representation (the 'pictorial' image) and the whole realm of iconicity (verbal, acoustic, mental images)" (4 n. 5). Images, in this sense, can be found in the world or within pictorial compositions, as seemingly intuitive or "automatic" objects of perception that signify by way of a broader iconology, symbolism, or connotative resonance.

turning racializing anecdotes into tangible evidence (Leong 177). That is, Leong understands hearsay and incorporated dialogue as documental in one instance, but not the other, disregarding how Wright and Luster's collaboration encourages readers to witness their own reading practices. The capacity to be photographed has turned everyone into a potential document, and, as many Black studies scholars have noted, has been used as a tool to reify aspects of the white supremacist imagination.<sup>6</sup> By studying "the poetics of citation" as part of a longer history of photo-poetics, we can further explore the complexities of this more ubiquitous supplementation of imaging to our perceptions of ourselves and others.

### **Romanticism and Photography**

Most poetry critics locate the origins of documentary poetry in modernist forms of fragmentation and appropriation. Philip Metres writes, "at the heart of documentary poetics—as at the heart of modernism—is the question of appropriation," and begins his essay on documentary poetry, "From Reznikoff to Public Enemy: The Poet as Journalist, Historian, Agitator," in the late modernist period ("News"). Marjorie Perloff begins her book on citational conceptual poetry with T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Michael Leong isolates "the documental tradition of modernist collage," finding an "emergent" practice of documental poetry in the works of Charles Reznikoff and Ezra Pound, and cites a number of influential texts, including Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Langston Hughes's "Johannesburg Mines," and Marianne Moore's "An Octopus," but doesn't consider any pre-twentieth century predecessors (5, 43). Though I explore the poetry of Rukeyser and Reznikoff in their contexts of depression-era photojournalism and objectivist

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<sup>6</sup> See for example, Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography and the Color Line: W.E.B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture* (2004); Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (2011); and Kimberly Juanita Brown, *The Repeating Body: Slavery's Visual Resonance in the Contemporary* (2015).

poetry in Chapter 2, my first chapter charts a longer trajectory of photo-poetics back to British romanticism. This is to go against the grain, then, of those who pit conceptual, Language, and documentary poetry against the supposedly naïve confessional romantic lyric, in all its emphasis on subjective experience and beauty. As scholars have argued for decades, it is far more accurate and interesting to read romantic poets as some of the earliest theorists of media and mediation.<sup>7</sup> I argue that tracing the lineage of photo-poetics back to romantic poetry allows us not only to explore the impact of early photographic technology on poetry, but to consider how viewing the world photographically has informed a whole range of poetic practices. I develop the concept *photo-poetics* to denote the use of photographic forms—seriality, fragmentation, indexicality, (re)framing, image-caption relay—in poetry that scrutinizes how the document transforms subjectification.

Though the technology of fixing photographic images, whether the daguerreotype or the calotype, was not available until the 1840s, the desire for images in the world to imprint themselves, without human intervention, onto some salvageable and transportable material is a touchstone of the romantic era. Thomas Wedgwood and Humphry Davey, two of the most well-known proto-photographers, worked on capturing images produced by the camera obscura using silver nitrate around the turn of the nineteenth century. Wedgwood was “the first person to attempt to record the camera image by means of the action of light,” though he never succeeded

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<sup>7</sup> Maureen McLane and Celeste Langan argue, for instance, that we ought to regard romantic poetry as the product of a broader “media revolution”: “Rather than offering us consistent expressivist renditions or blasts of immediacy, then, Romantic poets more often flag just how subtly and multiply their poems mediate any supposedly transparent experience they seem to proffer” (246). Gillen Wood argues that modern visual culture has its roots in the romantic-era interest in and feeling of shock produced by the “real,” understood in part through arts of verisimilitude and mass reproductions that presage photography and film (7). And in his recent work, *Romantic Mediations: Media Theory and British Romanticism*, Andrew Burkett presents a similar argument, charting the pre-history of media concepts in romantic era literature. As he writes, “what is perhaps most remarkable [...] about Romantic culture’s ubiquitous fascination with media/tion is that these intellectuals lived and worked during the generation just previous to the emergence of the media concept itself” (3).

in fixing the image, so any further exposure to light would blacken it entirely (Newhall 13). He was also friends to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who likely had access to their experiments (Batchen 60). Even if, as Alexander Neel argues, Coleridge was quite opposed to proto-photographic technology as a “blind mechanism” (209) that omits human will and imagination, his interest in the variability of human perception, particularly in what Rei Terada calls “spectra”—“optical illusions, hallucinations, and sensory oddities” (35)—speaks to a general interest in the relation between human perception and nature. Even when poets like Coleridge and William Wordsworth disavow the visual in privileging concepts like imagination and nature, it always returns; as William Galperin argues, “the visible is the central and unrivaled repressed of romanticism” (3). Chapter 1 will engage this early interplay of photography and poetry in more detail, drawing in particular on Geoffrey Batchen’s work, and will take as its premise that photography is best thought of as a romantic era invention.

Early experimenters in photographic technology conceptualized it using rhetoric similar to Coleridge’s aesthetic ideal of “organic form,” as nature or the sun creating an image with its own material, without human intervention. Peculiar for being naturally composed while producing an aesthetically legible, valuable, and reproducible object, what Coleridge called “organic forms” at once belong to the external and bespeak internal memory and feeling. “The form is mechanic,” he writes, “when on any given material we impress a pre-determined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material — as when to a mass of wet clay we give whatever shape we wish it to retain when hardened” (186). Most plastic, literary, and fine arts fall into this category. “The organic form on the other hand is innate, it shapes as it develops itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward Form. Such is the Life, such is the form. Nature, the prime genial artist, inexhaustible

in diverse powers, is equally inexhaustible in forms” (186). William Henry Fox Talbot’s *The Pencil of Nature* (1844), the first photobook and an introduction to calotype technology, epitomizes this ideal: he writes that the plates included were “impressed by Nature’s hand” and captured “by the mere action of Light upon sensitive paper.” Andrea Henderson has argued that Talbot was inspired by a nostalgia for romanticism, writing that the photograph is “a perfect vehicle for Romantic philosophical and aesthetic ideals.”<sup>8</sup> The camera interposes itself between the human eye and the world, meaning that the instant of capture is an unseen moment, an image lost and safeguarded at the same time. The desire to capture an instant that is forever slipping away, grappling with ephemerality, mortality, and the loss embedded within experience is a central theme in much romantic poetry; perhaps John Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn” is the most canonical example.

I focus on the work of William Wordsworth, though, because his interest in capturing images of the everyday, particularly of various lowly individuals he encounters and whom he finds already framed with significance, exemplifies the photo-poetic method and documentary approach that I aim to define. In an era that began to witness the everyday as aesthetic, and thereby as an array of extractable, frameable images, Wordsworth in particular found his eye despotically trained upon that which he routinely glimpsed and missed at the same time.<sup>9</sup> As the world transformed itself into an infinitude of latent images waiting to be captured, reframing and exhibiting the close at hand blended the familiar and unfamiliar in a manner exciting to the general public.<sup>10</sup> A will to document characterizes much of Wordsworth’s poetry as an endless

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<sup>8</sup> Batchen notes that Daguerre and Nicéphore Niépce used similar language to describe photography’s “copying of views from nature” or “the spontaneous reproduction of the images of nature” (62).

<sup>9</sup> I am drawing here on the work of Jacques Rancière and William Galperin, which I explore in more detail in Chapter 1. In Book 12 of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth famously named “the bodily eye, in every stage of life / The most despotical of our senses” (128-9).

<sup>10</sup> Galperin explores this in relation to Robert Barker’s 1791 Panorama of London, for instance, in which denizens of the city could view it as a large image in multiple perspectives. The everyday, Galperin suggests, is only available

project of recording, whether of his own poetic and moral development, of imagination and nature, or of the everyday and humble subjects.

His Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, in particular, draws on notions of indexicality, or a direction connection to reality. Framed as “a systematic defense of the theory upon which the Poems were written,” the Preface depicts the poet as imparting a sense of the everyday “by fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation” (734). In focusing on “humble and rustic life” and avoiding poetic diction and tropes such as the personification of abstraction, Wordsworth writes, “my purpose was to imitate, and, as far as possible, *to adopt the very language* of men” (735-6, emphasis added). He goes on, “I have wished to keep the Reader in the company of flesh and blood [...] I have at all times endeavoured to look steadily at my subject” (736). Wordsworth’s documentary approach to the poor rural people he encounters already betrays a proto-photographic way of seeing, which overlays the real existence of the subject with their figurative significance. Wordsworth writes that his method was to use “a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect” (734). The Preface makes explicit, in other words, how a photographic way of seeing the world alters the expectations of poetic expression. Poetry becomes a vehicle for accessing the depths of human feeling by way of real individuals who are indexed by the inclusion of their language, the citation of true discourse. As I explore in Chapter 1, Wordsworth finds actual people in the world already framed with discursive significance, which sets his own way of perceiving the world into relief.

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through such a repositioning or reviewing, through the surprise and recognition of something missed when it was experienced (*Missed Opportunities* 1-11).

In Wordsworth's poetic encounters with various destitute or unfortunate characters, we find a logic that anticipates documentary forms that tend to see real people as representative of social problems. The poor or pained subject depicted in poetry connected it to reality and to a depth of human feeling, expanding aesthetic value to previously uninteresting or common subjects while opening structural relations of complicity.<sup>11</sup> The intrigue of the everyday persisted through the zenith of the American documentary movement. Dorothea Lange, in a 1952 article for *Aperture* titled "Photographing the Familiar" writes, "Bad as it is, the world is potentially full of good photographs. But to be good, photographs have to be full of the world" (9). Many of Lange's best photographs are products of a bad world. But what does it mean to be "full of the world?" Such aestheticization of suffering is only possible if images and the world have a synchronous relationship based on interpretability. Documentary photography is recursive; not just an imprint of an object (perfect index), but an image of an image with a shifting horizon of meaning dependent upon the context of its reading. Less about preserving a certain individual, documentary traffics in the authenticity and having-been-there while it channels the impersonal and indifferent medium by which its images are communicated. As Kaja Silverman has argued, photography is an image-making technology latent in the world, available in unintended forms (sun fade, tan lines, atomic blast shadows) that register the memory of light. What her history of photography theorizes is the latency of imaging that embeds itself between man and nature. What the documentary tropes of immediacy, witnessing, and unobtrusive capture suggest is a desire to approach such nonhuman photography. Images are just there; they are made to appear; they are constantly happening. What poetry that responds to photographic ways of seeing tries to

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<sup>11</sup> In her 1994 study of documentary politics, *They Must be Represented*, Paula Rabinowitz writes that "Documentary circulates between the public and private, personal and political spheres by becoming simultaneously an aesthetic and archival object — part-fiction, part-truth; or if you will, at once base and superstructure, economic practice and cultural form" (6).

do, I suggest, is explore the iterative structures, patterns, ideology, and history that inflect images found in the world. This project traces a lineage of poets who dispute the tropes of revelation, recuperation of suffering, and giving voice to individuals that are so frequently heralded as the ethical and political work of documentary projects. And, as counterintuitive as it may seem, it roots such critiques of disclosure in the formal tropes that characterize photographic images.

### **Empathetic Vitalism**

Critics of documentary poetry, in disregarding its photographic forms, tend to directly connect the excerpted language or images in the poems with the people supposedly found or named therein. As Philip Metres writes, “most practitioners of documentary and investigative poetics advocate for an ethical treatment of texts that carry the traces of lost or othered voices” (“News”). Even if Metres and other critics resist the rhetoric of “giving voice” to marginalized people, they suggest that the texts poets cite bear indexical traces of lost voices that the poets then salvage.<sup>12</sup> Of Mark Nowak’s *Coal Mountain Elementary*, Leong writes that “Nowak, who sorts through a ‘mass of undigested information’ for usable poetic material, is in a structurally similar position to Ronald Hixson, whose job it is to find bodies, whether living or dead, among the overwhelming debris. Nowak, a discursive rescuer, salvages the miners’ traumatic micro-narratives [...] from the threat of silence” (47). Of *One Big Self*, Stephanie Burt has written that “for Wright and Luster, the project of portrait photography, of turning light on chemically treated

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<sup>12</sup> Briante, for instance, asks “‘How can we amplify voices without turning other people’s stories into commodities, without re-affirming the faulty myth of ‘giving voice’?” (*Defacing* 62). And as Metres frames it, “there is an ethical bind at the core of any documentary poetry project that attempts to reclaim history as some totality, or that says, This is the body” (“News”). So, although they grapple with their positionality as writers and recognize the impossibility of a totalizing docupoem, they still presume existent voices and particular bodies at the core of their works, to be amplified and rendered more recognizable. Photo-poetics, in contrast, focuses on impersonal representational structures and reading practices, without underscoring an audible, visible individual(s) at the poem’s root.

paper into representations of people and places, becomes a project of releasing people from bondage” (235). And if voices cannot be salvaged, the people to whom they belonged are mourned in poetic form. Leong calls this poetic “docu-mancy” and suggests that these works are “efficacious elegies, poems that redouble their sense of afterness into powerful acts of mourning” (32). Joseph Harrington talks of giving “life and memory” to activists as well as poems that “memorialize the murdered, the enslaved, the colonized, the surveilled, the silenced, the disappeared, the invisible” (*Tracking/Teaching* vi). In the chapters that follow, I organize my readings of photo-poetic texts against various critical desires for humanist recovery and elegy, focusing instead on issues of framing, mediation, and figuration that structure perception and that poets interrogate by redirecting textual fragments.<sup>13</sup>

*Photo-Poetics* insists then, on remaining in the spaces of signification that the poets themselves explore, without slipping into what I call *empathetic vitalism*, the critical and readerly tendency to imagine a person or people represented in poetic texts that use archival materials. This kind of earnest anthropomorphism is a problematic tendency of literary critics, not one belonging to the poems themselves. If we understand empathy not simply as feeling with another person, but per “the theory that the appreciation of a work of art depended upon the capacity of the spectator to project his personality into the object of contemplation” (OED), then empathetic vitalism is a desire to find individuated life in the projections of readerly affect.<sup>14</sup> Photo-poetics, I argue, resists suturing affect to individuated suffering, using excessive and

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<sup>13</sup> I’m drawing here on Brian Reed’s term “redirected language,” from his essay “In Other Words: Postmillennial Poetry and Redirected Language,” which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 4.

<sup>14</sup> Saidiya Hartman unpacks the “double-edged” nature of empathy in the opening chapter of *Scenes of Subjection*, whereby the white abolitionist imagines himself suffering as though he were enslaved in order to “make this suffering visible and intelligible” (19). What Hartman calls the “violence of identification” is the theft of the captive body by the white imagination as a resource for sentiment (20). Empathy localizes around the idea of a body that can in turn be inhabited by others.

fragmentary forms that index impersonal violence or loss so that the perceptual structures of subjection can themselves be examined, rather than the experiences of particular victims.

The still-dominant critical tendency to affiliate poetry with lyric, and lyric with voice, especially through the trope of apostrophe, means that readers of poetry are especially prone to empathetic vitalism.<sup>15</sup> In many ways, empathetic vitalism assumes the documentary poem to be an extended vehicle of apostrophe, or more specifically, of prosopopoeia, “the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity which posits the possibility of the latter’s reply and confers upon it the power of speech” (de Man *Rhetoric* 75-6). I find Saidiya Hartman’s discussion of her methodology helpful when thinking about how the poets I study approach the archive, not as a site that captures individuals, but rather as ideology stamped on structures and practices. She writes in *Scenes of Subjection*, “My reading of slave testimony is not an attempt to recover the voice of the enslaved but an attempt to consider *specific practices in a public performance* of slavery that encompasses the slave on the auction block and those sharing their recollections decades later” (12, emphasis added). I suggest that many photo-poetic works operate similarly, attending to recording and archival practices through poetic forms which, rather than rescue real people, explore how racialized and gendered typologies are mediated through shared documents. As Hartman argues, the desire to rescue or revivify or mourn the people supposedly found in repurposed documents exhibits an “integrationist rights agenda” that she considers “obscene: the attempt to make the narrative of defeat into an opportunity for celebration, the desire to look at the ravages and the brutality of the last few centuries, but to still

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<sup>15</sup> As Brian McGrath writes, “the rise of lyric in the nineteenth century [...] asserts the importance of address” (33); and as Jonathan Culler has argued, the prominence of the lyric is “the triumph of the apostrophic” (149). Culler writes that apostrophe is the trope that turns the poem into an event witnessed by the reader: “The poet makes himself a poetic presence through an image of voice, and nothing figures voice better than the pure *O* of undifferentiated voicing” (142). And Barbara Johnson argues in her essay “Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion” that the I-Thou structure of apostrophe’s vocalized address typically animates the lyric “I” as autonomous masculine subjectivity, a trope that is complicated by female speakers that, in pregnancy, instantiate multiplicity.

find a way to feel good about ourselves” (“The Unthought”). Empathetic vitalism is premised upon a similar recuperative desire that reading might have its own political efficacy.<sup>16</sup> I maintain that these works offer more unsettling encounters with the written records and visual objects that comprise the nonhuman remnants of archival materials. *Photo-Poetics* works to counter the finitude and narrative telos of suffering’s redress that the recuperative approach of empathetic vitalism implies. It offers instead a critical methodology for literary texts that appropriate documents in manners cumulative, iterative, and excessive, approaching the mathematical sublime in poetic form.

I suggest, moreover, that empathetic vitalism tends to over-emphasize the monad as the object of recovery, when the poets themselves seem far more interested in forms of accretion, aggregation, seriality, and fragmentation. Even when emphasizing a “thanatapoetics,” to use Leong’s term, a critical emphasis on rescue or mourning centers the human subject as object of care. The poets I read here, however, draw attention to the material document or object that stands in for and filters the representation of various types of people. That is, looking at documentary poetry in terms of human life or death is the wrong angle. Reading such poetry as photographic, on the other hand, allows us to pay attention to the specific forms of reframing, citation, and indexicality that alert us to how people are made to signify as images that do not properly belong to them. In other words, photo-poetics incorporates indices not of particular people or their ghosts, but the structures of signification and documentation that determine how people are read. This is not to sidestep the ethical imperative that drives much documentary poetry and critical responses to it, but rather to reorient the ethical question away from particular

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<sup>16</sup> For a helpful account of a similar recuperative reading trope in relation to the Victorian social-problem novel, see Carolyn Betensky’s *Feeling for the Poor: Bourgeois Compassion, Social Action, and the Victorian Novel*. There she argues that the production of bourgeois feeling toward the working class through the novel leads to the conviction that reading these texts is its own ethical labor.

people and a limited project of “rescue” through empathetic vitalism, toward a broader critique of how types of people are iteratively reinscribed into a shared ideology that permits differential exposure to violence.<sup>17</sup>

## **Lyric Reading**

To some, documentary poetry represents an uneasy blending of the political with the personal, an encroachment of the bureaucratic into poetry’s aesthetic or moral autonomy. As Nada Gordon puts it in her thoughtful poetic exploration of her own negative response to the genre, “there’s / something about its sheer factuality that, to me / rejects ‘poetry’ even while inhabiting it as a mode.” The quotation marks separating “poetry” from the sentence suggest the cause of Gordon’s uneasiness without her having to name it: poetry is exceptional, it must be excepted, particularly from the realm of the factual. Rei Terada names this the “nonconceptual lyric intensity” whereby the ideology of aesthetic autonomy makes lyric “seem the most literary corner of literature,” embodying Kantian aesthetics and “finally synonymous with the fiction of quality, with the idea that there is quality—whether conceived as ontology or as effect—left over after quantity” (197). This literary excess is imputed to poetry as that which allows it to seem universal, timeless, more than the sum of its parts. The anxiety or accusation of artlessness with which docupoetry is met is often a response to finding material historical particulars placed within the bounds of the poem, imbricating poetry and the world, and its conditions of its production and circulation.

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<sup>17</sup> I am drawing here on Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, in which she writes that “loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure” (20).

To many critics of docupoetry, “voice” is the enshrined term that maintains consistency with lyric ideology, whether imputed to the poet, the lyric “I”, or figures within the poem. In the words of Craig Santos Perez, “the docupoem emplaces voice within the historical and textual materiality of other contexts—highlighting the tension between voice and historiography.” Voice is a means of recovering lost stories, of solidifying identity and inviting recognition, of reinscribing lyric ideology in altered form. But the poets in this study complicate the immediacy and recognition implied by voice, even one in tension with historiography. *Photo-Poetics* argues against such a return to voice by surveying how citational poems invite lyric reading only to force it to the edge of tenable thought.

In her influential argument regarding the lyric and Emily Dickinson, Virginia Jackson historicizes how lyric became an umbrella term for various poetic genres in the nineteenth century, due less to any form inherent to the poem itself than to the context of its reading. The idealized scene of reading becomes identified with the idealized moment of expression, ahistorical and unmediated (7). “Fundamentally,” Jackson writes, “a lyric reading practice supposes that poems are written in view of a future horizon of interpretation” (57). While she maintains that “everything about Dickinson’s work contradicts that supposition”—her manuscripts tend to be addressed to particular individuals or herself, and sometimes contain material bits and pieces (fabric, dead insects, pressed flowers, etc., that belong to the specific occasion of their reception), and were not made for us as future readers—the force of lyric reading is to impute both a sense of timelessness and futurity into the poem as that which is perpetually open to interpretation. Jackson defines “lyric reading” as drawing “associations between literal accident and figurative meaning” (67). In her analysis of Dickinson’s fascicles, she mimics how others read “every blot, dash, and swerve as poetry” in an effort to recover the

intentions behind mishandled and over-edited archival remnants. She questions the tendency to interpret every fragment jotted on scrap paper or every occasional poem included in some correspondence as lyric. Such a reading practice imputes lyricism to coincidences of material reference and figurative meaning. By understanding a particular line within a personal letter as poetry, lyric reading transposes it onto a broader grid of legibility that supersedes the context of its utterance.

The irony that Jackson so convincingly explains, though, is that Dickinson's not-necessarily-lyric writing was exemplary of the poetic ideal of writing without an audience, something that most poets published in their lifetime cannot attain. The most lyric of lyric poets may not have written lyrics, Jackson argues, but the editing, publication, and marketing of Emily Dickinson was brilliantly effective at making it seem as though she did, trafficking on her apparent isolation and reticence to publish. As Theodor Adorno writes, "the lyric work hopes to attain universality through unrestrained individuation" (38). This universality is not innate to lyric writing, but socially constructed through the reception of perceived individualism. We often understand this individuated universalism through the trope of voice.

Paul de Man has argued that the lyric, as a readerly invention, is premised upon the humanist ideal of aligning meaning with experience, an alignment the poem dramatizes by the trope of breath or voice (*Rhetoric* 262). In the case of documentary poetry criticism, voice is a metaphor that infers the stability of the subject supposedly found within the poem, which is itself an extension of the poet's intent when extracting from various sources. As Barbara Johnson rights in her gloss of de Man's argument, "to use an anthropomorphism is to treat as known the properties of the human" (*Persons* 190). Using the metaphor of voice or elegy to create an identification between cited text and the human, empathetic vitalism presumes not the literal

rescue of some one, but the recuperation of a stable horizon of meaning, whereby whoever is supposedly represented or given voice is accessible and recognizable to the reader. Such a recovery of legibility and presence transcends the language and form of the poem itself. As de Man puts it, “To the extent that metaphor can be thought of as a language of desire and as a means to recover what is absent, it is essentially anti-poetic” (*Allegories* 47). By assuming this apoetic structure of recovery, empathetic vitalism reads both the intent to recover and the intent to be recovered onto the poem, as a kind of dynamic ethical project that the reader can join.

In this projection of liveliness onto textual fragments from various archives, empathetic vitalism disregards the workings of figuration and, as de Man puts it, “the impossibility of closure and of totalization (that is the impossibility of *coming into being*) of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions” (*Rhetoric* 71, emphasis added). The poems of this study adopt photographic forms to challenge precisely such closure, to stay in the space of figuration without affixing significance to particular individuals. As De Man writes, “to the extent that language is figure [...] it is indeed not the thing itself but the representation, the picture of the thing” (*Rhetoric* 80). Figure, Tilottama Rajan explains, is somewhere between sign and symbol, between a purely arbitrary relation between signifier and signified and their total fusion: “the ‘figure’ [...] imbues abstract thought with lived significance, but avoids a fetishistic identification of representation with presence” (466). By dislocating representation from presence, photo-poets study the movement of becoming-figural itself. This is why their poems operate photographically: they cite language pertaining to actual people just as a photograph indexes light touching a body, but they sever such text from the knowledge or even the sight of any particular individual. In the following chapters, my readings bear out the poets’ own

fascination with various forms of substitution that do not coalesce into a stable object of recognition.

If lyric reading is premised upon the inferred intention of conscious thought, then how might we read texts that cite heavily from other sources, which presumably bear traces of their own intent? As Sueyeun Juliette Lee writes of conceptual poets, “by utilizing a transcriptive approach, their writing ostensibly effaces their presence as authors, but their performances *demand* that we pay attention to them, which creates ambiguity around how we should receive the work.” That is, rather than sidestep intent, such transcriptive works place even more emphasis on why the poet chose certain texts, how they are excerpting from them, where they present such work and to whom. The work of locating intention toggles between what the cited documents were for and what the poet thinks they are doing in repurposing source material.<sup>18</sup> The poem forces one to read the poet’s intent against and alongside the significance of the extracted document in its original publication. As Leong writes, “such poems powerfully conjure the prior institutional contexts of the past inscriptions to the present scene of reading” (10). Photo-poetics exhibits a will to record, but rather than attend to fleeting subjective experience, it focuses on the documental substrate of society. Police reports, legal records, wartime civilian casualty counts, museum catalogs, x-rays, photographs, diaries, school curricula—the materials that chronicle and organize the sensible world are the subjects of the documentary poetic tradition. The poets I read seem to be drawn to the way these materials capture something so unseen and ready-to-hand, whether it be extraction economy’s profit motive or the alterity of

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<sup>18</sup> The controversy surrounding Goldsmith’s infamous “The Body of Michael Brown,” in which Goldsmith quoted from the public autopsy report following Brown’s murder by police, arose precisely from these questions of intent and context. Anne Waldman asks, “What was Kenny Goldsmith thinking? That it’s okay to self-appoint and perform the autopsy report of murdered black teenager Michael Brown and mess with the text, and so ‘own’ it and get paid for his services?” And Layli LongSoldier writes of how we should understand Goldsmith as an invader, colonizing the suffering of the marginalized for his own purposes. For more responses from poets, see CA Conrad’s post, “Kenneth Goldsmith Says He Is an Outlaw” on the Poetry Foundation blog.

personal memory, that even though it is reinscribed everywhere, it often goes unnoticed.

Drawing on methods of archival work (cataloging, captioning, listing, storing, collecting), photo-poetics expropriates fragments of archival materials to theorize, historicize, and politicize the documents that structure our lives.

Photo-poetics extends lyric reading, then, by turning to archival materials and building allegories, echoes, and unintended meanings through reframing fragments.<sup>19</sup> It traffics in and constructs precisely such coincidences of material reference and figurative meaning that we recognize as poetic. Claudia Rankine draws our attention to the crisp white lines adjudicating Serena Williams' tennis matches; M. NourbeSe Philip evokes through assonance the sound of anonymous cries out of legal records of slave trafficking. Rather than use lyric reading to fabricate an ahistorical unmediated scene of writing, these poets reframe the objects, images, and documents that index a specific historical event to expose its ideological substrate. If lyric reading, as Jackson, de Man, and Adorno understand it, sets to work the ideal of aesthetic autonomy, then photo-poetics adapts its capacity to build significance out of material particulars in the service of imbricating poetry and historical context. As Metres has argued, "the documentary poem opposes [the] idea of a closed system, inviting 'the real life outside the poem' into it while also offering readers a journey into the poem. Because of this double movement,

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<sup>19</sup> Whereas Brian Reed uses the term "redirected language" to refer to citational poetry, Stephen Fredman uses "collage" and "juxtaposition" in his *Contextual Practice: Assemblage and the Erotic in Postwar Poetry and Art*, which looks at poetic texts and artworks. He writes, "of necessity a vernacular procedure tied to the everyday and the overlooked, contextual practice works by uncovering new energies and images through juxtaposing found materials or by directing aesthetic attention to an existing but previously ignored context" (3). Marjorie Perloff's *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* uses the terms "appropriation, elaborate constraint, visual and sound composition, and reliance on intertextuality" to refer to the conceptual, "unoriginal" new poetry that turns away from mid-century expressive verse. Kenneth Goldsmith adapts "unoriginal genius in his own expository work, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age*, which looks at non-traditional literary practices including "word processing, databasing, recycling, appropriation, intentional plagiarism, identity ciphering, and intensive programming" (2). Whereas these works generally frame citational poetry against originality and self-expression, particularly in the context of the post-internet era, they focus less on documentary poetry as that which engages with social and political issues.

documentary poems constantly court their own collapse, testing a poem's tensile boundaries in the face of what Wallace Stevens called 'the pressure of reality'" ("From Reznikoff"). Because poets in this tradition press the boundary separating world and poem (take for instance, Briante's claim that we ought to read the bullet hole-ridden sign marking the Maestro Mauricio Farah Gebara Water Station as a poem), they not only resist the notion that the poem is a closed system but explore how poetic signification adheres to things in the world.

Photo-poetics insists upon the indexicality of the artifact that maintains a corporeal link to its referent. C.D. Wright quotes from interviews with incarcerated people whose portraits are included in *One Big Self* and Muriel Rukeyser cites extant medical records and x-rays of real lungs: like the pressed flowers and dead insects of Dickinson's fascicles, contextually specific remnants are included within the bounds of the poem to both index a particular individual or moment and to fabricate connotative significance on the back of this indexicality. But, and this is central to my argument, the transposition of such a referent into poetry renders it entirely figural, meaning it no longer stands in for an individual, but for the broader context of their legibility. Photo-poetics uses the index to assert both the "that-has-been" *and* its impersonal sublation into literature, at once.<sup>20</sup> It furnishes evidence not to expose a lost story or revive a voice, but to reframe the collective frameworks of visibility and interpretability that function at the expense of particularity.

This form of lyric reading that pertains to documentary poetry is only available, I suggest, by means of photographic ways of seeing. Photography combines the index of a particular object or being in a specific context with the imposition of figurative meaning. Yet, photographic images and poetic language maintain a material substrate that threatens a sense of total

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<sup>20</sup> As Roland Barthes writes of photography, "its noeme is always be a shock of consciousness: the *shock* (the anxiety) of 'I'm certain that has been'" (*Camera Lucida* 71).

contingency: mere marks on a page or abstract sounds, mere patches of shade and light.<sup>21</sup> What renders them significant is reading practice, contextualization and framing that produces legibility. The technical root of photography, what Hagi Kenaan calls its “mechanical birthmark” is absence of intention, the fact that at the instant the shutter closes, the photographer cannot see what is captured (12). Intimating intention, as Jackson explains, is the core of lyric reading. The photographer, like the poet who appropriates fragments from external sources, indexes something real while simultaneously framing and recontextualizing it as art or evidence. As I explore in Chapter 2, the documentary mode is particularly adept at using images of individuals to stand in for social problems: the wrinkles on a mother’s brow connote the worries of a nation, or the fragility of a naked child the violence of a war. The instant pictured is rendered meaningful and its image maintains an open relation to future readers as interpretable, even as the context of its interpretation may shift. Photographic ways of seeing turn lyric reading onto the visual world, morphing a particular, situated individual into a figural abstraction. Kenaan’s phenomenological account of photography calls this “the insertion of a frame structure into the visible” by which image-making is dependent on human intentionality, or “seeing-as” that reads images into the world, imputing significance to reality (30). Kenaan maintains that this is a natural effect of vision grounded in “elasticity and free play or, as philosophy would have it, in the imagination” (35). What photo-poetics explores is how “seeing-as” is not simply natural and imaginative, but historically and socially conditioned. That is, the construction of an intentional visual field is already political, and how we record the meaning we find in the world in turn reflects these conditions of appearance.

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<sup>21</sup> As Brian McGrath writes, “Despite the fact that after romanticism the lyric is frequently celebrated for its ability to carry and convey the poet’s voice and full presence, the lyric also names a difference within language, the ability of language to do something other than communicate” (29).

This is not to imply that photo-poetics is an extension of realism. Rather, like fragmented citations from archival materials, photographs image not the world itself, but how we already view and organize the world. Jean-Christophe Bailly explores this remediation by analogizing Talbot's invention of the calotype process as a way of fixing his issues with using the Claude Glass, a kind of mobile camera obscura, when visiting Lake Como in Italy. Talbot's intention was not to capture Lake Como itself, but the scenic view projected onto the Claude Glass, which he was unsuccessful in tracing. The photograph, Bailly writes, has less to do with accurately reproducing an image of nature, then, than with fixing this projected image, this framed and isolated "world unto itself" (9). "This amounts to saying," he continues, "that from the start, the quality of the image's definition and the accuracy with which it points to the referent are not to be understood in terms of realism" (Bailly 10). Photography is less about capturing what one sees in the world than about fixing the images that already characterize, or construct, perception. The photograph is already an image of an image, which exposes the world as already bearing visual-discursive signification. As Bailly puts it, the photograph is like "a veil or screen on which signification is caught red-handed, acting like a bath in which all existence is dipped as soon as it appears" (38). In this sense, the photograph indexes the way signification clings to bodies and generalizes them through aesthetically and ideologically inflected ways of seeing. "What is at stake here," Bailly writes, "is the way the objects that surround us come to inhabit us and are transformed into signs, subconsciously forming a mysterious network of energy that can be mobilized at any moment and that no voluntary agency can manage to eliminate altogether" (46). This is in part why it is problematic to insist on the liberatory capacity of documentary poetry: it implies the very aesthetic autonomy that poets know to be impossible, as though the poet could sit outside the network of signification that codes the visible world and save real people from it.

Rather, I argue that photo-poetics sets the working of signification into relief, repurposing documents not to resuscitate people from within them, but to index, like photographs, the structures and patterns of signification that are indivisible from the world.

This is why, I suggest, particularly in chapters 3 and 4, photo-poetics is so adept in showing how race and gender function as signifying structures that attach to real people. Hortense Spillers called the “coding” or “markers” that racialize and gender Black women “signifying property *plus* [...] layers of attenuated meanings, made an excess in time, over time, assigned by a particular historical order” (65). The history of photography as a tool of policing, bureaucracy, ethnography, and colonialism holds up the belief in the technology’s mimetic veracity while iteratively constructing categorical paths of perception. As Nicholas Mirzoeff argues, “the photograph became a prime locus of the performance of the racialized index” (111). Leigh Raiford makes a similar point, arguing that “the photograph in particular imposes a unitary vision and helps fix the meaning of that which it records. It provides the illusion of seeing an event in its entirety as it truly happened” (4). Thus, Raiford writes, “photography, entrenched in a discourse of ‘evidence’ and ‘truth,’ disciplines viewers to see race” (27). Photographic ways of seeing imbricate a grammar, syntax, or “hieroglyphics,” onto actual bodies, rendering them visual and figural in the same instant. Anne Anlin Cheng, in her study of Orientalism, calls this “an abstraction that materializes” (14). She writes that whereas racist perception that affiliates Black bodies with primitivism “rehearses the rhetoric of ineluctable flesh, Orientalism, by contrast, relies on a decorative grammar, a phantasmic corporeal syntax that is artificial and layered” (5-6). She understands the racialized Asiatic feminine as a construction of “synthetic personhood” and reads images that reinforce the interchangeability of person and thing, making flesh into ornament (14). Photo-poetics explores

this intertwining of discursive and visual signification in the construction of gendered and racialized subjects by way of iteration and seriality. By citing from documents that themselves index ideologically inflected structures of perception, and by using parataxis, repetition, and excessive itemization to indict such perceptual structures, photo-poetics estranges conceptual constructions of identity.

## **Chapter Overview**

Chapter 1 suggests we find the origins of photo-poetics in British romanticism, as a period that saw the rise of what Jacques Rancière called the “aesthetic regime,” whereby commonplace and humble people and things took on aesthetic significance. I follow Geoffrey Batchen in locating the origins of photographic ways of seeing in romanticism, and challenge how theorists of romanticism and photography alike tend to construct a binary along the lines of the nonsignifying visual detail versus symbolic ideation. Reading poems by William Wordsworth in which he encounters various destitute figures, I argue that they combine visual and discursive signification in framed and otherworldly images; these figures, in other words, are photographic objects *avant la lettre*. I also consider how Dorothy Wordsworth plays the role of a recording device for her brother, a kind of camera that he hopes might store memories of his experiences, and how readers of her journals have extended to it the same logic. Finally, I argue that in Wordsworth’s photo-poetics we already see the limits of the logic of typology and synecdoche that will be the signature of documentary works of art, in which the figures he describes pull away from his cognition, in a distorting excess of figurative language that affiliates them with the deathly and inhuman. I return in Chapter 3 to the entanglement of photography with typification in the nineteenth century, but beginning with a study of romantic poetry allows us to see that

poets were already grappling with the strange coupling of indexicality and impersonal figuration that challenges the logic of recognizable human type, which is central to a genealogy of photo-poetics.

Chapter 2 explores how photo-poetic texts of the 1930s, in particular Charles Reznikoff's *Testimony* and Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*, take part in and work against the documentary ethos of the period. Both book-length poems appropriate excerpted material: Reznikoff draws from recorded eye-witness testimony drawn from thousands of court cases, while Rukeyser repurposes direct reportage and legislative records pertaining to the West Virginia Hawk's Nest Disaster. I contextualize their projects within what has been called the "documentary decade," which I suggest is defined in part by the strategic use of images of particular individuals to stand in for a social problem. *Testimony* incorporates a litany of details within decontextualized fragments of eye-witness testimony, disaggregating the described suffering or violence from legal judgement and logics of precedent. I argue that its excessive, serial form works to index particular occurrences, and so maintains the force of evidence, but severs them from the experience of any individual person, in a departure from the representative methods of the era. *The Book of the Dead*, on the other hand, incorporates documentary photographs, fossils, and x-ray images to probe the uncanny assemblages of human-industrial remnants that index the Hawk's Nest Disaster. As such, Rukeyser resists suturing political response to contained narratives of suffering, instead forcing encounters with material fragments and photographic indices lodged in legal, regulatory, and medical archives. This chapter reads two well-established writers of the documentary poetic tradition, then, to reframe how they worked with archival materials using photographic forms.

Chapter 3 analyzes how the ideal of record keeping as a method of containing unmediated experience is feminized, connecting the figure of Dorothy Wordsworth to the avant garde poet Bernadette Mayer, who is known for her methodical experiments in self-documentation. Originally an audio-visual exhibit, Mayer's *Memory* (1971) was only recently published in full, with both text and images. For one month, Mayer took one roll of film each day, producing over 1,100 photographs that she then viewed while revising her journal into an extended observational poem. Original audiences would have scanned the images, arranged in a large grid on the wall, while listening to taped recordings of her reconstructed memory. I argue that her excessive use of details and blurring of interior monologue with descriptive observation upends any possibility of containing experience. Moreover, by incorporating into the text details caught in photographs but not perceived in real time, I suggest Mayer folds self-difference into subjectivity by way of what Roland Barthes called "counter-memory." Analyzing the use of photography as a tool of taxonomy in the nineteenth century, in particular Jean-Martin Charcot's iconography of hysterics, propels my argument regarding the blind point within serialized photographs which purport to delimit, through repetition, a type of person. While the other chapters in this project argue against the recovery of an originary subject within mediated records of suffering, this chapter suggests a relation to the self that involves a similar inscrutability.

Chapter 4 extends my analysis of photographic forms in documentary poetry to Black feminist contestations of mainstream recording apparatuses. Robin Coste Lewis's *Voyage of the Sable Venus* is an eighty-page poem in which every word is taken from museum records pertaining to Western works of art in which a Black female figure is pictured. I argue that by repurposing artwork titles, captions, and descriptive language, Lewis theorizes the relation

between visual and discursive significance as it imprints itself upon raced and gendered bodies. This reading goes against critical interpretations that understand the poem to revive some person or people supposedly pictured in the images and objects the appropriated text describes. Rather, Lewis's heavily researched poem explores the serial nature of racializing visual tropes and the photographic twinning of particular index and general typology that defines racialized perception. That is, her object of study is white pathology, not Black subjectivity. Moving from museum records to news media, I turn to Dionne Brand's seven-part long poem *Inventory*, which wrestles with a catalog of facts that her speaker tries to name, place, and record while watching the broadcast news nonstop for a year. Focusing especially on her work with the Iraq Body Count project, I argue that Brand's photo-poetics approaches the mathematical sublime: the inability to account for, or count, such impersonal loss that is nonetheless indexed in numeric records. Both poets thwart the tendency toward empathetic vitalism by focusing on the formal and structural re-inscription of race and ethnicity through procedures of documentation.

## Chapter 1

### William Wordsworth and the Romantic “Desire to Photograph”

In his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, William Wordsworth considers the aestheticization of suffering, elucidating the following principle: “We have no sympathy but what is propagated by pleasure: [...] whenever we sympathise with pain, it will be found that the sympathy is produced and carried on by subtle combinations with pleasure” (738). The source of this pleasure is not the suffering of another, but poetic form itself, what he calls the “continual and regular impulses of pleasurable surprise from the metrical arrangement” (739). Poetry works, he writes, by enlisting “the entire world of nature before me—to supply endless combinations of forms and imagery” (739). Some of the pleasure of sympathy, then, seems to be supplied by the artistry of the world itself, the poem a mode of documenting fragments of a world awash in evocative patterns and images. By turning lyric reading onto objects in the world, combining contingent reality with figurative significance, Wordsworth anticipates not only the invention of photography, but many of the ethical and formal questions surrounding documentary works of art. This chapter studies poems by Wordsworth that detail encounters with various destitute figures, including those he names the discharged soldier, the blind beggar, and the leech-gatherer. It also explores the complex mnemonic role that Dorothy Wordsworth plays for her brother, reading “Tintern Abbey” and considering her journals as source material for his poems. I’m interested in the poetic ideal he articulates that overlays the moment of observation with that of its recording, in an effort to capture the movement and duration of reading what I suggest are photographic objects. This often presents itself in figurative language that combines the visual and the textual. These works are photo-poetic, bringing together photographic and poetic ways of reading,

because they disclose the strangeness of viewing an individual as a figurative image, framed and set apart from the world. Wordsworth repeatedly registers a feeling of admonishment during these encounters, which unsettles the poet's own sense of self.

### **The Discharged Soldier**

Near the end of Book IV of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth recounts a chance meeting on a road late at night with a recently discharged soldier. Adapted from the 1798 stand-alone poem that was written at the same time as works included in *Lyrical Ballads*, the episode is marked by the poet's interest in commonplace and humble rural subjects, which characterizes the collection.<sup>22</sup> The episode epitomizes the documentary poetic stance, recording a humanitarian encounter with one of the destitute figures that populate his poetry—what William Galperin calls his “straw subjects.” These foils serve as instruments of self-reflection for the poet, as framed images that intrude from another world to bring something into relief for the speaker. The 1850 version has the speaker leaving a day of entertainment and “strenuous idleness” to walk home in a dreamlike nighttime setting, “Where the road's watery surface, to the top / Of that sharp rising, glittered to the moon / And bore the semblance of another stream / Stealing with silent lapse to join the brook / That murmured in the vale” (380-384).<sup>23</sup> It is as though the speaker were wading through

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<sup>22</sup> For an account of the differences and similarities between the versions, see C.F. Stone, III, “Narrative Variation in Wordsworth's Versions of ‘The Discharged Soldier.’” *The Journal of Narrative Technique* Vol. 4.1 (Jan. 1974) 32-44. For an account of the changes in the versions as they account for the growth of Wordsworth's self-conception as a “moral poet,” see Matthew C. Brennan, “The ‘ghastly figure moving at my side’: The Discharged Soldier as Wordsworth's Shadow.” *The Wordsworth Circle* Vol. 18.1 (Winter 1987) 19-23. Brennan's overarching point is that the homeless soldier represents a projection of Wordsworth's own inferiority and so serves as an alter ego or shadow otherwise submerged in his unconscious. By 1805, the poet begins to assimilate the soldier as his shadow and so is less reproachful and more sympathetic.

<sup>23</sup> This line repeats a passage in Dorothy Wordsworth's journal entry for January 27, 1798, in which she writes, “The hawthorn hedges, black and pointed, glittering with millions of diamond drops [...] The road to the village of Holford glittered like another stream” (qtd. Darlington 427). I will turn to the importance of Dorothy's role as a recorder of observations later on.

a river or shadow river, setting the scene for his immersion in another odd doubling. A deathly absence inaugurates the encounter (“No living thing appeared in earth or air”) before the figure, like the epic simile that introduces the leech-gatherer of “Resolution and Independence,” appears not as a human or animal, but as “an uncouth shape” (385, 387). The speaker’s immediate response is to withdraw behind a covering so he “could mark him well, / Myself unseen” (390-1). This marking signals both an observing and a recording, by which the poet seems to make manifest in the same instant the object of vision and a mark on the page. The poet removes himself from the potential of mutual observation. As James Averill puts it, “words of perception emphasize the relation and separation of the poetic eye and its suffering object” (143). Averill goes on to suggest that the figure of the soldier operates at once like a text that the viewer reads and like a spectacle he watches. The poem is “the scansion with sorrow, the reading into the other person’s pain,” while the speaker “does not leave his cover for the same reason that one does not walk out of *Othello* or onto the stage where it is played” (Averill 145). The unidirectional gaze and subject-object relation presents an almost scientific approach to observation, an analysis of the effects of a spectacle of suffering on the imagination. As C.F. Stone points out, both the leech-gatherer and the discharged soldier “represent the narrating poet’s present effort to describe adequately the enduring qualities of a past experience” (36). So, the figure is at once overwritten with legible signification, set apart like an aesthetic object of contemplation, and still a singular entity who can be studied and recorded.

The poet produces a kind of candid shot of the other in his stalled passage of becoming-human;<sup>24</sup> the figure is unusually tall, incomparably “meagre” and “ghastly in the moonlight”

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<sup>24</sup> Here one might recall the famous passage from book two of *In Search of Lost Time*, in which Marcel catches a glimpse of his ailing grandmother in the moment before he recognizes her as familiar and loved, seeing her as a “phantom” from the position of “a spectator of one’s own absence” (II 141). He figures himself as a travelling photographer, a witness and observer, intruding upon an unknown life: “The process that automatically occurred in

(396). He seems only half-human, half alive, as “a mile-stone propped him” up. This singular, ghostly, “companionless” soldier mutters sounds that cannot be deciphered and stands “a desolation, a simplicity, / To which the trappings of the gaudy world / Make a strange back-ground” (402-4).<sup>25</sup> Like the leech-gatherer, he is other than human; like the blind beggar from Book VII of *The Prelude*, he cannot see the poet and seems to arise from another world. In this sense, the discharged soldier, like Wordsworth’s other straw subjects, takes on the properties of a photograph. Removed from its context and reproduced elsewhere, the photograph is always out of place, offering an image that appears as both human and merely a form or shape, unlively and unseeing. Yet, the poem’s object of derision is not this figure, but the “trappings of a gaudy world” that suddenly seem a “strange back-ground” against which he is framed, and of which the speaker finds himself a part (403-404). Indeed, he admonishes himself: “From self-blame / Not wholly free, I watched him thus; at length / Subduing my heart’s specious cowardice, / I left the shady nook where I had stood / And hailed him” (408-412). The first enjambment registers both the speaker’s lack of freedom, and its cause as being his own sense of obligation to the other, which reveals the uselessness of his fear. Every detail in the scene strives to underscore its veracity, a sense that this encounter really happened.

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my eyes when I caught sight of my grandmother was indeed a photograph” (II 141-2). This is particularly relevant for understanding Wordsworth’s figurative language when approaching his straw subjects; photography not only renders the familiar (and familial) strange, but actually severs the observed individual from the intimacies of knowledge. Marcel’s grandmother becomes “red-faced, heavy and vulgar, sick, vacant, letting her slightly crazed eyes wander over a book, a dejected old woman whom I did not know” (II 143). Here photographic sight ostensibly provides a more objective way of seeing. Marcel finds not a beloved grandmother, but a “dejected old woman,” substituting revulsion and perhaps pity for love. If this is a photograph, it is because it initially stands apart from habit and experience, but only momentarily; it soon bleeds into Marcel’s general way of seeing, becoming part of what Siegfried Kracauer would call his “memory-image.” Yet even the “objective” description is tinged by a subjective and judgmental perspective that idealizes youth, health, pale complexion, etc. That is, what we take to be a photographic way of seeing is not simply indexical or unmediated, but rather a dislocating, and sometimes alienating, result of registering perception overlaid with signification.

<sup>25</sup> In the 1798 poem, there is no mention of the “gaudy world” as a background, but the figure does appear “Fixed to his place” (88), “Forlorn and desolate, a man cut off / From all his kind, and more than half detached / From his own nature” (57-60). This suggests that the sense of the figure as fixed, framed, and set apart from the world is central across the different versions.

