

Becoming Academic: US Identity Poetics, 1968–2008

by

Yeshua G. B. Tolle

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Doctoral Committee:

Professor Julian Levinson, Chair
Professor Lawrence La Fountain Stokes
Professor Aida Levy-Hussen
Professor Gillian White

For the realization of new theory we require new history.

—Cedric Robinson

We wish to . . . unsettle the assumption that it is easy or simple to write what one “is.” Why might I assume it is easy to write what is nearest to me? How do I know what that is—and what do I miss when I keep familiar things familiar?

—Beth Loffreda and Claudia Rankine

If I knew who or what I were, I would not write.

—Gillian Rose

Yeshua G. B. Tolle

ygtolle@umich.edu

ORCID iD: 0000-0002-5833-8544

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for
Mom and Dad
and to
all the poets

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Preface

Unscientific Autobiographical Prescript

This is a dissertation about the invention and conventions of identity in American poetry of the past half-century. So it is worth saying that “I” write “as a Jew,” “as a Puerto Rican,” but also as a Midwesterner and a product of state schools (less obviously freighted identities, hence the lack of scare quotes, yet equally pertinent to this literary history). That I write in and under these rubrics, these categories of social distinction, informs my attempt here to work through their brutal realities and fascinating fictions.

However, social identities other than my own are also at stake in this dissertation. For this reason, of course, I often rely on others’ work. Yet I am also informed in my analysis by the structural underpinnings of US society—infrastructural, if you will—which determine all US-based identities (albeit incompletely), just as I am when my authorship and subject matter converge. In this preface I discuss these structural underpinnings alongside a preview of the dissertation’s foci and investments. By such underpinnings, I intend both theoretical and macroeconomic dimensions of recent history. As we will see, even “I” and my identifications—these especially—are subsumed in this history.¹

¹ This opening, equivocating *apologia pro vita sua*, like so much else in the preface and the rest of my dissertation, borrows from philosopher and social theorist Gillian Rose, one of the guiding spirits, as it were, of my dissertation. See Rose, preface to *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), ix–xii.

Where “the social connection between persons is transformed into a social relation between things,” subjectivity does not recognize itself; it misrecognizes itself.² This is the condition of social life under commodity production, the social world that results from value in exchange, as Marx saw it. A century and a half on, the world he saw persists, technological advancements and all the forecasts of post-industrial society and the self-overcoming of capital notwithstanding. In the perspective of an ever more service-based and consumption-oriented American economy, this view may seem anachronistic, yet the simultaneously abstract and material domination that structures social relations through exchange-value remains the foundation of global distributions of labor and wealth.³ Marx’s legacy consists in the tools and categories to recognize this domination. What the critique of political economy leaves unelaborated, Gillian Rose points out, is the culture of capitalism—“capitalism as itself a culture in both its formative and destructive potencies.”⁴ It is not an incidental lacuna, important only to cultural critics or bohemians. At stake are widely shared and experienced forms of life. Commodity fetishism’s veiling effects shape thought habits, concepts of right and justice, freedom and equity. In his inquiry into the social as religion, Durkheim asks the question Marx did not: “If it was born *in foro externo*, how was it able to enter the innermost heart of the individual and penetrate it even more deeply?”⁵ The culture of capital, capital as a culture, reproduces itself through the mental structures that

² Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 157.

³ Moishe Postone, “The Current Crisis and the Anachronism of Value,” in *Marx’s Capital after 150 Years: Critique and Alternative to Capitalism*, ed. Marcello Musto (London: Routledge, 2019), 94–107; “Labor and the Logic of Abstraction: An Interview,” interview by Timothy Brennan, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 108, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 320–22; “Critical Social Theory and the Contemporary World,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 19, no. 1/2 (December 2005): 74–75.

⁴ Gillian Rose, *Hegel contra Sociology* (London: Athlone, 1995), 220.

⁵ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Jacqueline Redding and W. S. F. Pickering, in *Durkheim on Religion: A Selection of Readings with Biographies and Introductory Remarks*, ed. Pickering, 153 (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2011).

determine felt reality and possibility; the ways one moves and in which direction, toward what.⁶

It constitutes even the level of self-relation, perhaps that first and foremost. Where “the production of value in exchange structures the appearance of society,” subjectivity misrecognizes itself.⁷ It thinks it is self-identical, when really it cannot be.

In such circumstances, however, culture is no more direct than anything else. Bourgeois art’s ambition to represent the contradictions of social reality, to show the work of culture adequate to an era in which culture appears subject to any claim made on it by economy, recapitulates the founding antinomies of modern life.⁸ Free by right, principle, or statute, while in fact liable to unmitigated violence, exploitation without limit, the individual, that primary fiction of bourgeois property relations and law, asserts its abstract freedom, prizing above all those realms where it seems unconstrained.⁹ Modern art is such a realm due to its dialectic of

⁶ Bourdieu was no Marxist, but his account of habitus, field, and practice picks up where Durkheim’s sociology of pedagogy leaves off and as such offers the most robust available theorization of social objectification and subjectivation, mental structures’ incorporation and reconstruction of social space. See *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) and *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984).

⁷ Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno* (London: Verso, 2014), 131.

⁸ Jerome McGann argued that Romantic art presents social reality only in order to re-present and hence transcend it. See McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983). That this strategy occurs very differently in German and in English Romanticism is implicit in McGann but gets sidelined by his focus on Coleridge’s reception of German Romanticism through the non-Romantic Hegel. Echt German Romantics like Kleist, Hoffman, the Schlegels, and Novalis were consciously (and conscientiously) integrated into professional and institutional life at the highest levels, as Theodore Ziolkowski demonstrates. Their vision of the Romantic individual driven to the limits of his world presented social reality as they apprehended it through the institutions (university, law, mining, among others) in which they participated and to which they often implicitly appeal in their attempts to transform social life. See Ziolkowski, *German Romanticism and Its Institutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). For this dialectic of presentation and re-presentation in nineteenth-century French literary culture, see Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996).

⁹ Gillian Rose, *Dialectic of Nihilism: Post-Structuralism and Law* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 3. As Rose observes, this is the reality Marx’s commodity manifests. More than a sign of the derangement of the social under capital, value and commodity point to the juridical horizon of modernity responsible for the social’s shape.

presentation and re-presentation. Yet the contradictions art aims to resolve are the very contradictions that misrepresent the social reality it takes as its object and that objectify also the subject of art. “Social reality is read as a collection of intended meanings,” Rose explains, “but there can be no examination of how meaning may re-present an actuality which is inverted in that meaning.”¹⁰ To describe and interpret capital as a culture, to recognize how capital educates and imagine what can be done about it, then, requires an account of art’s refraction of the social, its activity in and despite its misapprehension of itself and its conditions. “Thus the inversion of actuality in the media of re-presentation should be the point of departure.”

This is an aim and premise of my dissertation. Since “poetry remains, even in the twenty-first century, the epitome of high literary culture,” as Dorothy Wang observes, there is a special appeal, even urgency, to examining poetry—that is, verse reading and writing practices apprehended under the sign of poetry—as part of an examination of capital as a culture.¹¹

In *Becoming Academic: US Identity Poetics, 1968–2008*, I try to document and analyze how a new American poetics refracted social reality between the student rebellions and the global financial crisis. I focus on the ways poets of color and multiethnic poets in and beside the American university system made race and ethnicity discursively salient. I argue that academic identity knowledges, to use Robyn Wiegman’s term, like Black and ethnic studies, were the

¹⁰ Rose, *Hegel contra Sociology*, 213.

¹¹ Dorothy J. Wang, *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 22. As discussed in my Introduction, this qualification of poetry as verse reading and writing practices, collapsed and elided in the catch-all category “poetry,” comes from historical poetics and lyricization research. See Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, “Lyrical Studies,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 27, no. 2 (1999): 521–30; Jackson, “Who Reads Poetry?” *PMLA* 123, no. 1 (2008): 181–87; Jackson and Prins, “General Introduction,” in *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Jackson and Prins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 1–8; Gillian White, *Lyric Shame: The “Lyric” Subject of Contemporary American Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014), 1–7, 31–35; Michael C. Cohen, *The Social Lives of Poems in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 10–14; Prins, ““What Is Historical Poetics?”” *MLQ* 77, no. 1 (March 2016): 13–40.

means by which something that came to be called identity poetics entered the university and US poetic practice.¹² Attempts in the Anglo-American literary tradition to put daylight between poetry and the university, critical to that tradition's self-presentation as an autonomous field of activity, compounded by the distrust and ambivalence of writers from historically marginalized groups toward Primarily White Institutions (PWIs), have concealed the academic origins of identity poetics and the outsized influence of poets of color and multiethnic poets in literary culture's academicization, the farthest-reaching transformation in postwar American writing. This literary history traces those origins and explores that influence. It is an effort to get at the social role and practice of poetry in the past half century, to show that poets of color and multiethnic poets were central to late twentieth-century and twenty-first-century American poetics, to disclose how identity became cultural capital in the profession of poethood, to demonstrate that the university field has emerged as the primary site of production for US poetry. To point out that these are all connected: faces of capital, capital as culture, which must be turned around and around, for nearly everything is in it.¹³

¹² Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

¹³ Nearly everything. Political theorist Cedric J. Robinson's career-long investigation into existing alternatives to the prevailing order showed how multiple other modes of human living remain co-present in the culture of capital; extensions in thought and practice of other life-worlds, different arrangements of humans and things. "The coexistence of alternative, oppositional, or simply different relations of power are left unexamined," Robinson lamented as late as 2007. "The possibility of the coincidence of different relations of power colliding, interfering, or even generating resistance remains a fugitive consideration." "Lived multiplicities," he thought, "the several histories extant in even the most modestly constructed societies, and the resultant matrices of identity" had yet to be robustly integrated in the study of racial regimes. In his rigor, Robinson argued that even Marxism had suppressed other modes and visions of socialism. Yet the discrepancy between Robinson's lament and the already abundant literature on race, empire, decolonization, and anticapitalist resistance available in 2007 points to his misgivings about that literature. Contrary to the charges of essentialism leveled against him, Robinson only asserted the presence of alternatives whose history he had meticulously traced. His opus *Black Marxism*, for instance, seeks to demonstrate the very *existence* of the Black radical tradition by way of a hundred pages on the history of the slave trade and slave rebellions *before* exploring specific manifestations of that tradition in literary and theoretical works. Paeans to agency, valorizations without history, would not pass muster. Much more pervasive than casual use of the term implies, "racial capitalism" shapes also moments that seem to escape or oppose its formations; only history, practiced as Robinson did, teaches how and where

Turning it around and around, why hover over identity? The interest in poetics has been at least preliminarily explained, but not the focus on identity. There are larger and more obvious categories through which to examine the culture of capital, like the money form, violence (material and symbolic), or culture and capital as such; less epiphenomenal categories.¹⁴ More than this, identity seems to have lost cachet and explanatory power in recent years.¹⁵ Yet, besides the money form, none of those faces of capital so directly and sweepingly shape daily life in the present-day United States, where even state violence and vulnerability to state violence get routed through identity and identification. Historically, too, my dissertation begins during a kind of national moment for identity. Introduced to academic and subsequently public discourse only

to spot the alternative. While glimpses of the alternative cannot but flash up in this dissertation, my aim is preparatory: to detail the contemporary scene so that such alternatives can appear by contrast. Indeed, I will often point to alternatives that prove not to be at all. Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film before World War II* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), xi, xii; *An Anthropology of Marxism*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019); *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 71–171. For the charge of essentialism, see Jonathan Fenderson, “Black Studies Post-Janus,” *The Black Scholar* 48, no. 4 (2018): 3–4.

¹⁴ For a recent poetics study squarely focused on capital, see Christopher Nealon, *The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), while the classic study of culture remains Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1958), memorably distilled in Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

¹⁵ Much tremendous criticism and scholarship could be cited; all of it centers on violence. In this line of thought, colonial, racial, epistemic violence vitiates the coherency required to instantiate liberalism’s concepts of self, body, and person, let alone identity. That these concepts have nevertheless long organized resistance to and thinking beyond racial regimes, just as they quietly subtend most attempts to imagine cognizing flesh apparently never constituted by them, gets chalked up to past limitations or motivated misreading. It is no surprise to see the concept of false consciousness creeping back in to cultural elite discourse in this capacity. Still, were the absolute correctness of this critique simply granted, identity would remain key to the construction of popular and academic life; hence, it continues to command attention. For powerful foundational work in this vein, often bearing concerningly little resemblance to its uptake, see Ronald A. T. Judy, *(Dis)Forming the American Canon: African-Arabic Slave Narratives and the Vernacular* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); David Marriott, *On Black Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Frank B. Wilderson, III, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

around the midcentury, the concept of identity emerged in the sixties as a peg on which to hang ideas, rhetoric, and action for a wide array of social movements.¹⁶ In some cases this was explicit; in others, retrospectively determined. By the end of the following decade, the Combahee River Collective, inspired by Maoist dialectic of contradiction, had coined the concept of “identity politics” from which the term identity poetics appears to derive.¹⁷ Despite ridicule and attacks from left and right, identity has held popular attention for several decades with its social, psychological, activist, and theoretical bona fides, while currently claiming institutional legitimacy in the form of identity knowledges and diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. Something about identity bothers, grips, and enchants Americans.

In this regard, it is misleading to say the focus on identity has not been explained. To recall the beginning, here at the end: where “the social connection between persons is transformed into a social relation between things,” subjectivity does not recognize itself; it misrecognizes itself. It thinks it is self-identical, when really it cannot be. Social life under commodity production, the social world of bourgeois property relations and law, creates the individual that is irreconcilable with society, that stands against it, or in the critical assessment, reduces to it without remainder. Yet the solution, the dissolution so sagely elaborated in the critical spirit assumes the contradiction handed down to it by the very contradiction it tries to solve. It bases itself in the antinomies of modern life and leaves the antinomies unthought.