When in conversation, the soldier remains “unmoved,” “quiet,” “neither slow nor eager,” “calm,” “concise,” and “patient.” The speaker claims he might have seemed “solemn and sublime”—that is, worthy of awe and respect—“but that in all he said / there was a strange half-absence, as of one / Knowing too well the importance of his theme, / But feeling it no longer” (442-445). Having been hailed from his inhuman stillness, the soldier is still a “ghostly figure moving” along the road with the poet. He remains figural, an image overwritten with discursive significance, because he is thoroughly identified with what the speaker takes to be his “theme.” The poet is eager to “speak of war, battle, and pestilence” with the apparently traumatized figure; indeed, he cannot seem to help himself (437). His enforced identification with this narrative of suffering is precisely what the soldier seems to know in advance and what sets him apart as a framed image, captioned by how he is seen. It is what renders him less than human and partly absent, otherworldly. He withdraws into a portrait that anticipates how it will be seen; his strange calmness is witness to his figuration. As has been noted, the soldier does not speak for himself. The account of his serving in “Tropic Islands” likely puts him in the West Indies fighting slave revolts, where tens of thousands of troops had already died of yellow fever by 1796 (Abrams 148). Wordsworth does not account for the larger violent colonial context that muddies the soldier’s apparent victimhood. Indeed, as James Allard notes, the soldier’s particular story might be obscured so that he can more easily personify the suffering of soldiers in conflict with France (140). The man remains otherworldly because he articulates this foreign context to which the speaker cannot relate but only register the unsettling contradictions that arise from it.

When Wordsworth leaves the soldier, he insists that in the future he ask for help; “At this reproof, / With the same ghastly mildness in his look, / He said, ‘My trust is in the God of Heaven, / And the eye of him who passes me!’” (457-460). The man’s attitude is at once

“ghastly” and “mild,” an odd coupling that renders his lack of agency, his apparent inability to take care of his own self, a problem for the passing subject, the viewer who happens to glimpse his image. This statement, whether ventriloquized or truly recorded, serves in the poem to render the figure a passive object of the poet’s passing agency. The speaker has a “quiet heart” in leaving the figure with a cottager and seems to feel assured by his “reviving interests” and his explicit thanks. Yet, in attempting to narrate what we might call a humanitarian act, Wordsworth’s poem reveals in advance the limits of a particular documentarian ethos. His hesitation at the door of his good deed, upon which he lingers and casts a backward look, marks what remains unknown and unavailable to one within this photographic way of seeing.

The photo-poetic here registers not simply the figure’s difference, but deconstructs the propriety of the given world itself, making it “gaudy.” That this word connotes ornamentality, flashiness, and what Wordsworth elsewhere affiliates with the “despotic” eye, suggests that the familiar world becomes spectacular by virtue of seeing and documenting this figure as photographic, as framed, captioned, and dislocated. The soldier anticipates being an object of visual interest when he states that his hopes are with “the eye of him who passes me.”

Wordsworth recoils at such an approach that seems to combine the active and passive, even as he responds to it and proves it a viable strategy. Rather than being an image out of place in this world, this world suddenly becomes a foreign and excessive sight in relation to the soldier’s (other)worldliness. His strange presence, simultaneously appearing as half-absence, thus opens paths to unseen, but haunting, relations that mark him, and which in turn the poet attempts to mark.<sup>26</sup> The poet’s desire to capture the image of the soldier and to record the encounter in detail

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<sup>26</sup> His experience recalls that which Roland Barthes describes in the opening pages of *Camera Lucida*: “One day, quite some time ago, I happened on a photograph of Napoleon’s youngest brother, Jerome, taken in 1852. And I realized then, with an amazement I have not been able to lessen since: ‘I am looking at the eyes that looked at the

responds to the soldier not as a particular individual, but as a figure for historical events. The poem is photo-poetic insofar as it is a byproduct of the drive to document the contingencies of material index and figurative significance. Wordsworth's ambiguous feelings of discomfort, hesitation, and guilt in the interaction anticipate a familiar response to documentary images of suffering.

### **Romanticism, Photography, and the Everyday**

What does it mean to suggest that Wordsworth's discharged soldier operates not simply *like* a photograph in this poem, but that his function *is* that of a photographic object, forty-one years prior to 1839? Part of what I'm implying is that photographic ways of seeing predate the technical inventions of Daguerre, Talbot, and Niépce, and as such, it is worthwhile to consider who or what took the form of photographic objects *avant la lettre*. What kind of scenes arrived framed and captioned? This is not to suggest that anything is in itself photographic, but rather to acknowledge a perceptual trend by which certain "picturesque" views begged to be captured and certain otherwise mundane encounters seemed to warrant the efforts of an accurate record.<sup>27</sup>

Scott Hess argues that "the picturesque is the primary point of contact between Wordsworth and

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Emperor" (3). Barthes seems to suggest that the eye can index traces of what it has seen, which can themselves be recorded, manifesting a direct link with posterity.

<sup>27</sup> As Thomas Pfau writes, the picturesque seeks to "convert, spontaneously, an empirical and heterogeneous landscape into a holistic symbolic effort" that serves to demonstrate an "aesthetic proficiency and social ascendancy" of the emergent middle class (*Wordsworth's Profession*, 69). In *The Pencil of Nature*, William Henry Fox Talbot writes of a desire to photograph emerging out of his inability to capture the picturesque Lake of Como in Italy using a camera lucida, suggesting that viewing a scene as symbolically meaningful gives way to wanting to reproduce it. He also demonstrates what Pfau calls the picturesque tendency to fetishize particular perspective, the rustic, and generic objects; calling on the authority of the Dutch masters for thematizing quotidian objects, Talbot writes, "A painter's eye will often be arrested where ordinary people see nothing remarkable." He goes on to say that his sixth plate is inspired by "picturesque imaginings." Batchen also writes of the picturesque being influential to Niépce's desire to capture a camera obscura landscape scene, noting that "beauty spots" were often chosen because of imagined framing, how they would look in a painting, and sites were sketched as mementos, anticipating postcards (73). For more on the social function of the picturesque, see Christopher Hussey, *The Picturesque: Studies in a Point of View* and Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740-1860*.

that yet-to-be-developed medium” (288) of photography, defining what he calls “Wordsworth’s photographic subjectivity” (286) as a structural position that places the poet at a disembodied remove from the landscapes he studies. Rather than focusing on the picturesque and the sense of power over and separation from landscapes, my study of Wordsworth’s poetry will focus on the recorded encounters with various destitute people whom the speaker views photographically, and who, in their movement of figuration, disturb his sense of self. I will suggest that this nascent interest in capturing the encounter with an unfortunate other has fueled much documentary photography, and that it is interwoven with a drive to record the everyday that has, to use Rancière’s terms, shifted the distribution of the sensible. Wordsworth’s encounter poems are photo-poetic because they register lyric reading thrown upon the world, by which particular individuals mark historical violence, the registration of which disturbs the viewer.

The periodization that Rancière outlines in *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (2004) proves to be a useful framework by which to understand the not necessarily causal, but related investments in photographic ways of seeing and an interest in the everyday that arose in the romantic period. His periodization helps explain why the romantic period, and Wordsworth in particular, are so important to a study of documentary poetry and photography. On the rise of photography and documentary practices, he writes that “lowly” subjects began appearing everywhere in art not as a result of a mechanical or technical invention that made their capture possible, but due to the rise of what he calls the “aesthetic regime.” Around the turn of the century, this shift introduced new aesthetic procedures and ways of seeing that combined signification with mute reality; this is what Rancière calls the “double poetics of the image:” “the legible testimony of a history written on faces or objects and pure blocs of visibility, impervious to any narrativization” (*Future* 11). The inscription of meaning directly on objects or bodies

combines with the withdrawal and silence of their materiality. The aesthetic regime upended the mimetic principles and hierarchies of the “representative regime,” whereby the hand of the artist transcribes abstractions into tropes, assuming “an order of stable relations between the visible and invisible – for example, between an emotion and the linguistic tropes that express it” (*Future* 12). Because commonplace reality was already viewed through this “double poetics of the image,” when photography was invented, humble scenes and individuals were viewed as potential aesthetic objects (Rancière *Politics* 28-9). Rancière argues that romanticism itself articulated a redistribution of the sensible such that the everyday became invested with significance; literature of the period became a way to respond to and record this significance. Romanticism was a declaration that “the becoming-sensible of all thought and the becoming-thought of all sensible materiality was the very goal of the activity of thought in general” (Rancière *Politics* 41). Rancière’s account of how the commonplace is rendered aesthetic entails transforming empirical things into meaningful inscriptions, dislodging and enframing them in altered contexts, but it also suggests they bear a trace of the strangeness of being made to signify. In romanticism, he writes, “the ordinary becomes beautiful as a trace of the true. And the ordinary becomes a trace of the true if it is torn from its obviousness in order to become a hieroglyph, a mythological or phantasmagoric figure” (Rancière *Politics* 30). The everyday becomes aesthetic by virtue of being rendered a textual image, an object to be read. As he puts it elsewhere, the aesthetic regime was born out of a “Romantic poetics of everything speaks” (*Future*, 15). Because the aesthetic event no longer has a prescribed form, nothing is inherently unrepresentable; distinctions between high and low, sayable and not, visible and not, cease to structure art. In this sense, it becomes impossible to distinguish the forms of art from the forms that life uses to shape itself, and “form is experienced for itself” (*Future*, 19). In this way, one

can imagine seeing something in the form of a photograph – a fragment of reality dislocated and reframed in a durational encounter constituted by inscribed aesthetic significance – without looking at an ‘actual’ photograph.

This approach of historicizing photographic ways of seeing that predate the technical invention of photography is not new. In his 1981 book, *Before Photography: Painting and the Invention of Photography*, Peter Galassi locates the origins of photography in the nineteenth century oil landscape sketch that functions as “a record of observation” (20). Charting a longer history that begins with renaissance perspective orientation and culminates in photography, Galassi is interested in what JMW Turner called “pictures of bits,” paintings in which the subjects were only nominal and the scope relatively minimal (qtd. 25).<sup>28</sup> Sketches of the period feel “contingent and impermanent,” Galassi argues, and “this sense of the picture as a detail, carved from a greater, more complex whole, is a characteristic, original feature of nineteenth-century art” (26). A new emphasis on artistic sensibility shifts into focus objects rendered aesthetic by virtue of the particular interest of the artist, rather than what traditional rhetorical schemas dictate. “The landscape sketches,” Galassi writes, “present a new and fundamentally modern pictorial syntax of immediate, synoptic perceptions and discontinuous, unexpected forms. It is the syntax of an art devoted to the singular and contingent rather than the universal and stable. It is also the syntax of photography” (25). The painter would come to claim a “poetic role” precisely by focusing on particular and humble subjects (Galassi 27).

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<sup>28</sup> Jonathan Crary, in his 1992 *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, rejects this account of Renaissance-era perspective leading to 20th century photographic realism. He argues instead that photography is symptomatic of a “reorganization of the observer” that he dates to the 1820s and 1830s and links specifically to the invention of the stereoscope (14). That is, rather than an extension of realism, photography extends a history of optical illusions and reflects a general readjustment of thinking the sensory perception cut from any necessary link with an external referent. I will return to the importance of the objective-subjective dichotomy in photography theory, but for now his account is of interest insofar as he too tracks a certain uprooting of vision in the 19<sup>th</sup> century of which photography is an element, not the central cause.

Charles Baudelaire lamented this shift in painting and poetry toward subjective perspective in his critique of the Salon of 1859, which included both perspectival landscape paintings and photographs. Drawing on the authority of poetic originality, he wrote that both were a form of copying: “they copy a word from the dictionary, believing that they are copying a poem. But a poem can never be copied; it has to be composed. Thus, they open a window, and the whole space contained in the rectangle of that window—trees, sky and house—assumes for them the value of a ready-made poem” (qtd. Galassi 28). The threat to aesthetic autonomy by a “ready-made” is recognizable enough to a modern reader; Baudelaire’s emphasis on framing as a contingent, haphazard matter suggests it poses a risk to ideologies of composition and interpretation.<sup>29</sup> Photo-poetics takes place at the intersection of copying and composition, reckoning with forms and figures as they are found in the world. The art object is thus a record of both the attempt to fix something seen in its contingency, and a rereading of that thing as a document of the mundane.

My suggestion is thus not only that photographic ways of seeing arose prior to the historical invention of photography, but also that we can trace the origins of photo-poetics, or poetry that uses photographic forms to document structures of perception that embed signification into contingency, to British romanticism.<sup>30</sup> In certain works by William Wordsworth in particular, one finds not simply a desire to capture things as they are, but to fix pieces of life in verse as a receptacle of experience. Photo-poetics is an attempt to grasp what exceeds the poem by fixing an image in its withdrawal or partial absence. It always articulates

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<sup>29</sup> See Rosalind Krauss, “Photography’s Discursive Spaces” for an account of how the photograph was constructed as an aesthetic object by being placed on a gallery wall and taking part in the discursive space of exhibition.

<sup>30</sup> In his article, “Coming Attractions: *Lamia* and Cinematic Sensation,” Orrin N.C. Wang provides a compelling and clearly related account of the beginnings of a cinematic history prior to the invention of film technology, in his reading of Keats’s *Lamia* as a cinematic object of desire.

this excess as a kind of foundational problem. As we will see with Wordsworth's reliance on his sister, Dorothy Wordsworth, this withdrawal prompts a desire for a prosthetic that could serve as a vehicle of unmediated sensory perception and record combined. A kind of pre-emptive nostalgia kicks in, not for what was indeed experienced and then lost, but embedded into the simultaneity of loss and experience, into the sense that you could be missing what is directly before you.<sup>31</sup>

Photography, in this sense, is not entirely conflated with the objects it produces, but with an entire context in which these images can be made and circulated. Ariella Azoulay, in her work on what she calls the "political ontology of photography," has distinguished the photographic event—the relational experience of taking an image that involves the photographer, subject, camera—and the photographed event, the historical happening or occasion that is pictured in the photograph. This in turn allows her to extract the photograph as one element arising out of a more complex event, an object that defies singularity (it is inherently serial) and ownership (it cannot be said to be created by the photographer). Indeed, she understands photography to be comprised of infinite and unfinished "encounters" (26). This distinction allows us to parse the photographic event apart from any product that arises from it, and to consider photographic ways of seeing that are not simply about the viewer's desire to fix a perceived scene or figure, but the apparatus that structures the event of encounter as ungraspable. Photo-poetics thus takes the form not of a more or less "successful" or "accurate" ekphrasis, but of grappling with the simultaneous desire and failure to capture, fix, and frame an image. The poet is dispossessed by an alienation in the moment of encounter that takes on a strange duration, that fails the test of both

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<sup>31</sup> This simultaneity of loss and experience is precisely what William Galperin discusses in *The History of Missed Opportunities: British Romanticism and the Emergence of the Everyday*, particularly in relation to what he calls Wordsworth's "double take," which I will discuss momentarily.

instantaneity and recognition. Part of what I'm suggesting, then, is that we already see in Wordsworth's poems the desire to capture a fixed image upended by the apparatus of the photographic event, and that this upending has something to tell us about contemporary visual culture and documentary poetry.

## Photographic Dualism

I am not alone in suggesting a link between the history of photography and British romanticism. There are two major precursors with whom I will engage in order to both contextualize and distinguish my argument. Geoffrey Batchen and William Galperin complicate the notion of photography as a unique technological invention that led to changes in perception, in part by locating the roots of photographic visibility in romanticism.<sup>32</sup> Batchen unearths what he calls a "desire to photograph" in the literature of British romanticism, citing Coleridge in particular as being among the "proto-photographers" of the era, whose desire for a fixed record drives an urge not simply to represent, but to photograph.<sup>33</sup> In *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography*, Batchen finds that photography inscribes a hesitation between opposing dyads,

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<sup>32</sup> Theorists such as John Berger, Stanley Cavell, and Kaja Silverman likewise find aesthetic, philosophical, and social precursors to photography in their work, suggesting that the technological invention simply realized a way of seeing or mediums of analogy that predated it. As Cavell puts it, with photography, the "mind had at once recognized [...] a manifestation of something that had already happened to itself," whereby the world is proffered to a subject "taking views of it, as from behind the self" (117).

<sup>33</sup> In her essay, "'A Something-Nothing Out of Its Very Contrary': The Photography of Coleridge," Alexandra Neel explores Coleridge's relationship with Thomas Wedgwood and Humphry Davy, who were experimenting with temporarily recording images on silver-based light sensitive paper in the 1790s, as well as his metaphorical use of the camera obscura. She argues that he didn't desire the photograph, as Batchen suggests, but rather that the idea of nature fixing an image without artistic aid is antithetical to Coleridge's ideal of poetic imagination. Neel cites Coleridge deriding the kind of reading that accompanies circulating libraries as a "mental camera obscura manufactured at the printing office," suggesting that a mechanical and transposable passive reaction links print technology and image production, and blurs the distinction between author and reader, production and reception (211). For Coleridge, as Neel puts it, "poetic imagination counters this desire to fix everything" and is thus a kind of antidote to the mechanism and "despotism of the eye" (215). Yet, her reading of Coleridge's famous *Ancient Mariner* as a kind of camera, who "does not think or act, but looks, watches, and passively records," suggests that photographic ways of seeing, even if glossed negatively, did inform Coleridge's poetry (Neel 212).

marking a set of unresolved paradoxes (subject-object, nature-culture, time-space, transience-fixity, real-representation). Its very name registers an opposition between light (photo: God, sun, nature) and writing (graphie: history, humankind, culture) that propels a post-structural strain of photography theory, thinking out of the spacing of unresolvable binaries. By generalizing photography beyond its particular invention or instantiation, Batchen ties it to distinctly romantic ideals of nature, the picturesque, and spontaneous reproduction, which were encouraged by the technology of the camera lucida or the Claude glass, to historicize photographic desire as a way of seeing. He shifts the discourse of early photography away from its technical invention and toward historicizing vision itself, suggesting that perception around 1790 underwent a shift that entailed a desire to photograph the world. Andrea Henderson builds upon this argument when she argues that Henry Fox Talbot (and not Wedgwood and Davy) was fixated on fixing the photographic image precisely because the sentiment of his project was steeped in late-romantic-era nostalgia for romanticism itself. She suggests that arresting the progression of time, holding still both an impending pleasure and loss, is a uniquely romantic gesture. Batchen's account is particularly adept at outlining the ways in which Niépce, Daguerre, and Talbot all describe their image-making technology as drawings made by nature, or sun-writing (Niépce's *héliographie*, for instance), which he connects to a romantic desire for unmediated experience.

William Galperin has returned throughout his career to the problem of the visible world and intentionality, to mass spectacle and modes of collective seeing brought on by technological and social change. In *The Return of the Visible in British Romanticism*, he characterizes a “romantic subjectivity” divided “by its responsiveness to a visible or material world, on the one hand, and to a world no sooner seen than imaginatively appropriated, on the other” (3). Like Batchen's *desire* for photography, Galperin finds an *impulse* to photograph latent in

romanticism. He reads photographic tendencies into Wordsworth's later poetry as a symptom of the repressed of romanticism, what he understands to be the unidealized visible world. For Galperin, "to the extent that there was a photographic impulse early in the nineteenth century, it was an impulse *opposed* [...] to the intentional structures of romanticism" (*Return* 224). He alludes here to Paul de Man's essay, "Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image," in which de Man argues that the "fundamental ambiguity that characterizes the poetics of romanticism" is the confluence of imagery and natural objects, imagination and nature, whereby poetic language directed by a desire to get closer to the ontological status of the object necessarily fails (*Rhetoric* 7). Poetic imagery strives to fuse matter and imagination, while what Galperin calls the impulse to photograph is an effort to excise imagination from perception. So, Galperin understands the "tyranny of the eye"<sup>34</sup> to be masking a "tyranny at the center of the poetic enterprise"; that is, the unavoidable invasion of the "merely" visible by the intentional, and of the mind by the figurative and symbolic structures of language (*Return* 243). He draws a connection to Wordsworth's later "anti-climax" poems and photographic seeing, which he associates with the detail, the contingent, and non-idealized reality. Insofar as late Wordsworth (*The Excursion* and the sonnets) is photographic, he is unpoetic (Galperin *Return* 242).

My reading of Wordsworth's encounter poems as photo-poetic questions Galperin's estimation of the photographic as a failure of the intentional structures of romanticism, and thus, to a certain extent, as a failure of poetry. The photo-poetic text does not entail an escape from imagination into contingency, but instead underscores the "fundamental ambiguity" that de Man defines, an odd and unstable conflation of a material being and its textual significance.

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<sup>34</sup> In *The Age of Wordsworth*, Charles Harold Herford writes that Dorothy's "'exquisite regard for common things' gave a richer tone to all [Williams's] perceptions, and helped to transform mere observation—the tyranny of the eye'—into imaginative vision" (140).

Photography, in other words, does not circumvent ideation to merely represent the thing in the world, but is characterized by the perception of a material thing as a framed image. In what follows, I will critique the typical framing of photography that constructs a paradigmatic binary consisting of the idealized and non-idealized, the imagined and simply seen. Doing so will put some pressure on the notion that “photography’s resistance to idealization is its greatest and most important feature” (Galperin *Return* 211).

Yet, it should already be apparent that Galperin’s understanding of the “impulse” to photograph is not simply different from Batchen’s “desire,” but diametrically opposed to it. For Batchen, photography arises out of a nostalgic response to impermanence, principally from the picturesque tradition by which natural spaces are transformed into potential landscapes, and quite literally into sketches, using the portable camera obscura. That is, by Batchen’s account, photography arose as a continuation of imaginative and ideational viewing practices, and not as a repressed contingency or matter-of-factness that was submerged under them. I am not suggesting that one of these options is correct or incorrect, but rather that they miss what I see as the more pressing concern for considering what romanticism, and Wordsworth in particular, can teach us about photography and the photographic encounter inscribed in poetry. What I find instead is a will to document showcased in encounters that render the mundane aesthetic by enframing it in poetic significance, while grappling with the desire to capture and fix what is in that moment withdrawing from comprehension. This withdrawal is not the mute materiality of the thing in itself but a kind of sublime excess of figuration (the leech-gatherer for instance, is at once a stone, a sea-beast, neither alive nor dead). The central tension is thus not between the visible and the ideational, which tend to ossify into static categories, but with the emergent modes of reading that arise out of photographic encounters that have a complex duration.

To more clearly situate my understanding of romantic photo-poetics, it is useful to consider what I see as twin genealogies of theorizing the photograph, understood either through the non-signifying detail, or loaded ideation (typically: death, memory, loss, love). One strand of photography theory, perhaps exemplified by Walter Benjamin's term, the "optical unconscious," tends to view photography as though it has the potential to open up onto "pure perception," as Henri Bergson defined it: a hypothetical "immediate and instantaneous" sight that does not discriminate upon objects based on their significance or use value (34). Ultimately, this is perception stripped of memory. Writers like James Elkins stress the strangeness of photographic images, their insistence on giving us "endless irrelevant details" that are not easily apprehended or made to signify (72). This is what Siegfried Kracauer refers to as the "layer of snow," extraneous "garbage," and "disorder of detritus"—the historical details that render the photograph opaque, in opposition to the meaning-laden memory image ("Photography" 51, 62). Photography expands ways of seeing beyond what the human eye can apprehend; the "optical unconscious" suggests a non-signifying visible reality under the surface of perception that is not otherwise available.

On the other hand, photography theory is rife with themes of mourning and the affiliated love, loss, and memory. Elkins laments the influence of Barthes' *Camera Lucida* for how it skewed photography theory toward the pang of both identifying human value and its concomitant inevitable death.<sup>35</sup> Even the *punctum*, which begins as the detail that resists the signification of the *studium*, shifts into the register of anticipating death, the "future anterior" that

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<sup>35</sup> Karen Beckman recently identified the trend against Barthes that Elkins epitomizes, and argues for the ongoing importance of *Camera Lucida* for its resistance to ideation and narrative knowledge, for what she calls the "nothing to say" that defines photographic ways of seeing. (See "Nothing to Say: The War on Terror and the Mad Photography of Roland Barthes" in *On Writing With Photography*.) That is, she suggests we find in Barthes's writing the other pole of the binary I define here.

haunts every photograph. Jacques Derrida, Eduardo Cadava, and Ulrich Baer have followed suit in affiliating the photograph with testament, witness, and grave.<sup>36</sup> Stanley Cavell has written of photography as having an essential relation to Skepticism, whereby the photograph serves as a reminder of mortality, separating us from a world that outlives us (124). Rebecca Comay writes of photography in relation to trauma as exemplifying the paradox of proximity so excessive that it signifies the irreparability of loss (“Impressions: Proust, Photography, Trauma”). And in Batchen’s more recent work, *Forget me Not: Photography and Remembrance*, he reads vernacular photographs (family albums, tintypes and daguerreotypes, embellished portraits) as memory objects with a talismanic effect, whose “ultimate goal is nothing less than immortality” (96-7). This matrix of competing affects (attachment and loss, memory and forgetting, life and death) arise out of the strange indexicality of the image with a living referent that Barthes puzzled over in *Camera Lucida*, itself a work of mourning. As Barthes elsewhere wrote, on the back of its denotative content, its “message without a code,” rides the enthralling connotative impact of the photograph. That is, it is precisely because the photograph indexes the real and bears the mark of objectivity that it has such an immense subjective import for these writers.

On the one hand, the nonsignifying detail resists ideation and stands as a signal of the real; on the other, strong ideational pulls of death, mourning, love and attachment come to characterize photography theory. I suggest that these two poles map onto broader binaries inhabited by a post-Kantian consciousness: objectivity and subjectivity. When we look into the history of objectivity, as Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison have done, it becomes clear that singularity, asymmetry, accidental details, and imperfections are early markers of an objective

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<sup>36</sup> See especially Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History* (1997) and Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (2002).

way of seeing, which from its inception is understood as a force of will that represses subjective perception, characterized by memory and ideation.

We begin to see in the early to mid-nineteenth century the transition toward what Daston and Galison have defined as a historically specific objectivity, arising in tandem with (though not necessarily caused by) mechanical apparatuses of vision like photography. The concept of objectivity surfaces in response to a specific anxiety that human perception interferes with seeing the world, leading scientists in particular “to aspire to knowledge that bears no trace of the knower” (*Objectivity* 17). As such, the oxymoronic ideal of “blind sight,” or “seeing without inference, interpretation, or intelligence,” came to pit scientific objectivity against aesthetic subjectivity, or the creative incorporation of imagination and memory into perception (*Objectivity* 17). As Daston and Galison argue, this is the history of objectivity that we have inherited today. Though objectivity has shifted in the twentieth-century to practices they term “structural objectivity” and “trained judgment,” it maintains the ideal of minimizing interpretive interference, allowing for particularities, irregularities, and asymmetries that would have been elided in the former image-making practices. Namely, what they call “truth-to-nature” is a historically prior mode of observation-based-drawing typical of scientific atlases, which they trace back to the anatomical drawings of Andreas Vesalius. In the truth-to-nature paradigm, beauty entails accuracy, and “the universal might be represented in a particular picture, the reasoned image, if not actually embodied in a particular” example (*Objectivity* 75). That is, a picture is composed through an imaginative recombination of repeated observations of particular entities that coalesce into an ideal illustration. The emblematic structure of Wordsworth’s descriptive images follows this logic, yet the force of singularity comes through in his encounters by means of a certain incapacity to record, a sense that the image of the other is withdrawing

from the viewer. The desire to account for singularity thus anticipates the anxiety of scientific objectivity to accurately record unidealized perceptual experience, and to constrain interference by intentional structures of perception. Objectivity arises in response to a historically specific concern with Kantian subjectivity understood as “an individualized, unified self organized around the will” (*Objectivity* 33). It is this will, and the actual willed practice of repeated concrete acts aimed to reduce subjective interference, that lead to what Daston and Galison call “a will to willessness” as the principal “epistemic virtue” of the era of objectivity.

It is not difficult to see how these binaries of objective and subjective map onto Galperin’s discussion of the visible and the intentional or ideational structures of romanticism. Where the visible for Galperin has the potential to record the singular, resist the ideological, and usurp subjective authority with non-signifying phenomena, it taps into a scientific ideology of objectivity. Because the world always only appears by means of signification, in the phenomenological sense of structural intentionality, because “pure perception” is not strictly possible, proposing the visible as that which arrests signification paradoxically relies upon the strength of the will to deny the self. In a strange reversal of prosopopoeia, the world is rendered mute and unlively by virtue of a projection of the individual will. By asserting the visual as what simply exists and does not signify, and suggesting that this resistance to intentionality has a certain political or ethical value, Galperin elevates one side of a binary that is dependent upon a notion of subjectivity as restricting and willful, obstructing a vision of what simply is. Rather than using photography to reinforce this binary, photo-poetics underscores the formal work of mediation that characterizes the record as an iterative inscription, whereby immediacy is

superseded by technical, aesthetic, and ideological interference that renders particular objects in the world textual and enframed.<sup>37</sup>

I would like to briefly turn to a text that lingers in the affiliation of photography and deathliness, to consider the drive to record and the force of inscription that I see underwriting both sides of the ideational-nonsignifying binary. Derrida's most extended meditation on photography, *Athens, Still Remains*, was written in response to Jean-François Bonhomme's photographs of Athens, which portray a city that persists among ruins. Thinking the singularity of death alongside the seriality of mourning, Derrida considers the desire to archive ignited by the replacement of the world with its persistent representation *en abyme*: "an infinitely elliptical discourse, mad with a single desire: to impress time with all times, at all times, and then furtively, in the night, like a thief of fire, archive at the speed of light the speed of light." (67). Yet, this desire is refuted by the reality of delay that displaces instantaneous capture, the fact that the closing shutter restricts the image from corresponding exactly with what the eye sees through the camera. In this sense, the impossibility of the image coinciding with and directly recording experience is brought to the fore. Derrida thinks through photography and the impossibility of the infinite archive by way of death and mourning. Much of the book revolves around the phrase, "we owe ourselves to death," which he finds inscribed on a phallic sepulcher in Kerameikos Cemetery. Naming it both a snapshot and an epigraph, Derrida admits that he would have loved to have signed the phrase himself: "the desire immediately overcame me to engrave it in stone,

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<sup>37</sup> For an excellent account of early scientific uses of photography that depend upon its association with objective perception, see Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic*, a text I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 3. Didi-Huberman argues that Charcot's use of photography was essential to his classification and invention of the hysteric patient. He writes that "in the nineteenth century, photography became the paradigm of the scientist's 'true retina,'" (32) giving rise to what he calls "inscription-description," a fantasy of writing as immediate record, inscribing what is seen to produce an absolute memory (29).

without delay” (1). Following his engagement with Heidegger in *Aporias*,<sup>38</sup> Derrida here isolates the impossibility of the experience of death and grafts it onto the impossible convergence of world-as-image and its record, necessarily spliced by delay. The urge to engrave the words without delay, to overtake their authorship, is the desire to archive that Derrida diagnoses in the production of photographic images. At the same time, it represents the impossible desire to outlive oneself, to experience one’s own death. As such, every photograph is about destruction and survival, the desire to archive (to perpetuate, preserve, and author life) confounded by the inevitability of the delay, the impossibility of experience divorced from loss, the debt to death. Photography then has an ontological relationship to death for Derrida, becoming the aporetic sight in which one can mourn for oneself. Closing with a meditation on Socrates awaiting the ships on the horizon that mark the arrival of his own death, Derrida describes this as a photographic scene, a dwelling in the delay between intent and its culmination.

Although this text is rife with a certain movement, a rushing to archive, to overtake loss, it ultimately reinscribes a sense of stasis associated with the photographic object as the still sign of death. What is of interest to me though, is the desire to photograph duration itself, as if the moment were perpetually slipping out from beneath one’s feet: “archive at the speed of light the speed of light.” What would it mean for a poem to focus on the process of documentation itself, rather than its product? In a work included in the collection *Decreation*, titled “Longing, A Documentary,” contemporary poet Anne Carson poses this question, borrowing a word for “what facts lack”: “overtakelessness.”<sup>39</sup> The poem is written in the form of a shot list, itself a series of

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<sup>38</sup> Derrida theorizes an aporetic form in the problem of being-towards-death that is central to Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. Whereas for Heidegger the fundamental temporal orientation of Dasein is towards his own death, for Derrida, the impossibility of experiencing one’s own death brings forth another more prior orientation: the death of the other.

<sup>39</sup> The word is from an Emily Dickinson poem:  
 The overtakelessness of those  
 Who have accomplished Death

snapshots, of a woman developing photographs at night with a strobe light, on plates submerged in river water. The poem ends not with a sense of having produced something stable, but with enjoying “the sense of work, of having worked” before “other fears” return. That the poem’s form prescribes further images to be taken suggests the endlessness or “overtakelessness” of this work, even as it admits satisfaction in the effort of recording. Rather than think of the title of the poem as naming a documentary called “Longing,” I suggest it registers longing as the basis of documentary efforts. By reconceiving photographic recording as having duration rather than being instantaneous, and as producing the sense of having worked rather than a work belonging to an oeuvre, we can see how documenting staves off longing without relying on productivity. What photography produces is the sense of having done something, which helps to ward off the sense that one is missing something. The image, in this case, is a byproduct of the drive to document.

By focusing on romanticism’s nascent desire to photograph, and the destitute figures Wordsworth encounters as photographic, I do not suggest, then, that these poems trace a static image through a kind of ekphrasis. Wordsworth is not photographically recording the thing in itself, apart from ideation, as Galperin suggests, but how it appears both as a framed image and as a particular individual indexing a broader, unseeable framework of visibility. Wordsworth’s photo-poetic works do not simply anticipate photographic tropes of death and mourning or import non-signifying details against romantic ideation, but rather evoke the anxiety of the record as that which usurps perceptual experience even as it tries to fulfill a desire for

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Majestic is to me beyond  
The majesties of Earth.

The soul her “Not at Home”  
Inscribes upon the flesh —  
And takes her fair aerial gait  
Beyond the hope of touch.

immediacy. The withdrawal of the figure, or the obscure or absent image, signals its “overtakelessness,” to use Carson’s term, its retreat from capture. The photographic objects in his poems incorporate duration as the event of reading within and against this withdrawal.

### **Recording Tintern Abbey**

Wordsworth’s “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey” offers an example of a missing image marking the inscription of a record elsewhere, specifically, in the eye and mind of Dorothy Wordsworth, who functions as a sort of camera, storing an impression for future development.<sup>40</sup> The poem is one of returns and re-viewings, not simply of coming back to a particular spot, but of returning to a site associated with what has been a source of succor over the years.<sup>41</sup> To the memory of this place the poet owes “that blessed mood” that lightens the unintelligibility of the world, even to the point of the “living soul” departing the body, when the bodily eye is “made quiet” and the mind can “see into the life of things” (47-9). The joy of his return comes not simply from the present experience, but from the sense that he is storing something away, that “in this moment there is life and food / for future years” (64-5). Yet, the return is not a repetition but registers a gap between the landscape and his memory as a “sad

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<sup>40</sup> Laura Mandell also writes of “Tintern Abbey,” and romantic lyric more generally, as anticipating photography in her article, “Imagining interiority: Photography, Psychology, and Lyric Poetry.” Whereas I suggest Dorothy functions as a camera, Mandell argues that she is a photographic portrait, whose unheard voice triggers a sense of both Benjaminian aura and of mastery, because the viewer anticipates the photographed subject’s future death, which they cannot. In this analogy, Wordsworth becomes the photographer who captures his particular way of seeing Dorothy by anthropomorphizing her absent voice. My reading suggests, however, that Wordsworth’s lack of mastery over his own ability to capture and record experience is what generates a desire for a photographic apparatus in the figure of Dorothy.

<sup>41</sup> David Simpson applies Marx’s theory of value to Wordsworth’s “spots of time” in a manner similar to the kind of storing and reviewing that I’m interested in here. For Simpson, the spot of time seems to refuse commodity form’s flattening by maintaining the opacity and surprise of time/space, “but it also images the unpredicted and uncontrollable making-present of all the past that characterizes the process of valorization” (138). That is, spots of time mimic the commodity form insofar as they are fixed, reified, and then made to move again, to reappear in ghostly form. The value of the past is reproduced as a constant present in the making of the poem and in its reading and rereading. My interest here lies in how this reproduction takes the form of an absent image made available only through the technical apparatus of reproduction that Dorothy personifies.

perplexity,” his present maturity a departure from former boyish days of bounding “animal movements” (74). His former self was not so abstractable from nature, and as such not easily representable; he admits he “cannot paint / what then I was” (75-6). His youthful rapture didn’t require thoughtful reflection, “nor any interest / Unborrowed from the eye” (83-4). Wordsworth aligns his former unabstracted, unreflective immersion in nature and experience with the visual sense itself, where the mature mind’s eye has not surpassed the actual eye, which Wordsworth will name “the most despotic of the senses” (XI 173). Now, “humanity” itself has come to imbue its “sad music” into nature, grafting humanist significance onto the landscape, and with it, deep spiritual resonance (91).<sup>42</sup> Thus nature comes to house and guide Wordsworth’s “moral being,” even if he no longer has direct visual access to his youthful immersion in its sensory reality (111).

Although Wordsworth states that the trade from sensory immersion to thoughtful reflection, from eye to ear, is a fair one, this poem is a testament to his investment in preserving some aspect of that former experience. The poet turns to his dear friend and sister Dorothy as one who could do just that: “in thy voice I catch / The language of my former heart, and read / My former pleasures in the shooting lights / Of thy wild eyes” (116-9). Through Dorothy, William is able to travel back to a visible register, from hearing to reading to seeing. Her voice is not reproduced but serves as a written document of the poet’s unrepresentable former pleasure; her ability to receive and produce information, to see and speak, are sublimated into a record. In anticipating Dorothy Wordsworth’s own progression into a quieter maturity, the poet addresses her as a receptacle of his own recollections: “when thy mind / Shall be a mansion for all lovely

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<sup>42</sup> Dale Townshend writes of the privileging of the aural over the visual in romanticism as the sensory organ associated with imagination. Townshend, Dale. “Gothic Visions, Romantic Acoustics.” *Gothic Technologies: Visuality in the Romantic Era*. Ed. Robert Miles. *Praxis* (Dec. 2005).

forms, / Thy memory be as a dwelling-place / For all sweet sounds and harmonies” (139-142). Not only is Dorothy to remember this instant of standing together on the banks of the Wye, but also his very address to her in this poem (“And these my exhortations!”), as if they were coterminous (146). His final entreaty is that she hold safe her memory of his ardor and love for nature, suggesting that his return is actually more precious because she is there to share and recall it. The telling absence of a description of the scene itself implies that it remains either in the past of his youth or in the future of Dorothy’s recollection, inaccessible now because thought obtrudes on observation. Whereas Wordsworth cannot represent his former self, Dorothy’s mind functions as a memory palace, archiving her own response to the scene as a repetition of his, so that it may be preserved for future viewing. The insistent now-time of the poem—its date-stamped title and specific indexical, “Here, under this dark sycamore” (10)—anticipates its own collapse into record, as the poem ends with the injunction to remember that “We stood together” (151). Wordsworth’s desire to record in his sister’s eyes an index of his own experience, “these gleams / Of past existence,” suggests that she function both mechanically as an archival body, and as a visual apparatus of capture (148-9).

There is a critical tendency to see Dorothy Wordsworth as having a direct, unmediated connection with the world, insofar as she functions as a recording device for her brother.<sup>43</sup> In a lecture Galperin gave in the spring of 2018 titled “Immediacy and Loss: Romantic Micro-Melancholia,” which draws from his newest book, *The History of Missed Opportunities*, he describes Dorothy Wordsworth’s Grasmere journals as enshrined, time-stamped records comparable to photographs, everyday descriptions of “the now” that attempt to record even the most insignificant detail. The Grasmere journal in particular offers “unmediated vision,” a kind

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<sup>43</sup> I will return to this tendency in Chapter 3, to explore in more detail how the work of recording and storing experience tends to be gendered feminine.

of raw material for William Wordsworth's poems, but also a direct connection to the experiences that Wordsworth only registers in retrospect through what Galperin calls a "double take": "the journal goes about reproducing the everyday without recognizing it as a world—a possible world—to which the writer's brother, who sees it in the wake of missing it, is perforce turned" (68). In Heideggerian terms, she is "struck by actuality," Galperin suggests, while also being immersed and unthinking; she is not withdrawn from things in the world, whereas her brother's double take, as a mode of retrospective thought, entails the emergence of the everyday only as veiled and distant.

Galperin reads the crossing of the Alps in *The Prelude* as a series of double takes, "in which things are seen again and for the first time, and where the quick step to apocalyptic vision is consistently bedeviled by on-site retrospection" (*History* 63). Wordsworth's double takes entail the rising of a material world that was missed in its original occurrence and returns in the form of thought, rather than image. But, paradoxically, it is the poet's inability to successfully reproduce the world by visual means that guarantees it survives what he calls "death by representation," recalling Benjamin's account of the real perishing into art. As Galperin puts it, "Wordsworth makes art's failure to grasp what is close by [...] a confirmation of something lived and real" (*History* 50). As in "Tintern Abbey," the absence of an image guarantees the survival of the real experience. Particularly relevant to my concerns though, is the purpose that Dorothy figures as a recording and archival technology that secures lost immediacy. For Galperin, Dorothy performs an unreflective worlding of one "thrown" into embodied circumstance, whereas William stands in perpetual remove from the everyday, able to see the veil that obscures vision. In other words, he aligns Dorothy with the unmediated photographic while William stands apart from experience and immersed in ideation.

Anne Mellor makes a similar point in her feminist rethinking of romantic subjectivities, but her argument is that Dorothy Wordsworth's journals are authentic records of romantic subjectivity, on par with *The Prelude*. She argues that Dorothy's journals should enter the canon of autobiographical writing as portrayals of a feminine romantic subjectivity characterized by non-dual embodiment, relationality, mutability, domestic caregiving, and, perhaps most importantly, the lack of a self-reflexive naming practice by which the written self is set apart from the experiencing self (Mellor 156). Mellor makes the point that her journals rarely use the first-person pronoun and embed a subjectivity within physical necessities and interpersonal relations, serving as "a substantial record of relatedness, of loving and being loved" (162). In other words, she maintains the emphasis on unreflective immediacy that one finds in Galperin's account, but to further a feminist revaluation of autobiography. As Mellor puts it, "Dorothy Wordsworth *is* what she sees and does and eats and feels and speaks and writes," and this mode of relational, porous being-with is just as real and important as what Mellor understands to be the archetypal masculine romantic subjectivity constituted by a coherent, consistent, self-aware autobiographical form (166).

Pamela Woof's introduction to the 2002 Oxford edition of the Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals also stand in accord with Galperin's understanding of them as photographic, unmediated testament to things as such. "Dorothy evoked things and people, and let them be," Woof writes, "One of our pleasures in the Journal stems from our belief that things were as she says they were [...] because Dorothy catches their language [...] The chance travellers on the roads speak their own words and have immediate credible life. We believe in the whole valley" (xiv). Her journals have an evidentiary force that stems from their simplicity, repetition, and fragmentary form. My point in relation to these accounts is not that Dorothy Wordsworth did

lead a self-reflexive, mediated existence (though I'm sure she did), but rather that her role as an accurate record keeper is repeatedly linked to the feminized ideal of immediacy and embedded experience. That is, the romantic ideal of nature as an organic whole, from which the individual is not alienated but a part, is here deployed in the figure of Dorothy insofar as she functions as a prosthetic technological apparatus – a camera, specifically.

### **Documentary Ideals**

Documentation works to extend the duration and support the validity of a given act, event, or occurrence. Yet, it only serves this purpose within a context of recognition; either it is given institutional value (through publication, for instance), or partakes in a collectively agreed upon allocation of meaning, in a manner similar to J.L. Austin's speech acts. Photography has always been associated with evidentiary force and documentary utility. Talbot anticipated photos being used to solve criminal mysteries; Barthes spoke of the "that-has-been," the veracity of the pictured thing, that pricks the viewer. The camera embodies the possibility of evidence, which is why Azoulay has written about the potential to record as a key facet in theorizing the political ontology of photography. In "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" Benjamin writes, "The camera takes a person's picture without returning his glance" (Weber qtd. 99). The lens is an inanimate, unintentional eye that is "always ready, always prepared to take in and take up everything without ever looking back" (Weber 100). Dorothy Wordsworth's journals, and her symbolic embodiment as William's "eyes and ears," function for literary critics as evidence of what Wordsworth saw, when he wrote about it, and that the given event indeed occurred (whether this be an encounter with a person or a view). Her journals serve to accredit the indexical nature of his encounter poems, that they really did meet a leech-gatherer, for instance. Dorothy's journals

occupy the role of the prosaic, unintentional eye that doesn't have a motive beyond recording what happened, what was seen, and occasionally what was felt about it. Yet, as my reading of "Tintern Abbey" suggests, Dorothy's capacity to archive experience is not necessarily the background or premise of Wordsworth's poetry, but rather its ultimate goal. The artifactual, documentary nature of Wordsworth's poetry informs his ideal of imaginative incorporation into nature as an organic whole, and Dorothy's role as unmediated recorder—her status as technical prosthesis—is paradoxically what underwrites and propels the desire for unity.

Wordsworth relied on his sister's journals to claim a kind of indexical veracity for his poems, as though she photographed what the two saw together. In Beth Darlington's "Two Early Texts," which reproduces "The Discharged Soldier" and "A Night-Piece," she analyzes their relation to Dorothy's journal entries, in order to date their construction and note similarities of particular phrases and descriptions in both her journal and his poem. She writes that in 1842 Wordsworth claimed in notes dictated to Isabella Fenwick that "A Night-Piece" was 'Composed on the road between Nether Stowey and Alfoxden, *extempore*' and that he claims to "distinctly recollect the very moment when I was struck, as described" (qtd. 426, my emphasis). Darlington contradicts this claim, suggesting that he actually borrowed language from Dorothy's journals to write the poem. Her journal entry from January 25, 1798 reads, "The sky spread over with one continuous cloud, whitened by the light of the moon..." (qtd. Darlington 426). His poem opens, "The sky is overspread / With a close veil of one continuous cloud / All whitened by the moon..." (1-3). Darlington argues that because Dorothy nowhere else paraphrases William's poetry and had no reason to do so, as her journals were largely kept for his sake, it is highly unlikely that she would have done so here. Yet, the claim to extempore construction is telling in its appeal to unpremeditated poesis, to literally being outside of time (*ex-tempore*). On the basis

of Dorothy's role as an accurate record-keeper, a kind of camera, William is able to claim both indexicality ("I was struck") and immediacy ("as described") for his poem.

The ideal of constructing a work of art in an instant is alive in early photography; Talbot, for instance, clearly takes a certain joy in insisting that though his photographic images may be complex and detailed, they take no more time than a representation of a simpler object. The photograph is out of time, breaking the limits of both temporal continuity and the speed of artistic construction. Yet, what is telling is that Wordsworth lays claim to extempore construction not in spite of Dorothy's journals preceding the writing of the poem but because of them; her records allow him to presume a level of veracity, impartiality, and having-being-there that is typical of the camera. As Darlington puts it, William may have intended to write a poem out of the situation, but "that he did actually write it depended on Dorothy" (426). Dorothy's journals don't simply disprove his claim of extempore poetic construction, then, but suggest that he had come to conflate citing her journals with drawing on his own experience. Writing, in this sense, is citational practice. Understanding his method as photo-poetic, as reframing her record to draw out the figurative significance of real encounters and occurrences, does not reinforce the notion that her experiences were unmediated, but rather allows us to explore how poetry engages with documentary records as primary materials that mediate the recollection of experience.

### **A Photograph of a "Blind Beggar"**

Wordsworth's encounter poems, however, register an odder engagement with documentary records and photographic ways of seeing. By viewing various destitute figures as photographic objects, as particular individuals bearing general significance, these photo-poetic works ask what it means to encounter someone as a document of suffering. Book Seven of *The Prelude*

chronicles Wordsworth's time in London and showcases his aversion to urbanity, to spectacles affiliated with technology and commercialism, and to masses of a viewing, inscrutable public. He writes of London as an overwhelming "concourse of mankind / Where Pleasure whirls about incessantly, / And life and labour seem but one" (70-71). London is a site of categorical *mélange*, where bodies and material objects in particular are conflated. Above doors of shops there stand "allegoric shapes, female or male, / Or physiognomies of real men," (163) including "Boyle, Shakspeare, Newton, or the attractive head / Of some quack-doctor, famous in his day" (166-167). Amid these simulacra the speaker finds "a raree-show" (174), "a company of dancing dogs," minstrels, and the screams of female vendors (176). The scene conjured is at once chaotic and uncanny, a repeating, labyrinthine mass of strangers selling visions at the edge of what Wordsworth perceives to be humanity itself. Following his prosopopoeial address to the city ("Rise up, though monstrous ant-hill on the plain / Of a too busy world!"), an enjambment splits "face to face, / Face after face," suggesting a shift from mutual reciprocity to unilateral iteration, conflating these apparitions in the crowd to "the string of dazzling wares" that appear in "shop after shop" (156-8).

Yet, the crowd is also composed of "specimens of man" (221): the "travelling cripple," "the Nurse is here, / The Bachelor, that loves to sun himself, / The military Idler, and the Dame" (207-209). Among them also is "The Italian" (214) "The Jew" (217), and "Negro Ladies in white muslin gowns" (228). The London crowd thus contains representatives of humanity's types, equally legible and distinct, as well as these more unsettling approximations of human traits, dogs dancing, allegoric shapes, and peep shows simulating human perspective. As Wordsworth puts it, this "huge fermenting mass of human-kind / Serves as a solemn back-ground, or relief, / To single forms and objects," giving them their "more than inherent liveliness and power" (621-

625). That is, this phantasmagoric din frames particular individuals as significant, as images of people who display for Wordsworth a kind of noble and untouchable suffering. He isolates a priest caring for a sick infant, for instance, who, “set off by foil” (601), appears more significant, more moving: “This One Man” he isolates apart from the crowd, emphasizing how he took no notice of being regarded (608). In the next stanza, this framing occurs in particularly striking form, when Wordsworth, “lost / Amid the moving pageant,” is startled by a blind beggar (636-637).

In this episode, the poet does not encounter a human, but a mode of representation, one of the many that bafflingly proliferate in the London book. He writes:

I was smitten  
Abruptly, with the view (a sight not rare)  
Of a blind Beggar, who, with upright face,  
Stood, propped against a wall, upon his chest  
Wearing a written paper, to explain  
His story, whence he came, and who he was.  
Caught by the spectacle my mind turned round  
As with the might of waters; an apt type  
This label seemed of the utmost we can know,  
Both of ourselves and of the universe;  
And, on the shape of that unmoving man,  
His steadfast face and sightless eyes, I gazed,  
As if admonished from another world. (637-649)

The blind beggar appears photographically for Wordsworth, as an unseeing, propped up image that presents itself to him with a sign, or caption, indicating how to read him. The order of events of the encounter is as follows: being struck or “smitten” by the “view,”<sup>44</sup> the speaker’s mind turns around “As with the might of waters,” before gazing “as if admonished.” A chance encounter begins with an external arresting force or violence that is transposed into a strong internal force that recalls the sublime sight of the sea. The external view is internalized and ends with a kind of passive looking in its wake. Even though the unmoving beggar is the object of the speaker’s gaze, he precedes him as subject of the sentence, his very shape seeming to house some of the force that runs through the speaker, a “shape” that recalls the liminal state of the leech-gatherer. And some of his blindness, which marks his label, is transposed onto the speaker, whose inability to acclimatize to what he has been seeing characterizes the London book. What this passage suggests is that the encounter is not static, but in motion, that it rests not so much on recognition or the realization of knowledge, but the force of signification and the affect that attends being admonished.

The beggar’s label is both “type” and emblem of “the utmost we can know” (645); as such, it functions like a synecdoche for the movement of photographic signification itself as a withdrawal from knowledge that proceeds from typification. The movement from the label to the shape, the caption to the face, is one of circumscription that accompanies photographic ways of seeing. As Neil Hertz points out, the very structures of London conflate body and text, which the speaker struggles to read: “fronts of houses, like a title-page, / With letters huge inscribed from

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<sup>44</sup> In her chapter, “Photography’s Discursive Spaces,” Rosalind Krauss suggests that the tendency to think of the photograph as an aesthetic object arises out of its compositional context within a gallery space. Referring back to the technology of the stereoscope, which Cray argues is the precursor to photography, she notes that the term “view” was frequently used, rather than “landscape.” This suggests that stereoscopic images were not thought of as aesthetic objects constructed by an artist, but as objective scenes or found images. Wordsworth’s language here also suggests that the blind Beggar is not so much a drawn or composed image as a reflection of a photographic way of seeing.

top to toe” (160-1). Geoffrey Hartman, too, notes that whereas one expects the face and eyes to be “centers of life,” with the beggar “they are as much a surface as the paper he wears” (242). It is this coincidental movement between seeing and reading for which the poet feels admonished. Yet the “as if” opens up a gap that reflects the ambiguity of the photograph, which, as John Berger puts it, arises out of the temporal discontinuity that is definitive of photographic representation (91). The lapse between the instant recorded in the image and the moment of looking opens up an abyss for Berger. And in this encounter, it is clear that the beggar is not there for the poet in particular to see him but is staging himself to be seen by any passerby. This discontinuity opens up a gap between the purposefully static temporality of the pose (appearing in this spot, with this sign, to become legible as needing assistance) and the moment of being seen, which bears an entirely different, unintended, significance for the poet. The beggar thus comes to figure photographic figuration itself as an oscillation between the singular index and the force of aestheticization, rendered as a shifting between seeing and reading. In the movement between the beggar’s still form and blind face, and his caption, the speaker feels the evidentiary force of a contingent and particular image coupled with the explanation that its blankness seems to require. When we look at a photograph, we engage with a recording apparatus not entirely governed by the will, and not entirely dictated by intention. The caption structures meaning in the form of narrative cohesion, but here the beggar’s caption signals the limits of this form of knowledge and the blindness that characterizes it.

The beggar is a photographic object for Wordsworth, revealing a visual world uneasily constituted by textual signification, the movement of language pointing to that which it is not.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> For an account of how photography reveals “the world infested by interpretation or signification,” see Rosalind Krauss, “The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism,” *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (1985) (107). And on how photography upends the distinction between original and copy, see Krauss, “A Note on Photography and the Simulacral,” *October*, Vol. 31 (1984).

Formally, this is achieved in the oscillation between seeing and reading, image and text, with the Label functioning as a caption to the beggar's framed, "fixed," "sightless" portrait.<sup>46</sup> In Hertz's account, the beggar's admonishment brings Wordsworth back to himself, following the emotional pleasure of what he calls the "blockage" that amalgamates experience of the mathematical sublime, an uncountable excess, into knowledge, which in turn keeps the poet from "tumbling" into the poem. For Galperin, the blind beggar challenges the speaker's self-consciousness and the poet's role as distant from or apart from what he writes, and thus immerses him into the excesses of urban spectacle. But the "as if" that tempers the otherworldliness of the admonishment makes it difficult to decide whether the poet is indeed kept apart from the world, or drawn into it, whether he maintains his distance as Hertz suggests, or is cast into the fray, as Galperin does. Even though the beggar seems a still point set apart from the "endless stream of men and moving things," I suggest that he is composite in form, better thought of as congealing a serialized aggregate or assemblage into the logic of type or emblem (151). Like the "travelling cripple" or "The Jew," he is a "specimen of man" rendered legible by standing apart from the dizzying crowd. Yet, Wordsworth insists on the particularity of the beggar and the Priest, indexically marking "This One Man," that, in the case of the beggar, pulls away from his comprehension. Wordsworth is engrossed in a form of perception that finds the universal in the particular, not in seeing something as it is "in-itself." The beggar is not simply sublimated into knowledge, or resistant to the speaker's assimilating subjectivity but, as the movement of synecdoche itself, confronts the speaker as a reader of the world, and by extension the poem's reader, with the ethical problem of seeing singularity as representation, part and whole, at once. It is the admonishment from another world, the beggar's radical particularity,

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<sup>46</sup> The 1850 version of *The Prelude* changes "fixed" to "steadfast."

and not simply the movement between unseeing face and caption, that renders the blind beggar photographic.

Focusing on the importance of Wordsworth's feeling of admonishment and the photographic nature of the blind beggar distinguishes my reading of this passage from Galperin's interest in the spectacle and democracy. Galperin's reading of *The Prelude* considers Wordsworth's resistance to what he calls the spectacular (the phantasmagoric din of the crowd), but he argues that this "romantic," "subjective" orientation—privileging a singular unity with nature, as opposed to immersion within public, popular culture—discloses the visible world as the repressed of the text, inadvertently showcasing it as more democratic. Wordsworth represents the city as spectacular, enumerating accidental, mundane, and lowly details that mimic a distracted, rather than intentional, orientation. As such, "the reproduction of the London spectacle leads inevitably (or so it appears) to the objectification and critique of a privatized, poetic vantage" (Galperin *Return* 117). It is precisely the distractedness, the experience of being swept up in a crowd, that engulfs the subjective viewpoint and unique stance of the observer-poet and renders him a part of the spectacular itself. Thus, for Galperin, Wordsworth capitulates to the visible in spite of himself, revealing the more indeterminate, democratic, and ethical humanism of scientific, spectacular ways of seeing.

In many ways, the culmination of what Galperin describes as spectacular experience is the encounter with the blind beggar, which he reads in some detail. The beggar resists symbolism and anticipates the Benjaminian loss of aura that Galperin affiliates with the spectacular in the London book. The beggar drags the poet into the world by challenging what Galperin calls "the speaker's blinding self-consciousness" and evacuating the space of distance between subject and object that characterizes an auratic, specular way of seeing. The beggar thus renders the poet

spectacular by disclosing knowledge of the world as it is, and the speaker's place within the "moving pageant"; by this reading the beggar is a pathway to identification and recognition. In seeing the beggar, Galperin argues, the poet encounters the resistance of the spectacle to ideation, finding himself mirrored and implicated in the movement of the crowd. Galperin links this nonhierarchical way of seeing to technological developments and mass viewership (the panorama, diorama, public galleries, the theatre) that anticipate photography and film, but does not emphasize the uniquely photographic properties of the encounter with the blind beggar. Reading the blind beggar as specifically photographic, however, allows us to register him as an enframed figure, at once contingent, mundane, and otherworldly.

Part of what this differing reading hinges on is the role of documentation itself, the exteriorization and inscription of a meaningful experience in the context of the autobiographical poem. What the episode of the blind beggar reveals is not only the poet's own spectacularity and embeddedness within an overwhelming social crowd, but also the form that aesthetic admonishment takes. The force and movement of the photographic aestheticization of perception is the overlap of representation, by which the particular comes to stand in for the universal, and singularity, the denotative structure of what Barthes called a "message without a code." The beggar is a framed aspect of the real world that the poet will try to capture in the duration of his movement into and withdrawal from the aesthetic. Distinguishing the photographic from the spectacular entails an interpretation of the apparatus of inscription that takes the form of documentation. And the desire to document doesn't follow from the kind of "blind sight" Galperin associates with photography, but from seeing something already inscribed with significance.

By focusing on how Wordsworth mediates his encounters with destitute figures in poetic form, we can see how he records a movement between typology and singularity. Elsewhere, in a discussion of the “photographic impulse,” Galperin provides an account of aestheticized versus contingent ways of seeing that is helpful for reading these poems. He writes that the panorama and, later, the photograph, displaced the authority of the viewer’s position, and introduced a “contingent or paratactic” way of seeing that he compares to paintings by Caspar David Friedrich. His landscapes that install a mediating, interrupting figure are exemplary for Galperin because the figure, by partly obstructing a given view, recalls for the viewer the experience of accidentally coming across a natural scene unappropriated by the imagination, even as it renders that possibility null in the painting itself (*Visible* 220). I suggest that the work of this mediating figure, and his interruption of a landscape, is similarly present in Wordsworth’s own encounter poems. Wordsworth’s speaker tends to come upon destitute figures accidentally, and is struck by them with an immediate, spontaneous response. The reader is not presented with a clear view, but, as James Averill notes, the sympathetic Wordsworthian speaker mediates between the reader and the spectacle of suffering.<sup>47</sup> If the speaker in Wordsworth’s encounter poems, adopting the intermediating stance as an observer of a spectacle of suffering, formally replicates Friedrich’s interrupting figures, then it would suggest that photographic ways of seeing don’t simply arrest the movement towards ideation and maintain contingency, but take part in a chiasmatic movement of signification and singularity. Wordsworth encounters particular, quotidian, humble entities that he already views as enframed, aesthetic objects. These poems record his own documentary stance to images of suffering, which blocks the reader from seeing the destitute

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<sup>47</sup> Citing Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*, Averill notes his interest in “the sympathy indeed of a contemplator, rather than a fellow-sufferer,” and suggests that “the contemplator is rather more interesting to Coleridge than the suffering contemplated” (12).

figures in their singularity. But the speaker's sense of admonishment nonetheless registers this singularity in the motion of its withdrawal from him. That which cannot be subsumed into type, or "specimens of man," is repeatedly represented in figurative language as something composite and inhuman, in excess of recognition.

### **Photographic Movement**

How can we think this withdrawal as the movement of photographic duration? If the photograph does not simply capture an instant but rather the entire extended network of its possibility, as Azoulay writes, then photo-poetics allows us to read this durational context through parataxis, iteration, and connotation—everything the image touches, repeats, and evokes. I find David Simpson's account of a ghostliness and haunting that characterizes these encounters with the poor, homeless, and destitute in Wordsworth's poems deeply compelling and useful for this approach. By his account, the inhuman nature of these figures registers the dynamics of commodity form: "Wordsworth offers what I take to be the first comprehensively modern formulation of the aporias of human interaction in a society of dispersed populations governed by the operations of commodity form, the first one in which the rhetoric of resolution is so fully withheld" (27). Wordsworth uses his poems to work out a profound alienation, an "ontological emptiness" that cannot be resolved or pushed past through face-to-face engagement with others. Rather, his deep disorientation, a response to modernization, industrialization, and the invisible movement of the commodity form, results from a recognition of the transposable nature of all things and individuals through the abstraction of use value into exchange value. This emptiness is projected onto the perceived victims of capitalism and modernization, Simpson argues, as a death-in-life automaton ghostliness. Wordsworth attends to the hollowness that seeps into

relations structured by capitalism; it is not just the ghostliness of the other or the emptiness of the self, then, but the impasse in relationality that his destitute figures embody. For Simpson, the withdrawal that I discussed registers the abstraction of the commodity form that undergirds relation, the subsumption of the individual into structures of exchange. My interest in the denotative resistance of photographic images might seem to insist on materiality where Simpson finds immateriality, the thing-in-itself where he finds only spectrality. Yet, it is precisely the structure of photographic signification to superimpose abstraction onto singularity, to produce a chiasmic movement between fixity and duration, accurate record and emblem. When Simpson reads Wordsworth's account of the "hunger-bitten girl" of revolutionary France as an "emblem" of poverty, a "still-life figure or spectacle of grief" (22), he gestures to the proto-photographic function of her (un)moving representative image for Wordsworth.

The oscillation between image and text is typical of photography, which, as many critics have noted, is inherently serial, moving within and beyond the limit of the frame. Alix Beeston has recently argued that "the irrepressible movement of photography toward multiplicity and sequentiality might well be understood as its elemental property" (14). And, in thinking about digital photography and its "expanded field," George Baker writes that, though photography has been aligned with notions of stasis, "by the moment of the early twentieth century, it has become impossible not to consider all the ways in which the social usage of photography—its submission to linguistic captioning, its archival compilations, its referential grip on real conditions of history and everyday life, its aesthetic organization into sequence and series—thrust the photographic signifier into motion" by rendering it necessarily discursive (125-6). In the introduction to his 2015 translation of Félix Nadar's 1899 memoir, *When I Was a Photographer*, Eduardo Cadava reads the term "photographopolis" (an apt term for Wordsworth's London), to refer to "Paris as a

city that is entirely photographic [...] a world that, having become a series of images, is increasingly composed of proliferating copies, repetitions, reproductions, and simulacra” (xii). According to Cadava, Nadar’s photographs presume the image is already multiple; what the camera captures is the pose that splits the subject, the extended network of relations and circumstances that he embodies; as he put it elsewhere, “Every photo is broken into by its own seriality” (SCT). Wordsworth admits that what he encounters in the beggar is largely his own projection, even as he simultaneously has an overwhelming response to an external force. The blind beggar is both singular and representational, visual and textual, still and in motion, synecdochally standing in for photographic signification itself. Wordsworth anticipates the kind of admonishment that viewers of documentary photographs feel when they render an individual emblematic of a social problem.

The strange duration of photographic ways of seeing is perhaps best set out in the poet’s interaction with the leech-gatherer in “Resolution and Independence.” Neither fully alive, nor dead, nor asleep, the man appears in Wordsworth’s epic simile as a huge stone atop a “bald eminence” transforming into a “sea-beast crawled forth” to sun itself on rock or sand. His body materializes a lifetime itself figured as a “pilgrimage” bringing head and feet together with age. The speaker looks on: “Motionless as a cloud the old Man stood, / That heareth not the loud winds when they call; / And moveth all together, it if move at all” (75-7). The figure is mutable and mobile but apparently stable, as a rock surfaced upon a mountain due to the slow causality of erosion or glacial drift only appears to be still relative to human temporality. Like a cloud in perpetual motion, the leech-gatherer only appears to be stationary because he is caught in the duration of another’s gaze. The speaker takes three stanzas to describe his looking before attempting to communicate with the figure, which, as Jacques Khalip notes, only breaks down in

a failure to see or hear the properly human or meaningful. Khalip names the leech-gatherer a “figural prosthesis” (65) and Simpson calls him an “admonitory icon” (185). And Wordsworth himself wrote of the reality of the leech-gatherer’s existence serving as the ultimate figure of suffering: “though I believe God has given me a strong imagination, I cannot conceive a figure more impressive than that of an old Man like this, the survivor of a Wife and ten children, travelling alone among the mountains and all lonely places, carrying with him his own fortitude, and the necessities which an unjust state of society has entailed upon him” (Averill qtd. 234). By functioning as a sign that moves both with and against his singularity, the leech-gatherer becomes a “living image of a stilled life, still hungry and still in need, an enduring icon of unexpended social concern” (Simpson 203). The strange movement of failed humanist communication, the becoming-animal of figuration itself, is here epitomized in the duration of photographic looking, which confronts something both still and in motion.

Indeed, while the old man “made a pause” in his discourse, the poet imagines him in perpetual motion, “Wandering about” the moors continuously (131). And like the otherworldly blind Beggar, the leech-gatherer seems to the poet, “from some far region sent, / To give me human strength, by apt admonishment” (111-112). In the duration of looking in which communication breaks down, the figure at once blends into nature (his voice “like a stream”) and is rendered foreign and strange, even inhuman (107). Out of the reduction of his humanity into a figure for mortal suffering, the blending of the singularity of this encounter and its representative function, there arises an imperative to stabilize the poet’s sense of self against this instantiation of his fears of “solitude, pain of heart, distress, and poverty” (35). He repeats his question, “How is it that you live, and what is it you do?” (118). Ultimately, the leech-gatherer’s persistence

despite his affiliation with “decay” (125) and “decrepit[ude]” (138) turn him into a symbol of the mind’s independence from nature.

Wordsworth’s leech-gatherer suggests an almost inherent relationship between excessive figuration and inhumanness that colors the appropriation of suffering by aesthetic form. Frank Kermode writes of the vitality of the romantic image as arising paradoxically out of its deadness, suggesting that symbolism functions “abstracted from life, existing in some pattern of the poet’s mind as independently of the particularities of ordinary perception [...] that only the poem itself can fully explain” (41). The poetic image is dead and un-vital, apart from the everyday world, but described using vital, organic terms, and so forms an inscription at once concrete and fluid. By recording actual encounters with real people, Wordsworth’s poems record the bizarre confluence of the deathly vitalism of poetic tropes and the actual lives of people.<sup>48</sup> The latter are routinely described in inhuman and deathly terms, as though viewing them photographically threw poesis onto the world itself, deadening people through their documentation into poetry. If the power of the poet “is to make images or symbols,” Wordsworth records the strange duration of reading both still and moving photographic images already stamped on his world, and already bearing symbolic significance (Kermode 154). The poem functions as a record of this encounter, suggesting that photographic ways of seeing beckon to be captured.

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<sup>48</sup> Dorothy Wordsworth records this encounter in the October 3, 1800 entry in her Grasmere journal. The specificity of her notes, and her inclusion of direct quotations, reminds us that the leech gatherer is not just a symbol, but an actual person: “We met an old man almost double [...] He was of Scotch parents but had been born in the army. He had had a wife, ‘a good woman, and it pleased God to bless us with ten children.’ All these were dead but one [...] His trade was to gather leeches, but now leeches are scarce and he had not the strength for it. [...] He had been hurt in driving a cart, his leg broke his body driven over, his skull fractured” (23-24).

## Chapter 2

### “The Documentary Decade”: Charles Reznikoff and Muriel Rukeyser’s Archival Poems

William Stott, in his book *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, describes a writing practice he calls radical documentary reportage. As an example, he cites a series of articles Maritz Hallgren wrote for *The Nation* in 1932, “Unemployment in the United States: How Many Hungry.” In order to contradict “the proud boast of the companies that none of their workers are suffering,” Hallgren spoke to individual employees to hear of their distress (Stott 171). “Like all documentary,” Stott writes, the series “describes the lives of specific individuals who represent a group of common people generally overlooked in the society. Like all documentary of the early thirties, it used a specific case to sabotage the general claims, the proud boasts, of those in power” (172). Such documentary texts relied on the tools of reportage: direct quotations, photographs, representative case studies, and firsthand observation, all of which authenticate and verify the sympathetic scene.

In this chapter, I explore the relation of photo-poetics to the depression-era documentary ethos, focusing on the period when the ethics, methods, and politics of left-leaning documentary rose to prominence in the United States. Rather than suggest straight historical continuity from romanticism to the 1930s, I trace a constellation of photo-poetic methods that adapt photographic forms to poetic texts. This chapter will explore two long poems from the 1930s that repurpose archival materials, Charles Reznikoff’s *Testimony* and Muriel Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead*, to explore how they adopt the documentary methods listed above even as they produce photo-poetic works far stranger than the exposé style of the time.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> These poems are often named as progenitors of contemporary documentary poetry. See, for example: Philip Metres, “From Reznikoff to Public Enemy: The Poet as Journalist, Historian, Agitator”; Brian Reed, “In Other

In order to review how documentary works of the period theorized themselves, we can take the example of James Agee's reflexive prose in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), which, alongside photographs by Walker Evans, documented poor sharecroppers in the rural American South.<sup>2</sup> Documentary works tend to fixate upon the individual as index of presence and as representative of a broader social issue or system; as such, they called for an objective way of seeing actual people that nonetheless read them, from a distance, as signs of a societal problem. Agee is aware of this paradox and routinely recounts grappling with the limiting perspective of his class-based voyeurism, though he still valorizes the camera for being "incapable of recording anything but absolute, dry truth" (206). In this passage, for instance, he tries to bring some of the indexical intensity of the photograph into his own writing about a particular man, as though his name were a talisman of authenticity:

George Gudger is a human being, a man, not like any other human being so much as he is like himself. I could invent incidents, appearances, additions to his character, background, surroundings, future, which might well point up and indicate and clinch things relevant to him which in fact I am sure are true, and important, and which George Gudger unchanged and undecorated would not indicate and perhaps could not even suggest. The result, if I was lucky, could be a work of art. But somehow a much more important, and dignified, and true fact about him than I could conceivably invent, though I were an illimitably better artist than I am, is that fact that he is exactly, down to the last inch and instant, who, what, where, when and why he is. He is in those terms living, right

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Words: Postmillennial Poetry and Redirected Language"; and Susan Briante, *Defacing the Monument*. By beginning this project with romanticism, I suggest a longer lineage of photo-poetics that can help us redefine certain documentary poems as theorizing changing modes of perception and rapidly proliferating practices of indexical recording.

<sup>2</sup> Paula Rabinowitz calls the work "an uncanny history of middle-class perception and its relationship to the powers and pleasures of looking at others" (36).

now, in flesh and blood and breathing, in an actual part of a world in which also, quite as irrelevant to imagination, you and I are living. (205-6)

Agee's twisting prose strains against his own incapacity to photographically represent Gudger, writing that words "are the most inevitably inaccurate of all mediums of record and communication" (209), even as he strives to "get at a certain form of the truth about him [...] in his actual flesh and life" (211). He rejects any artistry that fictionalizing elements of what he sees might produce and, in an echo of Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, writes that the ordinary world itself is the locus of true art: the goal is "to represent, to reproduce, a certain city street, under the conviction that *nothing is as important, as sublime, as truly poetic* about that street in its flotation upon time and space as the street itself" (207 emphasis added). Agee insists at once on relativism and veracity, on the biased perspective from which he records and on his writing's ability to index this man by virtue of naming and placing him at the coterminous moment of the reader's encounter with the text. Gudger's unique existence, as Gudger, is meant to anchor Agee's text in reality; like so many reportage projects, it traffics upon the presence of a living human individual.

I have been arguing that the germ of a documentary ethos, a desire to record ephemeral phenomena coupled with a tendency to read others as discursive images, can be found in romanticism. Focusing on Wordsworth's encounters with destitute figures has led me to suggest that it is not only threats of finitude, but images of suffering that stimulate a desire to photograph. Whereas Wordsworth's encounter poems grapple with the strangeness of reading people through their figuration, of finding them framed and photographic, depression-era documentary works counted on such reading practices to affectively communicate the nation's employment and ecological crises to a more sheltered public. They deployed the photographic

index—this particular individual you see in front of you is currently in pain—to anchor a broader movement of social welfare that was forming in a nation encountering the limits of agricultural production in arid climates, deforestation around rivers, and speculative investment in stocks.

In this chapter, I consider poets who write with and against documentary's popular ethos, whose photo-poetic forms put pressure on the trope that, as Agee's prose demonstrates, strives to index particular individuals who serve as representative of larger social problems. Tracing one lineage of photo-poetics, we can find poets from this period who continued, following Wordsworth, to grapple with the strangeness of photographic ways of seeing by incorporating photographic forms into their poems. I argue that the long poems *Testimony* and *The Book of the Dead* challenge the coherence of the individual that is the premise of representative politics. Reznikoff and Rukeyser's works echo the enigmatic morphing similes that characterize Wordsworth's descriptions of destitute others, by shifting the scale of the human out to the machine whole and down to the body part. Whereas Wordsworth's figures are inhuman in order to solidify the poet's sense of humanity (though estranging it as well), these documentary-era poets respond to the inhuman remnant stored within public archives. That is, while other photo-poetic texts construct archives following certain rubrics, a method I will explore in poems by Bernadette Mayer and Robin Coste Lewis, the poems considered in this chapter draw material from pre-existing archives. In considering a nation roughly built through law and infrastructure, they question its written histories in a manner that anticipates contemporary documentary poetry.

## **Documentary**

John Grierson coined the term “documentary” in 1929 to refer to non-fiction films with a “creative treatment of actuality” and Paul Rotha wrote the first book on documentary film in

1936, marking its ability to bring out the “meaning behind the thing and the significance underlying the person” (qtd. Kahana 1). Documentaries construct collectivities by representing individuals as synecdoches of a larger whole, of which the viewer is interpolated as a part, even as their stance as a viewer secures their safe distance from the material suffering made visible in the instant it becomes thinkable to them. As Jonathan Kahana writes, documentary is a form of abstraction and transition, translating one fragment of social reality for another, and is premised upon sustaining the tension between singularity and universality (8). A fundamentally democratic medium, documentary “ties the cinematic impression of reality to a collective activity of perception—literally, a common sensing” (Kahana 12). The documentary photograph is essentially discursive, using the vehicle of representative pain to produce a feeling of sympathy in the eye of the viewer that is linked to a knowledge of circumstantial suffering. In the 1930s, it was deployed to produce affective motivation in support of New Deal policies, by connecting knowledge of suffering with feelings of reciprocity. A genre premised upon authenticity, documentary belongs principally to photography and film, to reality recording itself mechanically.<sup>3</sup> Yet, as Kahana writes, its “politics of truth depends upon symbolic discourse,” on seeing individuals and particular places as standing in for national or social problems (34). Akin to a romantic nostalgia and desire to record lost immediacy, this period in the United States

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<sup>3</sup> Cara Finnegan writes of an accusation of staging the material content of a photograph and thereby forcing or faking its symbolic meaning, suggesting that the photographic index of reality as a mark of authenticity is key to documentary images. In August 1936 the Associated Press released Arthur Rothstein’s steer skull image on parched earth, symbolizing the drought conditions of the dust bowl. It turned out that Rothstein had been carrying the skull around to different locations in the South Dakota Badlands, and so conservative newspapers deemed it false propaganda for President Roosevelt’s New Deal policies (Finnegan 52). When interviewed in 1964, Rothstein stated that he was experimenting with lighting and texture, taking many pictures with the skull to capture “the cracks in the soil, the lighting, how the lighting changed from the east to the west as the sun went down.” The image was an art photograph taken out of context, published by Max Hill, an Associated Press editor who didn’t know the West, or the difference between the over-farmed arid Plains and the desert, and so took it as a symbol of the drought (Rothstein). Rothstein compares this mis-captioned and mischaracterized publication of his photograph to being quoted out of context.

was, as Monique Claire Vescia writes, driven “by a national compulsion to record in detail, and thereby preserve, America’s cultural life, which appeared threatened by economic collapse at home and the rise of fascism abroad” (xvii). Indeed, this is the period when the phrase “American way of life” first came to be used, named and created in the moment of its vanishing (Vescia xvii).

Documentary in the 1930s was more than a genre. As Stott writes, “a *documentary motive* was at work throughout the culture of the time: in the rhetoric of the New Deal and the WPA arts projects; in painting, dance, fiction, and theater; in the new media of radio and picture magazines; in popular thought, education, and advertising” (4, emphasis added). John Dos Passos published the first volume of his *U.S.A.* trilogy in 1930, alternating fictional plot with biography and “newsreel” collages. Pare Lorentz’s short documentary films chronicling human-induced climate change and ecosystem collapse, *The Plow That Broke the Plains* and *The River*, were screened in cinemas across the country before feature films. And a series of now canonical documentary texts were published, including Agee and Evans’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell’s *You Have Seen Their Faces*, Richard Wright’s *Twelve Million Black Voices*, Archibald MacLeish’s *Land of the Free*, and Dorothea Lange and Paul Schuster Taylor’s *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion*.<sup>4</sup> A literature of exposure, often also of political reform, blending fiction, poetry, history, and journalism, characterized intellectual and creative production of the American 1930s.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Many of these documentary works incorporate photographs taken for the FSA or by FSA photographers. Works like *You Have Seen Their Faces* also traffic in a rhetoric of sympathy and immediacy, which, I hope to show, is quite different from the works by Reznikoff and Rukeyser.

<sup>5</sup> Rocco Marinaccio notes that Reznikoff earned his bachelor’s degree in journalism and retained an interest in facticity and concrete images throughout his career. See Rocco Marinaccio, “‘The Sight to See and the Will to Do’: Charles Reznikoff and the Poetics of Exposure.” *Literature Interpretation Theory*, 17 (2006).

One can't write about this period without attending to the enormous archival collection of the New Deal program's Farm Security Administration (formerly the Resettlement Administration). Under the direction of Roy Stryker, photographers Dorothea Lange, Arthur Rothstein, Walker Evans, Jack Delano, among many others produced 250,000 photos for the FSA's "Historical Section" (Finnegan 38). As Cara Finnegan argues in *Picturing Poverty: Print Culture and FSA Photographs*, these images produced "a vast visual encyclopedia of the American people and landscape," even as they circulated widely in various mass culture contexts, fueling the rise of *LIFE* and *Time* magazines (38). Because they were government-funded, the high-quality, artfully produced images were free for publications like the Associated Press to take and publish, rather than send their own photographers into the field. The images worked discursively to tell stories of mass migration and poverty, to encourage support for the RA and the various New Deal agencies. Data repository, visual census, propaganda: this ethnographic photo archive was immediately set to work, as Finnegan argues, to negate the myth of the American agrarian ideal and to grant a certain nobility or relatability to the "newly poor." These were poor, struggling farmers of the dust bowl, tenant farmers, and sharecroppers who were recognizably victims of circumstances larger than themselves, with whom viewers might identify. They were also disproportionally white. Although the photographers took roughly proportional photographs of Black and white farmers and workers, the images the FSA chose to display were largely of white Americans.<sup>6</sup>

Lange's "Migrant Mother" photograph is perhaps the most famous image in the archive, well-known for its symbolic relevance. A white woman with a baby in her lap and two blond

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<sup>6</sup> For an in-depth account of representations of African Americans by FSA photographers, see Nicholas Natanson, *The Black Image in the New Deal: The Politics of FSA Photography* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992).

children on either side of her, heads turned away from the camera and resting on her shoulders, looks past the photographer into the middle distance with a lined brow and worried expression, her hand just cupping her jaw in a gesture of absorption. Like an encumbered version of Rodin's *The Thinker*, the woman (Florence Owens Thompson) draws the viewer in because she seems so unaware or uninterested in being photographed; as Michael Fried has argued in his study of seventeenth century art, the less an image lets on that it is being viewed, the more moving it is to the viewer. Authenticity and voyeurism come together in the seemingly candid photograph, allowing this particular woman to symbolize the worry and maternal care that belong to, and so construct, a national public.

Lange and Margaret Bourke-White often used internal captions in their images, ironizing billboard copy in relation to the economic suffering around it. Lange took several shots of poor migrants walking down highways with a billboard in the background reading "Next Time Try the Train – Relax." Perhaps Bourke-White's most famous image juxtaposes a line of mostly African American flood victims in Louisville with a billboard above them reading "World's Highest Standard of Living – There's no way like the American Way," with a smiling white family pictured in a car. These photos use the relay between text and image to generate sharp juxtaposition; if the viewer is to be interpolated by the ads assuring them of American comfort and prosperity, they must reckon with those excluded from its message, those beneath its premise and outside of its frame. Repurposing a Southern Pacific ad in the first case, and a piece of the National Association of Manufacturer's pro-business anti-New Deal propaganda in the other, these photographers used capitalist messaging against itself by grafting together incompatible realities, marshalling the indexicality of photography against staged image-production. These photographs are less about the people in them than about the environmental and economic

problems they represent and the viewer's relation to them, though they use particular faces to generate sympathy. At a time when Americans profited off of mass wheat production, the plains were over-farmed and drained of all resources; at a time when Americans profited off of lumber and coal extraction, the rivers were flooding due to soil erosion caused by deforestation. These images help the viewer see the inequities structuring the "American way of life" by reframing a corporate advertisement into compelling political propaganda. They force a recognition of complicity when the presumably more well-off reader confronts his own class-based interpolation. It is in this context of the critical use of the photographic index to ironize national myths that Reznikoff's *Testimony* first appears.

### **Reznikoff and Objectivism**

The initial 1932 version of *Testimony* was published under the more biting title, "My Country 'Tis of Thee," and included cartoon images by Charles Sheeler detailing "oratorical and poetic gestures." It appeared serialized in two issues of the modernist quarterly *Contact*, edited by William Carlos Williams and Robert McAlmon. Reznikoff had been working for the legal encyclopedia *Corpus Juris*, sifting through hundreds of case files detailing judicial opinions in order to summarize areas of case law for the encyclopedia. Bits of what he was reading as substantiation of rulings stuck with him, prompting him to extract and revise them toward poems that disregard legal opinion and ruling to dwell instead on the particular events, the moments of cruelty or neglect, and the details lodged in witness testimony. "My Country" begins with scenes from "Southerners and Slaves," using accounts of violence, theft, and a will bequeathing two slaves to portray racialized difference before the law, as well as the performative and theatrical character of legal argumentation. The incorporation of images that satirize both rhetorical and

poetic oration yoke together the country's legal and literary traditions, suggesting that nationhood itself is the repeated performance of amassed documents that are put on display and set to use as precedent.

Born in 1894, Reznikoff started writing poetry at an early age and earned a degree in journalism before graduating from NYU law school in 1916. Though he passed the bar exam, he never really practiced law, instead becoming a salesman for his father's hat business so that he could have more time to write. He met George Oppen and Louis Zukofsky (to whom the 1934 edition of *Testimony* is dedicated) in the late 1920s and was inspired by their discussions of Ezra Pound, Williams, and an anti-symbolist American modernism. Their conversations led Reznikoff to reconsider his training as a lawyer as valuable to a poet most interested in facts and material details. The three poets adopted the term "Objectivist" when Zukofsky published their work in a 1931 issue of *Poetry* that he edited, alongside his manifesto, "Sincerity and Objectification: With Special Reference to the Work of Charles Reznikoff." In 1934 the three poets created the Objectivist Press to self-publish their work, and though the press didn't last, Reznikoff in particular held fast to the epithet "objectivist," which he defined thirty years later as "images clear but the meaning not stated but suggested by the objective details and the music of the verse" (qtd. Weinberger x). Indeed, Allen Ginsburg claimed that Reznikoff's is "the largest body of concrete imagistic objective writing that anybody in America has accumulated" (139). Largely self-published, poorly reviewed, and under-read throughout his lifetime, it wasn't until the 1960s and 1970s that Reznikoff's work came to be appreciated and canonized, aided by Black Sparrow Press publishing his completed works. Reznikoff died in 1976, so he lived to witness the resurgent interest in his poetry, and to help guide its publication.

Many critics since then have read Reznikoff's poetry photographically, chief among them Paul Auster, who writes: "Charles Reznikoff is a poet of the eye [...] Each poetic utterance is an emanation of the eye, a transcription of the visible into the brute, unciphered code of being" (151).<sup>7</sup> He goes on to compare this mute optic interval in Reznikoff's shorter New York City poems to Henri Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment," the stopped instant in the flow of life that captures the whole scene (Auster 155). Ginsberg too stated that the "because of the photographic accuracy and precision of detail" in Reznikoff's poems, "the whole somehow is more than the sum of its parts" (142). The more photographic the poem seems, these accounts suggest, the more it appears an ineffable whole, a decisive yet unapproachable summation. But the language of documentary photography is also used to justify the simplicity and clarity of Reznikoff's verse as a vehicle "to respect and record" the lives of poor people (Gray 122). Geneviève Cohen-Cheminet has lamented this tendency among critics to think of Reznikoff as a transparent recorder: "the poet is shrunk to an objective walker-photographer-reporter of the real holding up a mirror to nature" (85). As such, the photographic epithet has been used both to reclaim an ineffable significance for the poem itself, as well as to advance the seemingly contrary claim for poetry as a vehicle of recorded suffering without synthesis. With respect to *Testimony*, I will suggest that Reznikoff's photo-poetics has less to do with respecting individual lives or recording unmediated experience than with how a legal system of documentation captures unintended details without reparative closure. It is the law, then, that inadvertently photographs contingencies embedded in eye-witness testimony, which Reznikoff's *Testimony* then repurposes. *Testimony* attends to the formal apparatus of legal recording itself, which is

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Heller also writes, "In Reznikoff, the poem attains to the condition of the photograph," rather than the lyric (167).

comprised of myriad particular cases that amass toward an endlessly receding totality through the logic of precedent, that is, a documentary machine in which the part does not always have a coherent relation to the whole.

The photographic analogy with respect to Reznikoff began with Zukofsky, who opened his “Program” defining “Objectivists” in reference to the machinations of the camera: “An Objective: (Optics)—The lens bringing the rays from an object to a focus” (377). More specifically in reference to Reznikoff, he praised his poetry “which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody” (Zukofsky “Sincerity” 273). His definition of objectivism as “rested totality” is somewhat opaque and turns not on objective truth value or historical transcendence, but on the poem as object, on “writing [...] which is an object or affects the mind as such” (Zukofsky “Sincerity” 274). And “sincerity” he defines as a preoccupation with detail and accuracy (Zukofsky “Sincerity” 280). There are clear parallels between the poem as non-symbolic object of recorded details and the photograph, but the objectivist credo praises the sincere gaze itself, the photographic *desire* to bring into focus, to aim at the particular. By repurposing myriad witness perspectives under oath, *Testimony* refocuses one’s gaze on the material of legal process itself to consider how it captures and records and in turn produces archival objects that manifest legal history as precedent.

### ***Testimony* (1934)**

*Testimony* began as a short collection of prose vignettes and grew into a five-hundred-page book of lineated verse over the course of over thirty years, as Reznikoff combed through thousands of cases amassing archival material. Though it has been published in different iterations, it was

never definitively completed. The 1934 version draws from 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century material and is divided into three main sections—“Southerners and Slaves,” “Sailing-Ships and Steamers,” “East and West”<sup>8</sup>—as well as segments pertaining to elements of the law or society: “Of Murder,” “Collision,” “Passengers,” and “Machinery,” for instance. The work is the product of Reznikoff’s poetic reuse and paraphrase, as well as direct citation of the reports. As Janet Sutherland has explored, the critical tendency to see the poet excised from a poem comprised of source material ignores the fastidious work of curation and erasure that Reznikoff performed. Yet, part of what renders *Testimony* photo-poetic is the force of the index that it does maintain, the imprint within legal archives of occurrences sworn to under oath. Michael Davidson has written that “what links the documentary imperative to acts of testimony is the fact that eyewitness reports retain some vestige of the unique individual; they testify that someone was actually present when such-and-such happened, and *this* document is its record” (149).<sup>9</sup> It is important to keep in mind, though, the layers of mediation that undergird *Testimony*. As Bruce Holsapple has argued, it would be “a fallacy to conflate historical events with rhetorical events” (128). The text as we encounter it is not a “vestige” of a unique individual, nor certain proof of what took place, but rather a legal document resulting from stages of editing: witnesses, lawyers, and judges filtered the text before Reznikoff made his selections. And Reznikoff altered the testimony further through synthesis, paraphrase, and recontextualization, and by changing the names of people and places referenced.

Yet, the knowledge that what is described was sworn to under oath, and thus in the context of the legal trial performs eye-witness veracity, retains much of its force. Indeed, the

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<sup>8</sup> These section headings are adapted from the regional divisions *The Federal Reporter* used, from which Reznikoff drew his material.

<sup>9</sup> I do not mean to imply, however, that testimony sworn to under oath is always true and accurate. Rather, it is the role that testimony claims within the legal apparatus as evidence that is of interest.

pressure of indexicality is constructed through mediation, precisely because the reader knows the literary text is repurposed legal evidence. Daniel Listoe has made a compelling case along the same lines, arguing that *Testimony* is more about archiving anonymity than unique individuality: “There are no voices, no presumed encounter with the sanctity of suffering, no secondary witnessing of unassailable experience. For when Reznikoff used his old student training to mine the documents and sees rather than hears he is following the textual traces without trying to shake off their archival aura: the marked arrangement—both material and virtual—of a selectivity in operation before he initiated his creative interventions” (Listoe 121). The “archival aura” is a sense of both distance and unique presence, producing what Arlette Farge writes is the naïve but powerful “sensation of having finally caught hold of the real, instead of looking through a ‘narrative of’ or ‘discourse on’ the real” (8). Rather than record incidents or people directly, *Testimony* records the legal apparatus of eyewitness evidence taken as justification for a judicial decision. As such, distance and mediation are built into the structure of testimonial indexicality, whereby a record of an occurrence held in memory is set to public record.

As an act of transmission and translation, testimony is necessarily distanced from the experience of the event itself (OED).<sup>10</sup> Defined as “personal or documentary evidence or attestation in support of a fact or statement,” testimony has a truth valence, sworn under oath or in the name of some greater power, but it is not the thing itself.<sup>11</sup> In Didi-Huberman’s writings

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<sup>10</sup> In emphasizing the distanced and fragmented poetics of Reznikoff’s *Testimony*, I am distancing myself from Charles Bernstein’s claim for “Reznikoff’s Nearness” in his essay of that name. Bernstein argues that *Testimony* “allows the event itself to speak, as if without interference without teller” and to be a “story of America’s forgotten, those who suffer without redress” (223). As such, it is a form of “participatory mourning” brought about by dissolving the “observer/observed” binary in the nearness of the event itself (218). My account of how *Testimony* functions is quite different; I suggest that it neither tells a cogent story, nor tells of any particular individuals who might be mourned.

<sup>11</sup> “Testimony” also denotes sacred tables of the law, the covenant with God; God’s own words were given as testimony, and believers can testify to God’s gifts. In this sense, it evidences what cannot be seen and has an

on Holocaust survivor accounts and photographs smuggled out of Auschwitz, he notes the difference between experiencing and witnessing an event, and claims that testimony requires this gap, this difference: “pure intimacy, mute or unfigured, ‘absolute’ intimacy, would have transmitted nothing to anyone” (87).<sup>12</sup> Referencing Proust’s account of coming across his grandmother as a photographic image, uncannily severed from intimacy and simply an old woman, Didi-Huberman suggests that in order to become legible, the difference that photography makes must intrude, the making-legible that accompanies framing, captioning, and recording. This legibility comes at the expense of totality: “To bear witness,” he states, “is to tell in spite of all that which it is impossible to tell entirely” (*Images* 105). Reznikoff’s *Testimony* is an exploration of the partial, the fragmented, of the narrated story stripped of many of its historical reference points, and particularly of its corresponding judicial ruling.

Without context, these fragments of testimony cease to function as evidence of a particular claim, whether prosecutorial or defensive. They lose their general referential function and judicial context, severing the described violence from the resulting decision, and so from the law itself, which is entirely directed towards judgement. It also dislodges these events from their role as examples in establishing precedence that enables them to be folded into the heritage of the law. As Davidson has written of the poetic use of documentary materials, it “does more than provide texture to historical themes; it participates directly in the writing of history by exposing the institutional venues through which history is written” (139). By severing testimony from judgement, evidence from law, *Testimony* questions the narrative and cumulative logic of legal

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unassailable truth value. It is a product of distance or absence that takes the form of a record insisting on nearness and validity.

<sup>12</sup> Giorgio Agamben, too, writes of the lacuna of witness: “The value of testimony lies essentially in what it lacks; at its center it contains something that cannot be borne witness to and that discharges the survivors of authority” (34).

recording apparatuses. It redirects textual fragments to show the law functioning as a kind of camera, mechanically and inadvertently capturing details that cannot be straightforwardly read. That is, by decontextualizing bits of witness testimony, the poem pushes the limits of archival logic bent on retaining narrative significance into the future, exposing instead the strangeness of the material detritus that outlasts us.<sup>13</sup>

Documentary and legal proceedings share a common logic of the generalizable example, which Reznikoff's work interrupts, even as his archival method is deeply invested in records of suffering and the emotional responses they provoke. What are we to make, for instance, of a vignette that reads, in its entirety:

The negro had been chased for two miles in a summer day by negro dogs. He was found in the bayou, up to his chin in the water, with a scythe blade in his hand. This, at the bidding of the man after him, he threw to the water's edge, and came out. As he did so, the white man struck him upon the head with the heavy butt of his whip, and the dogs jumped upon him and began to bite him. (547)

The poem identifies men solely by race, one defender and one attacker, one implied escaped slave and one implied overseer, their interaction indicative of the power structure at the root of American slavery. The man fighting for his survival is given no agency; his actions are described

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<sup>13</sup> In his introduction to the 1934 edition, Kenneth Burke quotes Reznikoff: "Once in a while I could see in the facts of a case details of the time and place, and it seemed to me that out of such material the century and a half during which the United States has been a nation could be written up, not from the standpoint of an individual, as in diaries, nor merely from the angle of the unusual, as in newspapers, but from every standpoint—as many standpoints as were provided by the witnesses themselves" (534). Burke counters this by stating, "Whatever individual standpoints they may represent [...] these bearers of testimony represent in the large the 'law court point of view'" (535). In Monique Claire Vescia's account, she maintains that it is Reznikoff's point of view throughout, as he selects and mediates the work (43). I suggest that these vignettes represent not individual or multiple human points of view, or the commanding perspective of the law itself, because they are so depersonalized and divorced from judicial context. Rather, they suggest the perspective of the archive, the infinite index in which fragmented traces of human-legal interactions persist, without cohesive or progressive structure.

in the passive voice, with him as the object of the sentence. He is the subject of the third sentence only, but any agency is overpowered by the strong accent on the indexical “this” and its response to the “bidding” of the white man. Appearing in a section titled “Slaves and Southerners,” the passage doesn’t particularly stand out from the surrounding ubiquitous violence, but the details of the scythe under water, the dogs, the butt of the whip, make the episode singular. The fact of its status as testimony serves to index the reality of this event, even as its context within the trial (who is being prosecuted, who defended) and who could be speaking it, is unclear. The passage oscillates between the particularity of its details and the generality of its characters, who function not as individuals, but as markers of racial difference characterized by violence. As Justin Parks puts it, “Reznikoff’s documentary collage-poem forecloses readerly identification with the anonymous victims of the violence it depicts, as well as the possibility of ascribing their suffering a sacrificial meaning within the narrative of nation, by refusing to provide any information that would enable its readers to contextualize its scenes of suffering” (50). Without context specific to the event and the narrative means of identification, the suffering in *Testimony* is irreparable; it simply persists, as recorded. William Stott calls records such as these “human documents” and writes that in response, “not only is poetic comment impossible, any human comment is [...] It confronts us, the audience, with empirical evidence of such nature as to render dispute impossible and interpretation superfluous” (13-14). Sueyeun Juliette Lee writes that *Testimony* is “unreadable” even as it evokes a strong emotional response: “As a reader, I am simultaneously fascinated by the simple beauty of the language—its ‘plainness’—and punctured by the brutality of what is actually being described [...] At the same time, this level of heightened sensitivity transforms into *numbness*.” She draws on Sianne Ngai’s “ugly feeling” of “stuplimity” (a reader response that I will explore further in Chapter 4) to name this confluence

of boring repetition and sublime excess, or “shock and blah.” Reznikoff has spoken of the initial appeal studying the law had for him, because it invokes the ideal value of equality, of crime and obligation balancing out.<sup>14</sup> But in life, this abstraction does not hold and nearly every vignette he includes shows the value of human life to be negligible or illegible. We do not know why this incident came to be recorded or what came of it, only that it happened and that it stimulates feeling.