The task, then, is not to resolve or dissolve contradictions and antinomies, whose conditions also condition the thinking that would transcend them. Rather it is necessary to sit

¹⁶ Philip Gleason, “Identifying Identity: A Semantic History,” *The Journal of American History* 69, no. 4 (March 1983): 910–31.

¹⁷ I discuss the history of this term in my Introduction. For the Maoist inspiration of the Combahee River Collective, see Colleen Lye, “Identity Politics, Criticism, and Self-Criticism,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 119, no. 4 (October 2020): 701.

with the problems, the handed-down categories; to assess the living that goes on beside them, which they (cannot) contain. Identity may fascinate and bewilder precisely because it fails to relinquish individual and social totality, while also restoring the difficulty of the philosophical tradition's forgotten third, when instead of the opposition between individual and totality, the question was the relation of singular to particular and universal.¹⁸ A "function cannot simply be dismissed," Stuart Hall writes in response to Foucault's dissolution of the subject, "because . . . it is not true," not as long as it organizes life in spite of its fiction.¹⁹ And identity is a fiction perceived as truth and pulled apart as a lie, which nonetheless structures social meaning and activity, while mediating particular and universal in a situation of living premised on their contradiction. In short, the impasse that is identity is an opportunity.

What kind of opportunity does the impasse lodged in identity present? An opportunity, again, to recall the beginning and its difficulties: capital is formative, Rose says; it shapes something perhaps misleadingly suggested above to be the individual. But the individual is an abstraction of bourgeois property relations and law. It is not educable, but reactive, a formal proposition dissembled as substantive possession. Nor should Durkheim's phrasing (*le for intérieur de l'individu*) offer distraction. At stake in capital's formative function is the recognition that totality escapes comprehension *because* it is comprehended and yet that totality is a proposition *of* comprehension and so realized *only* in its mis-comprehension and that, finally, this realization of mis-comprehension is action and cognition as it occurs in flesh.²⁰ Should a name be required for this realization, yet having dispensed with the resolutions of contradiction implied in the terms subject, ego, or self, we could do worse than Hortense Spillers's "one":

¹⁸ Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), xii–xiii, 18.

¹⁹ Stuart Hall, "Introduction: Who Needs Identity?" in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage, 1996), 11.

²⁰ Rose, *Hegel contra Sociology*, 204–6.

This one is not only a psychic model of layered histories of a multiform past; he/she is the only riskable certainty or grant of a social fiction, insofar as the *point* mimics the place where the speaker/speaking is constituted. . . . Who is this one? I am referring to a *structure* in this instance: the small integrity of the now that accumulates the tense of the present as proofs of the past, and as experience that would warrant, might earn, the future.²¹

An excluded third between mass and individual, social totality and its specious opposition that eventually folds into the social, Spillers's one, like identity (at least as I hypothesize its function), holds in tension prevailing contradictions and at the same time points to life that happens to their side. As she elsewhere elaborates, "The 'one who counts' would allow an inquiry into personality, or one *in relation* to others."²² Personality, one in relation, names the actuality of a manifold mind without recourse to the abstractions of interior depth or non-interchangeable individual self-possession.

Artistic and activist labors grant access to that personality, those movements of miscomprehension. They grant access to the formative potencies of capital, just as they do its destructive potencies. As such, those who practice these labors and those who study them have something to say about the culture of capitalism, its miseducation of the one that escapes it; the

²¹ Hortense J. Spillers, "'All the Things You Could Be by Now, If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother': Psychoanalysis and Race," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 395–96 (Spillers's italics).

²² Hortense J. Spillers, "Time and Crisis: Questions for Psychoanalysis and Race," *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2018): 29 (Spillers's italics).

proposition of identity that mediates its contradictions.²³ In this perspective, Aida Levy-Hussen formulates a vision of reading that might do justice to literary-critical work: “reading as a practice of wonder that agnostically recuperates the density of inner life.”²⁴ I hope the wonder is evident in what follows. And I hope my history of the fate and invention of identity in recent American poetics recuperates some tiny portion of the density of inner life, that small integrity of now that lives and thinks in the broken world.

²³ On the education of consciousness, see, of course, G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977 [1807]).

²⁴ Aida Levy-Hussen, *How to Read African American Literature: Post-Civil Rights Fiction and the Task of Interpretation* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 172.

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Abstract

Becoming Academic: US Identity Poetics, 1968–2008 documents how poets of color and multiethnic poets developed a broadly influential identity-based poetics between the student rebellions and the global financial crisis. In chapters that trace the development of Black, Puerto Rican, and Jewish poetry during this period, this dissertation argues that the rise of academic identity knowledges, like Black and ethnic studies, played an indispensable practical and symbolic role in enabling new forms of writing by poets from historically marginalized groups. This argument revises longstanding Romantic ideas about the artist as outsider. Leaning on sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of the “university field,” a term for the struggles over cultural and economic capital and scientific authority which regularly take place in the spaces and organs of higher education, *Becoming Academic* shows how, rather than draining poets’ creative ability, entrance to the university field motivated innovations in their writing of and about racial and ethnic identity. Indeed, the story told here, for the first time, about the central role of identity in—and poets’ of color and multiethnic poets’ outsized contribution to—contemporary poetry is part of a larger story of American literary culture’s academicization in the postwar era. From the midcentury on, this dissertation shows, when literary culture gradually lost its ties to newspapers, magazines, commercial publishing, and communal arts spaces and became largely based in institutions of higher education, poets of color and multiethnic poets were protagonists, so to speak, in this transition, whose impact must be registered to grasp the transformations in American poetry of the past half-century.

The literary history of recent American poetry offered by *Becoming Academic* breaks with familiar accounts of the period (often focused on white poets or perceived literary rebels), while substantiating its novel claims through readings of a wide range of well-known and overlooked literary texts and magazines, alongside correspondence, textbooks, photographs, and course syllabi. Among the poets and publishers whose life and work is analyzed are Miguel Algarín, Sarah Webster Fabio, Aracelis Girmay, C. S. Giscombe, Benjamin Hollander, Nicolás Kanellos, Nathaniel Mackey, David Meltzer, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Jerome Rothenberg, Charles Rowell, Evie Shockley, Nomi Stone, Piri Thomas, and Jay Wright. Above all, *Becoming Academic* provides a “thick description” of the past half-century of American poetry, piecing together an overall account of the period from the careers and trajectories of publishers, magazines, institutions, and, primarily, poets of color and multiethnic poets and their work.

Introduction

Poetry and the University

Literature is never indifferent to its institutions.

—Charles Bernstein

In this Introduction, I define key terms, outline my critical and methodological approach, and summarize the subsequent chapters. My main purpose is to explain what I mean here by “identity poetics.” As I show, current use of the term, though wide-ranging, is united in its underestimation of what goes (and some of what does not go) under that name. Expanding the parameters of identity poetics to include kinds of writing with which it is infrequently associated, as well as modes of reading, I argue that identity poetics is in fact a “metadiscursive” project, as Gillian White would say, one that has had a pervasive effect on American poetry and poetics. To this end, I do several things in this Introduction. In addition to offering a semantic history of the term, I return to the origins of “identity” in logic and philosophy to point up the surprising ways identity functions in cultural texts. Moreover, while I leave the relevant history of postwar higher education to Chapter 1, I assess some other forms of relation poets have developed with the post-sixties university field, the better to grasp the uniqueness of identity poetics. No less, I insist that the methodological resources of historical poetics, multiethnic poetry studies, and biographical criticism are necessary to coming to terms with this decades-long metadiscursive project. Finally, or rather first, I begin with an analysis of African American poet Jay Wright’s elegy “The Death

of an Unfamiliar Sister.” My analysis previews the kinds of reading used throughout this dissertation—and the ends toward which such reading is put.

Old Scholars and Unfamiliar Kin

In “The Death of an Unfamiliar Sister,” an elegy by Jay Wright first published in 1972, a death other than that announced in the title interrupts the poem after seventeen lines:

Once, in a sullen Mexican town,
an old scholar drew himself even,
for a moment, with the Mexican horizon,
and snapped his heart against it.¹

When reading Wright’s elegy, it is tempting to gloss over these lines, which seem to come out of nowhere. Who is this old scholar? What relevance does he have to the rest of the poem? To a degree, parallels can be drawn between the death of the scholar and the titular death of the sister; Wright himself draws them explicitly. But any parallels are dropped well before the poem ends, just as the old scholar is dropped, not to be mentioned again after a few lines. In a poem that is otherwise about coming to terms with a loved one’s dying, the scholar’s part is at best mysterious; at worst, vague and inessential. What does one make of him?

Among other things, this dissertation might be understood as a long, roundabout attempt not exactly to explain Wright’s old scholar, but to uncover the kind of meaning he might assume

Charles Bernstein, “Provisional Institutions: Alternative Presses and Poetic Innovation,” in *My Way: Speeches and Poems* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 154.

¹ Jay Wright, “The Death of an Unfamiliar Sister,” in *Soothsayers and Omens* (New York: Seven Woods Press, 1976), 55, ll. 18–21.

in a literary history, a way of reading, a situation, so to speak, which at once structures contemporary American poetry and remains hidden from American poetry's view of itself. That history, that way of reading, that situation is "identity poetics"—the bewildering array of texts and modes of reading and writing that have (and often have not) gone under that name. One aim of this dissertation is to show American poets, and their readers and critics, this essential aspect of their history.

As such, I would like to start with a brief reading of Wright's elegy. Like many of the readings in what follows, I begin with something strange or inexplicable or odd-but-overlooked in a text (in this case, the old scholar), which I show to be related, ultimately, to struggles in the university field. Also like many of the readings here, this one is somewhat involved. At the risk of trying your patience right out of the gate, my reading pings back and forth from Wright's second collection of poetry (in which "Death of an Unfamiliar Sister" was included) to problems of kinship in the late sixties to Wright's explorations in West African anthropology—all to make something of this old scholar. The payoff of this rather involved reading, I hope, will be a preview of the kinds (and rewards) of reading for identity poetics which this dissertation aims to uncover.

To understand what role anyone else, including the scholar, might play in Wright's poem, the role of the sister should likely first be addressed. Although the sister is central to this elegy, concerned with how one strives to be reconciled to a loved one's dying, a note of ambivalence is struck already in the title. What does Wright mean by making the sister "unfamiliar"? Taken alone—as it appeared in *Scottish International Review*, when Wright was a visiting professor at the University of Dundee—the poem is unforthcoming on this point. But four years after its

original publication, “Death of an Unfamiliar Sister” was recontextualized as something more than a standalone magazine poem. In his second collection *Soothsayers and Omens*, Wright joined the elegy to a suite of poems set in the landscape of his upbringing in the American West and Southwest, centered on a prodigal “I” who has returned home. From the same suite, the poem “Family Reunion” reveals the implications of “unfamiliar” in the title. In “Family Reunion,” Wright’s narrating “I” faces the suspicion of another, “saintly” sister.² Her perusal of the family photo album has turned up no one resembling the prodigal, prompting her to wonder who has shown up at the reunion. “Among these images you know so well,” the prodigal apostrophizes, “will you finally recognize me?”³ As owner of the album, the sister decides who belongs. Her recognition confers resemblance; lack of it consigns to difference. Authorized by the album, her sense of self and own establishes the parameters of family: the prodigal is at best an “unfamiliar” relative.⁴ The use of that word in “Family Reunion” and in the title of Wright’s elegy suggests a correspondence between the poems. It indicates that kinship is in trouble in both. Family ties appear frayed, haunted by the absence of likeness. When the “I” in “Death of an Unfamiliar Sister” asks for “the blessing you cannot give,” the sense is now added that something like a birthright, a right to recognition and lineage may lie in the balance.⁵ At the very least, family is fraught.

Wright, who started out as a Black Arts movement fellow-traveler, as it were, is thought to have early on turned away from Black Arts concerns. A major concern for Black Arts participants, as for many who were influenced by Black nationalism in the sixties and seventies,

² Jay Wright, “Family Reunion,” in *Soothsayers and Omens*, 39–40.

³ Wright, “Family Reunion,” 40, l. 55–56.

⁴ Wright, “Family Reunion,” 39, l. 4.

⁵ Wright, “Death,” 56, l. 62.

was “allegiance to kinship.”⁶ Kinship as a model of Black unity, though not uncritically adopted, as GerShun Avilez shows, pervaded the era and its artists. To discover skepticism of kinship in Wright’s poems would seem of a piece with his break. I am not so sure. It seems to me that Wright introduces the old scholar to mend or mediate doubts about kinship.

As the heady days of American social rebellion wound down in the post-1968 moment, misgivings about unity-through-kinship felt by Black Arts writers and intellectuals were felt by all who had been drawn to cultural nationalism and the search for “roots,” including Latina/os, Native Americans, Asian Americans, even Jews. Increasingly, it became difficult to believe that what was so apparently close—kith, kin, and community—could be grasped or accessed outright, as a given. Or as an incontrovertible good. That did not mean these lost their hold over the imagination. It was a matter of how to salvage or transform one’s sense of self and “own” as these related to the ties of family, friends, and neighbors. The question began to be asked: “Who or what am ‘I’ *because of* and *despite* my background, my history, my people?” Such an attempt at salvage or transformation, I believe, is what “Death of an Unfamiliar Sister” also gets up to. Some forty years after Wright’s elegy, poets Claudia Rankine and Beth Loffreda wrote: “We wish to . . . unsettle the assumption that it is easy or simple to write what one ‘is.’ Why might I assume it is easy to write what is nearest to me? How do I know what that is—and what do I miss when I keep familiar things familiar?”⁷ Like many in his generation, children of the thirties and forties, the first to be told higher education was a national good, Wright learned to keep familiar things unfamiliar by turning to school.⁸ Enter the old scholar.

⁶ GerShun Avilez, *Radical Aesthetics and Modern Black Nationalism* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 62.

⁷ Claudia Rankine and Beth Loffreda, introduction to *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind*, ed. Claudia Rankine, Beth Loffreda, and Max King Cap (Albany: Fence Books, 2015), 18.

⁸ On higher education as a national good, see James Axtell, *Wisdom’s Workshop: The Rise of the Modern University* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 326.

In a collection like *Soothsayers and Omens*, where bookish, academic references appear everywhere from the title on down, the presence of the scholar in “Death of an Unfamiliar Sister” is hard to view as merely incidental.⁹ Indeed, he could be said momentarily to focalize, embody this mass of reference. In the context of a book Wright once said was “concerned with the nature and possibility of historical knowledge,” this old scholar invites us to consider what kinds of history and knowledge lie just beneath the surface of a poem that appears intellectually unpretentious, personal, perhaps autobiographical.¹⁰ Yet the almost allegorical function of the scholar—he is a symbol of knowledge and education—cannot be held apart from his role in the drama of Wright’s elegy, his connection to the sister in the consciousness of the narrating “I.” As mentioned above, one thing we can glean from the poem is the parallel between their deathbed experiences; the scholar and the sister—who, for her part, would seem to symbolize the bonds and bans of kinship—are linked. This strange symmetry calls up a theme that runs all through *Soothsayers* and elsewhere in Wright’s work: twinship. If there are twins in the poem, they are not the siblings (estranged by “unfamiliarity”), but the scholar and the sister, who pass on in the same way. But Wright’s idea of twinship is not disinterested, drawn on as a “universal” trope; it stems from his reading in some of the classic anthropology of West Africa, and as such brings together the scholar’s and the sister’s allegorical functions, as well as their narrative roles—and the various parts of my reading so far.

Wright’s idea of twinship is rooted in the myth of Nommo, as related by anthropologist Marcel Griaule. Told to Griaule during fieldwork among the Dogon people of Mali and

⁹ The title alludes to a 1957 translation of the *Historia general de las Cosas de Nueva España* by Bernardino de Sahagún, considered by some the “father of anthropology.” Wright’s collection contains several poems that deal with the Aztecs and their legacy, whose decimated civilization Brother Bernardino studied.

¹⁰ Wright to George Koppelman, June 9, 1975, Seven Woods Press, Records, Box 22, Folder 11, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

transcribed in his books, this myth explains how humans came to have two souls. The twin spirit Nommo, offspring of the god Amma and the Earth, gave human beings two souls to protect them from the corruption of singleness, the condition of Amma's first-born, the Jackal, a malevolent entity. But human beings were ill-equipped for this gift. As a result, life is a constant struggle of self-reconciliation: our necessary, but ad hoc twinness beset by the primordial reality and terror of singleness. As intriguing as is the myth, why should Wright have been drawn—in *Soothsayers* and elsewhere—to this story from a small West African ethnic group?¹¹ According to midcentury cultural politics, this myth would constitute part of the inheritance of the African diaspora, a piece of the tapestry the slave trade had, paradoxically, assembled from the riven traditions of once-distant tribes and people, now available to their descendants. And Wright was by no means the first or last Black writer to discover in the anthropology of Africa myths, stories, and histories which felt relevant to the racial present.¹² He was also skeptical of such feelings, such inheritances, as his wariness of kinship might indicate. For Wright, the myth is as important as its source: not in fact the Dogon elder Ogotemmêli, but the French anthropologist Griaule who related what he learned from the former. If the Nommo myth presents twinness as an ontological dilemma, then the surprising pair made by Griaule and Ogotemmêli (both wisemen in their own way, yet also “native” informants) recapitulates that dilemma as a methodological one. The scholar is the twin of the ancestor; knowledge of my past is inseparable from what makes that past available to me, which may also separate me from it.

¹¹ To take one example of Wright's interest in the Dogon, the final section of *Soothsayers* is titled “Second Conversations with Ogotemmêli,” an homage to Griaule's most famous book *Conversations with Ogotemmêli*, where he relates his initiation into the mysteries of Dogon cosmogony.

¹² Wright is not even the only one drawn to the Dogon. Nathaniel Mackey's ongoing poem-sequence “Song of the Andoumboulou,” for instance, brims with references to the Dogon (and to Griaule and his colleagues), starting with the poem's title.

By this route, we return to the twins of Wright's elegy: the scholar and the sister. According to the schema provided by the myth of Nommo, which runs through *Soothsayers*, these twins need but cannot live with each other. In poems like "Death of an Unfamiliar Sister" and "Family Reunion," Wright refuses to find a saving grace in the claims of kinship, the claims of shared past and legacy, of what is "closest." The sister, bearer of kinship, is made strange. As home withholds its welcome and family their recognition, Wright's prodigal "I" learns the truth of the saying, "You can't go home again." But the scholar, whose abrupt entrance warrants my own somewhat abrupt introduction of Griaule and the myth of Nommo—this scholar comes to mediate between a too-rigid insistence on kinship and its outright loss. Precisely through Wright's continual recourse, across the whole length of his work, to scholarship like that by Griaule and his colleagues, but also by Akan philosopher J. B. Danquah, anthropologist Victor Turner, and historians Frederick Copleston and Francis Fergusson (his teacher), to name just a few, he holds at a certain distance, as it were, whatever is "near" in Rankine and Loffreda's sense. He does not simply decline the demands of kith and kin, legacy or inheritance, the mix of things often taken to give us that chimera, social identity; he alienates them, makes them "unfamiliar," by recasting them through scholarship. Twinness is not just a matter of pleasing symmetry in his work, nor is it only twinness as understood by the Dogon of Mali, but as interpreted by the anthropologists who disseminated their myths (and further, as received by a Black poet and erstwhile PhD). A new kind of reflexivity about one's kin and oneself is what the scholar makes possible—or better, plausible—to hold in mind as one reads the elegy, what he makes possible by lending to the sister's estrangement a framework, a web of reference that cradles without overwhelming her or the poem's mournful tone. What the scholar offers by accompanying the sister where the prodigal cannot—by being her impossible, improbable twin.

In this way, as a sometime-professor and serious reader of current scholarship, Wright reengages the “familiar” on the terrain of the university, where he and his generation of poets of color and multiethnic poets—and succeeding ones—taught themselves to engage in such reflexive operations. For as the three generations of poets on whom this dissertation focuses asked themselves who or what they were, what their “identity” could mean with cultural nationalism on the wane (and later all but gone), they did not do so in a vacuum. Like the rest of the nation, they were swept up in the postwar higher education boom.

As the cultural spaces that sprang up in the sixties either institutionalized themselves or faded from the scene, and as shifts in American economy put commercial publishing under greater and greater pressure, universities became the center of gravity for US literary culture, and for none so powerfully as poets. But while university creative writing or MFA programs were for fiction writers already in the sixties an influential counterweight to the hegemony of the New York City publishing world, they were nowhere near as important for poets. It was not until the nineties that MFA programs in poetry began to proliferate and dominate poetry publishing and award circuits. And the influence they did then have (for they had some) was mostly restricted to white male poets.¹³ In other words, poets of color and multiethnic poets who gravitated to the university field often orbited that sphere commonly known as academia, where research and scholarship were the order of the day. When the student rebellions helped to install identity knowledges in universities, they redoubled this force, making fields and disciplines like English, history, sociology, religious studies, and anthropology poets’ means of entrance and tenure (sometimes in both senses of the term). As they called into question, while trying to hold on to

¹³ See Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young, “The Program Era and the Mainly White Room,” in *After the Program Era: The Past, Present, and Future of Creative Writing in the University*, ed. Loren Glass (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017), 137–75.

the models of self and “own,” kinship and inheritance, social and collective identity, which the cultural nationalisms had popularized, in both their creative and critical writing, as so many like Wright did, they kept their eye on the university field. It was more and more the one place that extended to poets of color and multiethnic poets the possibility of a livelihood dedicated to writing and thinking. If they had to mine their identity and introduce to their work old scholars, as it were, to keep this possibility within reach, with all the temptations to research-thick, overly intellectualized poetry which these risked, they had no qualms in doing so. And we should have no qualms in reading them this way, for their innovations around identity, scholarship, and the university field had a resounding impact on US literary culture of the past half-century, no doubt far beyond their imagining.

Here *in nuce* is the logic and movement of identity poetics. More accurately, my reading of Wright’s elegy is a model for how to read for identity poetics. The moves and techniques found above—close reading combined with biographical criticism, reference to critical and scholarly works as intertexts, archival research, attention to poetry collections as a whole, interest in marginal or stray references, focus on figures who may be unknown to many readers, scholars, and poets alike—all of these will recur in *Becoming Academic: US Identity Poetics, 1968–2008*. My aim is to put poems and their authors in the conversations they want to have. As with any approach, there are rewards and drawbacks to this one. I want to suggest when it comes to what has been called identity poetics this approach has a particular urgency too. “The Death of an Unfamiliar Sister” traces a certain logic and movement of identity poetics, but it was also created under the conditions of identity poetics. While careful attention to form and language has been literary criticism’s bread-and-butter for the past six decades, biography, archives, and history are

required to make sense of a situation that encompasses individual texts, their authors' field of possibility, and methods of reading. Because that is what is at stake: not just poems and ways to interpret them, but a situation that has brought scholars, poets, and institutions into such close proximity it is hard to see where one ends and the others begin.

In my Introduction to this dissertation, I will provide a sketch of this situation, which the rest of the dissertation fills in. I offer here an account of identity poetics (including the term's origins) and the kind of "metadiscursive" reading required to come to grips with it. Overall, my dissertation historicizes the phenomenon by looking at three groups of poets of color and multiethnic poets—African American, Puerto Rican, and Jewish American—to show how each developed an identity poetics over the course of four decades under the pressures of academicization, here understood as the process by which the university field has become (and indeed made itself) the center of US cultural life—and especially, literary life—since the mid-twentieth century. Of course, other ways of relating to academicization have been devised, as I also briefly discuss. In addition, I give here an account of my methodology insofar as it must be adequate both to the poems I study and the historical and discursive situation that locates them and myself as a literary critic and scholar of poetry. Part of this account is an explanation of my focus on poets of color and multiethnic poets, whom I have placed at the heart of contemporary poetry and poetics. I will argue that such explanation is only necessary because such history as I construct and reconstruct has yet to be assimilated to prevailing narratives inside and outside the academy (if the distinction can even be said to hold). Finally, my Introduction concludes with chapter summaries, including an elucidation of the Preface that grounds all the work I do in this dissertation.

A=A?

A difficulty with making identity poetics central to my dissertation is the term's ambiguity.¹⁴ Its origins are uncertain and its uptake widely differs. I hope a brief semantic history will put readers who come with different ideas (or none) about identity poetics on the same plane, before I offer my own version. In my version, the term is a kind of jumping-off point for a much broader conception of the phenomenon than envisioned in previous use.

As I say, the origin of the term "identity poetics" is uncertain. It is hard to ignore its likely riff on the term "identity politics," coined by the Combahee River Collective in their 1977 statement, though "identity poetry" appears in a plausible cognate sense as early as 1975.¹⁵ To further confuse matters, a related but distinct expression entered the academic vocabulary around this same time. Emphasizing the invention or production of identity as a process of culture, rather than a natural endowment, "poetics of identity" seems to originate in the eighties. While sometimes later used interchangeably with identity poetics, poetics of identity tends to get applied in the general, cultural sense, rarely indicating poetics as a practice of verse writers and readers.¹⁶ It was not until the mid-nineties that identity poetics fully emerged as a term of art in

¹⁴ In a book that takes the term as its title, Linda Garber defines identity poetics as "a sort of postmodern identity politics." This will not do. And indeed, while Garber's chapters revolve around poets, the term is really meant to "bridge" a conceptual divide between lesbian and queer theory. In other words, the focus is not contemporary poetic practice. Another red herring is the phrase "poetics of identity," as explained below. Garber, *Identity Poetics: Race, Class, and the Lesbian-Feminist Roots of Queer Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 1.

¹⁵ Russell Hamilton, *Voices from an Empire: A History of Afro-Portuguese Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1975), 208.

¹⁶ David Lloyd, "'Pap for the Dispossessed': Seamus Heaney and the Poetics of Identity," *boundary 2* 13, no. 2/3 (Spring 1985): 320, 324–25 and Nancy K. Miller, "Changing the Subject: Authorship, Writing, and the Reader," in *Feminist Studies, Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 110. An earlier, less influential sense of poetics of identity comes from semiotics. Yuri Lotman refers to "poetics of identity" in the 1977 translation of "Two Models of Communication." The 1970 original uses the term "*poëtiki tozhdestva*," where identity (*tozhdestva*) means something like equivalence; personal identity in Russian is "*ličnost*," national or ethnic identity "*prinadležnost*." See Lotman, "Two Models of Communication," 1970, in *Soviet Semiotics: An Anthology*, ed. and trans. Daniel P. Lucid (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 101 and G.