In response to questions about objectivism, Reznikoff liked to quote the eleventh century Chinese poet W’ei T’ai: “Poetry presents the thing in order to convey the feeling. It should be precise about the thing and reticent about the feeling” (“A Talk” 97). Reznikoff has also spoken about his poetic methodology as objectivist in relation to legal testimony. The objectivist poet is one “who does not write directly about his feelings but about what he sees and hears; who is restricted almost to the testimony of a witness in a court of law; and who expresses his feelings indirectly by the selection of his subject-matter and, if he writes in verse, by his music” (Reznikoff “A Talk” 99). Biographically, he describes a shift in his writing style after meeting Oppen and Zukofsky, realizing his experience as a law student could serve his poetic endeavors.<sup>15</sup> In a court of law, the one testifying cannot simply state the conclusion, but must

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<sup>14</sup> He writes, “I soon saw the law in its elements as a beautiful order / in which benefit balanced obligation / and nothing was without its reason—or reasons” (16. 26-28). And he goes on, “The law that we studied / was not always the actual law / of judges or statutes / but an ideal” (16. 29-32).

<sup>15</sup> He writes, in an autobiographical poem:

I saw I could use the expensive machinery  
That had cost me four years of hard work at law  
And which I had thought useless for my writing:  
Prying sentences open to look at the exact meaning;  
Weighing words to choose only those that had meat for my purpose  
And throwing the rest away as empty shells.  
I, too, could scrutinize every word and phrase  
As if in a document or the opinion of a judge  
And listen, as well, for tones and overtones,  
Leaving only the pithy, the necessary, the clear and plain.  
(*Poems*, “Early History” 17.65–74)

provide evidence. As such, “there is an analogy between testimony in the courts and the testimony of a poet,” who cannot simply tell the reader how to feel (Reznikoff “A Talk” 99). “Poetry is inherently an expression of feeling,” Reznikoff states, but it is not given directly (“A Talk” 100). The poet feels something when viewing an event or a text, and so tries to write it as clearly as possible, so as to recreate that feeling in the reader. As Paul Auster describes it, “While objectivity is the premise, subjectivity is the tacit organizer” of Reznikoff’s poetry (154). By transcribing the above moment of capture and attack so simply, Reznikoff leaves it to the reader to do all the feeling, providing no moral judgement or recuperation of suffering, but letting the passage end at the moment of utmost violence.

Initially, *Testimony* seems a representative text of the documentary era: it rehearses eyewitness accounts of legally formative events in order to generate an emotional response in the reader, which can pertain to concerns over societal and economic structures of slavery, industrialization, child labor, mariner law, etc. Yet, its repetitive, numerous vignettes produce so many affective responses one after another at such scale that the contained symbolism and narrative structure of reform literature buckles. Perpetually growing in size, the archival fragments Reznikoff amasses wash over the reader as a series of snapshots or extended montage.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, there is no resolution to any given story; one is pushed forward to a new bit of testimony, decontextualized and with little to no knowledge of victim, perpetrator, or judgement. In this sense, it diverges from a documentary ethos that would mobilize affective responses to a particular image or exemplary case study to legibly stand in for a larger social problem.

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<sup>16</sup> Kenneth Burke’s introduction to the 1934 edition includes a quotation from Reznikoff: “He felt that the work could fill ‘an entire encyclopedia,’ that ‘*Testimony* should be ten thousand times as large’” (534). Indeed, *Testimony* reads like an inversion of the legal encyclopedia to which he was contributing, which condenses data, as it is a perpetually growing poetic record of scattered particulars.

*Testimony*'s form isn't so much narrative sequence as it is a list of staccato indexicals: this, this, this, this, as opposed to this and then that and then this. The vignettes draw one in, perhaps, but are just as abruptly over without climax or conclusion. They demand attention and affective response, but their sheer quantity evokes the excess of the legal recording apparatus, its litany of anonymous accounts of violence to which the reader cannot respond. Genevieve Cohen-Cheminet has claimed that this serial form is key to understanding Reznikoff's poetics, and that texts like *Testimony* are potentially infinite chains or "discrete series," following Oppen, in which "polysemous meanings dismiss linearity, totality and closure [...and] create dynamic significations between words and blanks, disrupting semantic stasis" (99). Cohen-Cheminet writes that "Reznikoff apprehends the insignificant-essential," an oxymoronic gesture that destabilizes "cognitive meanings" through "serial fragmentation" (98). More than just parataxis, *Testimony*'s serial form inverts the seemingly insignificant detail and whatever "essential" role these case histories play in legal precedent. There is no narrative resolution, no judgment, so the reader is diverted away from criminality and toward inscrutable violence, the repetition of which affectively conveys both its unavoidable and undeserved nature.<sup>17</sup> Rather than pressing sympathy for a particular represented individual, *Testimony* asks how we might view the impersonal legal machinery by which a plethora of anonymous violent intervals are captured.<sup>18</sup>

Witnesses seem to remember odd details from violent events, bits of data that stick in public records. To quote from the second episode in the first section, "Southerners and Slaves," in its entirety:

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<sup>17</sup> Bruce Holsapple makes the convincing point that *Testimony*'s form produces a sense of impending violence as inevitable, particularly in terms of the complexities of the machine age. See Bruce Holsapple, "Poetic Design in Reznikoff's *Testimony*."

<sup>18</sup> Reznikoff challenges, then, rather than subscribes to, the narrative structure of what Marinaccio calls "the defining sentiment of the Progressive Era, the era of the 'exposé,' when the power of the press to inspire reform by exposing injustice, inequality, and illegality was an undeniable fact of American life" (106).

John Wilson and his younger brother, Cumberland, were cutting timber on a ridge in the woods when Ballentine came up. He had a rifle and a squirrel which he had shot, said that it was hot weather for cutting sticks, and left, going over the ridge. Later, he came out of the woods, and stood watching them.

John Wilson, sitting on the top log, turned his face to the team. The front pair of oxen has started, but the others were still standing. Cumberland Wilson was just rising to tell Ballentine good-by, when he saw him with his rifle up, the breach of it under his shoulder and the muzzle aimed at John. That instant Ballentine fired and Cumberland saw the smoke rising from Ballentine's gun. John Wilson put his right hand to his breast and said, 'Lord of Mercy!' The blood gushed from his mouth and nose. Ballentine began to run away; he ran ten steps or so, stopped, and looked John Wilson in the face. The dying man bowed his head and Ballentine ran on.

What is the reader to make of the shot squirrel, the bowed head, the pair of startled oxen? Or the bits of dialogue caught up in the episode: "hot weather for cutting sticks," "Lord of Mercy!"? Without context, without knowledge of a potential conflict between the parties, the murder appears to be unmotivated, and these details initially seem to paint a realistic effect over the episode. What they actually evoke, though, is the testimonial source material itself; they validate the speaker as present in the moment and so serve to index the scene as having been witnessed. These details evoke what Roland Barthes called the photographic punctum, the "certificate of presence" that seems to validate the instance, but there is nothing particularly interesting about them. Rather, their proliferation throughout this and numerous other testimonials makes the legal archive seem an endlessly germinating mass of stray material. Collected for one purpose, when repurposed, these contingent details threaten the significance of the case study. *Testimony* avoids

recuperating pain and death into a clear narrative, and instead, numbs the affective response to suffering through serialization and through a strange focus on these acute details, rather than the case itself. These particulars are only recorded, we are reminded, because they happened to imprint themselves upon someone's memory. By redirecting fragments of witness testimony taken directly from judicial records, Reznikoff marshals the photographic index, the mark of something having occurred, to critique the premise of representation that undergirds both legal and documentary narratives.

There is a banality to the scale of seemingly unmotivated violence, of avoidable injuries or deaths in factories, ships, mills, and plants in which people struggle to make a living. Often the violence is directed downward: master hurting slave, ship captain hurting seaman, machine infrastructure hurting industrial worker. Accidents, collisions, and mishaps are described alongside episodes of selfishness, cruelty, disciplinary beatings, and strategic exploitation of the law. *Testimony* suggests that cruelty is not an exception to American history, but the rule of racist and capitalist economies and their resulting social antinomies. As Vescia puts it, countering the critical response that *Testimony* is an unmediated record of sheer brutality, the text explores "the social consequences of an economy based on various forms of slavery" (32). That is, the systematization of slavery renders capitalist violence banal. Self-preservation is the recognized code of conduct in so many of the episodes. One vignette, in which survivors on a lifeboat drown others in order to survive, ends with the exhortation, when they're finally spotted by another ship, "Lie down [...] and be still. If they make out so many of us on board, they will steer off another way and make believe they have not seen us" (*Testimony* 553). The same men who forced survivors off the lifeboat recognize a callousness that would spurn their own lives. By using the serial form to describe acts of neglect and cruelty across economies of slavery, sea

shipping, rail travel, industry, and agriculture, *Testimony* evokes a repetitious violence across time and place.<sup>19</sup>

Yet the poem does not offer a simple cause or a simple solution by reflecting upon the nation's history of slavery. Rather, Reznikoff uses the catalogue form of unending lists and material details to complicate documentary tropes so reliant on narrative and symbolic closure. *Testimony* is an unending series of cruelties that refuse to amount to anything; this is violence that does not add up. The poem comprises particulate details lodged in these records that rarely function symbolically or metaphorically. Arlette Farge has written of the affective experience of the archive, and what she calls the "torrent of singularities" that feel like a direct connection to the real past by virtue of being recorded and stored without the will of the one speaking. The main difference between judicial archival documents and published texts, she argues, is that the latter want to be read, whereas the former never held that intention (Farge 6). Rather, they are like fossils of unwanted encounters with the law: "The archive preserves these moments at random, chaotically. Each time, the person who reads, touches, or discovers them is at first struck by a feeling of certainty. The spoken word, the found object, the trace left behind become faces of the real" (Farge 11). This sense of encountering the real she admits is a kind of mirage, though, an archive-effect produced by the mechanisms of bureaucratic recording.

Testimony is the record distanced from the event itself, which in order to tell the event must insist on a gap or difference from it. Legal testimony is the mediated reproduction of eyewitness accounts presented orally to a public, then transcribed into written records used as

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<sup>19</sup> As Justin Parks notes, "the text's implicit proposition is that coerced labor, racial/ethnic, gender, and class violence and economic abuse can be traced to their roots in the period encompassing the Civil War and its results, when ongoing contestations over slavery and national belonging, the harrowing labor conditions of urban industrialization, and the market abuses that resulted, with the Panic of 1873, in the first modern economic depression, became pivotal issues at a defining moment for national identity" (56). This is not to conflate the violence and dispossession of chattel slavery with industrialized and other forms of labor, but rather to draw parallels in systems of exploitation.

proof or justification for the judge's ruling. The standardization of memory within the legal machine that processes cases turns upon the (mis)reading of the event that testifies to its inability to be reproduced, to its ultimate illegibility. We have seen time and again that even photographic or filmic evidence can become illegible within courts of law.<sup>20</sup> The event cannot be reproduced, and yet must be recorded. By redirecting these records of singular, and yet iterative and endless, events of cruelty or neglect, Reznikoff formally reduces the machine of the law to one of its parts, mimicking how mechanization reduces production operations into parts, some of which are human. Language, emerging from the context of a truth-bound eyewitness under oath, is the machine of the law. Reznikoff allows this valence to subsist, though he arrests its movement toward guilt or innocence. *Testimony* superimposes instead a litany of pithy cruelties, producing a sense of proximity or even contact through the indexical structure of having-been-there, even as it skims the utter inhumanity of what is touched.

Along with its expansive scale that broadens contact with legal records, *Testimony* slows down the pace at which verbal evidence is made to function, showing readers elements of trials that are usually unseen. A subset of the section "East and West" titled "Machinery," describes a garment factory in which an employee's job was to "carry rolls of wet cloth from a machine called an 'extractor' to hoist outside the building." The scene is set so that the accident seems inevitable: "On one side of the passageway to the rolls of wet cloth were the 'extractor' and the shaft propelling it and on the other a fan and the shaft upon which it turned. The fan was used for drying wool and turned about seven hundred times a minute—so fast that it looked like an object at rest. The 'extractor' was not so swift as the fan, but ran with much more noise, so that one

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<sup>20</sup> For more on the difficulties of reading video content in courts of law, see Naomi Mezey, "The Image Cannot Speak for Itself: Film, Summary Judgment, and Visual Literacy," *Valparaiso University Law Review*, 48.1 (Fall 2013).

would be likely to keep farther away from it. The passageway was about four and a half feet wide” (*Testimony* 579). Switching from the past progressive tense to the simple past tense, a figure enters the scene, with his hand full of ropes that get caught and wound in the fan, at which point narration ceases (579). In another poem, included in the 1978 edition of *Testimony*, a similar accident occurs, in a section subtitled “Machine Age.” An immigrant worker at a cotton mill, who was new and unfamiliar with farming machines, was drawing cotton through a feed-roll when it became clogged and stopped. The foreman simply yelled at him to restart the machine and left, so the man tried to free the jam by pulling on the cotton, which didn’t work, before he raised the cover of the “beater” and reached in: “Within the beater / were knives / moving so rapidly / one could see nothing of them but a blur” (*Testimony* 374). Again, the poem raises a sense of suspense and inevitability in reference to a dangerous machine in close proximity to people, moving too quickly, quietly, and seamlessly to be apprehended as a threat.

Bruce Holsapple argues in his reading of this second episode that Reznikoff deliberately flattens questions of responsibility and control through poetic design or form, which makes the accident seem inevitable (138). As he puts it, these poems reflect “a society that is accelerating beyond human control, beyond the bounds of the commonplace, beyond commonality itself” (Holsapple 140). The quickly moving blades of the fan and the beater are thus a metaphor for the massive acceleration of the machine age itself. While I appreciate this reading, I would add that *Testimony* betrays a formal interest in broader structures of hard-to-see material violence, specifically the failures of legal representation that accompany inequality and exploitation. What compels the immigrant worker to reach into the “beater” is fear of retaliation from the foreman for inaction, question, or complaint. He was not instructed properly, was not given safety warnings, and had no recourse or time to think, as three other machines in his charge were still

running. It is not enough to say that the machines are out of his control; the entire workplace was designed without care for workers like him, because his environment was designed to protect the individuals with consolidated power and wealth from responsibility. Accidents like these accumulate without actually happening (both poems end at the moment in which the injury begins) not simply to build suspense, but to show that this everyday violence is largely invisible to those in power and to the average consumer of goods. Some of these injuries may be counted and recorded, Reznikoff suggests, but many more disappear from view.

In the final and longest piece of the section “Southerners and Slaves,” one finds a rare positive example of recuperative solidarity. Kentuckian Francis Troutman ambushes a Black family living in Michigan with his friends and the county deputy sheriff, claiming the family members are slaves belonging to his grandfather. When questioned by gathering neighbors, Troutman states that “he was doing what the law authorized him to do” (*Testimony* 548). A multi-racial group of locals defend the family:

Troutman announced that he was taking them before the magistrate. Combstock, a white man, shouted, ‘You cannot have the negroes!’

Troutman, looking him full in the face, asked, ‘Why not?’

Combstock, pointing to the crowd, said, ‘You see it will be dangerous,’ and then said, ‘You can’t take them by moral, physical, or legal force, and you might as well know it first as last, and the quicker you leave the ground, the better for you.’ (549)

Troutman records the names of the white men refusing to comply, and they seem pleased to have their names recorded to signify freedom, to be “put down in capitals and taken back as a beacon to the land of slavery.” Troutman tries to appeal to the crowd using language of the law:

‘Resolved that as peaceable citizens we will abide by the Constitution and the laws of our country and that I, Francis Troutman, of Carroll County, Kentucky, be permitted peaceably to take the Crosswhite family before Sherman, a justice of the peace, that I may make proof of property of the slaves, and take them to Kentucky.’ He heard only jeers and booing. (549)

Another white man, Gorham, proclaims “that public sentiment was above the law, and that they would not let their citizens be taken away to slavery.” Troutman then offers to pay the townspeople for the family and Gorham responds, “You can’t have a shilling for them!” A small group of white men, apparently the leaders, confer together, before they echo Troutman’s legal discourse, announcing, “Resolved that these Kentucky gentlemen, if such they may be called, leave town in two hours [...] or they shall be prosecuted for kidnaping [sic] or housebreaking” (*Testimony* 550). In response to this announcement and the large crowd, the sheriff refuses to execute Troutman’s warrant and leaves.

In this incident, the violence and power of the document is invoked in order to claim ownership over people, with Troutman repeatedly trying to get the family before the magistrate, to secure his claim. What is interesting about this episode, as Vescia has pointed out, is how legal discourse is appropriated by a collection of laymen to speak back to this document (58). Vescia goes on to write that while in one sense their proclamation parodies the law, in another, “it also illustrates an instance in which the moral authority of the community takes precedence over the law [...] and the medium of legal discourse is instrumental in bringing this about. This was how the United States was founded, after all” (59). While the language of rights and resolutions is invoked in order to legitimize freedom and the common will, it is important to note that it is only voiced by white men. As far as we can tell from this witnesses’ accounting and Reznikoff’s

recounting, the Crosswhite family, even its patriarch Adam, do not have access to its discursive power.

Moreover, I am skeptical of an overly optimistic reading of this local uprising, as the violence of the document (in this case, a record of ownership or bill of sale) is recouped by the poem itself as an echo of a legal trial that may have led to the family being recaptured. That is, if Reznikoff encountered this testimony in a case history, the question of the Crosswhites' freedom did not end with the crowd's uprising, but in a courtroom in which it was later pursued. And it is unlikely that Adam Crosswhite would have appealed to the law, if he was indeed formerly enslaved; it is more likely that Troutman continued his appeal to authorities after this episode, and indeed may have won his claim. Whereas Vescia sees this episode as reflecting the promise of America's documental constitution, I understand Reznikoff to be offering an alternative communal discourse of rights and solidarity that is nonetheless always threatened to be subsumed into more powerful laws of ownership (i.e. the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850). Because this episode appears in *Testimony*, it indexes not simply that this really happened, but that this was narrated before a judge in order to produce another shadow document that indeed must overshadow this work of literature: the amassed and congealed power in the hands of the few that is secured by imperial documents. Reznikoff reminds us, particularly by showing white citizens with agency adopt the voice of the law, that those without access to its power are dependent upon those who do for representation. The inclusion of this episode in *Testimony* implies that even these voices may have ultimately been overruled by Troutman's document, suggesting that documents do not simply record relations, but are the very verbs and nouns of violence enacted by law.

Critics run aground when they read *Testimony* exclusively for symbolic resonance and recuperative narratives, without accounting for the material basis of the text. Reznikoff re-mediate legal discourse so that a stratum of detail, of radical particulars apart from the whole, produce, through their seriality, a sense of unending accrual without summation. Though we may form suppositions around uplifting or cynical readings, we cannot know from Reznikoff's text what happened to the Crosswhite family. Indeed, if legal precedent extrapolates from examples to produce summations, photo-poetics performs a different episteme of the example. *Testimony* refuses the structure of the example that is key to both legal and documentary discourses precisely because it insists on singularity within extension, in the form of an infinite index. What begins as an example of precedent for a legal standard, a piece of case law repurposed for an encyclopedia summary, is here rewritten into an oppositional montage of capitalist accumulation as synonymous with a litany of injuries. But because he suspends the question of judgement, Reznikoff opens up a nebulous space of collective agency and collective pain that refuses the logic of sin and reparation, guilt and punishment, that structures criminal discourse. He repeatedly contrasts the extreme particulate with the violence and force of documents that manifest the law. The detail does not simply serve narrative but is a reminder of the archival material itself, a reminder that what is narrated was sworn to under oath as having been seen.

*Testimony* avoids documentary tropes of national progress and recuperative suffering in part, as Parks has argued, by including a section titled "Depression" whose materials are actually drawn from the Panic of 1893, but were chronically misread as referring to the 1930s, suggesting the cyclical nature of economic crashes.<sup>21</sup> Parks draws attention to the use of bodies in pain to

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<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Stephen Fredman has written that Reznikoff is "leery of ideologies buried in historical narratives" and that "*Testimony* undermines notions such as progress or decline just as it undermines ideologies of all stripes. It

signify reality in the text, arguing that the body's disfiguration mimics the troubled suturing of a corporeal nation, the violence directed at Black bodies, and the disintegration of the laborer's body through automation and mechanization. While I agree in large part with Parks' reading, and will return to the question of body parts when reading Rukeyser's *Book of the Dead*, I'm particularly interested in the details included in this edition of *Testimony* that do not pertain to humans, but to the archival material itself. When Didi-Huberman writes of a painting's details, he notes that a close-up gaze dislodges itself from the painting's larger theme, submitting the viewer instead to what he calls the "tyranny of the material" (*Confronting* 236). That is, this method of reading closely doesn't disclose the painting as a whole, but the textured material that produces it without itself bearing figural significance. As an accident of representation, the detail becomes "sovereign," not a part of a whole, but rather a vehicle of its disfigurement (Didi-Huberman *Confronting* 256). In a section of *Testimony* titled "Gunshot Wounds," for instance, one entry reads in its entirety: "In gunshot wounds the edges are sunken; in wounds made with a knife the edges are smooth and the lips of the wounds stick out" (574). There is no reference to bodies or even flesh, only "edges" of some material, which is not necessarily human. Though we might surmise the excerpt came from a doctor's or officer's testimony, we are given this factual detail apart from any context, from any particular wound or wounded individual. The vignette's significance no longer comes from the case to which it relates, but from its context within *Testimony*, itself a paratactic arrangement of excerpts with variously smooth and jagged edges. If documentary significance hinges on synecdoche and this excerpt gives no individual and no

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displays social strife as often unmotivated (and unbearable) and then implicitly challenges the reader to make sense of it and do something about it" (73). Fredman focuses on its collage or assemblage form, what he calls its "contextual practice." He writes that "contextual practice initiates an art devoted to contexts, building works not around a central idea, theme, or symbol but by plucking and arranging images, materials, language, or even people from the surrounding milieu" (3). This practice, he suggests, uses redirection and juxtaposition of found materials to refocus attention on what is normally overlooked.

larger meaning, just the injury, it asks us to think structural violence apart from human agency.

The final poem in the 1934 edition reads: “As the case was turned over upon the wharf, a rattling was heard inside. The looking-glass was broken. The pieces were wedge-shaped; the cracks radiated from a center, as if the glass had been struck by a pointed instrument” (582). Ending with a non-human fracture, Reznikoff suggests that it is totalizing vision itself that has been dismantled by his project, that looking at the details of legal records in their singularity reveals not a functioning legal system, but edges and shards that fail to cohere.

### **Seas and Rivers, Harbors and Ports**

The 1934 edition of *Testimony* includes a section titled “Seas and Rivers, Harbors and Ports” that doesn’t appear in subsequent editions. This section reads like an ethereal catalogue, four pages punctuated only with commas and semi-colons, comprised almost entirely of names of ships, their captains, their cargo, the harbors, and descriptions of weather conditions. Kenneth Burke writes of it in his introduction: whereas for the most part Reznikoff’s “bare presentation of the records places us before people who appear in the meager simplicity of their complaints,” he does also “give himself over to embellishment of the ‘poetic’ sort” (535). Rather than read *Testimony* as comprised either of non-fiction sections pertaining to human suffering or poetic “embellishment” (read: aesthetics apart from politics), I suggest that the accentuated seriality of this section formally articulates the excessive litany of goods produced out of the litany or injuries chronicled in the other sections.

The descriptions of weather conditions occupy the longest paragraph, listing characteristics of visibility: “the night dark and thick and the sea high, and the wind a gale; wet, dark, and thick weather, the stars to be seen from time to time, the wind from the southwest and

the sea high, light drizzling rain, a dirty foggy night raining a drizzling rain the whole night” (*Testimony* 571). At first distinct, the descriptions soon run together: “squalls taking off but still a heavy sea; heavy seas, heavy swells causing the ship to pitch hard, ship pitching heavily, heavy head sea, causing the ship to go bows under, ship driving heavily, rolling heavily, ship going bows under, filling decks for and aft” (571). One has the sense of encountering lost meteorological descriptors, simple figurative language now unfamiliar, but resonant: “a pretty thick night, small thick rain” (571). The section’s syntactical form of the list or series is a microcosm of *Testimony*’s form, infused with excessive detail, repetitive events, and a flattening tone that plays with narrative on the level of the vignette, but ultimately rejects it at the level of the book. The list is a form that expresses typology and quantification, and in this section evokes the logbook of a ship captain unmoored from any specific date, location, or referent. Rather than suggest this is the poetic section of an otherwise prosaic, unlineated work, I read it as an exaggeration of *Testimony*’s form, in which vignettes repeat with difference, at once similar in structure and tone and singular in their inclusion of particular details. What this section shows more forcefully is material excess—“The ship chock and block full of bags of wheat; a cargo of yellow pine lumber, barilla, and pipes of wine; bales of lambskins and cases of manna; cases of essence of bergamot and boxes of lemons and oranges; ten tons of brimstone; a cargo of white ash, white oak, walnut and black walnut; sugar in hogsheads, tierces, barrels, and boxes”—that echo the expanding data of legal testimony itself (*Testimony* 570). An iterative accumulation of commodities here responds to the iterative accumulation of accounts of violence. Reznikoff creates a poetic index that formalizes the ways in which legal recording apparatuses encase and traffic in the perishable materiality of our lives.

In a 1969 interview with L. S. Dembo, Reznikoff positioned objectivism against the symbolists' credo, "to name is to destroy; to suggest is to create." In contrast, he claimed that his "belief is to name and to name and to name—and to name in such a way that you have rhythm, since music [...] is also part of the meaning" (97-8). This musicality is perhaps what Burke picked up on when he deemed the "Seas and Rivers" section a poetic "embellishment," but what it actually accentuates is how the entire book is not a transcription of reality, but a massive erasure poem. As Reznikoff states, "I throw out an awful lot to achieve my purpose" ("A Tall" 107). Repetitive and selective naming doesn't so much destroy or create but refocus the lens on how naming and serial forms of documental representation structure phenomenal reality. Contemporary poet Robin Coste Lewis has said of erasure poems, "Like a photograph, a poem or story erases what is outside of its frame, but, here's the curious part, also like a photograph it captures the unintended, and sometimes that turns out to be the most engaging part of the text: its accidents. Literary erasure is both an aesthetic and political tool to buoy this." Through careful selection, particularly in excising judicial ruling and narrative conclusion, Reznikoff draws out the unintended details caught in a recording machine not as a surviving human remnant, but as a material trace of anonymous suffering.

And in this section, lists of names evoke a shared ideology even as they denote individuals. Ships like "Harvest Queen," "Sea Nymph," "Golden Age," and "Gold Hunter" display the gendered and colonial ideology behind their purpose, and their optimism as well. "Captain Proud," "Captain Ivory," "James Fortune" and "John Law" at once comment ironically on the brutality of captains directed against seamen and appear entirely conflated with the commodities they promise. Auster wrote of Reznikoff's poetry: "It is a process by which one places oneself between things and the names of things, a way of standing watch in this interval of

silence and allowing things to be seen” (151). In his estimation, “Reznikoff is essentially a poet of *naming*” (Auster 161). In this section, the names of types of boats, weather patterns, horizon visibilities, and cargo take on a phenomenal descriptive capacity, giving a texture and pace to the flow of commodities through maritime trade. The work is less about “allowing things to be seen,” though, than about allowing nonlinear movement itself to be registered through a stream of iterative sonic flow. Goods, boats, weather, and even the sky, as well as bodies and injuries, are all recorded as shifting surfaces for this movement of capital.

Reznikoff upends the premises of containment, consolidation, and conservation that empower record keeping and cataloging, with particular reference to legal encyclopedias that amass examples to substantiate summaries of precedent. He also works against the grain of a similar documentary ethos that would use images of particular people to stand in for a broader social problem, allowing the viewer to sympathize from a distance. By serially accruing a mass of particular details that photographically index occurrences and yet fail to cohere symbolically or narratively, *Testimony* disaggregates suffering from cause and remedy. It stands apart from the documentary projects of its era by admitting the pressure of the multitude into poetic form, provoked by the infinite index of legal archives.

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### ***The Book of the Dead***

Muriel Rukeyser’s 1938 long poem, *The Book of the Dead*, also refutes the representational structure common to 1930s documentary culture and reform literature. In his review, William Carlos Williams commends the twenty-five-year old’s innovative use of archival materials. “Her material,” he writes, “*not* her subject matter but her poetic material, is in part the notes of a

congressional investigation, an x-ray report and the testimony of a physician under cross-examination” (89 original emphasis). Like Reznikoff four years earlier, Rukeyser incorporates bits and pieces of archival documents as the very material of her poetry. But Williams goes on to re-enforce a binary that would have these documents remain apart from the aesthetic domain of poetics: “She knows how to use the language of an x-ray report or a stenographic record of a cross-examination [...] She understands what words are for and how important it is not to twist them in order to make ‘poetry’ of them” (89-90).<sup>22</sup> Putting “poetry” in scare quotes, Williams implicitly references the on-trend American modernist aversion to Tennysonian poetics, even as he maintains distinctions of aesthetic autonomy premised on frames of use value, intention, and context. Rukeyser uses recorded material but does not use it as poetry, because poetic language is not for use. But Rukeyser herself would question this dichotomy in her essay, “The Usable Truth,” borrowing a phrase from Herman Melville to define what she calls “the attitude of poetry, capable of facing the tragic, the complex, the fantastic, capable of meeting the process of reason that works, not in the single-track a, b, c, d of logic, but rather in the cluster-to-cluster progress of an emotional sequence” (207). Rather than simply work to preserve a shared aesthetic tradition, poetry’s non-narrative paratactic logic is put to use to think the complexities of social life and its material documents.

Rukeyser uses poetry in *The Book of the Dead* to assemble medical and legal records alongside personal testimony and photographic witness to prompt an emotional readerly response. Sarah Ehlers suggests that this poetics “glances [at] a possible ethical relation, one in

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<sup>22</sup> Eda Lou Walton’s review for *The New York Times Book Review* maintains the same distinction, but negatively: “‘The Book of the Dead,’ a report on a village dying of silicosis is the material for poetry, but it is not poetry. This is reporting and not the imaginative vision” (19). Unfortunately, this reactionary delimitation of poetry as ahistorical “imaginative vision” is still with us. For a contemporary analysis of the longstanding generic division between documentary and poetry, see Joseph Harrington, “Docupoetry and Archive Desire,” *Jacket* 2, October 27, 2011.

which another might be made present but not subjected to representation” (92). Appealing to poetic tropes of prosopopoeia and apostrophe, Ehlers implies that the poem can invoke another without taking part in the typification required of recognition politics. What does it mean to make another present in poetry, without representing them? Ehlers continues, “the inclusion of the dead as part of the material reality of the living engenders expansive notions of collectivity and history that change the scale of politics” (92). In an example of what I have called empathetic vitalism, Ehlers conflates material remnants of bodies (x-ray reports, lungs held as evidence) with the persistence of individuals. Non-fiction documentary poetry is often understood to reference or make present some originary body to which historical trauma clings; whether they are revived as newly living or as a ghostly apparition, their (spectral) presence speaks to a humanist valuation of selfhood as continuous, immaterial, and forever counting towards a larger whole. What would it mean to think the materials that Rukeyser uses to assemble her poetic and aesthetic object as remnants, not as sustained spiritual presences but as material remnants, of the encounter between actual people and governing structures of evidentiary representation? In the second half of this chapter, I will read *The Book of the Dead* as a documentary poem that upsets notions of revivification, haunting, and incorporation of part into totality that many of its readings rely upon. Instead, I read the remnants of human-industrial body parts that the poem records as part of Rukeyser’s photo-poetics, as indexing not identifiable people or their ghostly presences, but estranging and inscrutable encounters between bodies and the legal, medical, and legislative systems of representation by which they are captured. Such a photo-poetic reading allows for an impersonal indexicality that does not reference specific individuals, but arranges discursive fragments whose repetition and diffusion signal unquantifiable loss.

## **The Hawk's Nest Disaster**

In March of 1930, at the height of the Great Depression, the Rinehart and Dennis Company of Virginia won the contract with Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation to begin drilling a three-mile-long tunnel through Gauley Mountain in West Virginia. The tunnel would divert water from New River to a hydroelectric dam overseen by the New Kanawha Power Company, which was licensed as a public utility, but was in fact a subsidiary of Union Carbide. The power produced by the dam was then used to fuel a metallurgical plant in nearby Alloy, also owned by Union Carbide. The contract stipulated the tunnel must be completed within two years, pending economic penalties. Agents employed by Rinehart and Dennis spread news of available jobs to Georgia and the Carolinas and thousands of migrant workers, predominantly African Americans with no connections in West Virginia, arrived to populate work camps set up at the mouth of the tunnel. Fewer than twenty percent of the men who worked in the tunnel were locals and seventy-five percent were Black, in a predominantly white region. This company strategy of distributing liability and cordoning off workers from the local population meant that when the workers began to get sick and die, both medical and legal remedy and public opinion were against them.<sup>23</sup>

Consisting largely of silica quartz, Gauley Mountain has veins of nearly pure silica, which the tunnel was engineered to strike, as the refined mineral was used in the processing of steel at the metallurgical plant. In fact, sections of the tunnel were widened in these veins in order to maximize extraction. The tunnel was thus both a means of channeling the river to fuel an electric dam and also a silica mine (House Subcommittee). For twenty-five years prior to its

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<sup>23</sup> Martin Cherniack, *The Hawk's Nest Incident: America's Worst Industrial Accident*. 15-23. These conditions also contributed to how dismissive most media coverage of the incident was: "The extraordinarily rapid dispersal of the work force—together with the suppression of information by the companies involved and the local lack of concern for the plight of despised migrants and blacks—was a major factor in expunging events from memory" (Cherniack 87).

construction, the U.S. Department of Mines had been warning about the dangers of silica and its direct link to the fatal lung disease silicosis, which results from breathing in fine particulate silica dust (Dayton 19). As a 1938 info-doc produced by the Department of Labor demonstrates, silica dust can pass through a sieve that holds water, meaning its particles can also pass through otherwise non-porous lung tissue, where it blocks oxygen to the blood. As the lungs produce tough scar tissue in response to the silica dust, their functionality reduces, choking the patient internally. In order to meet their two-year deadline, Rinehart and Dennis, overseen closely by Union Carbide, had the men drill the rock dry, because wetting the drills using a series of pipes would cost more and be less efficient. They also did not provide masks or other safety precautions for their employees, forcing them back into the tunnel shortly after blasts, and urging sick men to work until they had to be carried out. The conservative guess is that 764 workers died from silicosis during or immediately after the tunnel's construction, but because the disease can take years to cause death, because many men were buried in mass, unmarked graves, the numbers are likely much higher. According to Union Carbide, 4,887 men were employed in the construction and 2,982 worked in the tunnel itself (Dayton 17).<sup>24</sup>

Lawsuits on behalf of the employees began to be filed in 1932, but what has come to be known as The Hawk's Nest Disaster, one of the worst industrial "accidents" in U.S. history, did not receive widespread news coverage until the mid-1930s, when the U.S. Congress held hearings on whether or not to begin an investigation into Union Carbide's practices. (They voted against this and against bills designed to prevent workers' exposure to silica dust.) In 1936, twenty-two-year-old Muriel Rukeyser travelled from her home in New York City with

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<sup>24</sup> The numbers of men that Union Carbide paid undertaker Hadley C. White to bury in unmarked graves, without performing medical examinations or informing their families, is also unclear. At trial, White admitted he was paid 55 dollars for each body and claimed there were 33. But a rumor that gained traction put the number at 169 (Cherniack 59).

documentary filmmaker/photographer Nancy Naumburg to Fayette County, West Virginia to speak with survivors and witnesses, visit the dam, and gather data for what Leslie Ann Minot wrote “can only be described as a documentary in verse” (270). At this time, she had already published her first collection, *Theory of Flight*, for which she won the Yale Younger Poets Award, and had become involved in activism in the U.S., protesting the Scottsboro Boys trial in Alabama, and abroad, travelling to Barcelona to cover the People’s Olympiad and witness the start of the Spanish Civil War.<sup>25</sup> The West Virginia project was initially intended to include photographs, in line with other photo-poetic documentary projects of the era. But all except a few of the negatives that Naumburg took were lost and the book was published in 1938 without images, though with the shadow of a camera on its pages.

## Photographs

As many critics have pointed out, *The Book of the Dead* has a paradoxical relationship to documentary photographic technology, at times seeming to critique its authoritarian neutrality and at others relying on its rhetoric of exposure. By the mid-1930s, poets and photographers were beginning to wonder about the ethics of photographing the poor, while still acknowledging the need to document large scale suffering.<sup>26</sup> Shoshana Wechsler summarizes this paradox by noting that the silicosis epidemic could not be exposed without the use of “silicon-based photomechanical technology and the representational field it supports” (228). Justin Parks writes that Rukeyser exhibits a “self-critiquing incrimination of the camera as the tool of a liberal-

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<sup>25</sup> Rukeyser’s fifty-page FBI file, citing her activist work and publications, and her affiliation with the American Student Union, *New Masses*, People’s Radio Foundation, Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee, among others, holds her to be a “concealed Communist.” A 1952 memo in her file recommends putting her under surveillance, and officially marks her “Communist” (Thurston 178).

<sup>26</sup> See for example James Agee’s critique of Margaret Bourke-White in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, “Notes and Appendices.”

technocratic ideology of photographic visibility” (156). Sarah Ehlers writes that often the camera “controverts the authority of the poetic speaker” and sets a kind of wall of glass between the worker and the onlooker within the poem. Wechsler writes in a more positive valence that in the context of the 1930s documentary age in which “poverty and catastrophe had become a spectacle,” Rukeyser “erases the boundaries between [...] pen and camera” to undo readerly passivity (236). Leslie Ann Minot makes a similar point, that Rukeyser’s metaphoric use of photographed particulars compels a readerly response and makes political “action and change possible” (266). David Kadlec, on the other hand, critiques supposedly revelatory imaging technology, writing disparagingly that “Rukeyser portrayed the X-ray camera as a penetrating medium that could retrieve emancipatory truths from Gauley tunnel” (27). All these accounts assume that Rukeyser echoes photographic forms and documentary tools of exposure, even if she is also critical of them.

I agree with many of these critics that Rukeyser has a paradoxical relationship with documentary photography, but rather than suggest that she relied on its techniques of exposure while resenting its presumed authority or separation from the subject, I want to shift the terms slightly to think about both poet and camera as a document-producers, tools that turn bodies into legible documents, a dynamic with which Rukeyser realized she was forced to engage. That is, she does not simply reject and/or champion the logic of exposure but questions the broader context of record-keeping and documentality as such. Specifically, by reading the documentary photograph, the fossilized body part, and the x-ray image as material legal records with an indexical relation to a crime, Rukeyser asks how bodies become evidence in medical, judicial, and legislative settings. When a crime was committed by a shifting corporate “person” with the legal power of an oligarch, when unmarried Black plaintiffs were awarded less money than

Union Carbide paid the undertaker to bury workers in mass graves, Rukeyser questioned the principles of representation, recognition, accountability, and even keeping count, that form the core of documentary ethics, legal equality, and poetic elegy.

About forty pages long and originally published in the collection, *U.S. 1, The Book of the Dead* is a mix of lyric monologues, excerpts from the Egyptian Book of the Dead, and fragments largely taken from the House Subcommittee hearing on whether to investigate Union Carbide. It feels epic at times, lyric and meditative at others, and at others still has the more didactic tone of a travelogue with labor politics. Phillips Metres wrote that it “evokes ‘The Waste Land’—if it had been written by Rosa Luxemburg.” Rukeyser derived the collection’s title from the Federal Writers’ Project travelogue, *U.S. One: Maine to Florida*, which was sponsored by the Highway Association and also published in 1938 (Kadlec 27). As the travelogue’s jacket blurb explains, not simply a route guide, it “tell[s] things about the country and places along U.S. #1 that only natives know—things that strangers might have to spend weeks or months in a place to find out.” Indeed, the first poem of *The Book of the Dead*, titled “The Road,” echoes the tone of a guidebook, instructing the reader directly using the second person and deictically gesturing to the lines of verse themselves as if they drew the reader’s route:

These are roads to take when you think of your country  
and interested bring down the maps again,  
phoning the statistician, asking the dear friend,  
  
reading the papers with morning inquiry.  
  
Or when you sit at the wheel and your small light  
chooses gas gauge and clock (61)

The reader follows Rukeyser in real time while also taking direction from her verse, “past your tall central city’s influence” to “touch West Virginia.” Clearly the poem participates in the era’s broader ethos of voyaging out and “discovering” the country through the expansion of interstate highways, the bloom of personal camera ownership, and the widescale publication of documentary images from rural areas. As the poem arrives at Gauley Bridge, it continues in the present tense: “Now the photographer unpacks camera and case, / surveying the deep country, follows discovery / viewing on groundglass an inverted image” (62). Even as the photographer is invoked, her “surveying” eye does not reproduce what is in front of her but is mediated by a lens that inverts the image. Rukeyser doesn’t simply critique documentary or tourist photography, but her own (and the reader’s) tendency to manifest inverted perception that sees through one’s own preconceptions. As she puts it elsewhere, “the act of seeing opens new contradictions. For these eyes are mostly memory and partly moral, they bring their sentimentality and their traditions for furniture and set every scene for us a little” (qtd. Parks 159). The camera comes to signify a desire for proximity to the other that is interrupted by the act of recording, not simply in the moment, but even in advance of perception itself. The viewer finds the scene pre-framed, its symbolic and political relevance pre-scripted. Rather than read the photographer as a stand-in for the poet, I suggest that she takes the place of the reader, who follows the road of the poem and records it in memory or underlines passages as he reads, much like a tourist snapping photos. The poem ends:

Here is your road, tying

you to its meanings: gorge, boulder, precipice.

Telescoped down, the hard and stone-green river

cutting fast and direct into the town. (63)

The enjambment ties the reader to the line of poetry itself and Rukeyser uses deixis again to connect him to the road he must follow.<sup>27</sup> Its meaning will not be symbolic, but literal: the mountain's rock and the river's water that lead directly and menacingly into town. Rukeyser foreshadows how extractive capitalism imports violence into the landscape itself, as the "hard and stone-green river / cutting fast" already alludes to silica mining. The reader seems to record the poem through camera and telescope, as though spying on an encounter from which he is absent. Rukeyser cautions the reader regarding the vicarious intimacy she will momentarily provide him, at once guiding him along her poem and through his country and warning him against liberal reform tropes of imaging poverty.

In the fourth poem of the twenty-part sequence, "Gauley Bridge," Rukeyser offers an ekphrastic reading of a what seems to be an absent photograph, though what it describes is less a specific image than a technical mode of perception: "Camera at the crossing sees the city." She notes the distorted image it produces through its prolonged exposure time, marking the still and blurred figures in the town's intersection. The poem records both what the camera can and cannot see: "the little boy runs with his dog [...] he blurs the camera-glass fixed on the street" (68). By implying that the boy blurs the glass, rather than the photograph blurs him, Rukeyser again warns of photographic inversion that privileges the subjective-technical camera eye and its will to record above ephemeral reality. Later, she more directly challenges the reader's expectations of aesthetic pleasure: "What do you want—a cliff over a city? / A foreland, sloped to sea and overgrown with roses? / These people live here" (70). And yet, she has described no

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<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Kahana outlines how documentary films use deixis to emphasize "the immediacy of communication and the reversibility of the speaker's and listener's positions" (110). Rukeyser uses it in this instance to force a reflexive awareness of reading documentary as a mode of tourism.

particular people in this poem, only disembodied forms and categories of people: “the deserted Negro standing on the corner,” hands passing envelopes in the post office, “the tall coughing man,” “the hotel man,” “the waitress and the yellow apron.”<sup>28</sup> Instead, the poem is filled with infrastructure and reflective surfaces: “Glass, wood, and naked eye”: “many panes of glass / tin under light, the grey shine of towns and forests”; “books behind the public glass”; “post office window, a hive of private boxes”; “April-glass-tinted”; “plateglass window”; “harsh night eyes over the beerglass.” There is a tense feeling of watching and being watched, of even the “eyes of the tourist house” looking back at you (69). If we can read the “here” of “these people live here” as a deictic akin to “here is your road,” then “here” is not a real place, but the space of the poem itself, and the “people” just surfaces the eyes hit as they move across the page.

Rather than simply warn the reader against idealizing this small American town (though she does that too), Rukeyser is warning us to be aware of our own inverted perception that assumes we’ve captured something of the lives of these people beyond the representational artifacts they offer or inadvertently provide to the archive. The poem rejects the empathetic vitalism that would supposedly make people present without submitting them to representation; instead, it subsumes the entire visual field into a complex scene of signification, whereby people pictured are only available to us as representative types. Moreover, the glassy reflective surfaces evoke the silica that, as Wechsler notes, is used to create camera lenses, but of course is also the danger of the tunnel itself. It is precisely this camera eye that links the viewer to the violence of extractive capitalism; the same logic that sickens and kills these workers for profit would use their reproduced images for cultural capital. Rukeyser warns elsewhere of the through-line that

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<sup>28</sup> Justin Parks notes the excess of disjointed body parts in *The Book of the Dead*, and writes, “perhaps the most striking aspect of this section of the poem, though, is its proliferation of disembodied hands and eyes that assume an agency all their own, suggesting the process of photographic image-making by isolating the two organs on which this process relies” (167).

links white colonialism and westward expansion to both industrial exploitation and documentary voyeurism.<sup>29</sup> And yet, by engaging directly with the verbal and physical testimony proffered by the workers and their families, *The Book of the Dead* asks what we do with the materials that are left behind. This photo-poetic work produces an alternate record to counter the official histories, figured as a different road into the country itself, as it is discursively produced by inherited archives, precisely by attending to the indexicality of body parts turned into documents.

### Fossils

In one of the work's lyric monologues, "Absalom," Rukeyser throws the voice of the poet to Emma Jones, who had lost three sons and would soon lose her brother and her husband to silicosis. She tells of trying to get x-rays for her sons, being refused by the doctor because she couldn't afford it, and finally begging enough money to take them to the hospital. As Michael Thurston writes, "readers familiar with the documentary culture of the period would recognize in Mrs. Jones, in her understated determination and her flat tone, the strong and stoic mother figure represented over and over again in the work of Bourke-White and Caldwell or, perhaps most famously, that of Dorothea Lange."<sup>30</sup> Her youngest son, Shirley, was presumably too sick to travel and so told her, "Mother, when I die, / I want you to have them open me up and / see if that dust killed me" (80). In Catherine Venable Moore's introduction to the 2018 reissue of *The*

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<sup>29</sup> See, for example, in the titular poem, where she warns of American exceptionalism and its perpetual "frontiers" as a "fanatic cruel legend at our back and / speeding ahead the red and open west" (110).

<sup>30</sup> Thurston also notes the artificiality of this documentary trope that Rukeyser highlights in her careful editing of archival materials. He argues that Rukeyser knowingly traffics in documentary conventions in order to postpone a merely sympathetic response: "the conventions simultaneously refer to themselves so that the object of our sympathy is already ironized, already placed within critical quotation marks, already recognized as a construction; our sympathy itself, therefore, is bracketed by Rukeyser's complex eliciting of it." (181)

*Book of the Dead*, in which she writes of travelling to the region and interviewing descendants of the Hawk's Nest Disaster, she informs us that a doctor did perform autopsies on Jones's sons:

The doctor, in fact, preserved the lungs of all three brothers, hardened like cement, in jars as proof of their disease. *The Jones Boys*. That's what the doctor's son and his wife called the disembodied lungs after the old doctor died [...] The lungs sat in the couple's basement for years like forgotten pickles—until they loaded them into a the back of their pickup truck, drove them up to the dump at the top of Cotton Hill Mountain, and chucked them over the side. 'They sure made a racket when they went down over the mountain,' the woman said later in an oral history, 'but it sounded like just one jar broke.' (35)

The petrified silicotic lung of Shirley Jones, who offered up a piece of himself to be rendered evidentiary, is a strange hybrid of human and mineral, a direct product of his exposure to silicosis and the cause of his death.<sup>31</sup> To use Lynne Huffer's words, his lung is a fossil that "undoes subjectivity and life itself at the site of humanism's heart: the archive" (139). If humanism insists on the permanence and continued meaning of human life in this world, on the future significance of life after death, then the archive is its documental instantiation.<sup>32</sup> As Jacques Derrida writes, the archive is not about the past, but "a question of the future, the question of the future itself," of a future that never arrives as such but is shaped and pre-occupied by the archive (36). And the archive is also premised upon its own corporeal continuity, an unbroken chain of custody that maintains the authenticity and wholeness of the document. The fossilized lung stored in the

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<sup>31</sup> Cherniack writes that in the 1932 case filed on behalf of Emma's eldest son, Cecil Jones, by his widow, Dora Jones, "medical testimony [...] was dramatized by the introduction into evidence of the preserved lungs of Jones and also those of Walter Lewis Scott, another local man" (60).