US “po-biz,” that is, the world of poetry in all its frank business-mindedness and necessary self-promotional vanity. But its earlier circulation is obvious from a remark made by Jonathan Monroe in 1994, when he referred to “what has come to be called ‘identity poetics.’”¹⁷ In the context of language poetry and the American reception of poststructuralism, identity poetics was code for a kind of “group identity” to be “disavowed” or else deemed a site of stability that required exposure “as an uneven, shifting set of local engagements and alliances.”¹⁸ In fact, affirmative use of identity poetics appears to post-date its appearance as a term of condescension, if not outright abuse in innovative poetry circles. As the decade wore on, Charles Bernstein and Gary Lenhart took to calling theirs an “era” or “age” of identity poetics.¹⁹ Since then “identity-based poetics,” “identity poetry,” and “‘identity’ poetics” have even been discussed as if they were an actual movement in the vein of Imagism or New Formalism.²⁰ Due to its use in the nineties, the tendency became to consider identity poetics and its associated terms in contrast to

A. Levinton, “Some Problems of Meaning in Folklore Texts,” *Acta Ethnographica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 23, nos. 2–4 (1974): 161n16, 156.

¹⁷ Charles Bernstein, Ann Lauterbach, Jonathan Monroe, and Bob Perelman, “Poetry, Community, Movement: A Conversation,” *Diacritics* 26, no. 3/4 (Winter 1996): 209.

¹⁸ Bob Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 36 and Susan Brown, “A Victorian Sappho: Agency, Identity, and the Politics of Poetics,” *English Studies in Canada* 20, no. 2 (June 1994): 206.

¹⁹ Bernstein, “Stein’s Identity,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 42, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 487 and Lenhart, “Lover’s Leap: The Poems of Lewis Warsh,” *Talisman: A Journal of Contemporary Poetry and Poetics* 18 (Summer 1998): 55.

²⁰ Mark Wallace, “Towards a Free Multiplicity of Form,” *Witz: A Journal of Contemporary Poetics* 4, no. 2 (Summer 1996); David Clippinger, “Between Silence and the Margins: Poetry and Its Presses,” in *The World in Space and Time: Towards a History of Innovative American Poetry in Our Time*, ed. Edward Foster and Joseph Donahue (Jersey City: Talisman House, 2001–2), 238–39; Dana Gioia, *Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture* (Saint Paul, Minn.: Graywolf, 2004), 6; Gioia, David Mason, and Meg Schoerke, Preface to *Twentieth-Century American Poetics: Poets on the Art of Poetry*, ed. Dana Gioia, David Mason, and Meg Schoerke (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004), x; Stephen Fredman, introduction to *A Concise Companion to Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, ed. Stephen Fredman (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005), 3–4.

avant-garde and experimental poetry.²¹ In consequence, identity poetics was (and still is) taken to adhere to representational poetics or practice a kind of uninterrogated autobiographical verse.²²

This semantic history should serve as a baseline for my own version of identity poetics. In Chapter 1, I will return to identity poetics as a term of art in recent poetics debates, discussing the affirmative use that emerges in the aughts, alongside its persistence as a term or target of abuse by which to distinguish innovative poetry from “sociological” or representational poetry. But for now let me submit that the term arose not just to name a kind of poetry that came to prominence in the fifties and sixties, when through the auspices of movement politics and cultural nationalism poets of color and multiethnic poets began to take center stage in national poetics conversations. It was indeed poetry that often spoke in the first-person, as it were, though the divergent uses to which the plural and singular, let alone personae, were put troubles any charge of simple representational poetics; and no doubt its concerns were political and group-oriented as much as aesthetic, but the whole debate about the role of art in activist movements, ranging from the differences between Marxist and nationalist perspectives to the Black Panthers’ internecine conflict over the issue, suggests a more complicated art-politics dialectic than commentators typically allow.²³ In any case, while such poets and their successors were the ones for whom identity poetics appears to have been coined, the delay between their appearance and

²¹ Gus Puleo, “‘Los dos abuelos’: Nicolás Guillén and Luis Palés Matos,” *Revista Hispánica Moderna* 50, no. 1 (June 1997): 87 and Juliana Spahr, *Everybody’s Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity* (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: The University of Alabama Press, 2001), 110–11.

²² Charles Altieri, “What Is Living and What Is Dead in American Postmodernism: Establishing the Contemporaneity of Some American Poetry,” in *Postmodernism Now: Essays on Contemporaneity in the Arts* (University Park, Penn.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 40–41; Hank Lazer, “Learning the Lessons of Early Modernism,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 79, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 184; V. Nicholas LoLordo, “Identity Poetics? or, *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*,” *Postmodern Culture* 15, no. 1 (September 2004): np.

²³ For an important, comprehensive exception, see James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

the term's spread hints at intervening factors. (More on possible factors below.) It at least suggests that a more robust account of identity poetics is needed to understand its history and differential uptake.

In my account, identity poetics makes explicit social identity's discursive salience. To begin with the role of discourse in this account, I refer to Foucault's popularization of the term: "Whenever one can describe, between a number of statements . . . a system of dispersions, whenever, between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity. . . we are dealing with a *discursive formation*."²⁴ Discourse is the world of meanings that coalesces to create a meaningful world. It goes beyond written and published documents, though these have an important, even privileged role in modernity, where they are charged with preserving authoritative understanding of the relations between things in the social world. This gets at my use of "explicit." The modes of relation that structure a given social world are often unselfconsciously practiced. Identity poetics self-consciously brings into the realm of (literary) writing those concepts, statements, and practices by which social identity (e.g., race, gender, class) appears in the world.²⁵ In this respect, the verse reading and writing practices favored by the poets in this dissertation are coterminous with many kinds of critical and theoretical work, while exploiting the rhetorical and aesthetic resources associated with poetry in the modern

²⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 38 (Foucault's italics).

²⁵ As shown in recent work by Erin Kappeler, Anthony Reed, and Virginia Jackson, racism hugely informs many assumptions of current poetics, poetic practice, and poetry criticism, but in the latter half of the twentieth century they became just that, assumptions, and hence largely faded from conscious awareness. See Kappeler, "Editing America: Nationalism and the New Poetry," *Modernism/modernity* 21, no. 4 (November 2014): 899–918; Reed, "The Erotics of Mourning in Recent Experimental Black Poetry," *The Black Scholar* 47, no. 1 (2017): 23–37; Jackson, "The Cadence of Consent: Francis Barton Gummere, Lyric Rhythm, and White Poetics," in *Critical Rhythm: The Poetics of a Literary Life Form*, ed. Ben Glaser and Jonathan Culler (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 87–105; "Historical Poetics and the Dream of Interpretation: A Response to Paul Fry," *MLQ* 81, no. 3 (September 2020): 289–318.

period. Identity is, of course, a primary structuring discourse in multivalently stratified social space; its “salience” is everywhere implicit in the unequal, late modern United States. A certain kind of poetry and poetics since the latter half of the last century, here called identity poetics, has gained attention and imitators by forthrightly working through this discourse.

Said otherwise, then, identity poetics is the complex effect, localized in poems but created by the practices of editors, publishers, writers, critics, bureaucrats, and lay readers, which gets social identity to appear on the page. Yet in making identity appear on the page, none of the agents in this process could rely solely on personal experience, not even on a set of shared experiences that create the conditions for group consciousness, to relay the salience of social categories of belonging and stratification. Faced with multiple, unequally distributed readers and practitioners, identity poetics, at least as it emerged on a national scale in the late twentieth century, required for its improvisations on prevailing discursive formations a widely accessible body of knowledge about social identity.²⁶ In the postwar era, a massively expanding higher education system provided just that; the university field supplied poets and readers with sharable—though also changing and contestable—frames of reference about social identity.²⁷ In addition to scholarship in disciplines like history, anthropology, sociology, and English language and literature, which already exerted influence on social identity discourse, the 1968–69 student

²⁶ In other words, identity poetics may emerge anywhere there are discursive regimes that structure and are structured by (something like) identity. My specific interest is the historical juncture in US culture when identity poetics assumes national significance, but prior moments in American history, as well as elsewhere, could yield other examples of compelling work in this vein.

²⁷ Following Bourdieu, I use the term university field to name that site of struggle between economic and political capital and cultural capital, including in this case “scientific authority,” which happens to occur on campuses. It is through this struggle, in some (but not all) respects a struggle over the terms and institutions of social reproduction, that the university becomes “a primary articulator of state and civil society,” as Roderick Ferguson puts it; the means by which those struggles in orders of capital assume flesh, so to speak, and get acted out as human interests. Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, trans. Peter Collier (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 48, 128–29 and Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 11.

rebellions ushered in identity knowledge programs that borrowed from and contested these disciplines, prioritizing the knowledge of those whom they had historically “explained” without really consulting.

Paired with what it had to offer in that respect, the university system had become the main economic support for the US poetry world at this time, as I explore in Chapter 1. This convergence of knowledge and habitus meant that the university field was the primary site of production for identity poetics. As identity poetics began to develop, it did so by way of poems that appeared in scholarly journals and books published by university presses; poems that pastiche academic genres like the CV and article; that adapt older poetic forms, like notes and prose interludes, in light of scholarly convention; and borrow language and concepts from academic scholarship. Such textual and paratextual moves and realities reflexively highlight their condition of possibility, the university field. Identity poetics is in part a result of this reflexivity. It is a way poets, editors, and critics use to get social identity on the page in an era when higher education is conceived as a national good.

The notion of reflexivity also brings to the fore another dimension of identity poetics. Just as the poets, critics, and readers engaged in producing identity poetics are conscious of the discursive formations they engage they also tend to be conscious of the ways engagement with such formations appear in discourse. If the last sentence seems to swallow its own tail, as it were, that is because it does in a sense. Self-consciousness about consciousness is the hallmark of thinking that addresses its own grounds of possibility, the difficult project foreclosed by the Kantian theory of the categories but held open by Hegelian speculative reason, among others.²⁸

²⁸ Gillian Rose, *Hegel contra Sociology* (London: Athlone, 1995) and Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

To situate this point on a different plane, Gillian White has recently put forth a rousing call for metadiscursive reading in relation to a topic that makes plain the stakes for thinking (about) identity poetics. In *Lyric Shame: The “Lyric” Subject of Contemporary American Poetry*, White reconstructs a long and ongoing struggle for aesthetic authority between mainstream and avant-garde poets which in fact subtends a mutual investment in “expressive lyric.”²⁹ Considered an aspersion by an avant-garde suspicious (like the Language poets) of normative speech and subjectivity, expressive lyric is also the name for a kind of baseline poetic sensibility to those who (inheriting a New Critical position) view the poem as a “dramatic” situation. Poles apart in their rhetoric, avant-garde and mainstream actually share the fiction of expressive lyric, White insists, a fiction produced by readings, not poems.³⁰ The shame of failing to recreate the ideal New Critical poem, the shame of fealty to such a poem, even the shame of overdoing it; in each case, the real source of shame is shameful reading, which finds poems wanting, inhibited, or excessive. This shame extends to identity poetics, commonly identified with the so-called expressive lyric and accompanied by embarrassment from its earliest use.³¹ Readers of poetry are capable doing otherwise, White says. We can read for “metadiscursive style.” When we do so, these poems resemble “neither suppressed expressions nor modest confessions but . . . experiments whose assumptions (that discourse conditions the personal and expressive self) have been obscured by available accounts of ‘personal’ poetics.”³² In this view, poems are released from the expectation they will represent inner (or group) life, as well as the

²⁹ Gillian White, *Lyric Shame: The “Lyric” Subject of Contemporary American Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014), 4.

³⁰ White, *Lyric Shame*, 5–7, 36.

³¹ I address the embarrassment of identity poetics in Chapter 3, where the relevance of Jewish American poetry to a history of identity poetics (and its awkwardness) is discussed. Jewish American poets are shown to be partially responsible for the term’s very circulation by way of their embarrassment about the prospect of “group” poetics.

³² White, *Lyric Shame*, 38.

expectation they must thwart such representation. Instead, they can be expected to deal in the coin of the realm: the discourse that makes the personal appear.

If “personal” poetics, the poetics of the personal, is no longer seen as straightforwardly personal, or particularly expressive, but rather, an effect of discursive ploys and gambits, then the idea that identity poetics is naively representational becomes hard to maintain. To take this further: if the centrality of discursive formations to identity poetics is already granted, as the discussion above might persuade, then poets’ engagement not only with discourse on social identity but with *how* different ways of reading (for) that discourse affect and effect ideas of the self, subject, or the personal—then that engagement assumes a metadiscursive register. In metadiscursive perspective, identity poetics is a “meta” project, so to speak, one as concerned with representation as with how representations get produced and circulated.

When poets, publishers, and the rest interest themselves so readily in the extra-aesthetic, metadiscursive effects of aesthetic undertakings, they embrace a reality in American literature known at least since the era of the slave autobiographies; namely, that representation co-constructs the social world that determines the limits and possibilities of representation. Identity poetics brings something new to this old paradigm. The appeal and danger of identity poetics is its ability to render differences irrelevant.

At a glance, this might seem like an odd claim. In the identitarian sense, identity is a marker of difference in a socially differentiated field; it does not render difference irrelevant but registers the persistence of social difference. But beyond the identitarian (which is not my focus in this dissertation, appearances to the contrary) there is the sense of identity as self-identical, based on the logical origins of the concept.³³ Here it seems only proper to start with likeness. Yet

³³ Strange as it may seem, recourse to the logical origins of identity can help resolve difficulties that arise when “identity” is casually tossed around. Vincent Descombes, for example, turns to logicians like

recourse to likeness in this context presents an often overlooked difficulty. To fix identity to likeness would require that identity is posited. In other words, identification would simply be a matter of indicating what something already—and hence, obviously—“is.” This ignores the very grammar of identity as received by the English language from Greek thought. To say what something “is,” rather than qualifying something (“a red x”), links a subject and predicate (“x is y”). If the predicate were presupposed in the subject—that is, being what it “is”—then stating the predicate would be redundant. This is the meaning of the law of identity “A=A,” precisely a facile observation. And it is what Wallace Stevens meant by his statement, “Both in nature and in metaphor identity is the vanishing-point of resemblance.”³⁴ Though taken as a function of likeness, identity actually abolishes the relationality necessary to resemblance, to looking “like,” and simply “is” the thing, swallowing it up.