<sup>32</sup> Wai Chee Dimock writes, in advance of this continuance, that "to see the grave as the midpoint rather than the endpoint of human relations, is to call for a new ethics, a new politics, and a new aesthetics, all based on a broader definition of the species as partly actual and partly virtual [...] in reproducing us, perhaps against our will, it gives us a deep field of kinship, more robustly expressive of our humanity than our own life span" (*Through Other Continents*, 58-9). Dimock even cites the Egyptian Book of the Dead as a master text of remaining human after death. In this sense, it is the virtual continuance of life in the archive that becomes more lively than living.

doctor's basement signifies the Hawk's Nest Disaster, but always threatens to fall from this context of meaningfulness into a mute and strange material thing, thrown from its inheritance. What archival photo-poetics accentuates is this precarity and mutability of a document's significance, the movement between the meaningful remnant that is captioned with a name and the unidentifiable material remainder. Rukeyser's use of deixis, gesturing to absent images, brings this movement to the fore.

Optimistic readings of *The Book of the Dead*, as well as hopeful take-aways from the disaster itself, are premised upon teleological readings of the archive, specifically, that the deaths and suffering served a preventative purpose.<sup>33</sup> Such recuperative readings tend to gloss over the preventability of the disaster itself, the fact that Union Carbide knew what they were doing, the fact that countless other such preventable race- and class-related disasters have followed it, the fact that environmental racism persists today. These bodies and body parts that Rukeyser herself tries to record are not an accidental by-product but the purposeful effect of an extraction economy that treats racialized bodies as a material resource.<sup>34</sup> In her account of this poem, Sarah Ehlers writes that "Shirley is possessed and possessing: he is the ghost that haunts the poem, 'roaming the earth among the living' in order to imagine a form of collectivity that transcends bourgeois fantasies of subjectivity and political alignment" (89). This revitalizing reading of

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<sup>33</sup> The House Subcommittee closed its report with the following exhortation: "Congress should do no less than to see that these citizens from many States who have paid the price for the electricity to be developed from the tunnel are vindicated. If by their suffering and death they will have made life safer in future for the men who go beneath the earth to work, if they will have been able to establish a new and greater regard for human life in industry, their suffering may not have been in vain" (Cherniack 79).

<sup>34</sup> Geologist Kathryn Yusoff provides a useful account of race and extractive, colonial economies in her recent book, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018). She writes of "White Geology as a historical regime of material power" that produces temporal and spatial dislocations premised upon white anthropocentric definitions of agency and inertness. She writes of extraction economies operating across both ecological and racial zones of mattering, critiquing Anthropocene discourse for only now noticing what "Black Anthropocenes" already knew: the violent exposures to toxicity and pollution that subtend profits of geologic extraction.

haunting presumes a shared ethics and shared metric of value that does not exist in this context of intentional industrial exploitation. It reanimates Shirley and gives him an individuated agency. But what Rukeyser engages with is actually the poesis of documents as such within personal engagements with the law under capitalism. *The Book of the Dead* does not produce liveliness among the dead bodies it records but anticipates the archival sediments that Michel Foucault would call “poem-lives,” denoting the commonplace people whose representations exist in an archive by virtue of a flash of contact with the law.<sup>35</sup> Her project cares less about salvaging individuals (knowing this to be impossible) than about how people offer their bodies up to be rendered documental for the purposes of legal recompense, and what we do with these remnants after the law fails to offer any meaningful redress.

Rukeyser visited the British Museum during her trip to England in 1936 and saw the Egyptian Book of the Dead, a collection of sacred texts placed in coffins and meant to guide the deceased in the afterlife, from which she imports material for her poem (Dayton, 24-5).<sup>36</sup> “Absalom” quotes directly from, paraphrases, and echoes the style of the Egyptian Book of the Dead even as it draws from Philippa Allen’s testimony before the House Subcommittee, where she speaks of Emma Jones’s experience.<sup>37</sup> The fairly straightforward testimony (“Shirley was my youngest son; the boy. / He went into the tunnel”) is punctuated by italicized fragments that seem to prosopoetically give voice to Shirley: “My heart    my mother    my heart    my mother / My heart    my coming into being” (79). The repeated possessive phrases are separated by breaks, as though marking the pause between heart beats. The lyric monologue continues to tell

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<sup>35</sup> See Foucault’s essay, “The Lives of Infamous Men,” which was written as an introduction to a collection of eighteenth-century police records.

<sup>36</sup> She drew largely from the E.A. Wallis Budge edition.

<sup>37</sup> The title also references the Second Book of Samuel in the Old Testament, in which David laments the unnecessary murder of his son.

the story of Mrs. Jones's struggle with doctors and lawyers, trying to name the other men affected and the places nearby, before she states, "the whole valley is witness." Finally, the poem ends:

They called it pneumonia at first.

They would pronounce it fever.

Shirley asked that we try to find out.

That's how they learned what the trouble was.

*I open out a way, they have covered my sky with crystal*

*I come forth by day, I am born a second time,*

*I force a way through, and I know the gate*

*I shall journey over the earth among the living.*

He shall not be diminished, never;

I shall give a mouth to my son. (82)

At first glance, it would seem that these lines corroborate Ehlers's and others' readings of Shirley as a ghostly presence given voice and agency through his mother's testimony. I argue, however, that Shirley does not go on living, become reborn, nor is he even elegized in this poem; Rukeyser shows instead that he is entirely estranged, corporeally and linguistically, from his self, indeed that his body has become the vehicle of that estrangement. Rather than exhibit the "unity of subject and object that prefigures the moment at which history comes under genuine human control," as Tim Dayton suggests, the case of Shirley expresses radical loss of control in the face of capitalism's devaluation of human life (50).

The *Egyptian Book of the Dead* is not a prayer impossibly spoken aloud after the time of death, as Dayton claims,<sup>38</sup> but an incessant, redundant textual inscription that encased the body in reams of “spells” written on the bandages that held together a body emptied of its organs.<sup>39</sup> Prayers were even carved into stones that were then sewn into bodies, as was the case with the Heart Amulet of Hatnofer, which was on display at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art when Rukeyser was writing *The Book of the Dead* (Kadlec 32). Shirley’s is a body suffused with textual significance, in terms of the medical and legal cases to which he offered his organs for interpretation. Neither the speaker of this monologue nor its subject is unified; rather, he is distended, diffused. The poem’s language pretends to be Jones’s voice but is actually derived from Allen’s testimony; the lines Shirley supposedly speaks are ventriloquized excerpts of ancient mythology. Moreover, the emphasis on possessing one’s own organs (“They gave me back my heart, it lies in me” ... “I have gained mastery over my heart / I have gained mastery over my two hands”) is directly contradicted by both the Egyptian burial practice referenced in the poem and the Western medical procedure that Shirley’s corpse underwent. At the time of his death, Shirley was told he had pneumonia or fever; though intuitively he knew it was the tunnel’s silica dust that was killing him, he did not have authoritative knowledge of or control over his own condition. The poem’s final couplet further extends Shirley’s body, as giving him a “mouth” bears a stronger sense of materiality than, say, “giving a voice” to an issue does. Entering him into legal and medical archives as a textual-material fossil of human-mineral encounter, Mrs. Jones and Muriel Rukeyser do offer Shirley a certain “*journey over the earth among the living*,”

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<sup>38</sup> He writes that Shirley speaks the above quoted lines, “just as a dead man equipped with the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* would recite his prayers” (50).

<sup>39</sup> As the Egyptologist Foy Scalf explains: “The mummified body could be inserted into a casing made of cartonnage, a semi-hard shell formed from layering sheets of linen and papyrus covered with plaster [...which] served as important canvases for funerary decoration and text. Book of the Dead spells were commonly applied to these objects, ranging from spell excerpts to entire sequences consisting of dozens of spells inside and out” (24-5).

*not* as a living being or a ghostly apparition, but as a fossil, a nonhuman artifact that indexes a particular history. Fossilization is the molecular replacement of living tissue (animal or plant) with silica or other minerals. What was living is preserved well beyond death, but only as a fragmented material index, a sort of stone photograph. The lungs of the Jones boys were conserved in jars for ninety years; the silicotic lungs of those buried under ground would also decay at a different rate than human tissue and could still be exhumed today. Fossilization is not a metaphor, in this case, but a literal material archive interpretable through its historical context.

Fossilization has also been a natural process by which photography theorists have understood photochemical reproduction. André Bazin tracks what he calls the “mummy-complex,” or the realistic representation of someone for the purposes of preserving them, through ancient Egypt to contemporary photography. Writing in 1960 on the “ontology of photography,” he claims that photography “embalms time” and shares a “common being” with the object itself, “after the fashion of a fingerprint” (8). It is a continuation of Egyptian mummification as a desire for the permanence of being in altered form. Bazin goes on: “The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it *is* the model” (8). The ontological sameness of photographic image and model is derived less from its mimetic value than from its mechanical process; the camera’s nonhuman act of recording light hitting the body is what renders the photographic image a trace of the thing itself (Bazin 7). Rukeyser adapted the photo-documentary methods of her day but directed them away from particular individuals and towards these impersonal fossils. Shirley offers his lungs as an apparatus that involuntarily recorded the

industrial greed that caused his death. Less an aesthetic preservation of his self, it is a material relic, ontologically contiguous with a historical event that played out within the bodies of precarious men. Rukeyser's use of the Egyptian Book of the Dead suggests that she was working out precisely this "mummy-complex" in her own poetry: legal and medical archives already preserve impersonal bodies as fossils and records of historical occurrences, but poetry asks how we may use them.

### **X-Rays**

Initially, it might seem that *The Book of the Dead* is comprised of incompatible modalities: the photographic reflective surfaces of "Gauley Bridge" and the material fossilization of "Absalom." The former warns of an inverted documentary gaze that captures images of suffering and repeats white imperial perception. The latter is a strange index, impersonal and bodily, material and historical. The x-ray photograph offers a way to think these two modes together, as a photograph of silicotic lungs, which many sick workers volunteered or paid for in order to substantiate their legal claims against Union Carbide. In his essay, "X-Ray Testimonials in Muriel Rukeyser," David Kadlec argues that *The Book of the Dead* models itself after the penetrating and truth-revealing form of the x-ray photograph, obscuring the technology's ideological and racist functions, and in turn leading Rukeyser to misread the Gauley Tunnel Disaster as an issue of class instead of race. X-rays were widely used by employers at the time to screen potential workers for tuberculosis, which disproportionally affected poor immigrants and African Americans. As Kadlec puts it, "mass radiography campaigns served to cleanse 'racial' and 'ethnic' groups of the very claims to identity that might enable them to identify their mass subjugation. Penetrating visible markers of identity, X-ray screenings hid the evidence of the

racist work that they performed” (35). The x-ray doesn’t “see” race and so could be adopted as a supposedly neutral technology that shielded companies from liability for pre-existing lung diseases, including silicosis, which was predominantly contracted by Black men who performed the most dangerous work. While I agree with Kadlec regarding the racist use of x-ray screenings, I wouldn’t say that “Rukeyser portrayed the X-ray camera as a penetrating medium that could retrieve emancipatory truths from Gauley tunnel” (27), nor that the book itself is “a poetic approximation of the spatial and temporal depths of modern medical visual technologies” (30).<sup>40</sup> Rather than mimic photographic and technological tropes of exposure, I suggest that Rukeyser theorizes the absence of bodies nonetheless indexed by documents through her own archival photo-poetics.

Far from “emancipating” anyone with expository narrative, Rukeyser expresses the tenuous connection between visibility and legibility in large part by using deixis that gestures to absent images even as it marks their significance within the archives. By repurposing legal records in which speakers point to an absent x-ray image to substantiate their claims, Rukeyser accentuates the role of interpretation in the construction of archival documents. X-ray imaging was not a perfect science, and, as Kadlec points out was “in fact riddled with technical contingencies” that required interpretation (31). He writes, “modern medicine had generated a self-encrypting machine, one that robbed patients of the insides of their bodies as it wrested powers of signification away from the professionals it served” (31). The X-ray estranges the body from both the patient, whose internal bones and organs are read in a language unavailable to him, and the doctor, who is no longer the direct interpreter of the body’s pains and symptoms,

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<sup>40</sup> The “truths” of the workers’ exploitation, though far from emancipatory, were made clear enough by the House Subcommittee hearing and the articles in *New Masses* and *People’s Press*, which were the first to report the disaster. See Philippa Allen, “Two Thousand Dying on the Job,” *New Masses*, January 15 and 22, 1935. “1500 Doomed,” *People’s Press*, December 7, 1935.

but the reader of the electromagnetic waves' way of seeing.<sup>41</sup> As Daston and Galison have written, the strength of "mechanical objectivity" in the nineteenth and early twentieth century lay in the shifting role of the scientist as a disciplined reader, and with the x-ray atlases, "everyone in the field addressed by the atlas must begin to learn to 'read' anew" (85). Indeed, accounts of how silicosis came to be defined at the time note the "lack of medical consensus regarding the mechanism by which silica dust affected lung tissue, the course of silicosis once diagnosed, or even the degree of disability associated with various stages of the disease" (Markowitz and Rosner 192). Methods by which diseased lungs were read were thus very much open to interpretation.

It was within the legal context of worker's compensation for disability that silicosis diagnoses were determined, which meant that the differing interpretations of physicians posed a problem for industry and labor leaders alike. In their account of the "silicosis crisis," Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner write that the chronic disease, with varying ongoing symptoms and differing levels of severity, threatened industrial, political, and insurance standards for worker's compensation, which usually responded to injuries on the job. Industry and insurance companies were worried about lay juries deciding compensation cases in response to individual doctors' testimony and advocated instead for an "impartial" board of experts to be appointed as an official body of the state with final ruling power. Markowitz and Rosner note that such an "impartial" board would use "the appearance of medical and scientific objectivity [...] to cloak the reality of uncertainty, controversy, and differing political and social perspectives" on the disease, no doubt

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<sup>41</sup> Electromagnetic waves show parts of the body in black and white because different tissues absorb different amounts of radiation. Bones' calcium absorbs the most, so they look the whitest and air absorbs the least, so healthy lungs look black. X-rays use electromagnetic energy imperceptible to humans to create still images of human material. Like the photograph, it expands human perception; also like the photograph, it calls for new practices of reading.

to the benefit of industry (192). As insurance companies worked to limit the scope of compensation to disabilities that diminished the remunerative capacity of the worker, as opposed to diminishing their health in general, physicians had an even harder time defining silicosis. Because a reduced ability to earn wages was the new litmus test for a disability diagnosis, x-ray evidence was actually less useful than it initially seemed. Referencing work by George Wright at Saranac Laboratories, who wrote numerous articles on silicosis in the 1940s, they write that he “complained that an x-ray showing of ‘an anatomic alteration of the lungs or heart is still commonly used as evidence that these organs must of necessity be functioning abnormally [...] and the extent of the anatomic change is frequently considered an index of the degree of functional impairment’” (201). But according to Wright, “repeated experiments had shown little correlation between the medical evidence and measurements of a patient’s capacity to do work” (qtd. 201). That is, an employee could have silicotic lungs picturable in an x-ray, but still be able to work normally, and thus would not be eligible for compensation. As Wright states, “only functional impairment could be used to diagnose silicosis” (201). Because silicosis was a chronic disease defined specifically in relation to worker’s compensation laws that stipulated loss of earning capacity as definitive of disability, an x-ray showing alteration of lung tissue was not actually evidence of silicosis in a legal sense.

*The Book of the Dead* does not portray the x-ray as an unproblematic salvific technological aid to labor causes, but rather as a metaphor for the alienating archive itself: a biopolitical and legal recording apparatus that penetrates into private home and bodily strata while remaining impersonal. There is no one in charge of it; there is no one to whom it is entirely legible, but it will keep reproducing images and texts and objects and media with interpretability as its premise. The poem following “Absalom,” is titled “The Disease” and is comprised of

excerpts from the House Subcommittee interview with a physician presenting a series of x-ray images. “This is a lung disease,” it begins, and continues to gesture:

This is the X-ray picture taken last April.

I would point out to you: these are the ribs;

this is the region of the breastbone;

this is the heart (a wide white shadow filled with blood). (82)

When pointing out further advanced cases of silicosis, the doctor gestures to “nodules” on the lungs: “Third stage. Each time I place my pencil point: / There and there and there, there, there” (84). Like the poet laying out the map of the poem, gesturing to its lines as roads, the doctor maps out the disease on the body, his pencil landing on the page in a gesture that reproduces the data of the medical testimonial archive. He can only point to his own reading, to where his eyes are drawn and to what seems significant to him, but the repetition of “this” and “there” in the poem, without a corresponding image, produces an absence, gesturing to what is incorporated into the archive without being recognized or revealed. The doctor’s figurative language to describe the image emphasizes the potential idiosyncrasies of interpretation: “You’d say a snowstorm had struck the fellow’s lungs” (83). The break from plain scientific language, the colloquial “fellow” and “you’d say” seems to normalize the public viewing of a dying man’s organs, while the inverted figure of external weather to read an internal cavity estranges the evidentiary nature of the document, using an analogy that is at once hyper-visible and blinding. Rukeyser, in redirecting this bit of testimony, underscores the inscrutability imbedded in scientific discourse of material proof.

Rukeyser interrupts the doctor’s lesson with an excerpt from George Robison’s testimony to the committee: “It is growing worse every day. At night / I get up to catch my breath. If I

remained / flat on my back I believe I would die” (84). These lines counter the doctor’s abstractions, clarifying the imminent threat of death. The next stanza returns to the dialogue between the committee and the doctor: “It gradually chokes off the air cells in the lungs? / I am trying to say it the best I can” (84). The disease, the title of the poem and the referent of “it” in these excerpts, is everywhere and yet somehow still unapproachable. In the subcommittee hearing excerpts Rukeyser draws from, both the physician reading the x-ray and the patient describing his “functional impairment” assemble interpretive testimony of silicosis that still may not count as sufficient evidence. As Markowitz and Rosner write of New York State’s approach to legislating silicosis cases, the broader bill that folded it into worker’s compensation was rejected for driving up premiums, and the bill that finally passed “virtually made it impossible for workers to qualify for compensation” (198). As such, workers could be dying from a disease they know to have been caused by silica exposure in the workplace, and still not be diagnosable by company physicians or recognizable by the law. Rukeyser is clearly interested in how x-rays functioned in the cases brought against Union Carbide, but rather than redeploy them as vehicles of “emancipatory truths,” her arrangement of excerpts drawn from archives accentuates the vicissitudes in reading practices in personal, medical, and legal contexts. Moreover, her deictic gestures toward absent or unseeable images evoke a vacuity within photographic practices, not simply veracity and exposure. The unseeable and inscrutable x-ray images index the violent encounter of human tissue with industrial power, rather than any particular individuals.

## **Diffusions**

*The Book of the Dead* asks what we can make of human-material fragments and photographic indices lodged in the legal, governmental, and medical archives that assemble the historical

record of the Hawk's Nest Disaster. Documentary photographs, fossilized body parts, and x-ray images index the workers' bodies even as they subsume perception into recording apparatuses. This is less an account of recoverable subjectivity that forestalls future episodes of industrial exploitation, than it is a poetic expropriation of archival documents that demonstrates the transmutation of bodily suffering into diffuse and impersonal material relics.

As Rukeyser makes clear, this diffusion of the subject into nonhuman representation is also a problem of corporate personhood as distributed agency without accountability. One cannot question the intentions of Union Carbide. The use of an itinerant Black labor force, the mining of silica as the tunnel was drilled, the accelerated speed of the subcontracted job, and the open disregard for known safety precautions all indicate their bad intentions. And yet the company was hardly held accountable.<sup>42</sup> In his recent book, *Corporate Romanticism: Liberalism, Justice, and the Novel*, Daniel Stout critiques the assumed correlation between the rise of an uncomplicated individualism and enlightenment liberalism. He argues instead that the invention of corporations as legal persons challenged "the most basic assumption of liberalism and justice alike: that individual human persons might be meaningfully correlated with particular actions" (3). The same issue extended to industrialization, when "courts became confused about how to calculate liability in light of downstream effects" (Stout 4). What recognition, retribution, or justice is available, Stout asks in "liberalism without individualism, or an individualism without persons"? (18). Corporate personhood fractures the very possibility of restorative justice that

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<sup>42</sup> Hundreds of tunnel workers sued Rinehart and Dennis for compensation, as a clause of the company's contract with Union Carbide held them liable. The local court was overwhelmed with cases, the first two of which ended with hung juries or mistrials, so the suits, amounting to \$4 million, were settled out of court for a total of \$130 thousand. Half of this award went to attorneys in return for agreeing not to prosecute further (Union Carbide gave a further \$20 thousand to lawyers who agreed not to engage in further action). These lawyers also agreed to surrender all case files and records to the defense. Any new suits filed against Rinehart and Dennis would not be taken to court, but would be added to the settlement, further diluting workers' remuneration. In the end, 320 claimants received between \$30 to \$1600 each, "with single black laborers receiving the least and families of deceased whites [...] receiving the maximum payment" (Cherniack 65-67).

could clearly recognize personal responsibility, advancing instead an impersonal network of power that uses legal and medical authority, and financial compensation, to further enshroud itself. On the same page of the poem “The Dam,” which extolls the wide-reaching power and complicity of the monumental construction project, Rukeyser quotes both committee chairman Glen Griswold—“A corporation is a body without a soul”—and the rising stock and dividend of Union Carbide, reprinted in graph form (101). In her own footnote to the poem, Rukeyser further expands the causes and effects of the event, stating that “Gauley Bridge is inland, but it was created by theories, systems and workmen from many coastal sections—factors which are, in the end, not regional or national.” Rukeyser reads the broad systemic intention and unassailable diffusion of capitalism into stock exchange abstractions and particulate matter.

*The Book of the Dead* figures the diffuse agency of corporate greed through the white silica dust itself, which coats every body and surface of the region with its deceptive beauty. A poem titled “Alloy,” after the name of a nearby town and the term for fused metals, begins,

This is the most audacious landscape. The gangster’s  
stance with his gun smoking and out is not so  
vicious as this commercial field, its hill of glass.

Sloping as gracefully as thighs, the foothills,  
narrow to this, clouds over every town  
finally indicate the stored destruction.

Crystalline hill: a blinded field of white  
murdering snow, seamed by convergent tracks;

the travelling cranes reach for the silica. (99)

Rukeyser marks the brazen criminality of the enterprise and links it to the beauty of the landscape itself. The “snowstorm” of the patient’s x-rays is displaced onto the “blinded field of white / murdering snow” found in the nape of feminized hills “sloping gracefully as thighs.” The plunder is at once gendered and raced, as are many of the references to whiteness in the series. A poem that ventriloquizes George Robison’s testimony describes the tunnel blasts as white, the workers’ drinking water filled with dust, the nearby groves looking white with flour: “it stayed and the rain couldn’t wash it away and it twinkled / that white dust really looked pretty down around our ankles” (88). Alluding to slave or prisoner shackles, the dust encircles the men’s ankles but also permeates the entire environment, both the hills and the men’s bodies filled and covered with silica.

Kadlec reads the final stanza of this monologue as Rukeyser’s misinterpretation of the racialized nature of the Gauley Tunnel disaster. The lines are taken from Robison’s testimony, which reads, “As dark as I am, when I came out of that tunnel in the mornings, if you had been in the tunnel too and had come out at my side, nobody could have told which was the white man. The white man was just as black as the colored man” (House Subcommittee 67). To account for how the white dust could paradoxically darken the white man, Kadlec suggests that Robison switched the terms to reverse any potential “colorblindness of capitalist exploitation” and instead insist that “silicosis was a disease of racial proportions” (25). Rukeyser doesn’t grasp this, he argues, when she flips back Robison’s terms, writing, “As dark as I am, when I came out at the morning after the tunnel at night, / with a white man, nobody could have told which man was white. / The dust covered us both, and the dust was white” (87). While I agree that Rukeyser’s

appropriation of a form of Black resistance in the poem “George Robinson: Blues,”<sup>43</sup> is problematic, I hesitate to suggest that *The Book of the Dead* ignores the racist tactics of Union Carbide, and extractive capitalism, altogether. If the white dust figures the expansive logic of extractive white patriarchy itself, then Rukeyser doesn’t approach the disaster “colorblind,” but aware of how race is used to justify exploitation. As Susan Briante puts it, “white becomes a metaphor for the force of [...] economic and social control” (“Defacing”). In the poem “Power,” in which the speaker descends into the dam itself, guided by its proud engineer like Dante entering the Inferno, we are told that “the power-house stands skin-white at the transmitters’ side.” With this line, Rukeyser sutures together racial whiteness and the abstraction of personhood into industrial power.

The final poem of the series offers a kind of summary of settler imperialism, with clouds “lining the west horizon with their white / shining halations” that lead to the “disease” of exploitation that extends to farmers, sailors, and minors alike (117).<sup>44</sup> The poem ends with a rousing call to collective action, to “carry abroad the urgent need, the scene, / to photograph and to extend the voice” (123). In her own footnote to the text, Rukeyser wrote, “poetry can extend the document,” which has been the focus of much critical attention.<sup>45</sup> Justin Parks, for instance, writes that by “extending the document” Rukeyser attempts “to seize control of the documentary apparatus and put it at the service of humanist aims” (153). But *The Book of the Dead* hardly takes control over the modes of recording with which it engages; rather, it grapples with the diffusion and impersonality of industrial-legal power structures and the inscrutability of the documents that render people legible within those structures. The extension of the document that

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<sup>43</sup> She also appears to have misspelled Robison’s name.

<sup>44</sup> Briante makes a similar point, noting that Rukeyser contextualizes the industrial disaster at Gauley Bridge against a history of racial violence, including the Native American genocide and Civil War.

<sup>45</sup> See Michael Thurston’s chapter on Rukeyser, “Extending the Document,” for a recent example.

poetry performs is precisely this widening and estranging, so that it does not affix to particular individuals, so that its photographic indexicality extends to the Hawk's Nest Disaster and everything that allowed it to occur. *The Book of the Dead* lingers with the particularities of suffering, the grains of dust lodged in lung tissue, found in the archival documents that worked to contain and justify such suffering. What it offers, finally, are "Name and road, / communication to these many men, / as epilogue, seeds of unending love" (123). In other words, Rukeyser does not offer the communication of particular men, but names and roads (both literally and figuratively, alluding to the lines of her own poem) that might lead to "these many men," again both deictically gestured toward and absent. Ultimately, *The Book of the Dead* understands itself as an archival work among others, oriented toward a future that might receive the proliferation of care it offers.

If archival photo-poetics writes toward a potential future, it suggests that the missing images repeatedly indexed as though present in *The Book of the Dead* signal not simply absence, but latency.<sup>46</sup> In reference to a most famous absent image, Barthes's Winter Garden photograph of his mother as a child, George Baker reads the punctum as a latency that allows the affect of the photograph to germinate and disperse. Borrowing the term from photographer Moyra Davey, he writes that an "absent photograph" is an "image that exists only in the mind or in memory, in a text or in descriptive language" (89). By not including any particular photograph, but referring to several absent ones, of towns and lungs, Rukeyser allows their singularity to diffuse into inscrutability. "The photograph," Baker writes, "should be considered as potential, as becoming,

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<sup>46</sup> *The Book of the Dead* has itself received only belated sustained critical attention. As Dayton notes, it was relatively neglected until returning to print in 2000, before which it was only accessible through libraries' special collections (1). In his extensive and authoritative book on the Hawk's Nest Disaster published in 1986, Martin Cherniack notes that after much research, the only cultural artifact of the issue he found was the country song, "Silicosis is Killing Me," apparently never having found Rukeyser's book.

as germination, not as document, evidence, or index” (89). In *The Book of the Dead*, though, Rukeyser repurposes actual text and references absent images; the direct language of legal proceedings serves to index particular cases, while the general absence of images (including Nancy Naumburg’s photos) suggests a desire for latency or diffusion. What *The Book of the Dead* shows us is that photographic records in the form of images, fossils, and x-rays, can germinate through poetry without being personified. Material remains as historical relics index an interaction of body and extractive industry, and not because they are ghostly or spiritual communiques, but because they are material fragments, always capable of being found and repurposed, or merely thrown off a cliff.

The archival photo-poetics of Reznikoff and Rukeyser severs indexicality from individuality, in a departure from the representative methods of the documentary decade but in allegiance to its leftist politics. In their study of documents, they witness the fragility of a name and a body, the incapacity of an individual to hold together the diffuse occurrences of their life that nonetheless persist in archival form. These projects resist empathetic vitalism, which ties political and affective response to a sympathetic narrative account of suffering, and which attempts to recover originary bodies within the text. They ask, instead, what impersonal and multitudinous forms of persistence, latency, and muteness characterize archival excess. They do this by refocusing attention on the documental remnants of human encounters with the law and racialized extraction economies. Pushing these remnants to the point of illegibility, they explore a nonteleological inscrutability underwriting the archives with which they engage. By repurposing archival documents and objects that maintain a thread of indexicality apart from any referenced individual, *Testimony* and *The Book of the Dead* use poetic forms that, rather than contain or

salvage the injured and dead, admit to an excess, a superfluity of suffering that is nonetheless recorded.

## Chapter 3

### Bernadette Mayer's Experiments in Self-Documentation

The labor of recording and storing details is often feminized. Figuratively deployed as a vessel of mystified significance as well as of more mundane worldly value, there is something distinctly archival in the structure of femininity.<sup>1</sup> Women are often tasked with the work of recording details—notation, household management, and remembering dates—but to what degree does this gendered labor promise a recuperation of experience itself? The detail, as Naomi Schor writes, is not inherently feminine, but it is insistently feminized, bounded by the ornamental and the domestic, and linked to the visual register as opposed to the theoretical (4). In terms of aesthetics, Schor argues that the detail threatens the ideal of an organic whole and so must be defined in relation to it: either sublimated into “an aesthetic unity” or celebrated for its subversion of such unity (xxx). It presents a problem, however, when it detaches itself from the whole. The photograph, as ideal record of the observable world, can be understood in part by this problematic of the detail, for it is a fragment of a larger reality and is itself comprised of unassimilable details. In his 1927 essay, “Photography,” Siegfried Kracauer contrasts two records of the past, the technological and the memorial. “Photography,” he writes, “grasps what is given as a spatial (or temporal) continuum; memory-images retain what is given only insofar as it has significance” (428). Memory is subjective and forms by following paths of meaning, even if that meaning is unknown or non-linear, while photography obscures meaning with too many details: “In a photograph a person’s history is buried as if under a layer of snow” (Kracauer 429). Schor claims something quite similar in 1987, arguing that “details constitute the

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<sup>1</sup> For more on how the feminized record of experience becomes “a repository of aesthetic value,” see Barbara Johnson’s essays on gender and poesis, particularly “Muteness Envy” and “They Urn It,” (“Muteness”133).

greatest threat to the ideality of the photographic portrait” (49). The literary critical ideology that would expel or sublimate the detail follows from romantic and New Critical models of interpretation, by which every element is folded into a larger whole, flowing organically from it (Schor 85).<sup>2</sup> But as I have argued, romantic poetry itself engages a proto-photographic desire to “grasp” the observable and experiential world by recording and harvesting its details.

As explored in Chapter 1, Dorothy Wordsworth offers an example of such a memory prosthesis, journaling the occurrences and observations that her brother William Wordsworth used as primary material for his poetry. The reception of Dorothy Wordsworth’s writing, from its initial publication to the present, presumes her to experience the world more directly, that is, with less mediation than her brother’s poetry. With regards to her Grasmere Journals especially, critics figure Wordsworth as an archival tool, indistinguishable from what she records. Her role as an accurate record keeper is repeatedly linked to the ideal of immediacy and embedded experience that is wistfully venerated and yet also feminized as simple and unreflective. By extension, the romantic ideal of nature as an organic whole, into which the individual is fully incorporated, is here deployed in the figure of Dorothy insofar as she functions as a prosthetic technological apparatus, a sort of camera, for her brother William.

The desire to photograph is a romantic desire to secure lost experience, and Dorothy’s role as recording device contributes to the proto-photographic forms I chart within William’s poetry. In his recent book, *The History of Missed Opportunities*, William Galperin replicates these expectations that Dorothy’s journals reproduce the everyday unreflectively. Whereas William Wordsworth perceives the world through a sort of “double take,” a return inflected with

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<sup>2</sup> The recuperation of stray details into a unified aesthetic object is a project of lyric reading, as Virginia Jackson argues in reference to the critical reception and publication history of Emily Dickinson’s fascicles. She defines lyric reading as “associations between literal accident and figurative meaning” that invite surmise, whereby fragments, detritus, and details are read as though they had significance by virtue of poetic intention/attention (67).

thoughtful reflection, Dorothy engages in “unmediated vision” and the “capture of immediacy or procession through ‘now-time’ [...] seemingly endless simultaneity that the writer is simply encountering or passing through” (Galperin 70). This would seem to follow earlier critical responses that view Dorothy, impossibly, as both immersed in experience and capable of recording it objectively. Galperin goes on to write, though, that such a world of feminized recording is “almost stubbornly undifferentiated” (70). Rather than containing past experience, “the stratum of experience to which [the Grasmere Journal] attends is one of unrelenting seriality, or sameness amid variety, making it impervious to the defamiliarizing practices of recovery and the conceptual work that that retrospection entails” (69). As I explored in Chapter 2 in relation to Charles Reznikoff’s *Testimony*, seriality is a formal feature of photo-poetics that upends narrative structure through paratactic deixis (this, this, this). The overflow of details in the feminized records of Dorothy Wordsworth’s journals render it incapable of being sublimated to a larger whole. As an “unrelenting” documentation of details, the journal is photographic insofar as its “layer of snow” forms a non-narrative “counter-memory,” to link Kracauer and Roland Barthes’ terms.<sup>3</sup> Galperin touches here on a question of gendered poetics and photography that I will examine with regards to Bernadette Mayer’s work: What happens when the feminized technology of record keeping rejects paradigms of capture and containment? How does this refusal challenge the desire that immediacy be secured in an object of recollection, as in a poem?

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<sup>3</sup> Barthes writes that photography’s violence lies in its capacity to supplant memory and ideation with “nothing but the exorbitant thing” (91). Excess is built into the very thingness of the photographic image. “It fills the sight by force,” he goes on, “because in it nothing can be refused or transformed” (91). Consider Dorothy’s detailed account of the leech-gatherer—that he was “making his way to Carlisle, where he should buy a few godly books to sell,” that “leeches were formerly 2s. 6d. per 100; they are now 30s,” that he “had been hurt driving a cart, his leg broken,” etc. (23-24)—whereas William’s poem misrepresents the facts of the encounter (suggesting he was a lone traveler upon the moor, for instance) in order to accentuate the memorial significance of the figure of the leech-gatherer (“‘God,’ said I, ‘be my help and stay secure; / I’ll think of the Leech-gatherer on the lonely moor!’”)

This chapter will argue that Mayer's maximalist poetic experiments deploy photographs as primary material to interrogate the desired stability of the feminized record. Her photo-poetic use of fragmentation, excessive detail, and seriality deploy an exaggerated facticity to paradoxically overturn the desire to capture an experience. I will begin with a study of Mayer's formative photo-poetic installation *Memory*, before turning back to examine the rise of photography in the nineteenth century as an archival and scientific tool. I suggest that Mayer's use of photography in her experiments of self-documentation is helpfully explicated in relation to observational and descriptive practices of taxonomy. Her quotidian "poetry by the yard" forms a proliferating record that uses the unobserved detail to gesture to an absence or void that we already find in nineteenth century typological practices, a connection I will explore by turning to Jean-Martin Charcot's *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière*. Finally, I will conclude with a brief study of *Midwinter Day* to draw out the connection between photography, poetry, and counter-memory. Maggie Nelson writes that Mayer's work "embodies the legacy of the 'open, yeasty, limitlessly permissive' atmosphere of the New York art world at midcentury, along with the Whitmanesque 'aesthetics of monstrous absorbency, total inclusion'" (100). The figure of the hysteric as the embodiment of excessive and unlocatable pathology, and Charcot's attempts to use photography to capture her symptoms, offers a compelling analogue to Mayer's poetic experiments in recording her lived experience. To think of the porous, permeable, and expansive self alongside the quotidian, domestic, and detailed life record, in relation to photographic (im)mediacy, I turn now to Mayer's early work, *Memory*.

## *Memory*

*Memory*, originally exhibited as an audio-visual installation, is an experiment in self-documentation: during each day of July 1971, Bernadette Mayer exposed one roll of 35mm color film, producing over 1,100 photographs in total.<sup>4</sup> After they were developed, sometimes weeks later, she revised her daily journal entries while looking over the photographs, following tangents sparked by details in the images that redirect or overshadow her journal's written record. She then recorded herself speaking the resulting observational prose poem. The pictures were mounted in rows to be read from left to right, taking up 36 by 4 feet of the 98 Greene Street Gallery in SoHo.



Bernadette Mayer, *Memory*, CANADA Gallery, New York City, 2017

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<sup>4</sup> As Andrew Epstein notes, *Memory* takes part in a broader trend of “everyday-life aesthetics” that includes works like James Schuyler’s “Hymn to Life,” Robert Creeley’s *A Day Book*, Ron Silliman’s *Ketjak*, John Ashbery’s *The Vermont Notebook*, and Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life*, all of which were written in the ’70s (37).

Audiences scanned the images while listening to the taped recording of Mayer's reconstructed "memory," which lasted 8 hours in total. In 1976, Mayer edited the text for publication with North Atlantic Books (with only a few images appearing on the cover), an edition now out of print, and it wasn't until 2020 that Siglio Press released the images and text together in their entirety.<sup>5</sup>

In some sense, enshrining the exhibit in book form partially undoes its "disembodied" and "dematerialized" aesthetic, its resistance to the physical strictures of commodification and circulation.<sup>6</sup> The Siglio edition is beautiful: the matte hardcover in landscape format features a self-portrait of Mayer on the cover and a glossy color interior with images sometimes appearing in grid format and sometimes as bleeds. As a conceptually driven art installation, the 1972 *Memory* was experienced in a public space and likely in fragments: people would enter the room and hear the audio, perhaps match it up with a series of images, and follow along in time and space, moving down the wall as the days progressed. Clark Coolidge wrote of the installation, "you felt like no matter what photo you were momentarily focusing on the voice was commenting on exactly that image, until finally you were enveloped in a dream continuum of total contingency" (qtd. Baker). When reading the book, one can focus much more closely on the text, revisiting past days to perform close readings largely unavailable to the installation's first audiences. Yet, it is a long and repetitive book, formally reminiscent of Stein's *Making of Americans* or Reznikoff's *Testimony*, and is thus also likely to be read in fragments and not in its entirety.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, its focus on the mundane and detailed, the interrupted and incomplete,

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<sup>5</sup> The publication is made from scans of the original slides. It is not a perfect recreation though, as some slides were lost over the years, and others were able to be produced that were too over- or under-exposed to be properly developed in 1972.

<sup>6</sup> Mayer's work was featured in Anne Waldman and Andrew Schelling's *Disembodied Poetics: Annals of the Jack Kerouac School* and Lucy Lippard's *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*.

<sup>7</sup> As Louisa Lee writes, "reading this text over a number of days became an exercise in endurance and the re-reading of passages of the text is a necessity" (295).

render it impossible to coalesce into anything like a trackable narrative. It can be picked up and put down in any order. Though it follows a clear chronology, nearly every other element—including the quality of the images—is either murky or fine-grained. As Maggie Nelson puts it, Mayer engages in “the art of interminable catalogue” (104); Peter Baker writes that “such a text succeeds in creating a space of movement, a headlong dive into words and images.” This interminability allows the physical book to formally mimic aspects of the audio-visual installation, extending Mayer’s conceptual experiment in mediated memory into the present day.

By literally taking up the camera that Dorothy embodied figuratively, Mayer tests the imperatives to record and to capture that she finds embedded in poetics as a gendered practice. She stretches the itemization, the notation, the capacity to hold, until overflow renders the text porous, so it holds nothing, cannot contain, fails on the level of romantic aspiration to an organic whole. Her photographs are mundane, repetitive, and playful. Clearly inspired by the “snapshot aesthetic” of 1960s street photography, a style popularized by photographers like Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand, who carried handheld cameras around New York City, the images are spontaneous and blurry, with unclear framing and a chaotic sense of motion. The only documentary poet in this study who actually incorporates photographic images, Mayer doesn’t use them to embalm experience in a static archive but seems to anticipate the stream of “social photography” that Nathan Jurgenson ascribes to contemporary social media.<sup>8</sup> Her photographs are ephemeral and communal, often picturing the movement of friends with blurred lines and overlapping figures, not carefully framed or focused on objects or scenes. Viewed in the original

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<sup>8</sup> Jurgenson defines “social photography” as a cultural practice, part of a broader development in self-expression, memory, and sociality that expresses itself in the ephemeral and communicative activity of sharing images online (10). He writes that “the rise of social photography is an even deeper and more intimate saturation of the image into how we see, speak, and think [...] with more of our everyday moments understood to be pregnant with photographic potential” (11-12).

gallery exhibit, they would flow past the observer walking down the room, the scale of the exhibit and the ongoing sound of recorded audio generating a sense of the unending temporary. The photographs operate less as a static archive and more like discursive drift. They record not ephemeral experience itself but the unseen contingencies that only later gain significance upon re-viewing. It is these contingencies—a passing car, a blurred hand or face overlapped by a branch—that Mayer then registers in her paratactic writing style.

The possibility that anything and everything could be the object of photographic interest means that any record of the present is at once partial and excessive, always incomplete but also somehow too much, too detailed. Adapting the intensity of the lyric as self-exposure, Mayer uses such excess to disable the poem's shift from the particular into the universal register. The detail is neither sublimated into a whole, nor does it simply subvert it, because the work itself is not a unified entity. Rather, *Memory* remains shifting and ungraspable as both exhibit and text, consisting of such an excess of detail that it cannot be said to comprise a whole. As an auto-documentary text that lists and describes conscious thoughts, dreams, occurrences, and perceived surroundings, it is too fine-grained, too close-up, to reveal the edges of her subjectivity. Mayer lets the internal and external blend together so that it is difficult to perceive their difference, eroding the boundaries that would demarcate a self. This gesture works against gendered frameworks that value self-possession and composure. "Woman," Anne Carson reminds us, "is that creature who puts the inside on the outside. By projections and leakages of all kinds—somatic, vocal, emotional, sexual—females expose or expend what should be kept in" (129). If we take *Memory*, originally a vocal work, to be an outrageous, over-extended effort of "exposing her inside facts," we understand Mayer to be using tropes of feminine excess to explore an aporia within the concept of the self as that which contains memory (Carson 129). Mayer's prosaic

poetry refuses to be contained, to be quotable, and at times, even to be readable, which I will suggest is its own kind of feminist praxis.

Most critical approaches to Mayer's work on observation and documentation begin with *Midwinter Day* (1982), a poetic record of the domestic happenings of a day in her life, seemingly written as they occur.<sup>9</sup> It is at once a continuation of New York School and Language Writing's conceptual experiments in recording how the quotidian and ephemeral are shaped by language and form,<sup>10</sup> and a rejection of its male-dominated standards for habit, community, and autonomy. Put simply, Mayer married, moved out of the city, and raised children—and then she wrote about it. For this, her work was deemed less conceptually and politically interesting than that of her male peers.<sup>11</sup> And, even when lionized, her work was overly affiliated with maternity. Andrew Epstein, for instance, argues that Mayer's work performs what he calls a “poetics of the maternal everyday [...] a feminist aesthetic that explores how daily experience is inescapably shaped by gender, that strives to represent the lived realities of being a woman and a mother, and insists on the fact that motherhood is always, at some level, political” (159). Nelson, in her fascinating account of Mayer's relation to the New York School, also focuses on her work's inclusion of “the many anxieties, frustrations, pleasures, and desires which attend being or becoming a mother, mothering daughters, being a female writer, and having a female body” (101).

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<sup>9</sup> *Memory* has received comparative short shrift by poets and critics alike. As Ann Vickery points out, Clark Coolidge wrote that it was “not ‘talked about that much by the poets,’ and even Mayer notes that many friends admitted they could not finish it” (155).

<sup>10</sup> Examples of which include Andy Warhol's early monotonous films like *Sleep* (1963), John Ashbery's abstract expressionist poems, and Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* (1980).

<sup>11</sup> Ann Vickery points out that though she was a leading experimental poet on the East Coast, teaching many prominent Language writers and running St. Mark's Poetry Project for four years, Mayer was overlooked by Perelman and Davidson's critical overviews of conceptual poetry and hasn't received much critical attention until recently (150). She also notes that certain critics thought “Mayer's focus on the domestic gave her poetry a lack of political orientation” (159).

My understanding of Mayer's work is that she is and always has been deeply invested in exploring how a consciousness mediated by memory conditions perception. Taking her own life as a study, works like *Midwinter Day* and *The Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters* (1994)—a collection of unsent letters addressed to real people or abstract concepts, comprised of thick, run-on prose—don't simply thematize motherhood, but use its material necessities as its documentary material. Mayer's works detail cleaning, cooking, feeding, throwing away garbage, and the feeling of pregnancy because that is the stuff of her conscious and unconscious life. No doubt expecting such material to take up the space of literature is indeed a feminist act. But the problem with aligning Mayer's poetry with femininity is that, even though such affiliation may serve as a critique of patriarchal literary value, it does so by glorifying one side of the gender binary. As Sianne Ngai frames it in reference to the documentary poetry of Juliana Spahr, the question becomes, "how does one develop a critique of sexual difference without referring to the binary terms whose reiteration would seem to affirm and reinforce the system of sexual difference itself?" (317). My suggestion with regard to *Memory* is that Mayer undermines the norm of record keeping as a feminized practice affiliated with unreflective immediacy and the value of containment by means of the paradoxical and parallel trope of feminine excess. By disproportionately recording streams of contingent details, Mayer's photo-poetics breaches and finally capsizes the poem as a vessel for meaningful experience. Moreover, her incorporation of unseen details only noticed after the fact in photographic form implants a void or absence at the core of her work, an unremembered blind point that is indexed in the poem. More than simply elevating feminized domesticity to the annals of poetry, she approaches the everyday as the basis for her experiments in documentation, appropriating photography as a tool to extend the visible and recordable world indefinitely.

Mayer created *Memory* while still living in New York City, prior to her marriage and during the early period of her career when she was more engaged in performance art. She co-edited the magazine *0 to 9* with Vito Acconci from 1967-69, working closely with artists Sol LeWitt, Adrian Piper, Robert Smithson, as well as second-generation New York School poets like Kenneth Koch and Ted Berrigan. Largely begun when the established magazines wouldn't publish their work, and also to some extent in a rejection of the New York School style, Mayer and Acconci curated an eclectic and visually pleasing little magazine with an "overall ethos of fragment and ellipses" (Kane 198). The journal was part of the larger zeitgeist of zine culture that grew out of the proliferating technology of cheap reproductions. Mayer writes: "We found a mimeograph machine in my boyfriend Ed Bower's father's office in New Jersey. We had to buy paper, stencils and ink from the A.B. Dick company. For each issue we drove there with the typed stencils when the office closed at 5. p.m., and by the time they reopened at 8 a.m., we would have an issue of *0 to 9* run off and collated" ("Rock" 13).<sup>12</sup> An early version of a photocopier, the mimeograph forced ink through holes in a stencil onto paper, so the same page was printed and reprinted before the issue could be ordered and assembled. Mayer's early editorial interest in bringing together disparate writers and artists in multimedia collections is characteristic of her career. The journal was named after Jasper John's painting *0 through 9* (1961), part of a series of paintings that superimposed numbers over each other, forming a singular image that is also a series, and that itself is part of a series. This combination of all-at-onceness and sequencing pervades Mayer's conceptual duration works, informing how she parses the units of a month while also blurring and overlaying them in *Memory*.

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<sup>12</sup> As we will see, *Memory* is similarly detailed when it comes to recording equipment, location, and mundane particulars such as these.

Mayer also led a workshop, “Experimental Writing,” at St. Mark’s Poetry Project from 1971 to 1974, which was attended by poets later associated with the Language school of writing. Daniel Kane and Ann Vickery both credit Mayer with helping to foment the non-referential conceptual school of thought that Language writers like Charles Bernstein, Hannah Weiner, Bruce Andres, and Nick Piombino have become known for. Her workshops pushed against the New York School’s resistance to such a theoretical approach to writing, incorporating texts by Roland Barthes, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Jacques Lacan.<sup>13</sup> As Kane puts it, “Mayer generally encouraged her students to think of the act of literary production far more critically than they might otherwise have done” (188). At the same time, she engaged in experiments in collaborative writing, reading, and performance. One night in 1971, audience members showed up to a Poetry Project reading to find themselves confronted instead with a short film in which Clark Coolidge and Mayer ran around Coolidge’s home while reading from Gertrude Stein’s work. The piece challenged the audience with an almost inaudible recording of someone else’s poetry and shaky handheld footage that couldn’t focus on the poets reading. Such a performance frustrates readerly expectations of legibility and authorship. Mayer is well known among contemporary aspiring poets for her “Experiments,” a changing series of writing prompts that ask poets to estrange their own sense of voice. They include, for instance: “Construct a poem as if the words were three-dimensional objects to be handled in space. Print them on large cards or bricks if necessary”; “Write what cannot be written; for example, compose an index”; “Write a work gazing into a mirror without using the pronoun I.” Prompts such as these interrupt lyric tendencies toward self-expression, as well as standards of referentiality whereby the signifier has

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<sup>13</sup> Vickery writes that Mayer consciously blended philosophy and poetry at a time when this was not popular; she introduced her students to “Dadaism, psychoanalytic theory, and semiotics and also sponsored an interdisciplinary lecture series for her classes” (156)

an unthought, transparent relation to the signified. Words become material objects, an index to nothing, or a reflection without a self.