Without returning to the identitarian sense, the daring of identity—the sophistry, some have said—is in fact its movement by way of difference. Expounding Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, Pirmin Stekeler-Weithofer writes, “Any interesting identity statement dialectically starts with different things, different names or different representations that are, for example, judged as ‘referring to the same object.’”³⁵ The task set by identity is to discover what differences are “irrelevant” to equivalence. This is why Hegelian speculative reason, as elaborated by Gillian Rose, uses the copula (“is”) to establish and interrogate the gulf between things.³⁶ A classic Hegelian proposition, for example that religion and the state “are identical,” presumes the

Wittgenstein and Frege to defend the coherency of identity as a historical and social scientific category. See Descombes, *Puzzling Identities*, trans. Stephen Adam Schwartz (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016), 39–62.

³⁴ Wallace Stevens, “Three Academic Pieces,” in *Collected Poetry and Prose*, sel. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1997), 687.

³⁵ Pirmin Stekeler-Weithofer, *Hegel’s Analytic Pragmatism* (unpublished manuscript, May 2, 2016), §9.5.

³⁶ Rose, *Hegel contra Sociology*, 48–91.

obvious, that religion and the state are not identical, while opening up a whole array of questions about who would think otherwise, why some might desire the identification, under what conditions they could be identical, and how the experience of their non-identity challenges a world based on their identity. This, too, is the kind of work on which identity poetics endeavors.

Allow me to draw the connection more tightly. In their writing, poets of color and multiethnic poets draw on language, forms, concepts, imagery, and rhetorical techniques based in or derived from academic and extra-academic knowledge about social identity. The discursive formations of race and ethnicity, among others, fix this material to roles and positions in the social world, sometimes in a hard-and-fast manner, sometimes provisionally. When reworked in poets' writing, and when circulated and received along lines established by the literary system, this material becomes part of self-conscious discursive and metadiscursive projects to contest, affirm, transform, resituate social identities. Hard-and-fast associations, like those implied in the *Negro and Jewish Questions* and the *Porto Rican Problem*, can be dislodged by this process, just as provisional associations are cemented. In this way, *semes*, as Roland Barthes calls them, or units of signification, may become shorthand for an identity.³⁷ Assembled under the same rubric, they are differences rendered irrelevant by repeated use. Identity poetics assembles a system of such irrelevant differences. Through it, the poetry and its poets are recognized in their social positioning and as contributors to the discursive conversation. They even receive legitimation through this system as academicization advances, collapsing the distance between academic (and extra-academic) knowledge and poetics and increasing the number and profile of poets and their critics in the university field.

³⁷ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 17.

Such a system might better be labeled a symbolic ecology with all the implications of fragility. Indeed, it is unclear whether recent work in the identity poetics mold is part of the same discursive and metadiscursive projects as those conducted from 1968 to 2008. Underlying the periodization of my dissertation is a sense that identity poetics really takes hold in the US poetry world by the late aughts and at the same time substantially changes. Several of the poets I discuss here should be known to readers and critics of contemporary poetry, including Nathaniel Mackey and Evie Shockley, and perhaps to a lesser extent Judith Ortiz Cofer, Victor Hernández Cruz, and Jerome Rothenberg. But many, if not most of the figures discussed in these pages will be largely unknown to those outside specific research and poetics circles. While I argue that many of these figures, especially the publishers, were pivotal to the spread of identity poetics and deserve greater recognition, their minor status serves as a useful contrast to the stature of poets in the identity poetics mold since 2008. From Natasha Trethewey to Ilya Kaminsky, Raquel Salas Rivera to Claudia Rankine, Natalie Diaz to Cathy Park Hong, poets today who practice something like identity poetics are prize-winners, grant recipients, full professors, commencement speakers, authors of best sellers, and generally critically esteemed. The poets are not so much dramatically better, it goes without saying, for talent alone to explain the reception gap. Partly the difference can be attributed to previous generations having laid the groundwork for recent poets and partly to continued academicization, which, as I say, collapses the distance between poets and their sources of legitimation. And a major site of academicization in the US poetry world is the creative writing program. Not all the named poets, nor all who might be mentioned in this capacity, are MFA recipients, but the MFA program has made life for poets in the university field more lucrative and straightforward than at any previous time.

Yet with the rise of creative writing programs in poetry, which did not achieve the level and prominence of fiction writing programs until the nineties, the specifically scholarly dispensation of identity poetics may be losing its ground.³⁸ Previous generations of poets of color and multiethnic poets, marginalized in the “mainly white rooms” of the MFA, as Spahr and Young aptly label them, and with less footing for the most part in the mainstream and commercial sectors of the poetry world, to the extent those still existed, found a refuge in identity knowledge programs and humanities fields and disciplines influenced by these programs. These were spaces in which they could work on their craft and establish their reputations for four or more years as undergraduate or graduate students. This was one reason academic knowledge became useful to them; it was a way to signal their belonging in the university field, often in the form not only of pastiches on academic genres but in those genres, using the prevailing scholarship, theory, and criticism. The connection between their discursive strategies and academic knowledge was transparent and self-conscious. However, it seems as if the set of semes—identity shorthand—invented by these generations are being “uncoupled” from their social situation in a former university field that required poets of color and multiethnic poets to become academic to get by, not just craft teachers at the college level.³⁹ Though I save further thoughts on this topic for the end of Chapter 1, I will say here that as creative writing programs become the main route into the academy, the link between prevailing semes and the academic

³⁸ For a data-driven timeline of the rise of poetry creative writing programs, see Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young, “The Program Era and the Mainly White Room,” in *After the Program Era: The Past, Present, and Future of Creative Writing in the University*, ed. Loren Glass (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017), 137–75.

³⁹ I borrow the notion of aesthetic and social “uncoupling” from Timothy Yu, who analyzes this dynamic with regard to experimental aesthetics and the post-sixties political landscape. See Yu, *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry since 1965* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 161–62.

knowledge that once grounded them seems to be growing tenuous. Social identity appears as if reflected in them, not refracted.

Any history of American poetry which would follow the model of Mark McGurl's "program era" history of postwar fiction has to account for the relative absence until recently of poets of color and multiethnic poets from MFA programs. And it must account for the mainly scholarly and academic basis of poetry in American universities before creative writing achieved institutional prominence (similarly, for that matter, to how McGurl explores the roots of creative writing in the progressive education movement).⁴⁰ In this sense, my dissertation provides the prehistory of the program era in poetry. But from 2008 on, identity poetics and program poetics are inextricable. This is not in itself a bad thing. Indeed, this dissertation intends to leave scorched earth where critics used to stand who said academia is "bad" for poetry, enervating and depoliticizing it. By many standards (political radicalism, aesthetic excellence, experimental audacity), post-sixties American poetry merits comparison to any poetry written before World War II, and where this is not the case (social impact), the fault lies not with poets.

Academicization (and its twin engines: population expansion and the transformations of capital in an age of abundance) forced American culture to adapt. Fortunately, the results in poetry and poetics have been stunning. I harbor no nostalgia for a culture of outsider poets, replacing their sneers at "insiders" with salaried cooptation at the drop of a dime (well, slightly more than that), or for the moneyed or day-laboring virtuosos of some paradise lost, where poets could be poets without compromise or concession to the petty professionalism of daily life. Still, to the extent that identity poetics is losing its eagle-eyed self-awareness of the conditions under which poetry

⁴⁰ Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), 77–125.

gets written, its unpretentious reflexivity, I believe something important is lost. Not just something important, something *good*. When I make aesthetic judgments in this dissertation, unfashionable as it now is to do so in scholarship, I make them according to my sense of loss. My sense that what makes the poetry good is being abandoned.

Other “Traditions”

Identity poetics hardly exhausts the kinds of relations poets since the sixties have had with the university. Language writers such as Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, Bob Perelman, Susan Howe, Bruce Andrews, as well as MFA program stalwarts Mark Strand, Gerald Stern, Gregory Orr, and Louise Glück, not to mention poets like Anne Carson, Juliana Spahr, Maureen McClane, and Joshua Clover, forged relationships with the university on terms different from those established through identity poetics.

A case-study of the language writers proves insightful. In the seventies and early eighties “almost all language writers were based outside the university,” according to Bob Perelman, and yet “language writing was accused of being academic before very many academics had heard much about it.”⁴¹ Language writers met with a decades-old insult intended to ward off compromising realities, though the accusations of difficulty, prosaicness, and over-intellectualization were new to the list of gripes with “academic poetry.” Language poets’ remove from the ideals of a latter-day Romanticism, so much in favor in mid-century universities, was unmistakable. But the rapid entrance of language poets into academic institutions since the eighties throws into question their origins outside the university. Recently published correspondence between Bernstein, Andrews, and Ron Silliman shows that language

⁴¹ Perelman, *Marginalization*, 14.

writing developed in and beside academic institutions.⁴² Language poets and fellow travelers taught and got degrees at universities, read on college tours, published with university presses, and participated in campus radicalism and academic networks. The familiar image of language writing's institutionalization has been center-periphery exchange, with innovative outliers being recognized and incorporated by the arbiters of official verse culture. Or as Perelman writes, "the center has opened an embassy in an exotic territory."⁴³ Nearer the truth is an image of adjacent or overlapping spheres. Besides the fact that many language poets or language-adjacent writers did receive MAs, PhDs, and MFAs, the avenues of cultural legitimation, including academic fluency, were never blocked to the likes of Bernstein, Hejinian, or Howe, to name a few, just because they earned only bachelor's degrees. The social and cultural capital that accrued from upbringing by creative intellectuals and professionals (Hejinian and Howe), family wealth (Bernstein), and Harvard matriculation (Bernstein and Hejinian) made up for any lack of deigned recognition and arguably served as better preparation for academic success than, say, a decade spent in state schools. Language writers were not barbarians at the university gates so much as faculty-in-waiting.

Such contradictions between self-fashioning and social reality are common in contemporary poetry and poetics. More fundamental, while poets of several persuasions made their living in the university, the rise of identity poetics depended on a novel arrangement between poets and academic institutions. Language poets gained recognition in universities in part due to changes in literary tastes driven by their critical writing and their established advocates in English departments. This puts them in a lineage with the New Critics and their

⁴² Matthew Hofer and Michael Golston, eds., *The Language Letters: Selected 1970s Correspondence of Bruce Andrews, Charles Bernstein, and Ron Silliman* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2019).

⁴³ Perelman, *Marginalization*, 79.

avored poets, who rode a wave of disciplinary reform they themselves instigated. The scholar-poet formation of identity poetics resulted from no such change in literary value. It developed out of a situation in which poets historically excluded from and marginalized in US higher education met with unprecedented opportunities for study, careers, and legitimation in academic institutions. A perennial question in the era of modern authorship “How do you earn a living as a poet?” had long found an answer in the university, though only a few could take advantage of it. As higher education expanded after World War II, however, the answer became more common for more poets than at any time in the past. When identity knowledge appeared on college campuses, and when its scholarship began to filter into adjacent fields, poets of color and poets outside the white mainstream discovered that the university could provide them their livelihood too. This meant turning the identities that positioned them in the social world into matters for academic study. Aiming to secure a place in the university and develop their poetic craft at the same time, the result was a poetic practice that treated academic knowledge regimes as indispensable to any exploration of the personal in verse.

Canadian poet Anne Carson serves as a kind of analogue. Her education as a classicist in fact undergirds a commitment to post-sixties feminist identity knowledges. The characters who run through her poetic autofictions, and the use of life-writing genres (travel diary, personal essay, autobiography), frequently intertwine with questions of philology, translation, and women’s history. It is as if the only way to access the personal were through scholarly concerns and practices. Gender identity is not delivered as raw, autobiographical experience in Carson’s work—for that matter, where has “raw experience” ever been found in literary texts?—but a construction informed by academic knowledge. Race and ethnicity are treated similarly by the poets in this dissertation. And indeed, the precedent set by those who helped fashion identity

poetics has come to influence poets in the university across the board, regardless of identity. (Several of the language poets' recent exploration of their Jewish identity looks strikingly like late responses to identity poetics.) The identity poetics model serves as a template for poets who, now more than ever, need to establish a relationship to the academy to become legible to critical and popular audiences.

Historical Poetics and Multiethnic Poetry Studies

To return to the complicated situation of identity poetics in which poets, critics, and readers (if they are even separate) find themselves, where the poetry to be discussed often discusses itself in the same language a scholar might use, where the same institutions set the standards of legitimation for critics and poets alike, and where readers' taste is trained in the same university English classes that train poets how and what to write—such a situation requires literary critical methodologies up to the task. In particular, a literary history of identity poetics must grapple with the kind and level of reflexivity at hand and the specificity that poets of color and multiethnic poets bring to American literary culture. To this end, my work is primarily informed by two strands of current US poetry studies, historical poetics and multiethnic poetry studies.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ A third strand that informs my work is the study of poetry and the university. Research in this area has been essential to developing my claims and questions in this dissertation, as references in the following pages will show. But the research does not substantially inform my methods, the focus in this section, which is why I relegate it to a footnote. For foundational scholarship on poetry and the university, see Charles Bernstein, "The Academy in Peril: William Carlos Williams Meets the MLA," 1984, in *Content's Dream: Essays 1975–1984* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1986), 244–51; Gail McDonald, *Learning to Be Modern: Pound, Eliot, and the American University* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); Langdon Hammer, *Hart Crane and Allen Tate: Janus-Faced Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); "Plath's Lives," *Representations* 75, no. 1 (Summer 2001): 61–88; Robert Crawford, *The Modern Poet: Poetry, Academia, and Knowledge since the 1750s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Oren Izenberg, "Poems in and out of School: Allen Grossman and Susan Howe," in *The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry Since 1945*, ed. Jennifer Ashton (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 187–201.

Historical poetics is a form of literary interpretation that pairs historicization of verse production and forms with historicization of verse reading practices, including the scholar's own. Historical poetics originated in nineteenth-century poetry studies but now impacts study of poetry in all periods. Virginia Jackson, Yopie Prins, Gillian White, and Erin Kappeler, among others, have shown that the catch-all idea of "poetry" is a modern invention that effaces the formal and generic conventions poets assume, combine, adjust, and innovate.⁴⁵ This process of "lyricization," stemming from debates in Romantic poetry and criticism and accelerated by the New Critics, was advanced in English departments through textbooks, handbooks, and curricula. The lyricization thesis would suggest that anyone who studied poetry in US postsecondary schooling since the mid-twentieth century, including the poets in my dissertation, was exposed to lyric reading practices. The historical poetics analysis of lyric reading sheds light on the critical and aesthetic investments of my poets, as well as the norms against which they bridled.

However, a difficulty in bringing the methods of historical poetics to bear on identity poetics rests with the periodization of lyricization. It is not a coincidence that the lyricization thesis originated in nineteenth-century poetry studies, even if the scholarship now exerts influence in other time periods. In the nineteenth century lyricization was not consolidated as a hegemonic hermeneutics; the era overflowed with modes and methods by which to write and read (and not read) verse otherwise than lyric reading dictated, though they also butted up against incipient lyricization. As the twentieth century got underway, the expansion of higher education, where forms of lyric reading early took hold, overturned this state of plenitude; students were taught that the ideal poem depicted a "dramatic" situation in which a speaker must be discerned,

⁴⁵ See fn. 10 from the Preface. The account of historical poetics below borrows heavily from the work cited there. In addition to this work, see Kappeler, "Constructing Walt Whitman: Literary History and Histories of Rhythm," in Glaser and Culler, *Critical Rhythm*, 128–50.

that poetry facilitated a one-to-one connection between poet and reader which allowed them to “meet” across any distance of time and social circumstance, that poems were where subjectivity and personality could be most purely expressed and addressed, and other such ideas. By the mid-century it was hard to remember there had been other ways of reading verse. And when recalled, they were dismissed out of hand as strange, sentimental, unliterary. As such, historical poetics quite sensibly coalesces from study of a prior moment in literary history. Yet a major consequence has been the inability to imagine the relevance of historical poetics for the late twentieth century, when lyric reading had ground out of existence other modes of reading and writing.

An insight of my dissertation is that contemporary poets of color and multiethnic poets have shown a great deal more self-consciousness and self-awareness of this state of affairs than might be expected based on the view from the nineteenth century. This does not mean they have escaped lyricization, nor should their interest be reduced to the degree to which they resisted the lyric and lyric reading. Such a view makes heroes of poets, going so far perhaps as to lyricize them out of their time. And more than their self-consciousness and self-awareness, only natural for poets keenly attentive to discursive and metadiscursive registers, these poets often seem to draw on modes and methods of reading athwart the protocols of lyric reading, almost reminiscent of the plenitude of the nineteenth century and before. To my mind, it is unclear from where these modes and methods derive. It may be that lyric reading hegemony circulates less comprehensively and reliably than thought; that poets continue to reinterpret its principles, unaware how Cleanth Brooks or John Crowe Ransom or tenure committees might cluck at them, or not caring. It may also be—though this dissertation strenuously criticizes the neo-racial

romanticism often undergirding such claims—that poets outside the white mainstream receive, innovate, and maintain literary practices that run counter to the norm.

It is in this and other respects that I turn to the emerging field of multiethnic poetry studies. Not organized in practice or theorization like historical poetics, scholars such as Timothy Yu, Anthony Reed, Dorothy Wang, Evie Shockley, and Urayoán Noel nonetheless form a group of sorts in contemporary poetry studies, working at the intersection of US poetry and critical race and ethnic studies.⁴⁶ These scholars bring overdue attention to the history, range, and complexity of Puerto Rican, Asian American, and Black poetics, and by extension to multiethnic American poetry writ large. Their incisive analysis of institutional politics and aesthetics also highlights how and why poets of color (and poetry critics of color) remain overlooked and underappreciated in poetry studies. Their work provides the foundation for any multiethnic poetry studies deserving of the name.

Within this sampling of scholarship there is, of course, plenty of disagreement over issues close to the heart of my dissertation. I follow all these scholars in attending to the aesthetic complexity of poetry that tends to be mined for social and historical data or simply dismissed. I insist on close reading, despite the premises of that method no longer holding water, because as much as I would like to write straightforward literary history (whatever that means) identity poetics first needs to be treated as if it were more than materials for a history. Yet the privilege accorded experimental, avant-garde poetry in much multiethnic poetry criticism also seems to yield too much to prevailing standards and tastes. Defying conventional poetry criticism in

⁴⁶ See Yu, *Race*; Reed, *Freedom*; Wang, *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014); Shockley, *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011); Noel, *In Visible Movement: Nuyorican Poetry from the Sixties to Slam* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014).

crucial respects, a penchant for the innovative still tends to uphold normative and distorting value judgments and aesthetic categories. Moreover, difference of opinion and emphasis exists in this field even as to the value of social and historical approaches. Some prefer to focus on the poetry, wary of the implication of social history by another name, while others foreground history, arguing that the social and political life of aesthetics is a primary concern. Few of these studies, however, engage archives to the extent I think necessary for robust new historical accounts of the contemporary period. Indeed, my own archival research reveals that the relation of social to literary history may appear overpowering only because scholarship that treats multiethnic American poetry as epiphenomenal to social movements has been so misleading, if not downright wrong. A close inspection of the historical record indicates that many poets of color of previous generations already self-consciously address the respective roles of aesthetics and politics in their work; their overlap was not unfortunate or accidental but motivated. Archival scholarship lets one see through recent debates to deal with poetry that is already manifestly, confidently social in outlook, presentation, and intent.

All this is to say, multiethnic poetry studies is a hermeneutically sophisticated and politically savvy field still in formation. The long aftermath of the cultural nationalist movements in American history demands relational analysis. The structuring effects of race and ethnicity in the project of US nationhood mean whiteness, rather than acting as a master sign, is really the remainder of a brutal social calculus, defined by contrast to the life that goes on before and beside empire and capital. The fifties and sixties cultural nationalist movements, their aesthetic achievements, and the networks and institutions they established should be understood in relation to each other, as coordinated responses to this social calculus. And this too is what multiethnic American poetry, one of the legacies of cultural nationalism, must signify as an object of study,

if it would signify anything at all besides an ex post facto, canon-expanding category: a framework for recognizing verse practices maintained and innovated in and despite the culture of capital and its social calculus of race and ethnicity. This is why I insist on reading African American, Puerto Rican, and Jewish American poetry relationally. Other literary groupings could have been chosen. However, these let me address several levels and forms of racialization, marginalization, and cultural capital formation. I aim not to compare them, but to see how each developed under similar conditions of academicization. In this way, I intend to model the potential I see in multiethnic poetry studies.

Bringing these strands of poetry studies together, my approach in this dissertation combines literary analysis and literary, social, and institutional history. I close read poems and scholarly writing, drawing on an archive of small press and ephemeral publications, letters, and several interviews I conducted to situate texts in historical and aesthetic context. My interest is not contextualization for its own sake. I am interested in how literary texts refract and influence the social worlds that structure them; there is no other way to assess the impact of literary texts. To this end, I read literary texts alongside macro-narratives, while social and institutional history inform my textual analysis. In short, I tie discursive strategies to struggles in the field of cultural production, to their meta- and extra-discursive conditions of possibility. Instead of reflecting the social worlds which structure them, literary texts, in this account, refract these worlds and structure them in turn.

However, because I am not a sociologist (literary or otherwise) I am not equipped to assess struggles in the field of cultural production in the ways pioneered by Pierre Bourdieu,

Pascale Casanova, John Guillory, and James F. English.⁴⁷ While I draw on this scholarship at every turn, my own path has been biographical criticism. The ability to show, in slices of life narrative, the conditions under which poets and publishers think, write, and win or lose prestige is an affordance of biographical criticism. What I lack in breadth and scale of analysis, I try to make up for in thick description of scene and character.

Chapter Summaries

No single poet, school, region, or group invented identity poetics. To trace its emergence and consolidation and overturn familiar narratives about both US multiethnic poetry and academicization, then, requires a panoramic approach. *Becoming Academic* is divided into four chapters, each in their way spanning from 1968 to 2008. The first chapter lays out the historical arc of the period, surveying the major cognitive and structural changes to which it gave rise, while the remaining three follow the development of identity poetics in African American, Puerto Rican, and Jewish American poetry and poetics, respectively, across the forty-year span. The latter three chapters, the core of my dissertation, treat identity poetics as both cause and effect of the shift of US poetry's center of gravity from newspapers, "little" magazines, commercial publishing, and communal arts and bohemian spaces into universities. Generally speaking, they begin with rise of identity knowledge programs and their spread to other humanities fields and disciplines, before analyzing a chronological series of literary texts written in full awareness that a growing proportion of journals, presses, prizes, fellowships, and jobs for

⁴⁷ See Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); *The Rules of Art*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996); Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004); Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005).

poets were to be found in higher education. In each chapter, I show how identity poetics became a unique and privileged means for poets (increasingly, regardless of social identity) to accrue academic recognition and legibility in the university. Overall, I aim to uncover the active role played by African American, Puerto Rican, and Jewish American poets and publishers in the university field in remaking US literature in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

To get more specific, Chapter 1, “What Was Identity Poetics?” traces transformations in the US poetry world from the turn of the twentieth century, through the student rebellions and the rise of academic identity knowledges, to the global financial crisis. I argue that the academicization of American poetry results from structural changes in US literary, national, and economic life—the decline of periodical culture, book industry conglomeration, and postwar expansion of higher education, all related to the postwar decline of industry and manufacturing—over which individual poets had almost no control. I show how key impasses and debates in recent US poetics stem from an inability to perceive this history, as well as a desire, perhaps understandable, to blame specific poets, styles, movements, even institutions for the effects of structural changes.

Chapter 2, “Toward an Academic History of Post-Black Aesthetic Poetry,” tracks a series of engagements around cultural nationalism between poets, scholars, and publishers during and after the Black Arts Movement. These engagements set the stage for a “post-black-aesthetic” poetics, to borrow Evie Shockley’s term, heavily indebted to academic knowledge regimes and now broadly influential. The chapter surfaces tensions and dialogue between Black poetics and the production of scholarly knowledge about African American poetry. It shows how Sarah Webster Fabio’s neglected contribution to Black studies and the creation of the academic journal *Callaloo* raised fundamental questions about the frames of reference that structure Black poetics,

questions which Shockley, Nathaniel Mackey, and C. S. Giscombe engage in their poetry, scholarship, and editorial efforts from the eighties onward.

Chapter 3, “Schooling Puertorriqueñidad,” explores exchanges and cleavages between Puerto Rican poetry and the US academy. The chapter charts the emergence of a Puerto Rican identity poetics fashioned from engagement with Puerto Rican studies, sociology, and anthropology. This poetics turns Puertoricanness (*Puertorriqueñidad*) into a form of “transcultural capital,” as Israel Reyes calls it, and at the same time creates divides in Puerto Rican poets’ professional and artistic lives. Beginning with Miguel Algarín and Piri Thomas, whose ambivalent relationships to the academy are deemed exemplary, the chapter surveys how poems, collections, and chapbooks by Victor Hernández Cruz, Judith Ortiz Cofer, and Aracelis Girmay, alongside Nicolás Kanellos’s academic journal *Revista Chicano-Riqueña*, attempt to bridge scholarly debates and creative endeavors.

Chapter 4, “The Jewish Studies Inheritance,” turns to modes of ethnic-religious identification that developed in Jewish American poetry via identity knowledges. The breakdown of mimetic self-fashioning among American Jews, documented by historian Haym Soloveitchik, prompted poets in the postwar era to search for new ways to claim and authenticate their Jewishness. The rise of Jewish studies offered scholarly knowledge as a means to do just that. The chapter surveys how David Meltzer’s magazine *Tree* and Jerome Rothenberg’s *A Big Jewish Book*, as well as poems and prose by Benjamin Hollander and Nomi Stone, and in Marc Dworkin’s magazine *Shirim*, use Jewish studies scholarship as material to fashion discursive “Jewishness.”

Finally, the Preface, which might justly have been placed at the end of my dissertation, sets out the premises of this literary history and my role and practice as a literary critic. In the

Preface, I state that commodity fetishism, the most visible manifestation of bourgeois property relations and law and their veiling of social relations, veils also subjectivity's self-relation. As a result, all concepts of the own—like self, subject, and identity—hold out a prospect of direct access they actually deny. The only way to approach the singular, or the one, is to retrace the mis-education of consciousness. Following Gillian Rose, I claim that Marx's critique of political economy leaves unelaborated a critique of the culture of capitalism without which the mis-education of consciousness will appear as its education. I propose this literary history as a contribution to that critique.