Her most pithy and oft-quoted prompt—“Work your ass off to change the language & don’t ever get famous”—speaks to this creative labor that challenges referentiality and authority. It is unsurprising that Mayer included Barthes’s “The Death of the Author” in her workshops; whereas the Language writers she inspired focused on trying to “change the language,” she routinely investigated fame, the tendency for a published work to cling to its author, and so to change their relationship to their own writing. In a series of workshops Mayer ran with Ed Friedman, she challenged poets with day-long exercises in collaboration, published in the three-part series, *Unnatural Acts*. Poets were asked to anonymously contribute a piece of writing that then prompted pieces from different writers: “the ‘originals’ were then discarded and the afternoon proceeded with everyone continuing to write works inspired by the reworkings of reworkings of reworkings” (Friedman qtd. Kane 198). But the series ended when writers refused to contribute work anonymously, when they wanted to be named and seen by readers. As Mayer recalls, “the second time we did it, it was hard to get people to do it, because they didn’t want to lose their identity. Someone came up [...] and said to me, ‘Is anyone going to know what part I wrote?’ I said, ‘No, I don’t think so,’ That was a big problem for this writer” (qtd. Kane 201). Mayer, however, has sustained an impersonal approach to writing throughout her career. Rather than assume her turn toward writing about maternal life amounts to renouncing conceptual experimentation and adopting an expressivist or personal style,<sup>14</sup> I suggest that it is more fruitful to consider how she has inscribed anonymity into the material objects and temporal routine that her poetry so closely observes. By examining *Memory*, an early breakout work that inaugurates

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<sup>14</sup> Kane writes that Mayer “maintained a connection to writing as expressivist, microsocial, and personal” (193), and Vickery calls *Memory* a project of “externalizing the emotional” (153).

her experiments with temporal restraint, schedule, and repetition, we can see excessive, minute observation of her daily life becoming ungraspable, unidentifiable, and impersonal.

It is difficult to close read *Memory*; it resists being excerpted or taken up in parts, partly because the writing style is stream of consciousness, with long run-on sentences. As Bronwen Tate writes, “unlike the brief lyric, which can be read and appreciated in a moment or two, the long poem works through deferral and delay, contrast and repetition, theme and variation [...] duration and accretion” (44). Mayer called *Memory* an “emotional science project,” an exercise in constraint-based method that involved incessant journaling of “every event, every motion, every transition of [...] her own mind” (qtd. Vickery 152).<sup>15</sup> As Epstein notes, this offers a slightly different take on the “chatty colloquial voice” of the New York School quotidian, favoring instead a “rigorous, often ‘neutral’ or quasi-scientific approach to ordinary objects and experiences” that is more affiliated with conceptual art (166). Observations and activities bleed into thoughts and dreams, imagined scenes, directives to herself; the result is a consistent flow of data without the transitions that would make it more legible. There are spots, though, when Mayer seems to instruct us how to read, or how to hear, her work. The July 11<sup>th</sup> entry is one of those places. It begins:

You can see that the question I started out from has been almost completely left out by now: I go to a place where you cannot reach me or you go to a place where I cannot reach you, no one can reach you I am alone & you are examining, I can finally tell you that you are examining the reenactment of the crime the reenactment of the crime, to see what it suggests for the future, for future experience. I can tell you this much – there are places,

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<sup>15</sup> Her later works, like *Midwinter Day*, would also adopt temporal or spatial constraints. Most recently, *The Helens of Troy*, N.Y (2013) tracks down every woman named Helen living in Troy, New York to photograph them and write poems about them. The playfulness of her exercises and constraints belong to their own tradition, perhaps best exemplified by the contemporary (Soma)tic poetry exercises of CA Conrad.

different spots, to move between. The crime's already done so you can fool around. The photographer comes with us to the scene, with us what does that mean? (121)

Mayer offers an extended exercise in proximity without connection, the reader/listener stuck in the role of detective, examining not the immediate experience, but its restaging, or a copy of its restaging, as indicated by her use of repetition. Such a reenactment would suggest chronology, but moving between spots implies synchronicity, or at least, no particular order. A photographer in tow signals the desire to see "places" as "scene[s]," as legible images, that overtake random perception with a need for narration, for the cause and effect of criminology. But July 11<sup>th</sup> ends with a litany of details, theoretically endless, that aim to describe, or remember a place:

...there are so many things you never think to do there are so many ways of predicting the time there are ways of remembering it are there more ways of remembering it: yellow cover, red cigarette pack, white ashtray, grey-green film, silver cans, yellow bag, blue chairs, golden reels, black bag, blue shirt, blue pants & black belt yellow & white striped curtains stained glass bird red blue green & yellow bird black & silver camera blue & silver ring black shirt red pants brown moccasins white door green book black pen grey tape black box brown table & yellow floor blue cups yellow pitcher glass pitcher white window grey grate white & gold chandelier tan & white butts grey & white ashes Persian mat & red blue white & grey-green plant blue glasses & inlaid salt & pepper shakers, turquoise green pink & white, orange coil, orange light, white light green plant, red & white milk: some of these things are worn or faded (127)

Coupling colors and nouns together distinguishes items in an unnamed place, though clearly a domestic setting. But in focusing entirely on itemized perception, Mayer leaves out everything that would make this place matter, that would attach memory to a particular occurrence, another

person or a touch, a feeling or even a smell. This is the blur of photographic seeing, Kracauer's "layer of snow" that floods perception with detail and so actually blocks memory. Rather than contain past experience, such excessive description overrides it. Things run together in language meant to be digested and excreted, not saved, voraciously accumulating "a sample of hunger eating the colors of a line-up of words" (*Memory* 56). Things come in and out and lists won't secure them because the repetition and fragmentation of excessive particulars does not cohere. Rather, such sequences overlap and grow muddled, reminiscent of Johns's *0 through 9*, nearly illegible outlines swarmed over with muddied reds and oranges and blues.

These lists that seem to bloom and reproduce uncontrollably bring to mind automatic writing or machine learning, the anonymity of technology producing its own record of perception. Indeed, *Memory* is filled with descriptions of recording equipment, detailing Mayer's concerns about who is developing film and where, problems with sound recording, what kinds of tapes are used, and the pain of her note-taking hand. July 3<sup>rd</sup> for instance records her asking her boyfriend Ed to take photos of her backlit by fluorescent light, noting how it tints the film green, before going on to list the various equipment they have around the apartment: "the desk was covered with tapes & lists of sounds, catalogs of equipment, tape cleaner & degausser..." (39). *Memory* is everywhere concerned with the material conditions of recording, copying, and reproducing, which, as Nelson notes with regards to the tape recorder, "had much to do with the idealization of speed, immediacy, and improvisation" (103). Mayer tests the romantic paradigm that strives to couple unmediated experience with its own record, not by claiming subjective immersion, but by lauding the possibilities of mechanical reproduction.

And Mayer sustained this interest in the possibilities of consciousness archiving into the digital era. In a 1997 interview with Lisa Jarnot, Mayer states, "I'd like computers to be able to

record everything you think and see. To be like the brain, and to write that out [...] And somebody said to me, ‘who would read it?’ But I’m thinking that I would love to read it. Like if you had all these documents of everybody’s experience. It would be amazing” (Jarnot 9). Such a radical inclusivity, she recognizes, seems to go “against a poem or art,” because a record of everything could never end; it would refuse all framing and so all appeal to be read (*Midwinter Day* 102). Epstein calls this her “obsession with the idea of creating an artwork that might include, absorb, hold, and document *everything*,” that is, a paradoxical desire to have no boundaries to the text and still have its contents be contained, or held (Epstein 169). Clark Coolidge, a close collaborator, also wrote about their shared desire for the “‘Everything work,’ which would use every possible bit flashing through our minds” (qtd. Baker). *Memory* seems to approach this aspiration, at times ecstatically:

...save them for me certain moments I’m resting I’m restoring I’m gathering I’m hunting  
I’m starving I’m you you say go on being peering owl of fortress sounding out training  
sound to meet my ear drive & mark time I’m a history her coil mark time, suffer a  
moment to let me be like her a history, object she was determined defies all laws & rules  
is the language I bought from passersby sea crate full of junk & language twisting &  
twisting coil of all morning... (86)

Such a syntactically distorted array of words streaming through a day could be sought out and restored, turned from junk into history, but just as easily dissolves into the logic of consumption and destruction, eating and buying what will not last because, paradoxically, it will not end.

Ultimately, Mayer recognizes the failure of the record to both remember and to itemize: “I have no way of remembering a day” (*Memory* 40), she writes, and “It’s impossible to put things exactly as they happened or in their real order one by one” (*Memory* 48). In the

introduction to the 2020 edition, she writes, “It’s astonishing to me that there is so much in *Memory*, yet so much is left out: emotions, thoughts, sex, the relationship between poetry and light, storytelling, walking, and voyaging to name a few.” If the goal of this “emotional science project” was to reproduce “subjective” memory or “objective” reality, then perhaps *Memory* fails its own hypothesis. But in my view, Mayer is more interested in examining the overlapping layers of mediation that comprise perception, memory, and technological prosthesis, rather than fulfilling the ideals of immediacy and immersion that characterize the reception of Dorothy Wordsworth’s journals.

The way Mayer uses photography to record her life offers insight into mediated memory and perception. The photographs in *Memory* appear to be snapshots, unplanned and playful; they include images of her friends and boyfriend, the streets and buildings of New York City, the trees of rural Massachusetts (where they take a road trip), interior spaces, body parts, and cars.



Bernadette Mayer, *Memory*, Siglio Press, 2020.

Mayer claimed she was trying to take photographs of “what you’re really seeing, not trying to isolate objects and put them in the center of the frame” (“Naropa” 101).<sup>16</sup> Lindsay Garbutt writes in her review of the 2020 edition, “the combination of text and images allows for a fuller record of each day. Together, they convey the collaborative, communal world Mayer worked within.” Garbutt suggests that the text adds movement and duration to otherwise static images, creating a complimentary relation between them. But such an estimation of the fuller or more complete record, as I have been suggesting, is itself a fantasy of containment, premised upon the ideal that the record could be complete. Rather than simply aid the written record, I suggest, the photographs tend to overwrite it with details that merely persist, without leading to any such complementarity or completion. As Mayer writes in the July 25<sup>th</sup> entry, “I write all this stuff down I know it comes out of nowhere goes nowhere & remains, nothing leaves” (256). And in a 1989 exercise that returns to this entry, she asks, “Is detail in any form the same expression,” suggesting that the preservation of details in their difference, their unrecognizability, usurps the meaning or expression of a work of art (“Bring it Here”). Rather than spontaneously capture a moment, *Memory*’s photographs are remnants of particularity without cessation, awash in details that were unseen when they appeared. In other words, they do not recovery originary experience, but represent their own visual record that does not properly belong to Mayer, even as she reincorporates details from the photos into the text of *Memory*.

The photographs are the material fragments of Mayer’s observable world in a particular time and place and the basis of her text, but in many cases they seem to take over phenomenal perception altogether. That is, rather than see something and then photograph it, Mayer’s

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<sup>16</sup> This decentering approach, informed by street photography, speaks to a desire to capture “real” perception even as the photographs she takes displace the experience and memory of a scene. What is interesting to me here is that the discourse of the real is deployed, once again, through a photographic trope of unidealized vision, which I analyzed in Chapter 1 as a consistent trend within photography theory.

recording apparatus trips up experience and flips the priorities of archival desire. *Memory* is an experiment in how the possibilities of photographic recording shape perception, just as the Language writers explored how “language’s materiality shaped meaning” (Vickery 157). In the July 4<sup>th</sup> entry for example, Mayer writes: “Ed was still asleep when I got up. I washed at least 3 blue shirts to take to massachusetts & overexposed them on the fire escape. Tom said the underexposed ones look like a casket. Then I washed our blue hockey shirt, my 30s outfit, a lot of t-shirts including anne’s tie-dyed one, two pairs of army green socks, ed’s pants & hannah’s green & white shirt. Put them out to dry” (52). What is interesting to me here is that the shirts are not hung to dry before they are photographs: the exposure is off, but one can tell from the photos that all three are clearly in direct sun on the rooftop railing.



Bernadette Mayer, *Memory*, Siglio Press, 2020.

That is, over- and underexposure are not metaphors for being in and out of the sun, but references to the photographs themselves, which seem to precede the action they depict.

Throughout *Memory*, descriptions of activities or winding thoughts are interrupted by details from the photographs: yellow cabs or passersby that would naturally slip out of memory are frozen in images and listed on the page. The photographs in many cases determine what appears to be “seen” in the recorded text.

Moreover, Mayer does not understand the record to be a mechanical afterthought of perception, but an automatic system of sorting and noticing that is built into phenomenal perception itself. In a section of the July 5<sup>th</sup> entry, Mayer and friends play with optical illusions: staring at one color for so long that when you turn to a white page, you see its opposite, for example: “The retina—which lies at the back of the eyeball, the eye, like windows, like cameras, like image in sound” can be overstimulated so that it no longer sees a certain color (67).<sup>17</sup> The eye itself is a machine that acts based on prior experience, or memory. In this sense, Mayer is playing with the idea of cameras all the way down, that is, no external point from which one could say, this is a portrait of a life. Rather, Mayer’s audiovisual experiment uses self-documentation to muddle self-recognition by interposing archival apparatuses between perception and memory, and so reckoning with the layers of automation embedded within perception itself.

Mayer plays around with self-portraiture throughout *Memory*, often looking directly into the camera while taking poorly lit and oddly framed photos. In one series of proto-selfies, she lets the camera appear in the mirror, so we see a reflection of her taking photos of her reflection.

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<sup>17</sup> Mary Ann Doane and Jonathan Crary both write of the importance of a rise in interest in optical illusions in the nineteenth century, particularly in the scientific study of retinal afterimages. This reflects, Crary suggests, sensory perception cut from any necessary link with the external referent (128).



Bernadette Mayer, *Memory*, Siglio Press, 2020.

The seriality of the photos means the eye flits among them, trying to grasp a more complete picture of Mayer without landing on a definitive image. Like *Memory* at large, so much is left out through excessive description. This is one of those moments, which Vickery notes, when “Mayer switches between collapsing the traditional distance between narrating self and narrated self in autobiography and playfully foregrounding it: ‘The I-character is usually a she’” (154). By turning an objective lens onto her own image, Mayer renders it both I and she, self and other. This helps to explain how difficult it is to track perspective and subjectivity throughout *Memory*; everywhere inundated with undifferentiated conscious thought and perception, there is no speaker, certainly no lyric “I.” Rather, the scenes that play out in Mayer’s dreams or wandering mind blur alongside the sounds and textures of her days. She complicates the notion of subjective memory through what Louisa Lee calls “a systematic approach, in which the textures of the

scenes that her photographs depict – the light, the colours, the temperature and Mayer’s feelings at the time – are, despite being written in the first person, described and documented in quasi-scientific or objective manner” (294). And as Juliana Spahr argues in her reading of Mayer’s *Sonnets*, such collaborative intersubjectivity renders the boundaries of the self indistinct.

Returning to the July 11<sup>th</sup> entry, we find an example of Mayer’s actions bleeding into those of a friend:

This is Kathleen this is kathleen here is kathleen here is kathleen kathleen is here she’s doing the dishes why is kathleen doing the dishes why is she doing the dishes why the dishes why not the dishes kathleen doing the dishes she does them she did them last week she did them again she didnt do them right the first time why does she have to do them again do them again, she said. I’ll do them again there she is doing the dishes again look at her doing them she does them typewriter teletape tickertape typewriter tickertape teletape kathleen is doing the dishes she’s doing them again when will she finish when will she finish. (121)

Repetitive domestic work, not monetized, rewarded, or finished, blends into the sound of Mayer writing, into automated communication of stock price fluctuations. The first line gestures to Kathleen’s presence (“this is,” “here is”), but the repetition only makes her less precise or particular. And she becomes completely absorbed into the act of doing the dishes, the repetitive and invisible domestic labor that enables the work of writing and finance. Repetition and parataxis interrupt the narrative of production and consumption by isolating the material condition for eating, the clean plate or annotated page that is backgrounded to historical activity. *Memory* actually begins with a similar image, conflating the sink with the page: “& the main thing is we begin with a white sink a whole new language is a temptation” (9). Rather than view

such repetitive feminized labor as subordinate to a system of capital and consumption, Mayer elaborates the perpetually unfinished and gendered work of recording as its own form of history, the recognition of which amounts to the invention of a new language.<sup>18</sup> As Lee writes, “*Memory* can be read as an important resource in the Marxist feminist project to critically challenge and undo the false dichotomies between work and life, the home and the workplace, the personal and political, memory and history” (Lee 296). And as Nelson argues, this undoing is accomplished through formal excess: “a phobia of ‘going too far’—of writing too much, of wanting too much, of transgressing the proprieties of economic, literary, and/or sexual structures we’ve infused with a particular morality—is often tied up with a paranoia about the voracious desires and the vexing capacities of the female body” (127). Mayer uses an excess of details to undo the notion of feminine record keeping as an act that safeguards and stores history. As such, *Memory* recasts the work of archiving itself as a Sisyphean task that undoes itself as soon as it seems to be completed—“doing the dishes she does them she did them”—premised not upon progression but iteration.<sup>19</sup> Mayer’s attempt at the “everything work” challenges gendered tropes that promise the containment of unmediated experience within the aesthetic object. Instead, *Memory* adapts maximalist prose poetry forms to an excessive stream of particular details, exploring how the photographic record houses the unseen and gestures to the unseeable.

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<sup>18</sup> The July 30<sup>th</sup> entry begins, “When you are a woman you make a great record & a daughter, whose daughter, the doors & the bust armor plate of a woman and curls” (310). As in the above example, here Mayer pushes against the expectation that a woman serves as a record of a man, by inhabiting her father’s name or by being fashioned into a work of art. It goes on in this associative manner to question such identity structures (“who are you?”) and to affiliate them with thin caricatures delineating the gender binary (“little man doll fall down little woman doll moves closer, is wounded”).

<sup>19</sup> As Jacques Derrida writes of the archive in *Archive Fever*, “One will never be able to objectivize it with no remainder. The archivist produces more archive, and that is why the archive is never closed. It opens out of the future” (68).

## Photographic Counter-Memory

In his introduction to the 1976 edition, Dr. David Rubinfine, Bernadette Mayer's analyst, proclaims that *Memory* "is a new kind of autobiography," one that does not merely recollect the events of the past but revives "the quality of consciousness in which they occurred." Mayer demonstrates, Rubinfine states, how memory is "regulated by a constantly changing organization of consciousness, shifting from perceived external reality to internal images and from present to past as present"; that is, Mayer's writing style registers the difference between internal and external stimuli, past and present, as pliable and in flux. Rubinfine claims that normally such a state of consciousness is only available to one undergoing hypnosis or in a dream state, noting that he is flummoxed by how Mayer was able to access and translate it into literature. Perhaps because the 1976 edition did not include the photographs, Rubinfine does not address them at all, or consider how Mayer's writing from photographs would give her access to the past as though it were present. What *Memory* performs, I suggest, is less a hypnotic state than a reckoning in poetic form with the inventive work of photography, with its ability to supplant memory with record.

Mayer doesn't have access to the past as though it were present; she has access to documents that index what was not experienced at the time. She writes of viewing some undeveloped film, for instance, "I can read off details in it which were unnoticed while my eyes were open" (234). Walter Benjamin called this the optical unconscious: what is imperceptible in the moment is revealed by photography.<sup>20</sup> He writes that photography uncovers the "material physiognomic aspects of pictorial words which live in the smallest things, perceptible yet covert enough to find shelter in daydreams, but which, once enlarged and capable of formulation, show

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<sup>20</sup> Jean Christophe Bailly defines the optical unconscious as "the unknown share that every photograph conceals from the very person taking it" (47).

the difference between technology and magic to be entirely a matter of historical variables” (7-8). Photography seems to invent what already exists as something unseen—something too minute or complex to be perceived even as it is known in daydream fantasy—by bringing it to light and holding it enframed. In this sense, photography performs a crystallization of “pictorial words” into clear, eerily accurate images by which the imagined notion is supplanted by the real detail. As Roland Barthes reminds us, though the photograph is “mingled with our noisiest everyday life,” it maintains “an enigmatic point of inactuality” (91). “Not only is the Photograph never, in essence, a memory,” he goes on, “but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory” (91). What does it mean to say that photography both takes part in the movement of the everyday and also invents such a “counter-memory” out of the inactuality of its stasis? That is, how does the fantasy of the “everything work,” total description, actually come to invent an alternative reality that threatens memory with facticity? What is the relation, finally, between recording and inventing, documentary and poesis?

Mayer’s poetic practice is everywhere concerned with these questions, which she probes by using varying sets of constraints coupled with real-time durational recording techniques. Lytle Shaw explores these practices of description and “scientific authority” in her and Clark Coolidge’s collaborative works, particularly *The Cave* (written between 1972 to 1978), in a recent collection of critical essays on post-New York School poets. He examines not only Coolidge and Mayer’s “common embrace of the would-be neutral, non-aesthetic, ‘objective’ language of photographic and textual documentation that so many conceptualists turned to in the late 1960s, but more specifically [... their] engagement with what might be called self-imposed research projects, whose object of study is oneself” (156). That is, Mayer is not simply writing experimental poetry in the 1970s but is using poetry to perform “a series of carefully monitored

experiments” on herself (156). Her works from this period (many, including *The Cave*, unpublished until recently), are structured “by ‘exhaustively’ or encyclopedically treating a string of inexhaustible concepts,” including, Shaw itemizes, storytelling, description, memory, states of consciousness, education, and collectives (157). Shaw writes that Mayer’s poetic experiments operate as inquiries “into a discrete concept that could be exhausted by its close and continued study” (159). However, as we see with *Memory*, her serial photo-poetics maintains a sense of inexhaustibility, using photographic data to itemize the unseen, articulating its own negative capability. In his 1840 essay, “The Daguerreotype,” Edgar Allan Poe wrote that “the daguerreotyped plate is infinitely (we use this term advisedly) infinitely more accurate in its representation than any painting by human hands” (37-8). Such an emphasis on the infinitude of the daguerreotype’s accuracy suggests it is unmatched by human efforts, indeed, that it is an inhuman medium, something altogether apart and alienated from “human hands.” Mayer embeds this inhuman excess into memory as self-difference or estrangement through the serial structure of her photo-poetics, which re-records unassimilable fragments within a framework of what appears to be utter legibility. By integrating photographic counter-memory into self-documentation, Mayer does not revive past consciousness but destabilizes a sense of the self held together by consciousness progressing linearly into memory.

In her collaborative 1989 guidebook for high school teachers, *The Art of Science Writing*, Mayer offers directives to students trying to record and present their experiments: “Instead of writing in essay form, it is unexplainably illuminating to create a set or series of reflections on a subject and number them sequentially, chronologically, or randomly” (42). Shaw calls this and other passages “a kind of phantom poetics for Mayer,” illuminating how she tends to superimpose procedural techniques in her poetry that rely not on the logical order of hypothesis,

procedure, and conclusion, but on overlapping series. Her formal practice tends to organize descriptive writing both sequentially (by day, in *Memory*) and by mnemonic process that overlays data, notes, or images from the past with the present moment of writing.<sup>21</sup> Shaw describes how *The Cave* “progressively circles back on its own incomplete or inadequate descriptive episodes, treating these as a datum or ground for a series of improvisations and transformations that eventually turns the book itself, in its various layers, into a textual cave” (166). Mayer’s approach to *Memory* is similarly recursive, forming an iterative series of singular instances that attempt, through overlay, to analyze a phenomenological concept, and, in doing so, open up a cave or vacuity at the core of the work. In an extended experiment of self-documentation that investigates the workings of memory, Mayer does not reveal her interiority or narrate the meaning of her experiences (as we find, for instance, in Wordsworth’s reflections on his encounter with the leech-gatherer). *Memory* is a poetic text without subjectivity. Instead, it exposes a relation to the self as that which is exterior and estranging through its excessive cataloguing of photographic counter-memory.

### **Photography and Typology**

In what follows, I hope to theorize Mayer’s poetic experiments in self-documentation in relation to the history of photography as a tool of scientific description and taxonomy, in particular as the medium was used to figure the confluence of particular instance and type by which it is categorized. I briefly explore nineteenth century approaches to archival apparatuses of classification, before exploring in more depth the example of Jean-Martin Charcot’s photographs

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<sup>21</sup> Excerpts from her “Lecture at Naropa,” published in Anne Waldman and Andrew Schelling’s *Disembodied Poetics: Annals of the Jack Kerouac School*, include Mayer’s careful overview of the forms, or what she calls structures, of her published books, which all rely on some functional constraints.

of female hysteria patients at Salpêtrière. Rather than suggesting straight continuity between Mayer's "emotional science project" and the observation-based endeavors of nineteenth century Europe, I propose that they share a similar serial structure that overlays the singular instance with a legible concept or type. Mayer's poetics is indebted to the practice of observation and photographic recording that proliferated in the nineteenth century, and the example of Charcot's serial typology usefully foreshadows the absence to which her poetry gestures. If documentary poetry is best understood through photographic forms, as I have been arguing, then explanations of photography's centrality to observational scientific practice are particularly relevant to a poet like Bernadette Mayer.

In wide ranging accounts of nineteenth century photography and visual culture, one finds a repeated emphasis on the overlay of singular instance or particular example and the broader type it articulates. Mary Ann Doane writes of the rise of "archival desire," as evidenced by the proliferation of museums, libraries, and zoos, and the advent of new archival technology, like the phonograph, typewriter, and cinema, in addition to photography (82). And a need for facticity was everywhere, as Elizabeth Eastlake writes in 1857: "photography has become a household word and a household want; is used alike by art and science, by love, business, and justice" (138), to satisfy "the craving, or rather necessity, for cheap, prompt, and correct facts in the public at large" (161). Photography's ubiquity allowed every particular object or individual to be legible in its singularity, as unquestionable fact. But this facticity or indexicality only makes sense within a broader context of signification, whereby reality is configured into a space of writing, that is, abstracted from particular instance into code.<sup>22</sup> In her study of the emergence of

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<sup>22</sup> See Rosalind Krauss's *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* for a fuller explanation of photography and the signification of reality: "The photographic medium is exploited to produce a paradox: the paradox of reality constituted as sign—or presence transformed into absence, into representation, into spacing, into writing" (112).

legible time in the nineteenth century, Doane examines Etienne-Jules Marey's "chronophotography," photographic records of duration. Unlike the similar work of Eadweard Muybridge, who used separate frames of photographic images to study motion, Marey's work used multiple exposures within a single frame in order to minimize the gap between images. As Doane puts it, Marey's dream was of "representation without loss" and his obsession was capturing every incremental aspect of a movement (61). But this practice ultimately produced blurry superimpositions, illegible because they incorporated too much detail (54). In order to create the impression of motion without interruption, Marey dressed his subjects in black against a black background, affixing white dots on their joints. This produced linear illustrations of movement without the details of particular bodies, a prime example of the impulse toward standardization, exactitude, and abstraction that photographic technology often encouraged.

Allan Sekula's influential account of the coterminous rise of bourgeois portraiture and police photography similarly attests to how nineteenth century photography intensified this coupling of particular instance and type. Every individual portrait, he argues, became legible only as part of a broader social order, meaning that hierarchies of class, ethnicity, and morality were at once recorded and constructed within this panoptic visibility. Moreover, one's image was newly possessable and mobile, not only in the form of popular *cartes de visite*,<sup>23</sup> but also as something the state could possess, analyze, and deploy as evidence. Insofar as the social and legal order depends upon property rights and "possessive individualism," Sekula writes, "every proper portrait has its lurking, objectifying inverse in the files of the police" (7). Texts like the 1846 "Rationale of Crime," which included portraits of prisoners at two New York facilities and

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<sup>23</sup> Armstrong notes that "between 300 and 400 million of these photographic portraits were sold in England from 1861 to 1867 alone" (17).

was explicitly used as a tool of phrenology and moralizing typification,<sup>24</sup> as well as numerous anthropological and ethnographic photographic collections that organized people by type, strived toward a totalizing catalogue of images.<sup>25</sup> In his account of how Arab visitors to Europe viewed what he calls the “new apparatus of representation,” Timothy Mitchell writes that in the nineteenth century Europe became “a place of spectacle and visual arrangement, of the organization of everything and everything organized to represent, to recall, like the exhibition, a larger meaning” (295). Differences were not only catalogued and visualized, they were produced through the engaged curiosity stimulated by the exhibition form. “What Arab writers found in the West,” he writes, “were not just exhibitions and representations of the world, but the world itself being ordered up as an endless exhibition” (Mitchell 290). As Sekula puts it, “it was only on the basis of mutual comparison, on the basis of the tentative construction of a large, ‘universal’ archive, that zones of deviance and respectability could be clearly demarcated” (14).<sup>26</sup> By this account, photographs index particular individuals while rendering legible types of people, accelerating both colonial management and bourgeois subject formation.

One particularly heinous example of nineteenth century ethnographic typology that will prove even more relevant in the following chapter is that of Sarah Baartman, a Khoisan woman from South Africa who was taken to London in 1810 to be exhibited in human zoos and named the “Hottentot Venus.” The circulation of her body as an image of racial and sexual difference was justified by her status as an object of scientific curiosity: after her death her body was dissected by Georges Cuvier, Napoleon’s surgeon, and she became a prototype of the

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<sup>24</sup> Here one could think as well of the work of Alphonse Bertillon on criminal identification and Francis Galton, the founder of eugenics (Sekula 18).

<sup>25</sup> See for example, John Thomson, *Street Life in London*; James Forbes-Watson and J.W. Kaye’s *People of India* (1868-1875); the “Racial” Albums of the BAAS. For a more detailed catalog, see the “Anthropology” entry in the *Encyclopedia of Nineteenth-Century Photography*.

<sup>26</sup> John Tagg likewise writes of nineteenth century photography as installing a “new order of writing and representation [...] the careful scrutiny of bodies and spaces with a view to their regulation” (52).

“oversexed” “subhuman” (Hobson, 6). In her introduction to *Representation and Black Womanhood: The Legacy of Sarah Baartman*, Natasha Gordon Chipembere writes that Baartman’s “perceived hypersexuality created a Western historical trajectory of sociocultural images/imaginings of Africa and the black female body as inherently inferior, and thus a site to be plundered” (7).<sup>27</sup> Her body was made to function as an image in order to bolster Europe’s taxonomic colonial regime, the epitome of the violent confluence of “photographic” index (*this* real person whom you could pay to see) and racialized type. Following Sylvia Wynter and Evelyn Hammonds, we can understand this typology as part of the “demonic ground” of white supremacist signifying systems, whereby the Black female figure is both densely overwritten and voided of substance, a kind of ordered chaos.

Beyond the regulatory work of policing bodies through classed and racialized categories of portraits, Nancy Armstrong compellingly argues that nineteenth century literary realism is itself premised upon the identification not of things in descriptive visual language, but of images. That is, rather than indexing things in the world as such, realist description indexed a matrix of images that would tell the reader what is real, by virtue of categories forged through identification and recognition (3-4). Identity became a science of images, whereby “people came to visualize themselves and others not only in terms of gender, class, race, and nation, but in terms of intelligence, morality, and emotional stability as well” (17). And these images came to determine frameworks of legibility. As I argued in Chapter 1, it is precisely this confluence of the visual and legible placed upon the individual that William Wordsworth had already begun to

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<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth Alexander’s poem, “The Venus Hottentot” (1990), makes this link explicit. Its first section is written from Cuvier’s perspective as he corrupts the beautiful into the possessable: “Science, science, science! / Everything is beautiful,” he begins, going on to describe insect wings, water, crumbs, cranial measurements, genitalia. His section ends, “Elegant facts await me. / Small things in this world are mine.” The much longer section in Baartman’s voice ends with her imagining this corruption itself as exhibitable: his heart on display “so the whole world could see / it was shriveled and hard, / geometric, deformed, unnatural.”

lament. The rise of photographic technology in the nineteenth century only continued what he understood to be the uncanny coupling of the singular and the type, with formal tropes of portraiture, such as the pose or the constructed background, used to hasten such recognition.

The rise of photography in catalogues and ethnographic work served to both divide people into disparate groups and also connect them in knowable and perceivable spheres of being, appealing to the broader fantasy of a universal and totalizing archive of images. It is precisely this impossible ideal of a writable totality, or the “everything work,” that Mayer’s poetry plays with in her own domestic context, edging toward an inconceivable infinitude through excessive observation and description in serialized form. As is suggested by Marey’s blurry images, Mitchell’s “endless exhibition,” and Baartman’s over-written body, and as I will explore in more detail in reference to Charcot’s photographs of hysterics, classificatory photography does not simply subsume contingency to type; rather, it directs it toward discursive significance that is only realized through repetition, and what it repeats is never present or remembered but conjured up in the recognition of the image as a repetition. Like Mayer’s supposed reliving of prior conscious states in which the photograph intervenes as the vehicle for lost immediacy, the facticity of the photograph obscures the absence that undergirds typology.

### **The Hysteric**

Georges Didi-Huberman’s writing on the use of photography in Jean-Martin Charcot’s study of hysteria explores in more detail the relation between the photographic record and invention of type, in this case of feminine pathology. During his tenure in the 1880s at the infamous Salpêtrière asylum as a prominent neurologist, Charcot published the *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* in three volumes, a catalogue of images of women suffering

from attacks of hysteria, which was meant to serve as an archive and pedagogical resource. He called it “a living museum of pathology” (Didi-Huberman 17). The photographs were modeled, though, after the portrait form, using “oval framing, dramatic lighting, aesthetically-chosen camera angles, [and] the costuming of the hysteric-model (often selected for her beauty over her symptomology)” (Gantz 135).<sup>28</sup> As Janet Beizer writes, hysteria discourse in the mid to late nineteenth century was constructed around “an aesthetic and then a more general sociocultural category” as much as a medical term, which appeared regularly “in literature, newspapers, journals, salons,” to figure not just femininity, but “disorder and difference” (8). Charcot’s patients were prompted and posed, often blatantly, to embody an aesthetics of hysteria, in what Didi-Huberman argues is “hypocrisy as *method*, a ruse of theatrical reason as it presumes to invent truth” (8, original emphasis).<sup>29</sup> Charcot presented his work to audiences twice weekly, delivering carefully rehearsed lectures and performances of case studies that became so popular, a new amphitheater was built to hold up to 500 audience members, which included artists and writers of Parisian high society alongside medical practitioners (Justice-Malloy 135-6). In response to criticism that the rise in cases of hysteria was a direct result of his intervention (“as if I have created this condition by my own willpower”),<sup>30</sup> Charcot responded, “in fact all I am is a photographer. I describe what I see” (107).<sup>31</sup> In this sense, hysteria was co-created by the doctor

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<sup>28</sup> Didi-Huberman writes that “psychiatric photography took the form of an *art of the portrait*” (49) and elsewhere considers hysteria “as a chapter in the history of art” (4).

<sup>29</sup> In response to the accusation by skeptics that Charcot’s patients learned to play the role of hysteric at Salpêtrière and then performed it for him, Charcot countered that what critics derisively called a mere “cultural hysteria” was a “very picturesque” notion, thereby attributing the aesthetic register not to his own work but to its (mis)interpretation (Goldstein 331). It is interesting, though, that in accusing his critics of displacing the real thing with an image of it, he recycles an aesthetic term that so aptly describes the proto-photographic desire to adapt nature to landscape through the iterative capture and circulation of its aesthetic value. That is, he names precisely what he enrolls photography to do for him: invention by way of serialized records.

<sup>30</sup> Case file ledgers show a rise in hysterics at Salpêtrière and Bicêtre from one percent to nearly twenty percent from 1842 to 1882 (Goldstein 322).

<sup>31</sup> In Freud’s obituary of Charcot, he wrote, “He was not a reflective man, not a thinker: he had the nature of an artist—he was, as he himself said, a ‘visuel,’ a man who sees.”

and the patient as spectacle and performance, as a constructive relation between madness and the authorial gaze. The inventive force of photography plays out in this instance, as in others, through the overlap of particular instance and type. Didi-Huberman uses the term *facies* to signify precisely this: “the singular air of a face, the particularity of its aspect, as well as the genre or species under which this aspect should be subsumed. The *facies* would thus be a face fixed to a synthetic combination of the universal and the singular: the visage fixed to the regime of representation” (49).<sup>32</sup> Photography allowed the images to adopt the authority of facticity drawn from particular evidence mechanically witnessed, even as it took part in “the figurative possibility of generalizing the case into a tableau” (Didi-Huberman 30).

Not simply aestheticized, images of patients were made to form elements of a broader event within signification, an invention or reinvention of gendered pathology. Hysteria is the symptom,<sup>33</sup> Didi-Huberman writes, “of being a woman” and was “named, designated, and renamed a thousand times” (68-9). Causes of hysteria ranged from nervousness to diabetes to “moral impressions” to syphilis to “venereal excesses,” but all circled around the sexed difference of having a uterus, specifically as it was made to signify a certain “feminine sensibility” and fragility (Didi-Huberman 72).<sup>34</sup> But this frailty was coupled with unassimilable difference, an internal capacity for movement, “wandering,” and convulsive animality (Didi-Huberman 68).<sup>35</sup> For clinicians, hysteria became a site of excess itself, what the psychiatrist

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<sup>32</sup> Discussing the origin of his diagnostic method in one of his Tuesday lessons, Charcot stated, “One day, when reflecting over all these patients as a group, I was struck with a sort of intuition about them. I again said to myself, ‘Something about them makes them all the same’” (104).

<sup>33</sup> Or perhaps an accusation. Didi-Huberman writes, “hysteria almost never stopped calling the feminine *guilty*” (69).

<sup>34</sup> One of Charcot’s central contributions to the study of hysteria was diagnosing male patients as well as female, but these male patients were routinely feminized, and the source of their pathology often located in the failures of their mothers. Moreover, though a quarter of his patients were male, all of the photographs in the *Iconographie* are of women, suggesting that femininity remained central to the image of hysteria (Baer 43).

<sup>35</sup> As Janet Beizer explains, “Hippocrates (460-377 B.C.) was the first to use the term hysteria, derived from the Greek *hystera*, ‘uterus.’ He explained why the disease could be caused by sexual continence: the abstemious uterus dried up, lost weight, and consequently was able to migrate in search of moisture” (4). In the Middle Ages under the

Charles Lasègue called “the wastepaper basket of medicine where one throws otherwise unemployed symptoms” (qtd. Goldstein 324). In his descriptions of cases, Charcot sought to contain this messiness through extensive itemization and description, by constructing a “visible alphabet of the body” (Didi-Huberman 26). As Stephen Heath writes, Charcot “sought to bring order to hysteria, this medically most undisciplined of illnesses with its riot of manifestations and symptoms, to establish its ‘clinical picture’” (100).<sup>36</sup> He defined four periods distinctive to the hysterical attack, moving from rigidity to spasms to vivid expressions of emotional states to delirium; adding up to a “fundamental type” against which particular instances could be measured (Goldstein 326-7). In other words, he constructed a formula whereby a panoply of symptoms could become legible through narrative structure. As Didi-Huberman writes, his ultimate goal was “Seeing everything, knowing everything. Circumscribing (and not writing). Making the eye expound (and not speak, nor even really listen): the ideal of the *exhaustive description*” (26, original emphasis).

This ideal arises out of the fantasy of seeing as describing, without delay, of producing an unmediated record, a pure and total “inscription” of what is seen. In *The Birth of the Clinic*, Michel Foucault defines the ideal of medical description as characterized by a dual impulse toward precision and accuracy, on the one hand, and generalization and comparison on the other. The repeatability of descriptive terms thus “authorizes the transformation of symptom into sign and the passage from patient to disease and from the individual to the conceptual” (Foucault 114). The ideal of exhaustive description, what Foucault calls “the great myth of the pure Gaze”

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auspices of Christian ethics, hysteria shifted to signal sexuality, rather than continence, and was linked to the sin of lust and female pleasure (5). Bezier goes on to explain that though hysteria changed in the nineteenth century, it maintained “an essential conservatism” (6): “As nineteenth-century explanations of hysteria evolve and ostensibly leave the womb,” she writes, “they inevitably return to its image” (7). That is, even when explicitly decoupled from female anatomy, feminized difference remains in place, as an image that coincides with what is perceived.

<sup>36</sup> As a contemporary of Charcot put it, “the camera...was as crucial to the study of hysteria as the microscope was to histology” (Goldstein 327).

or “speaking eye,” represents an “ever-withdrawing horizon; it is much more the dream of a thought than a basic conceptual structure” (115).<sup>37</sup> Photography as invention relies on such dreams of unmediated recording in order to fuse the coincidence of viewing and knowing, with all contingency folded into narratives of type. Yet the hysteric remains an unoccupiable position; as much as Charcot aimed to contain it typologically, it belongs properly to no one, which is why the photographs must repeat, must pose the same figure again and again or show a different woman inhabiting the same pose, in the movement of becoming figural.

Doctors were unable to find a physical cause of hysteria, an organic or material substrate that could ground their variable observations. In a section of his study of Charcot titled “Glances and Clicks,” Didi-Huberman draws out the link between clinical viewing and the production of a photographic image, suggesting that the ideal of certainty itself, the assurance of being able to read another, turns the clinical gaze toward its own physical potency (27). As the translator of the English edition points out, Didi-Huberman plays on the literal meaning of *coup d’oeil* (glance) as a “blow of an eye,” a form of violent contact or percussive force. Didi-Huberman writes that Charcot “armed himself with photography,” as a tool to define hysteria through totalizing visuality, that is, as that which inscribes the event of signification upon the gendered body itself.<sup>38</sup> As a photographer for Charcot, Alfred Londe, put it, “This is in fact about keeping the lasting trace of all pathological manifestations, whatever they would be, that could modify the exterior form of the patient and imprint on her a particular character, an attitude, a special facies” (qtd. Baer 48). The hysteric contains her own perfect record in the image of her body as type.

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<sup>37</sup> Ulrich Baer names this “Charcot’s phantasmatic belief in the pure coincidence of inscription (of the image on the mind) and description (of the impression in theory)” (48).

<sup>38</sup> Bezier links this notion of inscribing significance on the hysterical body to realist narrative form: “The growing belief, in the nineteenth century, in the superiority of impersonal or objective styles of narration finds a support in the hysteric’s semiotic body, which relays language to gesture and physical symptom” (9).

But what if the gaze were flipped and the clinical aporia of hysteria was itself the seat of pathology, “the neurosis of an immense discursive apparatus, which generated ‘woman’ as a specific image, compatible with hysteria?” (Didi-Huberman 73). If the hysterical body is “a spectacular conflagration of all paradoxes in a single gesture,” whose evidence of pathology is never entirely graspable, whose symptoms have no organic root, then the photographs that are printed and bound to produce a legible and reproducible iconography of hysteria become their own material substrate, cause and proof at once (Didi-Huberman 74).

Ulrich Baer’s account of Charcot’s *Iconographie* explores this allegorical relationship between the camera and the hysterical body by way of the flash. Studying the images of catalepsy that show different women reproducing the same frozen gestures, Baer writes that by ushering the women into dark rooms and exposing them to a bright light without warning, in advance of being photographed (in the form, that is, of a camera obscura), Charcot was able to prompt a mechanical repetition of the embodied memory of physical or psychic trauma. As Baer puts it, “catalepsy retains by way of the body what photography retains by way of the camera: it freeze-frames and retains the body in an isolated position that can be viewed and theorized outside of a sequence of motion” (53). It captures an unremembered trauma in the same way that the photograph captures the unseen experience. And these frozen gestures were repeated not just by the same patient, but by different, interchangeable patients, rendering the isolatable symptoms a common by-product. In other words, the hysterical body was understood to be capable of producing an unmediated record of its own trauma by way of a gesture that was visible and repeatable in different cases. The feminine pathology merely pushed to an extreme what the feminized subject was taken to be: an ideal recorder and container of experience, as we saw in the reception of Dorothy Wordsworth’s journals.

Baer's larger point is precisely this; it is not simply that the camera is able to capture the physical repetition and immobility of traumatic memory, but rather that the hysterical body itself only exists as an allegory of the camera and mechanical reproduction. If, as Joan Copjec puts it, "the theory of hysteria was from the beginning a theory of mimesis," it is not simply of the hysteric mimicking the traits of the disease or being made to mimic it through hypnosis, but rather an imitation of the form of the camera itself ("Flavit" 33). In other words, the hysteric presents her body to the camera as its own recording machine, inhabiting the photographic form of iterative counter-memory. Her body, as record, both evidences and overwrites the supposed root of her pathology. The production of the hysterical body as effable and repeatable type is thus inextricable from the technology of photography. And, in turn, the positivism of photographic evidence mechanically produced is a smokescreen for an aesthetics of hysteria made, as Copjec writes, out "of the imagination, of the production of images cut off from the natural" ("Flavit" 30). The photographs never provide access to hysteria as such but repeat its image of gendered pathology by way of the hysterical body as camera. Rather than consider photography as a purely disciplinary technology premised upon totalizing legibility, in line with Sekula, Tagg, and others' panoptic interpretations of photography and typology, what the *Iconographie* shows us is the retreat of sense in photographs that gestures to an impossible and non-existent material substrate. If the hysteric as distinct type only exists by way of the camera, then photography doesn't exist before it's subjected to the unknowable realm of the hysteric's position.<sup>39</sup>

But what of the violence of the clicking camera to which Didi-Huberman draws attention? How can we think of the camera as an internalized and embodied recording

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<sup>39</sup> I am grateful to Rithika Ramamurthy for helping me to arrive at this formulation.

mechanism if it is also this very real external threat of capture? Before returning to Mayer's poetry, I want to briefly touch on a case referenced by Freud that is pertinent to the relation of photography to invention. It is an instance, in fact, where a woman invents the presence of a camera. In what he calls "A case of paranoia running counter to the psycho-analytic theory of the disease," Freud describes the situation of a woman brought to him by a lawyer who doubts the veracity of her claims. A thirty-year old single woman working to support herself and her mother, she explains that she was courted by a male colleague who convinced her to have an affair with him. While in his apartment rooms during the day, and in a compromising position on his bed, she is frightened by a click or knock sound coming from across the room, where a desk is positioned in front of a curtained window. When she asks about it, he explains that it is likely from a clock on the desk. But on her way out she sees two men on the staircase, one of whom is carrying a box of some sort, who whisper something inaudible as she passes. She convinces herself that they were carrying a camera and had taken photographs of her in the room from behind the curtain. Her conviction that her lover was intentionally recording their tryst to blackmail her eventually drives her to consult the lawyer.

In a second, private consultation with the woman, Freud discovers that she had a prior paranoid reaction following her first visit to the man's house which preceded this one. She feared he was telling her female boss about their affair and that this boss, whom she describes as having hair like her mother's, would punish her. Freud then understands her paranoia to be directed towards this mother figure, rather than the man. This allows Freud to align her case with the overarching type of paranoid disposition, which is guided by "the narcissistic origin of her homosexual object-choice" (269). Though she tells Freud she immediately asked about the clicking sound in the man's room, he suggests to his readers that this is a "mistaken memory"

and that she only asked about it after she saw the men in the stairwell, explaining that “this deferred use of impressions and this displacement of recollections often occur precisely in paranoia and are characteristic of it” (270). The idea of the camera in this case produces the memory that would have recorded it, turning the apparatus of capture around. In fact, Freud suggests that there was no external cause or sound: “I do not believe that the clock ever ticked or that there was any noise to be heard at all” (270). Rather, the knocking she registered was the sensation of her clitoris, which she “subsequently projected as a perception of an external object” (270). Freud explains that he has observed something similar in his hysterical patients, who register “genital excitation” as an external knocking sound.

Freud suggests that the woman overwrites her feeling of desirous vulnerability with the presence of a camera recording her. Rather than listen to her own body, she projects its sound onto an external object that threatens her with her own conscience and shame, but only in retrospect, to supplant what was felt in the moment and immediately lost. But the camera as paranoid counter-memory portends her public exposure, as evidence of her affair and, more broadly, her desire. In other words, the mediation of the idea of a recording device makes the intensity of her own desire known to her. This case analogizes the threat of capture and punishment that haunts female desire, but it also exposes a blind point at its center. While the camera might signal the woman’s entrapment in a panoptic patriarchal gaze that mediates the parameters of her desire, the unseeable photograph that the camera produces figures the opacity or absence that instigates it. Even when it captures an image, the photograph is incapable of returning experience to her; it is held hostage in its externality. In her reading of this case, Copjec writes that the clicking or knocking sound is “the subject’s own surplus *jouissance* [...] which cannot be escaped, got rid of, even though we never manage to claim it as our own”

("May" 102). It is the palpable turned into the sonic, the internal self known only through its alterity, forever unassimilable in its singular difference. As Copjec writes, "it is jouissance that not only singularizes us, but also doubles and suffocates us [...] Jouissance makes me me, while preventing me from knowing who I am" ("May" 102). What I am suggesting is that the photographs the camera produces, in their very absence and impossibility, signal the threat of external materialization that follows from self-difference. They introduce an uncanny anonymity in place of the woman's private desire, figured in the impossible image of her on the bed, replicating the type of the "loose woman."

Mayer tests this externalization with her use of photography that displaces memory by superimposing a detailed document of experience, allowing her to itemize what was not seen as though it were. Mayer uses photographs not to introduce normative or objective ways of seeing into her poetry, but to incorporate the work of counter-memory as constitutive of memory itself. This difference within the self that makes one forever illegible in any totality is precisely what intrigues Mayer as she pushes the edge of self-knowledge in her experiments in constant self-recording.

If the unknowable and immaterial void of hysteria is masked by typological descriptions of hysterics but gestured to by Charcot's iterative photographs, Mayer's poetry does something similar with the strangeness of memory. The experimental parameters of her poetry suggest a methodical approach to defining memorial experience, but the excessive, blurry, and at times unreadable combination of poetry and photographs undoes any clearly thematic project. Moreover, by including details from photographs of what she did not experience at the time as though they are memorial, Mayer suggests that memory is actually teeming with real absences that appear as presences. Her experiments in self-documentation press the limits of the totalizing

record or “everything work” by picking up the camera that records her intimate life and using the images it produces, in their alterity, to transcribe her life in poetry. Mayer adapts the typological uses of photography developed in the nineteenth century, the iterative overlay of singular instance and type, to experiment in different poetic structures, taking her own self as both subject and object of analysis. But rather than codify and abstract from her experience, she lingers in the excess of details that amass through the process of recording. Specifically, the photographs she takes to aid her projects displace the immediacy and presence that seem to define her constraint-based approach with the alterity of the unseen.

### ***Midwinter Day***

I close with a brief examination of *Midwinter Day* to suggest, finally, that Mayer’s use of the photograph as counter-memory introduces a specifically poetic opacity into her auto-documentary works. Published in 1982 and perhaps her most critically popular work, *Midwinter Day* is a book-length poem in six parts that was ostensibly written in one day, December 22, 1978. It represents Mayer’s best attempt to record her experiences and thoughts as they occurred. It is an account both of ordinary domestic tasks in Lenox, Massachusetts with her husband and two young children, and a record of her dreams and associative, wandering interiority. Of her virtuosic writing process Mayer states, “Nobody ever believes me when I tell them that it was written in one day, but it almost was” (Naropa 100). She rehearsed dream writing for two weeks in preparation, kept copies of the day’s newspaper and other written material, and took photographs to write about and incorporate later. In fact, she exposed one roll of film, the same amount she took each day during the month-long *Memory* project, and she made written descriptions of the images before selectively folding that text into the poem (“Naropa” 101).

These photos shadow the text without ever appearing or being referenced in it. Mayer writes of the photos, “In this instance and also the use of the photographs in *Memory* [...] I was never trying to take beautiful photographs necessarily. I was always trying to take as many as possible; to take photographs as what you’re really seeing, not trying to isolate objects and put them in the center of the frame. But just take them to reflect what actual vision is, and not romanticize it [...] The other thing is that you don’t always see all these things when you’re looking with your eyes. It became more information” (“Naropa” 101). She goes on to note examples of visual data that supersede anything that could be transcribed in real time. By “not romanticize,” I take Mayer to mean that she tried to remain as objective as possible when taking the photos, to record her daily life as though it didn’t belong to her. The lack of a central object in the image seems to mirror the lack of subjectivity in the poem. As she puts it, “it would be interesting to write about what you know and leave out the self,” to approach the self anonymously (“Naropa” 101).<sup>40</sup> Once again, Mayer uses photography as an ostensibly objective record of reality but also as a blind point of inaccessibility or difference within the self, a record of what one does not see that is then folded into the remembered day.

In her lecture at the Naropa Institute, she offers a couple of examples of these descriptions for *Midwinter Day*, drawn from photographs: “1. Trying to see myself in the mirror over the typewriter as sea. 2. Breakfast at the bottle of milk, white light. Lewis in shirt jacket. Marie stripes putting oatmeal in mouth” (101). Direct engagement with the photographic images seems to infuse an account of perceptual experience with poetic language: simile, paratactic sentence fragments, a synesthetic overlay of taste and sight arise out of Mayer’s automatic approach to recording photographic data. She does not simply use the photos to prompt

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<sup>40</sup> In the same lecture, she laments the resistance many poets have to collaboration: “it’s amazing to see how frightened people are of sharing their anonymity” (101).

memory—that breakfast consisted of milk and oatmeal, that Marie was in stripes and Lewis in a shirt jacket—but rather to stimulate a connotative and figurative approach to documentation. It's unlikely that Mayer perceived her mirror as a sea when she was photographing herself looking into it, or registered the bottle of milk as white light, but more likely that these figurative ways of seeing were fostered through exposing film to the moment and retroactively annotating it. Rather than understanding her use of photography as an aid to memory, then, what I have been suggesting is that Mayer uses photos as data of the optical unconscious to experiment with poetry as another medium that occludes as it records. She engages with the documenting material itself, which is used, in an echo of Charcot's photographs of hysterics, to invent immediacy while paradoxically exposing a void or absence as the substrate of the poem.

*Midwinter Day* figures the impossible “everything work” as akin to a dream. In the fifth section of the book, when Mayer is finally at her writing desk after a day of errands and cooking and dishes, she writes:

I had an idea to write a book that would translate the detail of thought from a day to language like a dream transformed to read as it does, everything, a book that would end before it started in time to prove the day like the dream has everything in it, to do this without remembering like a dream inciting writing continuously for as long as you can stand up till you fall down like in a story to show and possess everything we know because having it all at once is performing a magical service for survival by the use of the mind like memory. (*Midwinter Day* 89)

If we take this passage as a key to understanding *Midwinter Day*, its dreamlike hypothesis is of the constant, ongoing linguistic record that safeguards one from annihilation, or at least wards it off for as long as possible. But, as she puts it in the same section, the iterative work of memory *is*

the risk of self-difference: “Sometimes the story changes in remembering like the threat of extinction, shrinking forests, quarks, quasars, and black holes, dirty snowballs and antirocks in space” (86). The alterity within memory itself is here figured in terms of both natural destruction and quantum physics, gesturing to a kind of larger-than-life ineffability that stretches the coherence of the self out into the material and scientific world.

In a work largely understood in terms of its close attention to the minute, quotidian, feminized labor of parenting and quiet living, Mayer insists on total optic relevancy: “Everywhere there is has everything there is to look at” (107). But this is purchased in the breakdown of living itself, of life overtaken with its serial record until it engages this more destructive, withdrawing void. Her long-time collaborator Clark Coolidge puts it well: “the certainties of didactic discourse are hurled into the erosion of the poetic principle. Poetry being forever lost must submit to its own vacuity; it is somehow a product of exhaustion rather than creation. Poetry is always a dying language but never a dead language” (qtd. Shaw 164). By coupling the written record of her day with the alterity of the photograph, Mayer opens up this anonymous underside of the self in poetic form as that which withdraws from sense. In her experiments with constant, impersonal documentation, Mayer uses photography to capture the unseen, which is then folded into her poetry as the unknowable, as self-difference that strains to be a “perfect” record. This double movement is what Édouard Glissant calls poetic force: “the opacity of the diverse animating the imagined transparency of Relation” (192). In Anne Waldman’s introduction to *Disembodied Poetics* she writes, “A poetics by nature harbors contradictions. It takes in the vagabond phrase, the unarticulated desire, the thought that has nowhere else to sleep” (xiii). Rather than express a thought, poetry allows it to rest in the poem unarticulated. Mayer’s poetic experiments, with their close observations and procedural seriality,

can be productively read in relation to photographic typologies that were popularized in the nineteenth century. But in an echo of Charcot's catalogue of hysterics, this photo-poetic method does not safeguard or articulate her self; instead, the "imagined transparency" of the photograph further obscures and anonymizes the self.

## Chapter 4

### “O Type accumulated”:

#### **Iterative and Infinite Forms in the Poetry of Robin Coste Lewis and Dionne Brand**

Poetry studies has an unfortunate tendency to create fallacious categorical distinctions between formal experimentation and so called “identity politics.” There is still a general sense that if poets experiment with form—especially non-lyric, constraint-based writing—they attend to questions of aesthetics rather than questions of race, gender, and sexuality. The latter is associated with expressivist modes of writing, whereby poets are taken to be representatives of a larger group. This chapter’s basic premise is that this structure of representation is itself problematic and that contemporary Black feminist poetics is working to disrupt its imperatives. African American poets have largely been excluded from canonization of experimental work: Donald Allen’s 1959 anthology of avant-garde poetry, *New American Poetry*, featured only one Black writer and his 1982 follow-up on postmodern poetry did not add any others. A more recent example of this bifurcation is Marjorie Perloff’s 2006 Presidential address at the MLA in which she advocated for a return to the “merely literary” as opposed to “anthropological” and “historical” tendencies in criticism today. Dorothy Wang unpacks what “merely literary” means by tracing a split in New Lyric Studies between the “literary” and the “cultural” (1-16). These distinctions, she suggests, creep outward so that “literary” is linked to the aesthetic, abstract, and philosophical; while “cultural” is linked to the material, mimetic, and autobiographical. Her argument is that race necessarily embeds the cultural and political into the literary, and that by insisting on this binary, critics construct and maintain a white poetic tradition.

Poets and critics like Elizabeth Alexander, Evie Shockley, and Anthony Reed have worked to counter this false dichotomy, grounding contemporary Black experimental poetry not in the whitewashed avant-garde tradition but in broader inheritances of innovative African-American poetics that attend to both form and race.<sup>1</sup> In her essay, “New Ideas About Black Experimental Poetry,” Alexander reads Gwendolyn Brooks’s experiments with sonnet forms, Langston Hughes’s incorporation of blues into the lyric, and, perhaps most relevant to this chapter, Robert Hayden’s use of verbatim text in “Middle Passage,” first written in 1945. Hayden’s poem uses slave traders’ recorded accounts of their problems with “cargo,” from journals and court testimony, to reflect upon enslaved Africans’ “voyage through death / to life upon these shores” (48). Hayden’s “Middle Passage” is part of the longer history of citational poetry that I have been studying, then, but also speaks more specifically to what Alexander calls Black artists’ “collective genius as experimenters: to take received forms that have not included us, wrestle with them and make them our own and new.” This poetic method of expropriation undoes our notion of history as entirely past and entirely narratable, a subsumption of particular occurrences to general storylines. As Arlette Farge puts it, “history is not a balanced narrative of the results of opposing moves [...] The historical event also resides in this torrent of singularities, which are as contradictory as they are subtle, sometimes even overwhelming” (86). The excessive, serial poetic forms I have been explicating mimic this “torrent of singularities” by coupling photographic indexicality with a vacated subject position, whether it be the gendered self or the injured other of industrial exploitation. Hayden’s poem is a precursor to the works by Robin Coste Lewis and Dionne Brand that I will discuss in this chapter, which expropriate text

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<sup>1</sup> See Evie Shockley, *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011); and Anthony Reed, *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

and data from other sources to index unnamed figures whose seriality in the archive occludes direct reference. Whereas “index” denotes evidence of an occurrence, “reference” implies a context of shared knowledge, whereby a name signifies something recognizable. Photo-poetics, I have been arguing, uses the index to theorize, historicize, and politicize societal documents by reframing fragments of archival text, without reference to any particular individuals.

Though Lewis and Brand’s poems engage with archives pertaining to all sorts of art and news media, photography offers an interpretive framework for how repetitive documentation can both index real details and construct representational types.<sup>2</sup> As I explored in Chapter 3, photography represents an uneasy melding of material particularities and types constructed through serial repetition. As such, it has become a scientific tool of observation that seems to plainly record reality, even as it uses pictorial tropes to create the interpretive paths by which the image will be contextualized.<sup>3</sup> Theorists of critical race studies and visual culture have taken up photographic signification as a means by which race is constructed: Tina Campt writes that “race is neither fact nor substance, but instead a reality that materializes socially as a significant index of human difference and meaning” (127), and Leigh Raiford argues that rather than record race, photography produces it as a visualizable fact (12). Much of nineteenth-century ethnographic portraiture worked to pathologize, exoticize, and dehumanize people who could be categorized by Western conceptions of race and otherness.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Lewis’s own interest in photography theory supports this approach: “Photography is an archive I rely on a great deal to work, as well—literally, but also ideologically [...] The philosophy of photography is a great love” (“Black Joy”).

<sup>3</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman calls photography “a paradox of mendacious irrefutability” for this reason, in his study of Charcot and the invention of hysteria through the circulation of photographs of female patients in his care (61). In his account, photography constructs scientific legitimacy out of contingency, truth of type out of particular imaged instants.

<sup>4</sup> In 1850, the Swiss “comparative zoologist” Louis Agassiz, for example, paid J. T. Zealy to photograph African American slaves to provide “proof” of supposed biological difference between races. This pseudoscience draws on efforts in phrenology to map human characteristics, especially predisposition to criminality, onto cranial shape and size. See for example, M. B. Sampson’s 1846 treatise, *Rationale of Crime* (New York, NY: D. Appleton & Co.),

But the inescapable contingency of photographic details disturbs the work of caricature and category that is better served by an artist's impression than by the camera's lens. Nineteenth-century physiognomists were frustrated by photography's accuracy, its failure to empirically record the "mental condition" they imputed to their subjects (Armstrong 126). Francis Galton, for one, responded by harnessing the veracity of the photograph to capture the so-called criminal type. He superimposed multiple exposures onto a single negative, producing a prescriptive virtual matrix for reading actual people in the world. Galton defended his use of composite photographs by the mathematical logic of averages: "They are real generalizations, because they include the whole of the material under consideration. The blur of these outlines, which is never great in truly generic composites, except in unimportant details, measures the tendency of individuals to deviate from the central type" (166). The metric by which he selected whom to include within the genre of criminal, however, is never explained. Physiognomy takes part in practices of supposedly neutral data collection, collation, and theorization that are embedded in the production of criminality or ethnicity as mythic, hegemonic, pathological—composite facticity supposedly revealed through blurring the contingencies of photographic reportage. By focusing on the contingent details nonetheless caught in the frame, photo-poetics critiques the reading practice that blurs difference in the production of type.

In her lecture "The Race Within Erasure," Robin Coste Lewis considers erasure poems as "aesthetic and political tool[s]" that realize contingencies caught within historical frames. These contingencies, accidentally captured in archival documents, are fruitfully repurposed because they are the unintended. The poets I have been studying are lyric readers of documents, imputing significance to the details and detritus that persist in them. And this lyric reading of documents, I

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which includes portraits of incarcerated individuals in New York prisons. This line of thinking led to Francis Galton's "eugenics" in 1883, and the widespread use of photographic portraits to produce racial histories.

suggest, replicates how photographs signify and matter to their viewers. As Walter Benn Michaels writes, “the photograph has no internal logic—it depends for its existence on something outside it (what it’s a photo of) and for its significance on what someone sees in it. And this openness is what Barthes famously called the ‘punctum’—the thing in the picture that moved the beholder” (104). The punctum is the contingent detail caught in the photograph, but also its temporal quality, the fact that something was and isn’t, at the same time. As Barthes writes, “the Photograph is an extended, loaded evidence [...] in the Photograph, what I posit is not only the absence of the object; it is also, by one and the same movement, on equal terms, the fact that this object has indeed existed and that it has been there where I see it” (115). Rather than interpret the punctum as a vehicle of elegy, as many have, photo-poets deploy it as index and absence at once, not in reference to some particular lost person or people but as a double movement embedded into typological structures of perception.<sup>5</sup>

In the first half of this chapter, I argue that Lewis’s method of redirecting language that indexes absent images runs against a critical grain that wants to find lost or injured people given voice, rehabilitated, or elegized in and by poetry, contained by texts that work in turn to contain suffering. I read this critical ethos of empathetic vitalism as symptomatic of a more general response to aesthetics of suffering, whereby the narrativization of injury and the sympathy it inspires produce the sense of having resolved something. Photo-poetics, I suggest, draws on forms of archival work (cataloging, captioning, listing, storing, collecting) to index not particular beings or bodies but dominant, often racializing, ways of seeing that are produced by circulating

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<sup>5</sup> This is why Barthes never included the Winter Garden Photograph in *Camera Lucida*: there is no objective example of the punctum, no general referent for what he calls its “wound.” The image of his mother as a child could only be read by us as an example of some generality, as “one of a thousand manifestations of the ‘ordinary’” (73).

and safeguarding certain media. By citing captions without their visual referents, Lewis finds ways to index abstract structures of perception that are often not immediately apparent. *Voyage of the Sable Venus*, I argue, upends a synecdochic system of representation that makes images of particular people bear general meaning. *Voyage* renders recognizability itself problematic by reframing what is viewed in order to expose the means by which it is read. My reading engages a broader interest in how textual and pictorial signification work together not only in poetic works but in structures of perception more broadly, how material bodies become symbolically inscribed, or ascribed aesthetic value.<sup>6</sup> I suggest that *Voyage* theorizes the unseen consequences of material particulars congealed into aestheticized value; its concern is not so much records of individuals but record keeping itself and the value systems such documentation perpetuates.

### **“Redirected Language” and Missing Images**

Robin Coste Lewis’s *Voyage of the Sable Venus, and Other Poems*, the first debut collection to win the National Book Award for poetry in forty years, has received much public and critical attention. The titular long poem, as Lewis explains in its prologue, “is a narrative poem comprised solely and entirely of the titles, catalog entries, or exhibit descriptions of Western art objects in which a Black female figure is present, dating from 38,000 BCE to the present” (35). The titles are not repeated, altered, or broken, but Lewis does play around with punctuation, line breaks, and spacing, so that it is difficult to distinguish the specific referent of any given fragment. She also returned the original racially inflected terms that were excised by museums and libraries; as she puts it: “I re-corrected the corrected horror in order to allow that original

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<sup>6</sup> I’m drawing here on what Hortense Spillers called the “hieroglyphics of the flesh” that imprints history upon racialized bodies, as well as Anne Anlin Cheng’s recent work on “ornamentalism,” whereby stereotypes of Asiatic femininity are constructed through aestheticization that flattens distinctions between human and object into what she calls “synthetic personhood” (14).

horror to stand” (Lewis *Voyage* 35). This radical archival gesture disavows any purported neutrality adopted by these institutions, insisting on the historical frame of racist caricature and appropriation.<sup>7</sup> *Voyage*’s form is the most explicitly citational of all the works in this study, using only found text. In a recent essay, Brian Reed uses the term “Redirected Language” to refer to such poems that splice text from other sources, appropriating and rearranging (usually) prose into unintended connotative directions. Though Reed largely dates this form of collage or citation-based poetry to a postmillennial information-age context, in which streams of data become inextricable from the poet’s sense of world and self, we can understand it as part of the longer history of photo-poetics that I have been tracing, including poets as diverse as William Wordsworth and Robert Hayden.<sup>8</sup>

In Lewis’s hands, redirected poetry performs the politicization of language through form. By reframing the same words within a different context—both how the lines appear on the page and the fact that the page is packaged as poetic—the method theorizes reading as a complex practice of mediation. As we saw with the works by Charles Reznikoff and Muriel Rukeyser that I read in Chapter 2, the cited language is often redirected out of an institutional context, whether from legal documents, government regulations, police reports, or, in the case of *Voyage*, museum and library archives and exhibition copy. These are texts that aim to describe and record objects or events in the world from a position of authority and supposed objectivity. Yet, Reed has a

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<sup>7</sup> On the event of Kara Walker’s 2019-2020 exhibition at the Tate Modern, Zadie Smith noted her similar insistence that we not rewrite the horrors of history to make it more palatable: “Caricature and stereotype are not Walker’s flaws—they are her sharpest tools. She treats them as the DNA of history, the building blocks of our social reality, ‘scripting’ for us, informing and affecting our behavior, and posing the greatest risk not when they are made explicit but rather when they are allowed to sink into invisibility, to appear ‘natural’ or ‘inevitable.’ It is then that they become most firmly entrenched as ideology.”

<sup>8</sup> Reed’s argument draws on Perloff’s influential book, *Unoriginal Genius*, in which she argues that in the post-Internet context, “what Hart Crane called the poet’s ‘cognate word’ begins to take a back seat to what can be done with other people’s words—how already existing words and sentences are framed, recycled, appropriated, cited, submitted to rules, visualized, or sounded” (xi).

curious tendency to assume that the poets using these texts aim to restore to them an ethical value or purpose: he writes that Timothy Donnelly's "The Last Dream of Light Released from Seaports" seeks to "redeem" the USA Patriot Act of 2001, and that Philip's *Zong!* wants to "through reassembly recover the lost voices of African slaves drowned in the Middle Passage" (776-778). It is precisely this impulse to restore and revivify that I take *Voyage* to be interrupting. Photo-poetics specifies an impersonal approach to redirected language that does not assume voice or recovery but instead focuses on documentation itself and the world-creating work of documentality.<sup>9</sup>

Lewis resists the linear narrative pull that this recuperative impulse relies upon (from a worse past to a better future) by using poetic form to theorize seriality within captions that index absent images. It is nearly impossible for the reader of her work to visualize any coherent art object (let alone a person), even as her redirected language means they never stop feeling the pull of indexicality, the affect that attaches to the knowledge that these words describe extant art objects. Lewis uses lists, for example, to stack racist representations, to overlap the unreal collective with the real particularities, so that figuration itself becomes visible as an iterative structure. As a medium that indexes material singularities while generating serial reproductions, photography can shed light on how the iterative functions in poetic form. Moreover, considering nonvisual photographic modes in poetic repetition proposes nonspectacularized ways of seeing systemic racialized violence.

Other poems in the collection that precede and follow *Voyage* also reference absent images, though they are more directly ekphrastic. For instance, the poem "verga:" opens with an

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<sup>9</sup> I borrow the term "documentality" from Maurizio Ferraris, who argues that the social world is constituted by documents that produce the basis for biopolitics and the governable subject (271). In the same sense, poesis or creative production is guaranteed not merely by praxis but by its inscription and survival on some medium (167).

epigraph from Fazal Sheikh's collection of portraits of Somali refugees in Kenya, *A Camel for the Son*. The quotation is from a letter given to Sheikh by Abshiro Aden Mohammed, the leader of the women's group in the Dagahaley refugee camp, that describes the gender inequality and violence experienced therein. The epigraph explains that "women don't want the men to go into the bush because the women will only be raped but the men will be killed," before narrating a particularly horrific rape (Lewis *Voyage* 16). The awful logic of this trade-off breaks apart in Lewis's hands. Her fourteen-line poem reads like a twisted sonnet, repeating the syntax of the lines in the epigraph but reordering the verbs, nouns, and subjects so the lines press the boundaries of sense: "Many men will be caught by the trees in the bush / Several trees will be raped by the bush and killed" (Lewis *Voyage* 16). Lewis doesn't describe a photograph here but does reference a collection of absent portraits. Though the epigraph contains a vivid scene that the reader can picture, the poem disrupts any such imagined visibility, resisting the spectacularity of suffering so often reinforced in documentary photography (not however, in Sheikh's portraits). The verbs in this example of redirected language don't let any of the violence of the epigraph disappear, though. Instead, it affixes to inanimate, plant, and animal beings alike. The first line of her poem repeats the final line of the epigraph: "Before leaving her they put stones in her vagina" (Lewis *Voyage* 16). Forcing the symbol of inanimate nature into the locus of gendered reproduction implies a killing and burying of motherhood itself. But the final line reads, "Before leaving, the vaginas were seen standing in the stones," suggesting a strange inversion of power, a feminine monumentality that remains largely unpicturable, and divorced from the subjectivity of the "her" in the epigraph (Lewis *Voyage* 16).

The following poem, "The Wilde Woman of Aiken," follows ekphrastic tropes of speaking to an art object but inverts the direction of address, so the "I" of the poem belongs to

the woman in the portrait. A note Lewis provides informs us that when Oscar Wilde toured the U.S. in 1882, he was criticized for his theory that anything could be beautiful. J. A. Palmer (of Aiken, South Carolina) made a satirical photograph staging objects that he found ugly, including a large droopy sunflower, mismatched fabrics, a vase in the shape of a face, and an unnamed Black woman, to disprove Wilde's aesthetic theory. Lewis's poem recognizes the flattening of the human into the strata of the inanimate that renders the image satire; her poem opens, "I am not supposed to be / beautiful" and goes on, "Vases and I are not permitted / to dally. If I were a name, // it would be *Wall / paper*" (Lewis *Voyage* 17). Blending into the background and yet defining and writing every space, naming herself "Wall-paper" allows Lewis's speaker to expand and address her photographer:

My hair is made  
of a million breathing paisleys.

For five thousand years,  
I have listened to you  
think aloud about a world

that does not exist.

I am sitting here,  
in the open,

and you are there, dripping  
beneath your dark

velvet, waiting for light (Lewis *Voyage* 17)

Alluding to a photographer covering himself behind his camera tripod, arranging and judging images while remaining obscured from view, Lewis reveals the astounding ignorance of this privileged position. If you construct visibility you are blind to it, she suggests, and are likewise deaf to “the glass inside your syllables” and mute regarding their implications: “The story has not even begun.” The speaker aligns herself with light and life, with “eager seeds” and a “hundred garlands,” finally declaring: “You / cannot / prevent me” (Lewis *Voyage* 18). Once again, an absent image becomes the vehicle not to reinforce the life of a particular subject but the regenerative, substantive, and lively multiplicity of life itself. Lewis reframes the significance of this photograph, putting it all on the side of beauty.

Finally, in a poem titled “Beauty’s Nest,” Lewis reflects on another absent image, the highly photographed beauty of the Grand Canyon, once visited but unseen. When her father came home from World War II, he and several other Black veterans visited the Grand Canyon, driving there and arriving at night. But no hotel nearby would allow them entry, so they stood at its edge to say they had been there, and then drove home. When Lewis herself visited as an adult, her father admitted that he had been there too, but “didn’t really *see* it” (“Black Joy”). Lewis subtitles her poem with a caption, turning it into the photographic record her father was denied: “Jim Crow Welcomes You Home After the War, Just After Midnight Grand Canyon: 1951” (Lewis *Voyage* 21). Her poem records his experience and hers together, blending her impression of “an elegance / so inconceivable” with his vain attempt “to conceive all the things / it is still too dark / to see” (Lewis *Voyage* 21). “The Grand Canyon is beauty to me,” Lewis has stated, that kind of sublime beauty that drives aesthetic production (“Black Joy”). That her experience of it is infused with her father’s loss suggests that her engagement with aesthetics is similarly

informed by its historic refusal of Black witness. In her meditation on the canyon's vastness, Lewis's speaker considers her body's own depth, the hidden landscapes one cannot see. By offering a photographic caption and poetic record of an absent image, Lewis provokes her reader to consider what it means to be inhabited by invisible sublimity.

### *Voyage of the Sable Venus*

*Voyage* continues this line of inquiry by considering structures of visibility apart from coherent individuals. A closer examination of *Voyage*'s form compels the reader to remain in the space of representation, without slipping into the lure of a "voice" or "life" buried within archival documents. Initially, the poem seems to offer such access, mirroring a sense of voyage towards "real" figures accessible through poetic invocation. The poem begins with "The Ship's Inventory" and an "Invocation: Blessing the Boat,"<sup>10</sup> followed by eight "Catalogs": Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome; Ancient Egypt; The Womb of Christianity; Medieval Colonial; Emancipation & Independence; Modern, Civil, Right; Modern Post; The Present/Our Town. In this way, Lewis returns a sense of movement, travel, and risk to the space of a museum.<sup>11</sup> In a 2016 essay, "Boarding the Voyage," Lewis develops an extended metaphor for her process of gathering texts for the project as embarking on a ship, collecting figures to join her on the voyage. Evoking the violence of the Middle Passage, Lewis asks her reader to move with her again through the archive itself. As she puts it: "Perhaps the true museum, the most honest

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<sup>10</sup> Alluding to Lucille Clifton's poem and collection, *blessing the boats*.

<sup>11</sup> Lewis's method of juxtaposing museum objects to redirect how they are seen in broader contexts of slavery and racialization is reminiscent of Fred Wilson's influential 1992 exhibition, *Mining the Museum*, at the Maryland Historical Society. As Kerr Houston writes, "Wilson unsettled the museum's comfortably white, upper-class narrative by juxtaposing silver repoussé vessels and elegant nineteenth-century armchairs with slave shackles and a whipping post. Texts, spotlights, recorded texts, and objects traditionally consigned to storage drew attention to the local histories of Blacks and Native Americans, effectively unmaking the familiar museological narrative as a narrow ideological project."

archive—the eternal exhibit—doesn’t occur outside, but occurs and reoccurs within our bodies. Perhaps the gallery is not material, but memorial.” The archive in this sense is not an external storehouse of things but the unfathomable inheritances that form us. But when the reader tries to locate a sense of self or subjectivity unearthed through archival memories, she is confronted repeatedly with material resistance. “Invocation” begins:

Untitled

Anonymous

Clay

Prehistoric

Cow

Bone

Detail

Of a

Balsarium

Glass Moss

Fragment

Untitled Gelatin

Silver Print

On Paper On

Stucco On Canvas

On Concrete (Lewis *Voyage* 40)

A nameless materiality (clay being associated with raw matter) is attached not to any identifiable body or time period, but to female generativity as such (“Cow / Bone”). Lewis repeatedly thwarts the semantic expectation of a noun the reader could pin to the adjectives; here “Detail / Of a” seems linked to “Balsarium,” a kind of vase or vessel, but is upended by “Glass Moss,” which combines incompatible textures into an unseeable referent. The repetition of “On” in the final stanza again disrupts the sense that the photograph (“Gelatin / Silver Print”) could refer to a singular art object; instead, the “Fragment” multiplies its seeming impression on different material surfaces. These descriptions of matter redirect the reader’s desire for the singularity of a human body, signaling instead the repetitive visual tropes that adhere across material strata. Later in the same section, Lewis offers a slanted apostrophe, interrupting the call to a discernible absent object that could undergird a poetic subjectivity: “O Type accumulated—Figurine 38 felt / Tip monumental relief” (Lewis *Voyage* 41). The only potential addressee of this apostrophe (“O Type”) is typification itself, the construction of a type based on iterations amassed over time.<sup>12</sup> That “Figurine 38” could refer to a person who could feel anything is hinted at but then denied, folded into a tool affiliated with textual inscription, by the enjambment “felt / Tip.”

Lewis describes the years-long archival project as a form of entrapment within the voyage itself, figuring what it might mean to embody the gendered and racial violence of diasporic memory: “One could write the word ‘untitled’ on a piece of paper every day for the

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<sup>12</sup> David Marriott, on the topic of Blackness and typification, writes that Black men of the Jim Crow era were forced to assimilate to racist caricatures: “Blacks, then, must not only suffer the anonymity of being imitated as types but, because of their slave heritage, they can only slavishly ape—as types—the images of others” (61).

next one hundred years without stopping and you would never reach the end of female namelessness. I began to grow wild inside. I began to feel I was on board all the time” (“Boarding”). Lewis theorizes the paradox of titling or naming namelessness by using language that documents visual objects that cannot be visualized. The poems in “Catalog 7” especially emphasize this: “Untitled Anonymous Memory,” “Anonymous homage to an Unknown,” “Untitled Self-Portrait Spirit / Untitled Book Page / Untitled Woman in a Sardine” (Lewis *Voyage* 104-106). An archive continuously filled with empty placeholders marks gendered absence without actually referring to anyone. The affect this produces is something akin to the mathematical sublime and threatens Lewis’s sense of her own coherence and stability. Rather than pit the material against the linguistic, then, she looks at how the archive renders the Black female body “overdetermined from without,” inscribed with histories of namelessness that attach to visual representations (12).<sup>13</sup> As Kimberly Juanita Brown writes, “studies of the Black Atlantic and its subjectivities have always been studies of visual culture(s), whether or not they have been received as such.”<sup>14</sup> Lewis explores how visual culture produces racialized subjects through what I understand to be a photographic mode of index and iteration. I hope to explore how it is precisely the endlessness of iconicity and textual repetition that Lewis uses to render herself, as a poet, a figure of representation among others, one who is “on board all the time,” rather than a rescuer of real people or reviver of lost voices.

Central to understanding *Voyage*’s use of repetition and redirection is how it denies narrative constructs of historical progression. Lewis spans a massive amount of time, but, as

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<sup>13</sup> Frantz Fanon is explaining in this section of “The Fact of Blackness” how the racial epidermal schema operates differently from antisemitism. He writes, “I am given no chance. I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of the ‘idea’ that others have of me but of my own appearance” (116).

<sup>14</sup>In a similar vein, Paul Gilroy writes, “Cognition of ‘race’ was never an exclusively linguistic process and involved from its inception a distinctive visual and optical imaginary. The sheer plenitude of racialized images and icons communicates something about the forms of differences these discourses summoned into being” (35).

Tessa Roynon writes, she “collapses the distant and recent past into a chilling continuous present” (146). Like the space of the museum, though divided into time periods, the same background walls or white pages seem to flatten temporal difference into a series of encounters with repeating “now’s.” Though it is called a “narrative poem,” Lewis likens narrative form to propaganda and the fantasy of history.<sup>15</sup> Racist violence violates the norms of narrative cohesion (logic, causality, beginning/middle/end). Insofar as it meets our expectations of closure, narrative silences repetition, absence, and rhyme—what Fred Moten calls “the occluded of language: sound” (*In the Break* 44). For Moten, poetry interrupts narrative by way of the somatic, marking difference just below the level of cognitive recognition: “So a phrasal disruption of the sentence is crucial; so poetry remains to be seen and heard so to speak, and in excess of the sentence because it breaks up meaning’s conditions of production” (*Black and Blur* 3). Poetic materiality, or form, that uses fragmentation, repetition, and enjambment manifests interruptions in the production of sense and undoes the relentless readerly orientation toward a whole.

Moten also makes the argument against the impulse to read Black art as a means of recovery: “Black art neither sutures nor is sutured to trauma. There’s no remembering, no healing. There is, rather, a perpetual cutting, a constancy of expansive and enfolding rupture and wound, a rewind that tends to exhaust the metaphysics upon which the idea of redress is grounded” (*Black and Blur* ix). If the “idea of redress” is grounded in a Western metaphysics of selfhood as autonomy and racial histories as narratable, Lewis’s use of fragmentation, redirected language, and seriality works to undo its moorings. As Lewis states: “The problem with insisting on narrative as a performance of wholeness is that we don’t engage these fibers, these fragments” (“Boarding”). Despite her insistence on maintaining fragmentation, critical responses to her work

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<sup>15</sup> Lewis writes of “the intellectual propaganda called history” (“Boarding”) and elsewhere states, “I can’t separate the fantasy of history from the fantasy of narrative” (“Black Joy”).

tend to fall back on the restorative, vitalizing, and ultimately progressive narrative of “giving voice” to lost, silenced figures.<sup>16</sup> Michael Leong writes that, “inserted into a new collaged context, the sable Venus is rescued” and that Lewis engages in “a documental act of reclamation and recovery” (70). Molly Hagan writes: “She resurrects the women of the past, giving them back their limbs and names” (597). Tessa Roynon writes: Lewis “returns the humanity to these anonymous women” (146). Dan Chiasson writes: “All those women made into serviceable, mute paddles and spoons, missing their limbs and heads, are, by the miracle of verbal art, restored.” This humanist emphasis on wholeness suggests a liberal and readerly desire for the conflict to be resolved, for mediation to fall away, for poetic invocation to perform a kind of magic.

The desire to find voice resuscitated through archival poetics reinforces the problematic notion that there are *people* to be found buried in these textual fragments. Empathetic vitalism conflates the repurposing of representational objects (and in this case just their captions) with a reference to the people supposedly disfigured therein. This critical tendency, when used in Black studies, Stephen Best calls the “cult of voice,” linking it to a broader “recovery imperative” (132). He defines it as “a critical ethic [...] to recover Black subjects from archives structured by violence and colonial dispossession” (Best 11). A related strand of critical race studies he names “melancholy historicism” or “cult of death,” for its repeated attempts to find traces of lost lives in the archives that meet with repeated failures (Best 15). Acknowledging the impossibility of recovery, melancholy historicism remains committed to entrenching a shared history in a forensic engagement with colonial archives. I would argue that *Voyage* falls into neither the “cult of voice” nor the “cult of death,” but rather theorizes how aesthetic objects deploying Black

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<sup>16</sup> On the problem of using images of Black suffering to illicit sympathy and prompt redress, Christina Sharpe writes: “These images work to confirm the status, location, and already held opinions within dominant ideology about those exhibitions of spectacular Black bodies whose meanings then remain unchanged [...] Such repetitions often work to solidify and make continuous the colonial project of violence” (116-7).

figures are rendered, as Best puts it, “anarchival” (88). Instead of focusing on rescue or loss, presence or absence, Best writes: “The problem of the archive is less a question of the ontology of the object of the past than the ontological disturbance the archive produces” (88). Because Black figures tend to appear in Western archives only through their disfigurement, rather than attempt to restore what was never given, the “anarchival” opens up possibilities for considering how figuration becomes attached to racialized bodies through formal signification. By redirecting the language of artwork titles, captions, and descriptions without giving her reader an image or human referent, Lewis opens up the hermeneutic problem of the “anarchival” as one of absent bodies rendered aesthetic, accessible only as coded representation.<sup>17</sup>

### Captions and their Photographs

To read *Voyage* outside of such typological constructs, I will focus on how it orchestrates odd relations between seeing and hearing, image and discourse. Lewis avers a commitment to thinking these disciplines together.<sup>18</sup> Of a poem entirely composed of words applied to works of art, she writes, “I wanted the poem both to talk about the history of visual culture (race, gender, power) while also performing the history of poetic forms in English, simultaneously” (“Black Joy”). The poem performs this literary history formally, moving through heroic couplets, concrete poems, imagistic brevity, and free verse, while playing with rhyme, alliteration, anaphora, and enjambment. In his review of the poem, Dan Chiasson called its form a kind of scrambled ekphrasis, but one thing Lewis insists upon is the inability to know, appreciate, *or*

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<sup>17</sup> Or, as Lewis puts it elsewhere, as caricature: “Not enough is said about the indoctrination of perception [...] It is difficult to explain the psychological damage of what it feels like never to see yourself reflected back in your world in any way, ever, even physically, except as caricature” (“Black Joy”).

<sup>18</sup> Lewis states, “We’re constantly trying to separate words from pictures, text from image, but that it’s impossible. I wanted *Voyage* to perform the history of that intersection, poem by poem” (“Black Joy”).

even see an image apart from its contextualizing caption. Part of what I want to consider here is how this interplay between the discursive and visual is inflected by her use of captions as the source material for poetry. How does a visual object that is both absent and indexed become inscribed in a poetic reading practice? Lewis's work with archival records is less interested in exposing an unknown narrative than in reorienting our attention to what is already seen, to what, in fact, constitutes perception. In doing so, she suggests, along with recent scholars and artists of Black abstraction, that one response to representations of racialized violence is not more exposure but theorizing our very frameworks of visibility.<sup>19</sup> Eve Sedgwick's influential essay on reparative reading suggests that a potential alternative to exposure is to "*displace and redirect* [...the] aperture of visibility" (140). Lewis's long poem effects a reorientation of the visual aperture by means of focusing on the text surrounding, placing, and describing an image and rendering *that* poetic.

As such, I explore here how captioning functions in relation to an image as a naming device, and how this relates to the naming Lewis highlights in her title, the epithet and name "Sable Venus" as applied to the aestheticized and objectified Black female figure. I think through the caption, moreover, as a principally photographic device. Taken from the Latin *capito*, meaning "a catching, seizing, holding," and the Old French *capcion*, meaning "arrest, capture, imprisonment," *caption* was adopted in English in the seventeenth century for legal document titles referring to property seizures and apprehensions by judicial process. It wasn't

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<sup>19</sup> Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) theorizes the abstraction of Blackness in American literature. More recently, Leigh Raiford delivered a public lecture on Black abstraction, "'Burning all Illusion': Abstraction, Black Life, and the Unmaking of Whiteness" (Brown University, 9 November 2018); Philip Brian Harper has addressed the topic in *Abstractionist Aesthetics: Artistic Form and Social Critique in African American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2015); and Adrienne Edwards in the curated exhibit, *Blackness in Abstraction* (Pace Gallery, 2016). For an analysis of how contemporary aesthetics of Black abstraction has its roots in the Black Arts Movement, see Margo Crawford's *Black Post-Blackness: The Black Arts Movement and Twenty-First-Century Aesthetics* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017), especially the chapter titled "The Politics of Abstraction."

until the twentieth century U.S. context that caption referred first to the heading of a chapter or article, and then to the title below an illustration, or a sub-title in cinema (OED). A caption supplements an image by contextualizing it, allowing it to be read historically, but it also interprets the image in advance, in some sense seizing or arresting it. It provides a discursive frame by naming what is indexed in the image and describing what has been left out beyond what the lens could capture. As Paula Rabinowitz has argued, documentary images require narrative to become affecting—a caption must accompany the piece of evidence or artifact (17).<sup>20</sup> And the caption is not limited to just the words below an image but comprises everything that holds and contextualizes the image in its reception; the ways in which photographs are ordered and displayed can also function as part of the apparatus of captioning (Rabinowitz 17).<sup>21</sup> By capturing and reframing found words on another page, Lewis displaces and recontextualizes captions that work to place and contextualize art objects.

The photograph is a fragment out of place and time, an image spliced into a new framework and repurposed for a future viewer. By copying text that names or describes extant art objects, *Voyage* photographs the captions it rewrites. That is, it uses the photographic index in conjunction with serial repetition to reframe the significance of what is pictured. Lewis turns the work of collecting, cataloging, and taxonomizing back onto the archive itself. She forces a recognition of accrued (racializing, aestheticizing) symbolic significance in what could otherwise be dismissed as neutral language of cataloging. It is precisely this confluence of the index and

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<sup>20</sup> Susan Sontag, too, writes that “the identification of the subject of a photograph always dominates our perception of it”; the caption that tells us what the image depicts is an essential element of the two-part system of photographic signification: form/image and content/text (92).

<sup>21</sup> John Tagg similarly understands the work of the caption as the “grasping of meaning” that accompanies looking, as it is embedded in ideological structures of perception. As he puts it, there are “a whole set of graphic, editorial, and verbal devices” that come into play when coding an image (3).

serialized, implicitly racial tagging schemes that makes explicit what Lewis has called “white pathology.”<sup>22</sup>

A poem from “Catalog 5: Emancipation & Independence,” for instance, punctuates its short, stairstepping quatrains with “Girl” and “Black Girl” to bring the color line into relief.

Little Girl in Orange

Black Girl White Flower

Black Girl Dragging White Girl

Blue

Girl Behind Black Door

Black Forest Girl

Girl in a Green Dress

Half-Length Portrait of a Mulatto Girl (Lewis *Voyage* 86)

The use of colors in this poem (red and yellow also appear in the preceding stanza) estranges the ways in which we mark bodies as Black, white, or “Mulatto,” pressing on the neutralizing terms of racial categorization. Though the “Girls” here initially seem beautified in dresses and flowers, there is an imputation of violence against white people (“Black Girl Dragging White Girl / Blue”) that is oddly misplaced in the Catalog’s Jim Crow context. Lewis uses the relay between titles to show how white rage becomes displaced and projected onto Black figures. The one recognizable artist’s name mentioned in the poem, “Black Girl from the Cottingham Suite,” references a painting by Robert Cottingham depicting a marquee billboard that reads *Black Girl*

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<sup>22</sup> On the question of whether or not *Voyage* is about Black subjectivity, Lewis has answered: “No, what it exposes is white pathology [...] tragic sadness that has really nothing to do with me” (Sharpe).

and “*The Butcher*.” Lewis also includes two references to school integration, evoking the violence that was directed toward Black students and alluding especially to the famous photograph of fifteen-year-old Elizabeth Eckford walking to school in Little Rock, Arkansas, surrounded by a vitriolic screaming white crowd. The poem mashes up stereotypes that create the repeating, shifting form of the “Black Girl”: ornamental and violent, subjected to violence but also impervious to it. A later quatrain reads, “Negro Girl Pelted by Crowd / Potholders / with Black Boy and Girl / Eating Watermelon” (Lewis *Voyage* 87). Juxtaposing an image of violence with a consumer item that protects (presumably white) hands from being burnt while it depicts a dehumanizing racist image, Lewis suggests that repetitive, stereotypical images directly inform material suffering. Whereas descriptive language with a clear referent leaves little room between text and image, the juxtaposition of multiple captions opens up space for the reader to theorize how aesthetic objects are placed within cultural contexts to reinscribe the ideological bases of their production.

Lewis works with descriptions that tell us facts about the material construction and origin of an artwork, but her poetic displacement of the text sets loose a connotative relay otherwise unavailable in captions meant to anchor an image.<sup>23</sup> This relay responds to an absent image that is nonetheless indexed by textual fragments in a kind of reverse rebus; as such, the reader’s affective response is linked to specific, locatable, but unseen archival works. This operates like Barthes’ punctum, the affective response to the *that-has-been*, what he calls the “certificate of presence” that *is* the photograph but is registered only as loss (87).<sup>24</sup> The punctum is fastened to

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<sup>23</sup> In his essay, “The Photographic Message,” Roland Barthes defined two possible ways in which text and image are read together (in comics or ads, for instance): “anchorage” and “relay.” With anchorage, the text captions the image and the image illustrates the text; they work together to reinforce a clear message. With relay, the image and text are in a juxtapositional but complementary relation; they don’t mean the same thing, but a broader (often comical) meaning is realized when they are read together.

<sup>24</sup> In lectures delivered in 1979 on photography and haiku, which anticipate *Camera Lucida*, Barthes writes that the haiku shares photography’s *noeme*, the indexical guarantee that *that* has taken place: “The haiku presents the life of

singularities that only gain legible significance by virtue of their relation to a broader context, what Barthes called the photograph's *studium*. *Voyage* underscores both the materiality of the objects described and their symbolic abstraction into aestheticized, racialized vehicles of social currency. By writing exclusively using captions, Lewis photographs documentation itself to show how symbolic significance and aesthetic value cohere around iterative images of raced figures.

### **Naming Repetition**

The unseen images themselves, though, index not a particular entity, as most photographs do, but the serial construction of a mythic racialized figure, named the "Sable Venus." As Saidiya Hartman writes, "One cannot ask, 'Who is Venus?' because it would be impossible to answer such a question. There are hundreds of thousands of other girls who share her circumstances" ("Venus" 2). In the legal documents recording the deaths of two young women that Hartman reads, "Venus" refers to but does not belong to one woman, as a moniker given but not chosen or accepted. The name addresses many women and no woman; it marks a real atrocity but cannot be attached to any particular subject. "The Sable Venus" is an unsignable name and, moreover, a name given in order to disavow the violence of sexualized domination. As Hartman puts it elsewhere, "The discourse of seduction obfuscates the primacy and extremity of violence in master-slave relations" (*Scenes* 81). The imputation of desire and lasciviousness to the Black female slave, she argues, sanctioned the use of her body for others' pleasure, making the legal prosecution of rape impossible. Reading the archive against the grain, then, the name Venus in

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the Event and its abolition simultaneously" (*Lectures* 72). He uses the word *satori*, or "mental jolt," to get at something similar to the *punctum*, the non-interpretive, indivisible detail that arises paratactically out of a scene and "sets a bell ringing" inside one (*Lectures* 78). Such a comparison suggests that *the punctum* may not be an exclusively visual effect.

this context indexes not a person but a likely crime. As Nicholas Mirzoeff puts it, “The index is a sign that designates a truly existing thing (in commonsense terms) in the way that a bullet-hole indicates the passing of a bullet” (111). The index leaves a mark, independent of its being registered as such. These marks or traces persist in the archive and are taken up by Lewis as sites of misnamed trauma, of violence that was given the name beauty/pleasure. The form of “The Sable Venus” is thus both real and mythic, singular and serial, and as interchangeable and ghostly as the commodity form itself.<sup>25</sup>

The name captions what cannot be seen, only inferred. But what Lewis shows us is that captions can slip away from what they name, can relay in unintended directions, and indeed, can apply to unexpected visual entities. As Tina Campt puts it, “The question of futurity is inextricably bound up in the conundrum of being captured by and accountable to the historical impact of the Atlantic slave trade on the meaning of Black womanhood in the Americas” (15). Drawing on Hortense Spillers’s memorable assertion, “I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name,” Campt states, “I share her sense of capture” (15). Lewis, too, explores what it means to feel captured by a name, to be captioned within a frame, that cannot be simply accepted or refused.