I would like to add that the title of my Preface is not meant to be clever. This is so despite the unexplained echo of Kierkegaard, and despite the perhaps not immediately apparent significance of the terms “unscientific” and “autobiographical.” The Preface is unscientific because it states what can only be argued and shown. My density of expression there reflects the condensation of arguments, debates, and theorization alluded to in the footnotes. As a literary critic, I am ill-equipped to argue better what philosophers, economists, and social theorists have about bourgeois property relations and law, commodity production, and the education of consciousness. Indeed, my capacities as a literary critic also point to the significance of term “autobiographical.” Keenly aware of the very denial of access to subjectivity I posit, I am interested instead in the conditions that make possible the authorship of *Becoming Academic*. In this regard, I try to describe the work a literary critic might do, under which constraints, and toward what ends. I conclude that a literary critic might set herself the task, in all humility, of thinking the absolute, its actuality, by way of a manifold mind educated in the culture of capital; neck-deep, if you will, in its dangers and compromises. An unstated implication of this

conclusion is that the conditions of the authorship are to be found in the history it unfolds. This, too, is why the Preface might justly have been placed at the end.

Outro

“Crises,” Cedric Robinson has observed, “incur a collective response which is the accumulation and emanation of individual biographies.”⁴⁸ Identity poetics did not result from a political crisis, at least not directly. Yet there is no question that three generations of US poets have faced a crisis of vocation: how to be a poet while making a living? A glance at William Charvat’s 1968 classic *The Profession of Authorship in America* reveals this crisis is the author’s inheritance as a modern professional. What the research university and the regimes of the knowledge economy did after the sixties was to introduce, on a scale novel for its extent, a way to square career and vocation. They would be squared in the form of academic positions, ranging from tenured professor to director of a university press. Still, submission to the university patronage system was not simple, nor did it happen all at once. The transformation of US poetry progressed in leaps and jerks, in punctuated equilibrium, attended at every step by anxiety, frustration, doubt, and hope. To tell the story of identity poetics is, indeed, to narrate “a collective response which is the accumulation and emanation of individual biographies.” History is not alone the effect of systems and structures. It is driven by personalities—characters, we say colloquially—and by freak and chance and missed alternative. And in the end, we can tell only what the archives will support. The archives we discover, and those we create.

⁴⁸ Cedric J. Robinson, *The Terms of Order: Political Science and the Myth of Leadership* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980), 257n2.

Chapter 1

What Was Identity Poetics?

“Your poetry?” the man seemed a bit surprised. “I thought maybe you were a bunch of professors.”

Charles laughed. “I’m sure we sound like that, but we’re not—a bunch of professors. Some of us teach... but...”

—Douglas Messerli

In this chapter, I follow transformations in the US poetry world from the turn of the twentieth century, through the student rebellions and the rise of academic identity knowledges, to the global financial crisis. I argue that the academicization of American poetry results from structural changes in US literary and national life—the decline of periodical culture, book industry conglomeration, and postwar expansion of higher education—over which individual poets had essentially no control. Therefore, blaming poets for “becoming academic,” as has been fashionable since the mid-twentieth century, is at best a waste of breath and energy and at worst a dangerous distraction. These structural changes, in turn, are related to compromises of US economic policy in the postwar era, which accelerated trends away from industry and

Douglas Messerli, “Nine Nights in New York,” *My Year 2005: Terrifying Times* (Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2006), 112.

manufacturing toward a technocratic, service-based, and consumption-oriented macroeconomy. I discuss this macroeconomic transformation at the end of the chapter.

There are two departures from the main historical narrative in this chapter. I start the chapter with a return to the debate over identity poetics from the Introduction. In the twenty-first century the debate has reached an impasse, I observe, with proponents and detractors both brought up short by its received terms and parameters. The history that follows should point a way out of this impasse by revising what is thought about the origins of identity poetics. Midway through, too, I pause to discuss the continuing fallout of Romantic theories and debates in recent American poetics. It is only by recognizing the latent Romanticism of poets and critics left and right that one can understand a widespread inability to conceive the real dimensions of change in the world of late-twentieth-century poetry.

Beyond Dismissal and Affirmation

As discussed in my Introduction, American literati began in the nineties to hold their nose at something called identity poetics. It was a mode or movement, the claim ran, which smuggled social categories into poetry through special pleading; it was ethnography, sociology, public policy dissembled as poetry. A poetics of representation gone off the deep end. Aesthetically speaking, identity poetics was said to foreground and explore the poet's (race/gender/class) identity in first-person, autobiographical verse. Among others, literary critics Helen Vendler and Marjorie Perloff have recently emerged as representatives of this critique. In her review of Rita Dove's *Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (2011), edited by a Black poet and including many poets of color, Vendler asked whether some were not "included . . . for

their representative themes rather than their style.”¹ Given a choice between more white, modernist showmanship à la Wallace Stevens or a touch of Chicana poetics by way of Lorna Dee Cervantes, Vendler was unambiguously for the former. Despite being a world apart in terms of taste and favored poets, Perloff sounds strikingly similar. “Identity politics,” she says, merely expanded “the poet’s ostensible subject.” Now “we have Latina poetry, Asian American poetry, queer poetry, the poetry of the disabled, and so on.”² Subject, speaker, and theme were more important than innovation in this new-fangled poetry, more important than style or substance.

Around the same time that identity poetics came under scrutiny in these quarters, it was elsewhere affirmed. In the first place it was more complex than its critics granted. But more than this, complexity, as an uninterrogated criterion of aesthetic value, overlooked the extra-aesthetic conditions under which poetry gets written. While she does not use the term, Cathy Park Hong, in her widely read polemic “Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde” (2014), responds to critics of identity poetics like Perloff. Against the racist vapidness of conceptual poetry and related white-bread experimentalism, Hong calls for renewed attention to innovative poetry that keeps voice and subject in play rather than jettisoning them as “bourgeois niceties.”³ For voice and subject have been tools that the wretched of the earth used to “alter conditions forged in

¹ Helen Vendler, “Are These the Poems to Remember?” *The New York Review of Books*, November 24, 2011, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2011/11/24/are-these-poems-remember/>.

² Marjorie Perloff, “Poetry on the Brink: Originality Is Overrated,” *Boston Review* 37, no. 3 (May/June 2012): 60.

³ If Hong’s lack of explicit reference to identity poetics seems to stretch the connection, consider the following remarks by Danielle Pafunda on one of Hong’s lesser-known essays: “Hong responds to Marjorie Perloff’s rejection of identity poetics by insisting that ‘poets [of color] who acknowledge language’s artifice and unsettle race via formal deconstruction [. . .] have provided their own “lively reaction,” creating a vanguard of new formal and interactive possibilities.’ Poets may be stuck with the master’s tools, but many apply them to unexpected ends.” See Pafunda, “Building Inheritance: Cathy Park Hong’s Social Engagement in the Speculative Age,” in *American Poets in the 21st Century: Poetics of Social Engagement*, ed. Claudia Rankine and Michael Dowdy (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2018), 202–3 (Pafunda’s brackets).

history.”⁴ Forms and approaches that appear retrograde in the perspective of literary history, dominated by modernist hankering after the “new” new thing, are transformed, *sub specie saeculorum*, into radical feints and sallies against empire and oppression. In Daniel Borzutzky’s memorable formulation, the poetry of identity stands in proud defiance of

UnitedStatesian avant-poetry’s subjectivity-masking, first-person denying, retro-1970s-we’re-not-so-into-narrative-and-emotions-because-they-are-subjectively-fabricated-phenomena-whose-conservativism-needs-to-be-combatted-with-revolutionary-anti-subjectivity-or anti-creative-“texts.”⁵

Knee-jerk dismissal of what appears non-innovative, just like the lemmings’ mad rush toward the faddish, ignores the *raison d’être* of innovation: the demand to be adequate to a changed moment. This is what identity poetics of all stripes offered and which Vendler’s modernist heavyweights and Perloff’s avant-gardes offer only fitfully, almost accidentally.

However, the dismissive and affirmative accounts of identity poetics both miss the larger picture. Identity poetics is more than a type of poetry; it is a situation that encompasses poets, critics, and cultural institutions. It is a mode of reading as much as a set of tropes and techniques. Hong’s and Borzutzky’s implicit imperative to outperform the darlings of the (white) canon return the conversation to craft and criticism, when what is urgently needed is history. Perloff wants less subjectivity, while Borzutzky wants more. Hong wants context; Vendler wants transcendence of context. Along with its theory-fied and dog-whistled equivalents, identity

⁴ Cathy Park Hong, “Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde,” *Lana Turner* 7 (2014): np, <https://arcade.stanford.edu/content/delusions-whiteness-avant-garde>.

⁵ Daniel Borzutzky, “Delusions of Progress,” Harriet Blog, *Poetry Foundation*, December 29, 2014, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2014/12/delusions-of-progress>.

poetics remains the one thing that requires no explanation, just a position for or against. My history aims to remedy this oversight. If I am successful, then poets and critics will recognize in their activity some of the key determinations of the last half-century of American poetry and poetics. They will better comprehend the stakes of the situation and their place—*our* place—within it, as readers and writers in an academicized, if not academic, world.

A Little History

Identity poetics refracts the academicization of US literary culture and the rise of identity knowledge programs in the wake of the student rebellions. These processes—from which identity poetics results and to which it contributes—form part of the material history of what Hortense Spillers called the “well-educated social subject,” and Christopher Newfield, the “professional middle classes.”⁶ As higher education expanded, prompted by Cold War research agendas and the shift toward a service- and consumption-based, post-Fordist economy, more poets than at any time past found in the university field a site where writing and thinking could be their vocation. In the post-sixties era, the ambiguous triumph of the student rebellions in the form of identity knowledges also opened the academy on an unprecedented scale to poets of color and multiethnic poets. In life and work poets responded to these epochal shifts, doing so in terms conditioned by those shifts. As they became teachers, critics, scholars, they wrote out of distrust, ambivalence, and embrace of these roles. But embourgeoised and professionalized, they could not shake their technocratic training. They lived a “double life,” as Evan Kindley put it,

⁶ Hortense J. Spillers, “*The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Post-Date*,” 1994, in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 432 and Christopher Newfield, *Ivy and Industry: Business and the Making of the American University, 1880–1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 11–13.

caught between the demands of art and administration.⁷ For poets of color and multiethnic poets, identity poetics was a means of squaring these different poles of the poet's existence. Yet the very notion of a double life, as I will show, stems from strains of Romanticism that remain a major obstacle to recognition of the situation of identity poetics. This latter-day Romanticism extends across ideological divides. It is not easily gotten over and even this history bears witness to that fact.

Already in 1964, Adrienne Rich took as cliché complaints about “how American culture stifles its artists with foundation grants and professorships, how we are all ‘condemned to endless promotion,’ tamed and emasculated by prosperity, inflation of reputations, writers’ conferences, the exigencies of careers, domesticity.”⁸ Such complaints were as cliché as their object. Going under as many names as there have been critics to kvetch, Charles Bernstein’s coinage two decades later has proved enduring: official verse culture. The ward, if not the product of the academy, official verse culture is what gets the stamp of approval in *The New Yorker* and *Poetry*, the trade and university presses, anthologies, classrooms, and award and academic job selections, all while “den[ying] the ideological nature of its practice.”⁹ Middle-class and middle-brow in sympathy, it “strategically incorporate tokens from competing poetry traditions.”¹⁰ In other words, official verse culture is the hegemony of literary professionalism.

⁷ Evan Kindley, *Poet-Critics and the Administrations of Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017), 15.

⁸ Adrienne Rich, “On Karl Shapiro’s *The Bourgeois Poet* (selections),” in *The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic: Eight Symposia*, ed. Anthony Ostroff (Boston: Little, Brown, 1964), 192.

⁹ Charles Bernstein, “The Academy in Peril: William Carlos Williams Meets the MLA,” 1984, in *Content’s Dream: Essays 1975–1984* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1986), 248.

¹⁰ Bernstein, “Academy,” 249.

Established by the sixties and still aggravating its critics in the eighties and since, that verse culture exists on the other side of a chasm from the one T. S. Eliot inhabited when he lamented the “disorganization” of the “modern literary system” in 1920.¹¹ Employed at Lloyds Bank himself, Eliot doubted if there was any way besides book reviewing to support oneself as a “man of letters.” Ten years Eliot’s junior, Louise Bogan (an exemplary man of letters, pronouns notwithstanding) is a case in point. “Her life consisted of literary work, reviewing and translating and serving on committees, none of it particularly lucrative,” Jed Rasula comments. “It was the literary life available to members of her generation, for whom academe was rarely in the cards.”¹² Clearly, this was not a world in which there were too many grants and professorships.

A change took place in the interwar period that bridges these divergent verse cultures. Modernist poet-critics were forced to reinvent themselves in the aftermath of the 1929 stock market crash, as Evan Kindley argues. “The wealthy patrons who had sustained modernist poetry during its first decade of efflorescence began to disappear,” he writes.¹³ When the Great Depression began to be ameliorated by welfare-state programs like the Works Progress Administration, poets saw an opportunity.¹⁴ Their assumption of the role of “administrators of culture” (Kindley’s term) is part of the prehistory of identity poetics. An aspect of this role-reversal was modernist poets’ reevaluation of their relation to the university field. Indeed, if the agonistic relationship between American poets and the academy goes back at least to Longfellow’s career at Harvard, modernism cemented the terms of that relationship as they exist

¹¹ T. S. Eliot, “A Brief Treatise on the Criticism of Poetry,” 1920, in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: The Perfect Critic, 1919–1926*, ed. Antony Cuda and Ronald Schuchard, (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 207.