*Voyage* is not interested in narrating a story or exposing a previously unknown injustice. Rather, it reframes what is already visible by shifting the register in which it is noticed: Lewis forces a rereading of what has already been read and absorbed. In a section of the first Catalog titled “Element of Furniture Decoration,” she forms two columns that split function/content and form:

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<sup>25</sup> Brown writes about her goals to “make legible the multiple enactments of hypervisibility Black women cannot escape, and to highlight artistic attempts at using opacity, framing, fragmentation, and repetitions of the visual to illustrate a desire for Black subjectivity that includes Black women within it” (*Repeating Body* 7). Similar to Lewis, then, she charts an aesthetics of Black female being apart from anchoring visual representation.

water jar

bowl

ointment spoon

in the form of swimming

Black girl

mirror

with handle

in the form of a carved standing

Black girl (Lewis *Voyage* 48)

The repetition of Black female form is stressed by the enjambment in the right columns while the gap between object and its decorated form imbues a liveliness to the latter, as if the described figures were indeed swimming or carved. Lewis does not simply play with a sort of double entendre here but presses again and again on the forced objecthood of Black female bodies in the context of the Atlantic slave trade. The two columns ultimately come to “mirror” one another, though, and rather than distinguishing the form of the “Black girl” from the objects listed, it juxtaposes them so they face each other in endless relay. Fred Moten writes of this doubling of subjecthood and objecthood as the “Resistance of the Object.” Drawing on Marx’s hypothetical thought experiment, “If commodities could speak...,” Moten insists that Black performance is the resistance of the object in the form of sonic rupture, a split of sound from sense that follows from a split in personhood and subjecthood (*In the Break* 261). This cut issues a break in a value system that would separate use value from exchange value, insisting on a different framework entirely. Poetic interruption instantiates this break—as Moten puts it, “Song cutting speech. Scream cutting song. Frenzy cutting scream with silence, movement, gesture”—but it doesn’t

break apart entirely into formlessness, a sort of outside or void (*In the Break* 39). Rather, following work in trauma theory whereby the traumatic moment is only experienced as a delay, the poetic break of sound into sense “ruptures interpretation even as the trauma it records disappears” (Moten *In the Break* 39).<sup>26</sup> Lewis’s poem performs this confluence of record and disappearance so forcefully by using captions without their images, documenting racializing perception by leaving out what is seen.

And she does so by means of poetic form, her use of enjambment, parataxis, connotation, apostrophe, repetition, and fragmentation. The last section of the first Catalog, for instance, closes by attending to the sonic rupture of sense in poetic repetition. The word “relief” appears throughout the poem, but here repeats eleven times: “Site relief / Relief fragment”; “Relief / Relief // Relief / Relief” (Lewis *Voyage* 54). By forcing an emphasis on sound, Lewis shifts the focus from the name of a sculptural technique to an abstracted cry that rises out from the archive. By implication this cry marks subjectivity, but it cannot attach to any isolatable subject and so resounds only as echo. Between the two meanings (sculptural technique, alleviation of pain) there flashes the sound itself, the word becoming syllables, the repetition leading to the near loss of meaning, before the act of reading forces a second connotative significance. In this sense, reading is always a rereading.

The poem’s title is itself a rereading, sourced from Thomas Stothard’s 1794 etching, “The Voyage of the Sable Venus, from Angola to the West Indies.” Stothard’s etching shows an African woman posed like Botticelli’s *Venus*, gliding across the Middle Passage, attended by

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<sup>26</sup> See especially Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). Caruth redefines history as nonreferential through the concept of trauma. Historical memories do not point to definable experiences but bear witness to what cannot be fathomed by repeating the departure that characterizes the (non)experience of trauma. Trauma can be shared, can exist culturally and be embedded into a group’s history, but not through reference or direct unmediated knowledge. The return of trauma always occurs as a departure, an obfuscation, an opacity. For Caruth, literature attends to this and reading is an opportunity to listen to the inarticulate trauma of another.

Triton and some cherubs, in a cruel obfuscation of historical violence. It derives from an ode written by Isaac Teale, an English clergyman living in Jamaica, which extolls the pleasures of raping enslaved women (Allen 667). Yet, when Lewis came across this etching, she states that she fell in love at first sight (“Boarding”). In the relay between image and title she found a gap to reconfigure historical structures of value: “Once I found an etching in whose title I heard the history of all humanity: Voyage of the Sable Venus” (“Boarding”). She calls the title an “epic written in one line” and focuses on the dissonance, within the Western archive, of finding darkness and beauty written together (“Boarding”). Finding this title is what inspired Lewis to focus on histories embedded in the names of artworks, the visual codes that instruct perception. She suggests that perhaps “the *true* reason no one has never seen *Sable* and *Venus* in the same room together, at the same time, is that, quite simply, they are the same person” (“Boarding”). Beauty, she tells us, is “the greatest ideological territory of conflict” (“Boarding”).

A kind of ethics of aesthetics arises when Lewis links beauty to what she calls “Black joy,” when the central question becomes who and what gets to be cherished. In her most recent book, Hartman writes of a similar politics of beauty: “Beauty is not a luxury; rather it is a way of creating possibility in the space of enclosure, a radical art of subsistence, an embrace of our terribleness, a transfiguration of the given” (*Wayward* 33). Alluding to Audre Lorde’s famous essay, “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” Hartman’s “serial biography of a generation” collects a multiplicity of archival documents and reforms them into narratives of indistinct individuals (*Wayward* 31). She uses what she calls “critical fabulation” to construct lives previously felt but unknown, and, like Lewis’s “Sable Venus,” Hartman’s “portrait of the chorus” creates a composite representation out of repetition (*Wayward* 31). By writing with records that index

Western art objects, Lewis creates a work of beauty that doesn't rely on narrative, wholeness, or exposure but on poetic fragmentation that creates space for critical rereading and recaptioning.

The penultimate page of *Voyage* includes what critics agree is a reference to Lewis herself,<sup>27</sup> “Venus of Compton,” italicized text attributed to whom reads: “I send you these few lines in order / To bring you up // On what has been / Happening to me” (Lewis *Voyage* 109). This text can be traced to a 1986 book by Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem* (dedicated to Roland Barthes). Alloula writes of erotic French colonial postcards, out of which emerges “a sort of half-aesthetic concept: the Moorish bosom, the exclusive property of the exotic postcard, which sets down its canon” (105). Alloula explores the apparent invitation of the postcard subject's pose to repeated exposures, without an envelope to protect its privacy. The line Lewis draws from the text is the presumed intention of postcard communiqués, the updates on one's well-being sent out to relatives. As Alloula taxonomizes this genre of photographs, he notes that “they are all captioned as if they are innocent family portraits” (110). Part of this aura of innocence, he argues, derives from the overt poses and captions that seem to solicit a jocular, winking gaze. One portrait, for instance, shows a woman holding an intact vase, while the caption reads, “The Cracked Jug,” a conflation of female figure with material vessel (a trope Lewis stresses throughout *Voyage*) that hints at the woman's apparent wantonness and availability.<sup>28</sup> Alloula writes, “It is not enough for the colonial postcard to be the rowdy form of this soliciting in public places; it must also be the deceitful expression of symbolic dispossession. [...] They offer their body to view as a body-to-be-possessioned” and thereby take part not only in

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<sup>27</sup> See Chiasson, n.p.; Roynon, 149.

<sup>28</sup> Lewis has stated that white pathology can be figured as a vessel abjected in the form of Blackness: “White people hating themselves so intensely that they have to find a vessel, a vessel that they perceive to be their exact opposite, in order to remove it from their own psyche.” See Lewis, “A Door to Robin Coste Lewis's Los Angeles,” interview by Leah Mirakhor, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 24 April 2016.

their personal exposure but in the general dispossession of “the image of the body of Algerian women as a whole” (Alloula 118). The “Sable Venus” serves a similar function. Appearing as both a particular aesthetic object and as a generalizing type, it names the dispossession entailed by being rendered figural through the violent distortions of male colonial desire.

That Lewis expropriates these lines under her own pseudonym suggests that she circulates “Sable Venus” images even as she includes herself among them. She implies that captioning is inherent in racializing perception; the aestheticized and objectified female form is a photograph of itself insofar as it depends upon received perceptual abstractions serially constructed. The poem’s title upends the possibility for self-reference or self-possession upon which naming relies, suggesting that the trope of “Sable Venus” instantiates a voyage away from itself, an absence plastered over by repeating images.

By curating her anarchival collection around the “Sable Venus,” Lewis creates a catalog not of a particular subjectivity or series of individuals, but around the impersonal form of category itself; her photo-poetics questions categorizing as a means of analysis in humanist and aesthetic thought. Lewis implies that the very traits that enfold her within such a type become impossible to contain within it. The necessary attributes of Blackness and femininity, because they define the limits of what qualifies as “Sable Venus,” cannot be subsumed within the type itself but overwhelm it through the endlessness of repetition that Lewis’s inventory fails to contain.<sup>29</sup> The edge of the text itself, as circumscribed by an author as exterior cause, is folded into and out of the last page: “Catalog 8: The Present / Our Town.” The moment of writing and reading are conflated into a repeating “now” as the location of Compton is inserted into the space of the poem, rendering the distinction between the aesthetic and the “real,” the repetition and the

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<sup>29</sup> See Jacques Derrida, “The Law of Genre,” *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1980), for an account of this paradox.

original, impossibly blurred. The enjambed ekphrasis that begins the final page (“Still: / Life”) suggests a paradoxical image at once static and in motion, representational (film “still” referring to a photograph) and living (Lewis *Voyage* 110). Life persists not apart from structures of visual signification but within them, and within their interruption.

The lines following “Venus of Compton” are a bracketed suggestion that the unending circulation of reproductions of images opens up strange and unintended streams of identity-formation: “(Young Woman and Hope, Holding / Photo of Pearl)” (Lewis *Voyage* 109). Stothard’s “Sable Venus” standing in an oyster shell is here converted into a photograph of a pearl, a reproduced image of a commodity at once exotic, valuable, and feminine. Though it conflates a name (capitalized Pearl) with an object, it is extracted away from the human form, into the kernel of aestheticized commodity itself. Rather than have this photograph suggest a lost or missing person, Lewis reminds us, with some sense of “Hope,” that the “Sable Venus” was always an aesthetic construction, separable from any “Young Woman” in her singularity.

Instead of reading for salvific tropes of redemption, photo-poetics allows us to interpret *Voyage* as a work that engages critically with the racializing perception perpetuated by Western art historical documents. Because it deals with contextualizing language or captions that describe representational objects, Lewis defers and displaces subjectivity in her poetry to evoke instead how white pathology uses the record to circumscribe Black femininity, especially using poetic forms of repetition to portray its iterative structure. Photography’s form offers a way to think the capture and redirection of fragments that index a material object, but more than that, it allows one to think the relation of particular detail to general type. In her essay “The Race Within Erasure,” Lewis states: “Like a photograph, a poem or story erases what is outside of its frame, but, here’s the curious part, also like a photograph it captures the unintended, and sometimes that

turns out to be the most engaging part of the text: its accidents. Literary erasure is both an aesthetic and political tool to buoy this.” Literary erasure lifts up particular words that are “accidents” of the archival recording process, words that don’t seem to signify beyond their description of an object, but which Lewis’s work redirects to expose underlying valences of signification. She lifts up the detail to reveal how, through iteration, it congeals into type.

Rather than use representations of particular individuals to stand in for a larger group, *Voyage* upends the synecdochic structure so central to documentary and realist genres and to the racist insistence that Black art be representative of Black people. Instead she joins other contemporary feminist poets and artists who experiment with form to deconstruct the records and representations that scaffold white supremacy.<sup>30</sup> *Voyage* is actually dotted with figures writing, drumming, or otherwise making art. The poem “Element of Furniture Decoration,” for instance, ends with this description:

a spout

inkwell

in the form of a crouching

Negro Negro

seated writing on

a scroll (Lewis *Voyage* 50)

Again, object and form are separated into two columns, and the repeated figuration of Blackness on the right is performing the action the object calls for. In the most obvious sense, the figure is another racist objectification set apart from the creative act, and yet the language of the descriptive caption captures a sense of agency. The figure is both an inkwell and a writer, both

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<sup>30</sup> See for example, M. NourbeSe Philip, Claudia Rankine, Carrie Mae Weems, and Kara Walker.

the material and the imaginative basis for the written word. In moments like these, *Voyage* asks the question, what if the Black female form is not simply the abject other of a white Western tradition but its very foundation? In the third catalog, “The Womb of Christianity,” Lewis dwells on the late Medieval figure of the Black Madonna. Initially, she parsed the archives of Christian art, “crawled around from manger to manger” and found no representations of Black women, until finally she stood up and saw “not a maid, not a servant, not fractured or broken” figures but the “Holy Black Virgin, Mother of All the World” (“Boarding”). Ultimately, it is not a marginal history that Lewis unearths in the records of Western art but rather the uncontainable “Sable Venus” at the root of all beauty, aesthetic invention, and poetic experimentation.

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### *Inventory*

The second half of this chapter turns to the long poem *Inventory*, by Dionne Brand, which, like *Voyage*, refracts Western media through a photo-poetics that highlights the ways in which racialized perception is constructed. In a short essay titled “Seeing” from her 1994 collection, *Bread Out of Stone*, Dionne Brand considers the choices one male cinematographer makes when filming a Black woman’s body, focusing tightly on her skin.<sup>31</sup> She asks, “what makes this happen if the eye does not possess some frame through which seeing is composed? Frames perhaps already describing, perhaps not already as if born to it but born in it, already describing the edges of the picture and what must be at the focus” (170). She articulates a reading practice

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<sup>31</sup> The woman is likely Sherona Hall, who immigrated to Canada from Jamaica and co-founded the Black Action Defence Committee. She was featured in a documentary film Brand co-directed with Ginny Stikeman in 1991, called *Sisters in the Struggle*. Brand also filmed the poet Leleti Tamu reading a love poem, a scene she describes in “Seeing” as being negatively received by the cinematographer: “The head of camera relays the message that he does not feel that the woman reading the lesbian poem is reading to him. No kidding, I relay to him. This is the eye that always looks and needs to be looked at” (171).

inherent to filmic observation that enshrines racialized figures as aesthetic representations, one that predates and predetermines formal choices of framing because it is already there, “born in it.”<sup>32</sup> For Brand, this white gaze is what must always be looked back at: “You cannot leave this eye alone for a second, at least not if it’s resting on you. It will fall back on itself, on things it knows” (171). Echoing bell hooks’s account of the “oppositional gaze” from her essay two years prior, Brand too delineates a form of looking back that operates neither as identification nor recognition, but as contestation over what organizes the visual world itself. In one sense, *Inventory* is all about this unending effort to look back, the vigilance of the oppositional gaze in the context of mediated war.

Brand’s seven-part long poem, *Inventory*, from 2006, wrestles with a catalogue of facts delineating a post-9/11 North American world, using forms of enumerating, placing, and recording. Two sections draw heavily from the Iraq Body Count (IBC) project, which uses Western media sources to collate numbers and make records of Iraqi civilian deaths, in response to the moratorium imposed by U.S. and U.K. governments on such public counting (Vellino 249). *Inventory* brings together multiple contexts of watching and surveilling: television news, airport security, Hollywood film, policing and silent witnesses. Heather Milne defines Brand’s work as a project of “mediatized witness,” (186) using media coverage of the Iraq war as “raw, poetic material that is mobilized through de- and re-contextualization into a powerful critique of the war” (155). In this sense, *Inventory* takes part in the documentary poetic tradition, redirecting data, statistics, and direct quotations from other sources. As Diana Byrdon writes, “Brand turns the methods of listing and taking stock, the standard procedures of a market-oriented inventory,

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<sup>32</sup> As Christina Sharpe writes, the history of slavery for Brand is also “an optic that guides her way of seeing, understanding, and accounting for her place in the world [...] the frame that produces Black bodies as signifiers of enslavement and its excesses, and it is the ground that positions her/us to bear the burden of *that* signification, and that positions some of us to know it” (99).

against the market ethic that has led to the suffering she records” (997). Like Lewis, then, Brand’s photo-poetics is a mode of critiquing dominant forms of Western perception. Brand repurposes statistical data to critique the ways in which war is remediated in the West and domesticated through television news and film.

Critical responses to *Inventory* tend to focus on how Brand humanizes what appears to be distant suffering through forms of witness and mourning. Brenda Carr Vellino argues that Brand’s project aims to restore Arab lives to grievability, drawing on Judith Butler’s term.<sup>33</sup> Brand’s project is not about prompting sympathy, for Vellino, but about the “creation of intersecting precarity archives as oppositional mourning strategies” (256). Vellino casts *Inventory* as a form of itinerant elegy, building alliances trans-locally rather than nationally, in line with Brand’s coterminous work with Min Sook Lee on *Borderless*, and her broader engagement with anti-deportation campaigns like No One is Illegal (252). Similarly, Byrdon argues that Brand is engaged in a non-identitarian “planetary humanism” (999) that redirects found information to change the way in which it is seen, “asserting the power of her own eye’s citizenship and possession of herself and the world” (1000). Milne argues that Brand “renders *visible* and *grievable* the very elements that the mainstream media and entertainment industry actively work to obfuscate” (193 original emphasis). But such an emphasis on grief and elegy, I suggest, misconstrues the impersonal character of the enumerated dead, which in the end remain statistics. How can one mourn a number, Brand seems to ask, and how does merely re-recording statistics of war resolve the endlessness of its loss and suffering?

While I agree that *Inventory* does not offer paths of identification or sympathy, characterizing it as elegy or as a mourning strategy still implies that it refers to nameable and

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<sup>33</sup> See Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (2009).

recognizable people, even in their deaths. This recuperative interpretation maintains empathetic vitalism by way of what Michael Leong calls poetic “docu-mancy,” or documentary poetry that recasts archival materials into “powerful acts of mourning” (32). My interest in considering *Inventory*, on the other hand, lies primarily with its discursive forms of oppositional witnessing, and with the problem of how to store records of suffering with no sincere hope for its redemption. I argue that *Inventory* uses the list form and the accumulation of numbers beyond the thinkable to register not simply the failures of quantification in the context of global capitalist violence, but the failures of humanist record keeping, elegy, and memorialization itself. That is, I think *Inventory* is less interested in the category of the human and the form of the poetic elegy, than in keeping watch, and in the artifactual work of poetry that produces something nonhuman that looks back at the reader in its inscrutability.

Brand builds mediation into identity from the start, emphasizing how watchful immersion in visual culture shapes perception and Black being. Opening with an incantatory collective “we,” *Inventory* begins: “We believed in nothing // the black-and-white american movies / buried themselves in our chests, / glacial, liquid, acidic as love” (1). The human form, in mind, body, and affect, is from the start rendered multiple, porous, at once empty and filled to excess with American film culture, with racialized (“black-and-white”) and aestheticized ways of seeing. The first-person plural, which Brand uses throughout this section, offers a way to think collectivity grammatically, without delineating the edges of identification; it can toggle between inclusive universal (as in Tracy K. Smith’s “Us & Co.” and Camille Rankine’s “We”) and exclusive group (as in Gwendolyn Brooks’s “We Real Cool”). Alluding to Paul Laurence Dunbar’s “We Wear the Mask,” *Inventory* continues: “we arrived spectacular, tendering / our own bodies into dreamery, / as meat, as mask, as burden” (3). Brand begins with the Fanonian encounter with

blackness as ontological mystification, as that which is perceptible as matter and abstraction at the same time. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson refers to this as “ontologized plasticity,” arguing that the “black(ened)” subject is not simply dehumanized but rendered “infinitely mutable” (11-12).

Jackson goes on to write that such plasticity “collapses a distinction between the virtual and the actual [...] whereby the abstraction of blackness is enfleshed via an ongoing process of wresting form from matter such that raciality’s materialization is that of a dematerializing virtuality” (35).

To arrive spectacular, then, is to be “born in it” (Brand “Seeing” 170) as “enfleshment of conceptual vagueness” (Marriott “N’est Pas”), to be enframed within and by one’s body, rendered photographic.

In Brand’s recent lecture, *An Autobiography of the Autobiography of Reading*, she expands upon this connection between racialization under colonialism and photography. She opens by describing a photograph from her early childhood in which she and her sisters and cousin pose for a photographer, creating an image to send to her mother and aunt in England, noting, though, that England itself is just as much the intended recipient. She does not recognize herself in the image, but does remember the effort of the pose, hushing her sister’s tears and trying to appear proper:

Everyone says the little girl looks like me. I doubt it. I do not recognize myself. Already I am changed in the photograph, since I leave off being myself to follow the directive of the photographer; already I have changed, thinking of composing myself, for the audience. I now recognize myself as authored, altered. As selected, sorted, from a series of selves for appearance and presentation. All photographs are like this, of course. (5)

The phenomenon of arriving spectacular, then, can be understood as a photographic pose that operates on the individual even without a camera present. As Nathan Jurgenson puts it,

paraphrasing Kaja Silverman, “the photo pose is the imprinting of the camera on the body, parallel to the camera imprinting the image itself in its record” (81). What Brand terms “*the* autobiography of reading” defines a similar form of imprinting through the absorption of canonical British literature, which “identifies the subject who is supposed to be made, through colonial pedagogies in the form of texts” (8). The pose is racialized subject formation under colonialism, then, formed through reading practices that produce an identifiable and legible image of a subject. The pose is this “becoming, becoming the representation of the self, signified by the opportunity of the photographic event” (Brand *Autobiography* 7). Every particular autobiography is delimited by *the* autobiography that the colonial subject is made to emulate, structuring the self as photographic, an iteration of a figure. As she puts it in *Inventory*, “Everything we were preceded us” (4).

Brand’s articulation of spectacularized racialization finds an echo in what Sara Ahmed writes in “A Phenomenology of Whiteness” is an inherited orientation within an inherited world. “As Fanon’s work shows, after all,” Ahmed writes, “bodies are shaped by histories of colonialism, which makes the world ‘white,’ a world that is inherited, or which is already given before the point of an individual’s arrival” (153). In this sense, the past is not simply what precedes one, but what one is “thrown” towards. As Ahmed writes in her essay, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” race works by orienting people in the world, and whiteness becomes “worldly” through its disappearance into its own experience (150).<sup>34</sup> This chapter attempts to read how Lewis and Brand use poetry to unmake this disappearance and expose the tools of its reification.

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<sup>34</sup> See also Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, for a more detailed account of how race “orients” people, particular Chapter 3, “The Orient and Other Others.”

*Inventory* shows that bodies given over to spectacle are also disappeared into machinic service within capitalist structures of resource extraction, expanding the “we” to include “we poor, we weak, we dying” of global disparity (5). Brand emphasizes the material and embodied conditions of suffering of those most exposed to the impossible future-present tense of global war, climate change, and growing precarity. But rather than adhere to the individual human body as threshold of care and responsibility, she rethinks identity and agency along models of machine-body assemblages: “the rivets we fastened / to our bare bones like cars” (6); “buildings mechanized with flesh and acreages / of tender automobiles” (7); “machine and body, shield and tissue, / the highway worked itself into her shoulders / and neck, now she was trembling, tasting / all the materials the city stuffs in its belly” (45). Born into material and discursive conditions that exceed our capacity for mastery or understanding, the body is absorbed into a capitalist system of production; not as its natural other or outside, but along a continuum of flesh or relations of exteriority. Brand adopts the term “inventory” from Antonio Gramsci, who wrote in *The Prison Notebooks*: “The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is ‘knowing thyself’ as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory [...] therefore it is imperative at the outset to compile an inventory” (qtd. Brydon 994). These traces plant exteriority within oneself, so that the self can never be fully recognizable. According to Brydon, Brand kept this excerpt, from Edward Said’s citation of it in *Orientalism*, above her desk when writing *Inventory* (994). The task of inventorying all that predates, determines, and constitutes a “we” as multiplicity and alterity is at the root of Brand’s work, even as she recognizes its endlessness.

Brand avoids using the first-person singular for much of *Inventory*, sidestepping the logic of lyric subjectivity, and a third person narration structures the poem’s third section, which

emphasizes the figure of “mediatized witness”: “One year she sat at the television weeping, / no reason, / the whole time // and the next, and the next” (21). This feminized, domestic watcher records numbers of killed Iraqis civilians—“twenty-seven in Hillah, three in fighting in / Amariya, two by roadside bombing, Adhaim...” (23)—and Americans—“nine shot dead in // Missouri shopping mall, possible yes, in restaurant / in Madison, three nephews, one aunt in Nashville fire bomb” (24), in a post-9/11 context of constant crisis and “amber alerts” (25). Watching becomes synonymous with counting—“the abacus / of her eyelids” (38)— as an embodied role that the speaker can materialize and offer to her reader: “take this letter, put it on your tongue, / sleep while I keep watch” (37). Milne writes that while Brand links patriarchal power to war, violence, and neoliberal capitalism, the “compulsion to witness and to document” is tied to feminized, affective labor of keeping inventory (187-8). And like Bernadette Mayer’s project of continuous documentation, Brand examines a form of gendered record keeping that renders containment through poetic elegy or commemoration impossible. The female viewer is perpetually watching television, staying alert not just for one year, but “the next, and the next.” The position of wakefulness Christina Sharpe attributes to Black being in the wake of slavery Brand here extends to being in the wake of global imperialism and mediatized war: “At least someone should stay awake, she thinks” (26); “she has to keep watch at the window / of the television” (28). Rather than keying into elegy, this televisual mediation of death takes part in a documentarian approach, monitoring an interminable present of serialized images that bring externality into the home, while also implying the threatening proximity of broadcast content. In Sara Blair’s description of photojournalism, the image is “an object in flux, promiscuously

available for commerce, protest, and art” (16).<sup>35</sup> This mix of information and entertainment has come to define contemporary news media and serves as a backdrop to Brand’s engagement with war as mediated violence. The numbers of reported dead never become people, never take the human or “grievable” form of a static portrait. Even as the numbers and places seem to caption deathly events, they are unmoored from any visible or frameable reality: “numbers so random, / so shapeless, apart from their shape, their seduction of infinity” (26). Rather, what the form of Brand’s inventory reveals is the vastness of what is imperceptible within mediated records of war.

Brand confronts the endlessness of inventorying loss, disclosing a chaotic substrate within the archive that uses numbers to index deaths. The numerical “seduction of infinity” reflects romantic discourses on the sublime, but as though inverted in perspective, so that rather than natural landscapes, it is the ordered world of lists and data that is rendered ineffable, unending, terrifying. *Inventory* engages with the mathematical sublime, the rational use of numbered measurement instead of intuitive or aesthetic response to scale. But the numbers, Brand suggests, do not arrive at a culmination; they go on and their seriality poses a problem for rationality.

In her essay, “‘Theorizing in a Void’: Sublimity, Matter, and Physics in Black Feminist Poetics,” Jackson writes of the “ontological absence” that constitutes Black female iconicity in canonical humanist discourse, what Sylvia Wynter called its “demonic ground” (619). She writes that the (dis)figuration of the Black female body paradoxically produces its absence and opacity

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<sup>35</sup> Blair’s thoughtful analysis of the rise of documentary photographs in 1930s Harlem, particularly the use of small hand-held cameras during the “great riots,” provides a useful account of how documentary photographs can function “as a form of evidence, a mode of sensation, a call to arms, a considered aesthetic artifact” (15).

as the other of white femininity (622).<sup>36</sup> Edmund Burke, Jackson reminds us, elaborated the concept of the sublime using a racialized matrix: he divided the beautiful (feminine) and sublime (masculine) along gender lines, while coding masculine sublimity as dark and feminine beauty as white. As such, “in Burke’s theory, ‘negro woman’ became a chaotic symbol of inverted sex-gender,” an oxymoronic figure whose perceived excess troubles vision itself (625). The sublime functions, Jackson argues, as “an antecedent to both perception and knowledge” in a post-Enlightenment context (628). What she names “the black feminine sublime” is thus generated by “discursive-material trace effects and foreclosures,” negative spaces or voids, that undergird what is perceived and recorded. Inhabiting the perspective of this inverted sublime exposes the imperial field of vision and its attendant justifications for violence as chaos dressed in order (628). By Jackson’s account, liberatory ideals premised upon representation of typically unseen peoples fail because they rely on the very matrix of recognition that rendered the Black female as void, a signifier of the foreclosure of humanist ideals. Drawing on Evelyn Hammonds’s essay, “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality,” Jackson asks, if one cannot see Black femininity itself, but only register it by what orbits around it, then it exceeds protocols of evidence, observation, and calculation (635). In this sense, there is no Black femininity as such within the white supremacist imaginary, only material-discursive phenomena, remaining on the plain of the virtual.<sup>37</sup>

One cannot stand at the point of the infinite or sublime, as its impossibility is what conditions the known world, but, as Jackson writes, “affiliation and proximity to that which is

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<sup>36</sup> The black feminine sublime is thus what constructs white femininity. As Hammonds writes, “The female body in the West is not a unitary sign. Rather, like a coin, it has an obverse and a reverse: on the one side, it is white; on the other, not-white or, prototypically, black. The two bodies cannot be separated [...] White is what woman is; not-white (and the stereotypes not-white gathers in) is what she had better not be” (n.p.).

<sup>37</sup> As Saidiya Hartman has noted in reference to the position of the slave, the question is “what does it mean to try to bring that position into view without making it a locus of positive value, or without trying to fill in the void?” (“The Position of the Unthought” 185).

denied standpoint is both a disorderly space of immeasurable terror and potentiality” (630). As potentiality, the Black female sublime can only be approached through unending seriality (Jackson 630). I understand *Inventory*, as a poetic form of oppositional witness, to be positioned at one such impossible point, registering the overlap of chaos and sense that grammatically structures archives of war and violence. The statistics Brand cites are just such an overlap: as numeral abstractions that index particular deaths, statistics fold contingency into a larger system of info-storage. Rather than making people legible through the enumeration of their deaths, Brand’s poetics suggests a mathematical sublime that exceeds protocols of evidence, observation, and calculation (635). So, it is by inflecting the mathematical sublime with what Jackson calls the Black feminine sublime that Brand registers a void within serialized numerical records, and I argue, poetic elegy.

Brand overturns liberal humanitarian frameworks of white witnessing that endow sovereign subjectivity to the one who looks and who maintains potential indifference through the capacity to turn away. Black feminist oppositional witness upends the dichotomy of abstracted whiteness and imaged black chaos, which Kimberly Juanita Brown describes in her essay, “Regarding the Pain of the Other: Photography, Famine, and the Transference of Affect.” Brown traces a colonial visual paradigm whereby documentary photographs symbolically code images of Black bodies in chaotic abandon and suffering, unable to self-govern or self-nourish. What she calls “the poetics of the dead” uses repetition to compose both a “privileged subject position” of white witness in harmony with chaos “projected onto black available corporeal texts” in order to occlude any self-reflexive awareness of racialized perception itself (Brown 191).<sup>38</sup> In her

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<sup>38</sup> Pooja Rangan writes convincingly about what she calls the “red herring” of “endangered humanity” in documentary discourse, which obscures the practices of mediation that regulate the meaning of what counts as human even as they adopt tropes of accuracy and self-evidence (4). She coins the term “immediation” to indicate the how tropes of documentary immediacy are mediated.

inability to stop watching, Brand's figure of "mediatized witness" gives up not only the sovereignty of looking away, but also the impression of having seen *someone* at all. That is, while the trope of documentary witness relies on the impression of having perceived particular bodies as signs of a social problem, oppositional witness refuses to gather sense from suffering. From the perspective of the Black feminine sublime, the humanitarian framework of ordered white witness and chaotic black suffering falls apart and the tools of order and ordering themselves turn chaotic.

As *Inventory* accumulates numbers of dead that remain detached from people, unmoored and unmournable, bodies and machines blur, scales of order buckle:

she is a woman who is losing the idea  
of mathematics,  
the maximum is so small, the  
crushed spines of vehicles fly in the air,  
all September, all October (33)

The mundane regularity of succeeding months is here met with a confusion in which numbers stop making sense, human and machine bodies blur together. Two stanzas later, the poetic sublime seems her only resource: "now she wishes she could hear / all that noise that poets make about / time and timelessness" (33). In an echo of perhaps the most canonical romantic poem on the sublime, Shelley's "Mont Blanc," Brand writes:

Let us not invoke the natural world,  
it's ravaged like any battlefield, like any tourist  
island, like any ocean we care to name,  
like oxygen

let's at least admit we mean to do each other  
harm,  
we intend to do damage

then she may stop this vigil for broken things,  
then she can at least sit down  
to eat the chrome muscles of grocery carts,  
the hearts of ubiquitous concrete barriers (42)

In the context of climate change, species extinction, and environmental destruction, the natural world can no longer be a resource for speculating on what exceeds human reach. Shelley's "everlasting universe of things" here becomes "broken things" that stand in for dead humans, but also morph into objects that construct the edible, drivable world. The vastness of the ocean is replaced by "blue seas' limning screens / [...] saturated with experts on terror" (44), while "this figure, eight hundred every month / for the last year" relentlessly adds up: "things, things add up" (52). And these "things" are never coherently human, but always morphing material substrates: "she'll gather up the nerve endings / spilled on the streets, she'll count them like rice grains" (30). The impulse to document and archive remains central to her project, but the purpose of future retrieval now seems irrational: "she'll store the nerves' endings in glass / coloured bottles on a tree near the doorsteps, / for divine fierce years to come // when the planet is ruined" (31).<sup>39</sup> The work of oppositional witness, Brand implies, is not elegizing people or storing data, but the crucial work of repositioning intention within imperialist and capitalist

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<sup>39</sup> One thinks, for example, of the ideology of recovery driving the millions of dollars spent on DNA zoos, like San Diego's Frozen Zoo, which sustains cell cultures, sperm and embryos of endangered and extinct animal species.

exploitation of the planet and its inhabitants: “let’s at least admit we mean to do each other / harm.” Adopting the position of victimhood and grievance, she reminds us, is a central tool of colonial power and white supremacy.

Writing of a female figure who watches the broadcast news nonstop, holding still as “the wars’ last and late night witness,” Brand alludes to the radical archival work of Marion Stokes. Stokes recorded television news twenty-four hours a day for thirty years, compiling over 70,000 VHS tapes which now belong to The Internet Archive, and are in the process of digitization. They stand as the only comprehensive collection of cable news from this period, as the broadcast stations tend to record over past tapes to save resources. As Matt Wolf explains in his documentary film *Recorder* (2019), Stokes’s project began in 1979 with the Iran Hostage Crisis, which helped usher in the twenty-four-hour news cycle, and ended in 2012 with Stokes’s death, as news of the Sandy Hook massacre was being recorded. The film positions Stokes’s project as a continuation of her leftist political activism, which included working as a librarian with the Free Library of Philadelphia and co-producing the show *Input* from 1968-1971, a local talk show that brought together academics, religious leaders, activists, and artists to discuss issues of social justice (Al-Samarrai). According to Wolf, Stokes was “fighting to protect the truth by archiving everything that was said and shown on television,” forming a “time capsule” that captured the otherwise ephemeral stream of information that comprises the television news. Stokes built a technological apparatus that watched everything: up to eight television sets and VHS recorders set up in different rooms of her house, everything saved, catalogued, and stored for an unknown posterity.

In thinking further about the extreme, at times manic labor of accumulation that constituted Stokes's recording, it seems odd that Wolf's film repackages it as a prescient and rational project with the forthright goal of safekeeping and accessibility.<sup>40</sup> It is not as though Stokes edited, digitized, or organized the collection to render it accessible to a future audience; did she really anticipate edifying historical merit to be gleaned from tapes of late night infomercials and weather reports? Instead of focusing on the resulting archival project, I suggest that we can think of Stokes as engaged in an extended mission of looking back at informational power, a project that is more oppositional and radical than simply carrying network news into the future. As Noor Al-Samarrai notes, Stokes had been surveilled by the government for her affiliation with the Communist party, at one point attempting to defect to Cuba, and she was incredibly careful about not digitizing her recordings while she was alive. She did not use TiVo or other automatic or pre-set recording technology, and though she invested in Apple stock, she never used the internet. What if rather than a practice of saving and securing, then, hers was an exercise in continuous, mediated and mechanized watching?

Such an incessant watching does not allow for easy cataloguing or containing, then, but rather begs the question of intent: Why would anyone try to record everything? As we saw in the work of Bernadette Mayer, such excessive recording actually renders experience ungraspable and illegible, a stream of continuous data that is difficult to parse or condense. As Mary Ann Doane suggests, "if everything is recordable, nothing matters except the act of recording itself" (66). Wolf's film emphasizes bookending historical events, and the "revolutions, lies, wars, triumphs, catastrophes" that the news captured, the focal points to which one might return. But

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<sup>40</sup> Her son remembers needing to rush home during dinner to switch the tapes, an automatic and compulsive drive to keep recording at all times. He also recalls his mother's increasing distance and isolation from everyone except her husband, and their tendencies toward hoarding, agoraphobia, and seclusion.

most of what is recorded will actually remain unviewed and unremarked upon, in excess of historical utility. Stokes's project records the cable news as the constant movement of consumption itself, an unending cycle of fearmongering and mediated violence that becomes indistinguishable from the advertisements that punctuate it. Both the news broadcasts and the ads work together to produce a broader and more dangerous cultural ethos that needs to be watched, Stokes's project suggests. Brand seems to note precisely this in *Inventory*:

nothing personal is recorded here,  
you must know that, but  
one year the viciousness got to be too much

the news was advertisement for movies,  
the movies were the real killings

the baked precipitous ditches,  
twisted metal hulks of things that used to be,  
fires intense as black holes, voids in schoolyards  
and hotels, in kitchens and prophetic boys

all this became ordinary far from where it happened (22)

American news renders distant war ordinary by importing filmic narrative tropes, actually shifting its mattering, the way it moves us, into pop culture.<sup>41</sup> This incessant remediation of U.S. wars opens up "black holes, voids" that Brand links paratactically to her inventory of dead

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<sup>41</sup> Examples of films that remediate recent historical events include *Zero Dark Thirty*, *American Sniper*, *9/11*, *United 93*, among many, many others.

civilians. It is this coupling of “incalculably and paradoxically dense yet voided im/materiality”—“twisted metal hulks of things that used to be”—which Jackson links to “the meeting of blackness and femininity in/as sublimity,” that Brand finds refracted in numbers of civilian dead at the hands of U.S. imperialism (622). That is, the repetition through film and news content of images, narratives, and justifications for war only accelerate the seriality that Brand affiliates with the mathematical sublime, as a careening unthinkability arising from an otherwise banal list of numbers. Perhaps by using technologies of recording to look back at cable news for thirty years, Stokes was also trying to render it unordinary, to mark it as significant in its every variation. Her and Brand’s projects of creative documentation should not be thought of as vehicles for commemoration, as Milne, Vellino, and others suggest. As Brand writes, “nothing personal is recorded here.” Rather, the figure of oppositional witness, the perpetual wakefulness of one who sits at the window of the television, provides testament to the ungraspable and unthinkable void that something like a civilian body count can seem to contain.

To return, then, to the mathematical sublimity that Brand’s *Inventory* exposes from the perspective of Black feminist oppositional witness, we can say that documentary poetry uses forms of excess to pose the ceaseless recording apparatus as an injunction against containment within art as a cathartic solution to a political problem. In her influential work of affect theory, *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai defines a series of “noncathartic feelings” evoked by “art that produces and foregrounds a failure of emotional release” (9). In reference to the poetry of Gertrude Stein, Ngai characterizes the affects of “astonishment and fatigue” as a typical readerly response to such excessive taxonomic writing (253). What she calls “stuplimity” is a slant on the sublime that precludes transcendence of overpowering nature, but instead dwells with the

stupidity of material agglutination that seems to go nowhere: “Stuplimity,” she writes, “reveals the limits of our ability to comprehend a vastly extended form as a totality, as does Kant’s mathematical sublime, yet not through an encounter with the infinite but with finite bits and scraps of material in repetition” (271). The affective response of stuplimity appears to reverberate with many of the excessive documentary texts that I have examined, from Dorothy Wordsworth’s quotidian journals to Reznikoff’s accumulation of stray bits of testimony to Mayer’s exercise in observing minutia. All these texts put a “strain on the observer’s capacities for conceptually synthesizing or metabolizing information,” as Ngai puts it, generating an affective response of both amazement and boredom (263). And yet, Ngai is quite insistent that stuplimity is a response to the “finite but iterable,” and that “the concept cannot extend to infinity” (272). In the works she references, “large but finite numbers take the place of the infinity we associate with Kant’s mathematical sublime” (274), and “one confronts the mechanical operations of a finite system, whose taxonomy or combinatory incorporates oneself” (277). There is a manageability to stuplimity, Ngai implies. She writes of On Kawara’s work *One Million Years (Past)*, for instance, that “the sublimity of such a vast amount of time is trumped by its organization into bureaucratic blandness” (293). Stuplimity results from the consolidation of data into controllable, finite, iterative “heaps” that cohere in a manner difficult to apprehend.

But the documentary poets I study here are expressly invested in an ongoingness that cannot be reconciled with Ngai’s insistence on finitude. The “infinity of traces” that Brand attempts to inventory from within identity are echoed in the statistics she cites that pose the mathematical sublime not as transcendence but as void. Even as their poetic texts may end out of necessity, Mayer, Brand, Reznikoff and others acknowledge the formal pull toward continuance

that constitutes the ceaseless recording and re-mediation of data. Their works suggest infinity, without of course being capable of it. *Inventory* does this in part by evoking the constant stream of televisual witnessing as it mingles with numbers of civilian dead, numbers that cannot arrive at a sum, but signal only the most cursory index of suffering.

Siegfried Kracauer defines photography in similar terms; even though they are bounded by a frame,

photographs tend to suggest infinity. This follows from their emphasis on fortuitous combinations which represent fragments rather than wholes. A photograph, whether portrait or action picture, is true to character only if it precludes the notion of completeness. Its frame marks a provisional limit; its content refers to other contents outside the frame, and its structure denotes something that cannot be encompassed—physical existence. (210)

The contingencies recorded in photographic images speak to their fragmentariness; their frames do not entirely bind them as aesthetic objects but represent only virtual edges within the infinite extension of the physical world. Something similar is at work in Brand's use of indexical data that marks one aspect, not of a larger whole, but of what cannot be grasped as a totality. As Mary Ann Doane writes, photography and cinema emerge as indexical technologies that are able to represent contingency, the "random [...] intractability and aberrations of the individual" that are unassimilable to experience as such (14). The threat of contingency is an excess "that excludes meaning and control" (Doane 32). Doane writes that statistics, as part of a broader archival impulse of the nineteenth century, function as a "technique which seems to acknowledge most definitively the dominance of contingency while simultaneously trying to master it" (16). It is this excess that Brand is able to indicate by her invocation of the mathematical sublime through

redirected statistics, in contrast to any political or poetic attempts to explain, justify, or contain suffering. It is this excess, too, that Marion Stokes manifests in her incessant taping of televised news: less an act of archiving than of oppositional witness, a looking back that is itself inscrutable.

In the same section of *Inventory* that introduces “the war’s last and late night witness,” we find another scene of watching that connects the reader to an unreadable subject. Brand interrupts the third person narration to take up the “I,” shifting to epistolary form as if writing a letter to a “you” in some better future: “I’m waiting / to step into another life, / will you come then and find me” (35). In another canonical echo, this time of John Keats’s “This Living Hand,” she writes:

all I can offer you now though is my brooding hand,  
my sodden eyelashes and the like,  
these humble and particular things I know,  
my eyes pinned to your face (37)<sup>42</sup>

Brand approximates the trope of immediacy so central to romantic aesthetics through deixis (“*these* humble and particular things”). But instead of a ghostly, disembodied hand reaching toward the reader and asking for life, here the poet’s eyes (and I’s) watch the reader’s face, as if the words were looking back at the reader, even creating him—the next stanza begins, “understand, I will keep you alive like this” (37). This passage suggests that in the context of its reading, the poem constructs the reader as much as the reader constructs the poem. Brand stages

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<sup>42</sup> Christina Sharpe notes an odd line from Brand’s *Thirsty*, “standing here in eyelashes,” stressing that what Brand calls “the brittle gnawed life we live” is “unprotected from the terrible except by eyelashes” (Sharpe 68). Here they become “sodden eyelashes”—wet and tearful, but also seething (*Inventory* 37).

an encounter in which the reader sees what he sees on the page, but also sees himself looked at by that page.

Yet, something perhaps stranger occurs with the literal significance of “pinned to” that Brand plays with here. Dale Tracy reads this as a passage of connection, in which the speaker’s witnessing of suffering is handed to the reader to ingest, “in material terms that match what she witnesses (suffering bodies)” (177). But *Inventory* implodes the possibility of any such matching or mathematical reciprocity; numbers don’t add up, or add up relentlessly, implying no possible material recompense or offering that could substitute for the losses they signify. Rather than reading “my eyes pinned to your face” as suggesting connection, I read it as a bizarre grafting that subverts the mechanisms of bio-policing. In the brief second section of *Inventory*, Brand describes a familiar scene of airline travel and customs and border security, in which “lines of visitors are fingerprinted, / eye-scanned, grow murderous” (16). The ritual threatens its own kind of chaos, when an indiscriminate urge to destroy erupts in response: “she felt ill, wanted / to murder the six boys, the guards, / the dreamless shipwrecked / burning their beautiful eyes in the patient queue” (16). Brand’s “she” reads echoes of the Middle Passage and refugee crises into border security (“palimpsests of old borders, the sea’s graph on the skin” [16]), into the systematic passivity or banal evilness of such “fascism” (17). Travelers “burn” their eyes onto biometric photo-identification that renders them legible within the Department of Homeland Security’s database. One way to not be seen in this context, to avoid being co-opted into what “counts” as an alien or citizen, would be to refuse and disassemble the identity that it relies on, the consistency of one’s fingerprints and retinas, the coherence of the singular body itself. By literally pinning her eyes to her reader’s face, Brand’s protagonist renders them both illegible to the security state, producing an uncanny figure that defies humanist individuation.

Brand closes *Inventory* by trying to collect things that bring happiness, but finally ends by announcing:

I have nothing soothing to tell you,  
that's not my job,  
my job is to revise and revise this bristling list,  
hourly (100)

Closing on this compulsion to facticity, Brand underscores the ongoingness of a Black feminist poetics of the sublime in which the record doesn't encase or entomb people but becomes something altogether unrecognizable and unhuman. This "bristling list" is animalistic, threatening, morphing, and growing at an unknown scale.<sup>43</sup> If *Inventory* is such a list, it is not intended to comfort, contain, or elegize, but to look back at the reader so that what he takes to be ordered is made chaotic, and the taxonomy of ongoing injuries is rendered sublime.

By using data that index actual deaths, Brand employs documentary authority against the impulse of recovery that takes part in humanitarian binaries of sense and chaos. Rather than name and elegize the dead, she acknowledges the "absence and impossibility of names" and calls on us to "deny our useless names in solidarity" (*Inventory* 78). Loosening or losing the names that caption us as coherent individuals is one response to the "anarchival," the "ontological disturbance" produced in archives that record lives only through their disappearance (Best 88). Brand's speaker explodes her own subjectivity and sovereignty in the impossible task of

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<sup>43</sup> In his short essay titled "What Thing Is Poetry?" Derrida compares poetry to a hedgehog curled up on the road, pausing to expose its bristles in an attempt to protect itself, which paradoxically exposes it to more danger. In this odd metaphor, the poem is at once the nonhuman animal and the car accident itself, the encounter or "contamination" (235). Even as poetry is the desire for "absolute inseparation" of "ideal meaning" from the "body of the letter" (229), "its event always interrupts or derails absolute knowledge" (235). I see *Inventory* as concerned with a similar paradox—the desire to assemble an absolute archive that unravels itself when the numeric ideal matches neither the actual bodies killed in war nor its transmutation into poetry.

inventorying such loss: “There are atomic openings in my chest / to hold the wounded” (100).

The “infinity of traces” that Brand attempts to inventory within identity are refracted in the statistics she cites, by which the mathematical sublime opens onto a void within the structure of the archive.

Reading *Voyage* and *Inventory* together allows us to theorize photo-poetics in relation to gendered racialization, as a means of redirecting archival text and data to reframe what is perceived, to focus attention on how perception is mediated. Using photographic forms of image-caption relay, fragmentation, and indexicality, these poems recode the endless “torrent of singularities” unintentionally caught up in archival documents. Whereas Lewis repurposes language pertaining to Western art objects that include Black female figures, Brand draws on numbers generated by the Iraq Body Count Project and places them in relation to broadcast news media. Their projects use iteration and infinite extension to upend the work of typification, categorization, and numerical and virtual abstraction that render racialized violence aesthetic, entertaining, or otherwise justifiable. By citing extant documents that name, place, and stand in for something else, both projects gesture toward missing images and unseeable events, including them in their poems as absences. As such, they work against the tendencies of empathetic vitalism that seek to restore humanity or voice to individuals, reinscribing instead the work of oppositional witness, of looking back at imperialist and white supremacist structures of perception.

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