¹² Jed Rasula, *The American Poetry Wax Museum: Reality Effects, 1940–1990* (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1996), 59.

¹³ Kindley, *Poet-Critics*, 73.

¹⁴ Kindley, *Poet-Critics*, 74.

almost unaltered today.¹⁵ It was no longer only cozily academic poets—even the academy’s discontents were becoming academic. Such is the legacy of what Langdon Hammer calls modernism’s Janus-face.

In the twenties and thirties, the New Critics used poetry to gain entrance to English departments in the American university system, and as a result paved “*poetry’s* way into the university too.”¹⁶ Faced with the hegemony of historical research, which had replaced philology and pedagogy as the discipline’s *modus operandi*, critics like John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Cleanth Brooks turned to poetry to make the case for the *sui generis* status of literature, as “distinct from . . . philosophy, politics, and history.”¹⁷ In the work of the New Critics, poems—read through the modernist lens of irony and difficulty—were the ideal testing ground for analysis of literary texts *qua* literature. Poetic language was considered the primary dimension of poetry by the New Critics, rusticating the study of genre and history and treating poems as discrete, almost invariably short textual objects. As criticism—the term that came to be applied to the close intricate reading of literary language—began to rival historical research for influence in the English department, poet-critics like Ransom and Tate found themselves in two worlds at once. Their modernist aesthetics undergirded both their academic success and creative practice. On one hand, the poet claimed privileged access to poetic language, the real object of literary study; and on the other, the critic defended poetry against the naiveté of writers without a critical (or modernist) consciousness. The trap of modernism’s Janus-face was set. The postwar heirs of modernism who aimed to go beyond the petty professionalism whose features Rich traced in

¹⁵ Alan Golding, “American Poet-Teachers and the Academy,” in *A Concise Companion to Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, ed. Stephen Fredman, (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005), 55.

¹⁶ Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 145–57 and Langdon Hammer, *Hart Crane and Allen Tate: Janus-Faced Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 28 (Hammer’s italics).

¹⁷ Graff, *Professing*, 121, 145.

1964, discovered that all the values, tricks, and conceits they had inherited were nurtured in the very field they were trying to quit.¹⁸ To be a better poet, perhaps being a poet at all, was to ensnare yourself in the university.

At the same moment the English department embraced poetry, the ways poets earned money and status outside the university changed. Book reviewing, deemed by Eliot “one of the most corrupting, degrading, and badly-paid means of livelihood that a writing man can ply,” however awful it was, required a periodical culture to sustain it.¹⁹ So did poetry publishing in newspapers and magazines. Reviewing and being reviewed, publishing poems and editing periodicals were vital sources of economic and cultural capital, fundamental to the profession of modern poetry. But the interwar and postwar years ushered in a transformation in poets’ relationship to newspapers and magazines.

Consider the case of New York City, the epicenter of US cultural capital. The flagship modernist biannual *The Dial*, edited by Scofield Thayer and Marianne Moore, folded there in 1929. This was followed by the folding of *The Century Magazine* in 1930, *Scribner’s Magazine* in 1939, *The Forum* in 1950, and *The American Mercury*’s mutation into a Nazi rag in 1953–55. As the immediate postwar years gave way to the sixties, the trend continued. Between 1960 and Bernstein’s coinage of “official verse culture” in 1984, many important and paying outlets for poetry would cease publication, including *The Menorah Journal*, *Masses & Mainstream*, *New World Writing*, *Evergreen Review*, *American Review*, and the *Saturday Review of Literature*. Major venues still existed, like *The New Yorker*, *Harper’s*, *The Nation*, *Commonweal*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*, but they were changing too. More than half the poems that have appeared to date in *The New Republic*, for instance, were published by 1960, just forty-three

¹⁸ Langdon Hammer, “Plath’s Lives,” *Representations* 75, no. 1 (Summer 2001): 82–83.

¹⁹ Eliot, “Brief,” 207.

years since the magazine's founding. From 1960 until the late seventies, poetry in *The New Republic* slowed to a trickle. Some publications, like *The Hudson Review* and *The Paris Review*, established in 1948 and 1953, respectively, acquired considerable prestige in these years. Others, like *The Partisan Review*, never regained their pre-sixties stature. And while new magazines and journals arose, like *New York Quarterly* in 1969, *Parnassus* in 1973, *Grand Street* in 1981, and *The New Criterion* in 1982, they were insufficient to fill the place of those that went under. These losses were mirrored by developments elsewhere, such as the folding of Marguerite Caetani's Rome-based *Botteghe Oscure* in 1960, the San Francisco-based *Ramparts* magazine in 1975, the *Transatlantic Review* in 1977, and the decision of the Iowa-based *Ladies' Home Journal* to stop publishing poems in 1961. American periodical culture would never be the same.

Momentous as was the change in periodical culture, it occurred against the backdrop of the better-known, even more dramatic conglomeration of literary book publishing. Beginning with the purchase of Random House by the Radio Corporation of America in 1965, "the sale or merger of [independent publishers] [became] a way of solving . . . an intractable set of financial problems" in the book industry.²⁰ "Conglomeration in the publishing industry," Dan Sinykin explains, "submitted publishers to greater commercial pressures and compelled more attention to the bottom line."²¹ No one to my knowledge has explored in depth the devastating impact of conglomeration on poetry publishing, but many then and since have alluded to the obvious consequences for a mode of writing that could not sell enough even to achieve midlist status, except under exceptional circumstances. Poetry, like certain kinds of literary fiction and political and social theory, was underwritten with profits made elsewhere. The study remains to be written

²⁰ John B. Thompson, *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century* (Malden, Mass.: Polity, 2010), 104, quoted in Dan N. Sinykin, "The Conglomerate Era: Publishing, Authorship, and Literary Form, 1965–2007," *Contemporary Literature* 58, no. 4 (Winter 2017): 470.

²¹ Sinykin, "Conglomerate," 462.

on the precise nature and extent of conglomeration's effect on the poetry world, but the effect could not have been negligible.

Compounded on one side by the downturn of book reviewing and poetry publishing in periodicals, and on the other by conglomeration's constriction of the mainstream book market, American poets in the sixties would have to find other ways to advance and support themselves. Enter the university.

Literary professionalization and changes in periodical culture coincided with an expansion of American higher education. Jay Wright, whose poem opened the Introduction, was among the generations that lived through the inception of the higher education boom of the postwar era. Born in Albuquerque, New Mexico in 1935 and raised in Southern California, he had attended the University of California, Berkeley on the G.I. Bill. He studied at Union Theological Seminary in New York City and earned a master's in comparative literature from Rutgers in 1966. In the fifties, when Wright started at Berkeley after army service and a short career as a minor league baseball player, college enrollments in the United States increased 49%. In the sixties, they increased 120%.²² The number of higher education institutions—two- and four-year, private and public—rose from 1,851 to 2,525, growing 36% in the span of two decades.²³ In addition to the G.I. Bill, which paid veterans' tuition and became upon its approval in 1944 the template for future veteran aid bills, the 1965 Higher Education Act (and subsequent reauthorizations) further expanded access to higher education. Meanwhile, Cold War battles fueled research funding in the sciences and humanities. Wright was educated in the era when

²² Thomas D. Snyder, "Higher Education," in *120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait*, ed. Thomas Snyder (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Center for Education Statistics, 1993), 66.

²³ U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics, Table 233, 1995.

higher education became “a truly *national*—not merely personal—benefit,” in the words of historian James Axtell.²⁴

As it did the rest of American culture, the expansion of higher education drew poets to the university. In 1957, Robert Frost proclaimed, “a thousand, two thousand, colleges, town and gown together in the little town that they make, give us the best audiences for poetry ever found in all this world.”²⁵ And indeed, college-based journals were resurgent during the downturn in poetry publishing in New York City.

Before the sixties there was no shortage of campus quarterlies (and bi- and triennials), but the status they began to assume outstripped anything in the past. Journals like *Sewanee Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *New Letters*, *Epoch*, and *Chicago Review*, founded between the turn of the century and the forties, were joined by *Massachusetts Review* in 1959, *Puerto del Sol* in 1960, *Michigan Quarterly Review* in 1962, *Field* in 1969, *The Iowa Review* in 1970, *AGNI* in 1972, *New England Review* in 1978, and *Conjunctions* in 1981. Started as a “little journal” in 1965, *Salmagundi*, for instance, moved its operations to Skidmore College in 1969. The fortunes of two famed journals also prove instructive. In 1935, Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks established *The Southern Review*; four years later, John Crowe Ransom established *The Kenyon Review*. The journals folded in 1942 and 1969, respectively, yet both were revived in this period—*Southern Review* in 1965 and *Kenyon Review* in 1979. Besides these journals were the ones that appeared as a result or in the spirit of the demands for Black

²⁴ James Axtell, *Wisdom’s Workshop: The Rise of the Modern University* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 326.

²⁵ Robert Frost, “Maturity No Object,” introduction to *New Poets of England and America*, ed. Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), 12, quoted in Golding, “American,” 64. In private correspondence, Frost griped and grimaced about the demands made on him by universities. See Mark Richardson, introduction to *Collected Prose of Robert Frost*, ed. Mark Richardson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), xxv.

and ethnic studies. *Calaloo*, founded by Tom Dent, Charles Rowell, and Jerry Ward in 1976, and *Revista Chicano-Riqueña/The Americas Review*, founded by Nicolás Kanellos and Luis Dávila in 1973, two prominent examples, are discussed here in Chapters 1 and 2. Others included *Obsidian* at the State University of New York, *Centro* at Hunter College's Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, *Confrontation* at Ohio University, *Aztlán* and *Amerasia Journal* at UCLA, and *Shofar* at Purdue University. Quincey Troupe, Karl Shapiro, Marilyn Hacker, Russell Leong, and Alvin Aubert were among the talented poets who helmed these ethnic studies– and English department–based journals.

All in all, the period witnessed tremendous growth and newfound respect for college-based periodicals. Ted Solotaroff, founder and editor of *New American Review*, observed in the mid-eighties that

the proliferation of graduate writing programs has meshed with the PhD programs to form the principal training ground of the literary and intellectual vocations in a culture that views literature as a rarely profitable, occasionally glamorous, and mostly dubious form of merchandise.²⁶

For poets, unlike fiction writers, NYC ceased to be the center of economic life already in the sixties, replaced by the university.

A Way Into the University

²⁶ Ted Solotaroff, "The Literary Campus and the Person of Letters," 1986, in *The Literary Community: Selected Essays, 1967–2007* (Riverdale-on-Hudson, N.Y.: Sheep Meadow Press, 2008), 265–66.

Jay Wright's example again provides a counterweight to the art-academy antagonism. Five years after the publication of "The Death of an Unfamiliar Sister," Wright read at the June 1977 Modern Language Association "Afro-American Literature" seminar at Yale. He participated not as an interloper or outcast from the academic world. His academic training and contacts meant he belonged at that seminar, organized by Dexter Fisher and Robert Stepto, whose landmark edited collection *Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction* (1979) resulted from it. He was not alone. There at the site of a "propitious event in the institutional history of the humanities," as Ronald Judy describes it, where "the agendas of Afro-American studies and poststructuralist critical theory meet" and initiate a rethinking of "American cultural history," Wright was joined by Sherley Anne Williams, Michael Harper, and Amiri Baraka.²⁷ Variousy embraced by and ambivalent about predominantly white institutions (PWIs) in their careers, these poets experienced many of the same "Janus-faced" vexations as, say, Robert Lowell or Sylvia Plath. Baraka, a Howard University dropout, for instance, never lost the animosity to higher education that ended up tying him to it. Yet their trajectories also differ. Two years after Wright left Rutgers, having completed all but his dissertation, a series of events unfolded which cleaves the history of postwar poetry, events without which the 1977 seminar would not have been possible: the student rebellions.

A global phenomenon, the 1968 student rebellions broke forth out of anger at imperialist wars, state repression, racism, environmental disaster, and the tyrannies of the sex/gender system. Students the world over occupied government and academic buildings and took to the streets with working-class groups to strike and protest. The most famous rebellions occurred in

²⁷ Ronald A. T. Judy, *(Dis)Forming the American Canon: African-Arabic Slave Narratives and the Vernacular* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 1, 2.

May 1968 in France, where the economy was brought to a standstill, but protests spanned from Brazil to Japan to the Soviet Union.

In the United States, the student rebellions swept coast to coast, drawing on and extending the spirit of the civil rights, anti-war, free speech, and cultural nationalist movements. Triggers included the race riots that took place in cities like Detroit, Milwaukee, and Newark the previous summer, growing outrage over the Vietnam War, and the Orangeburg massacre, when police in February 1968 killed two college students and a high school student at a protest on the South Carolina State University campus. As 1968 and the 1968–69 school year unfolded, strikes, marches, takeovers, bombings, and arson visited American campuses. At Columbia, Cornell, and the University of Chicago, Southern University and Howard, San Francisco State College (now University) and the University of California (UC) school system, the City University of New York (CUNY) school system, and more, students demanded an end to racism, patriarchy, imperialism while fighting to transform their universities. Through the battle din, administrators heard at least one demand loud and clear. “Black students demanded a role in the definition and production of scholarly knowledge,” historian Martha Biondi observes, an insight that applies to many groups in these struggles.²⁸ As a result of the student rebellions, the first programs in Black studies, Asian American studies, Native American studies, Puerto Rican studies, and Chicano studies were established on American campuses. Women’s, Jewish, and LGBT studies would follow in the coming years, inspired by the same activist and institutional energies. These “identity knowledge” programs, as Robyn Wiegman refers to them, played a critical but overlooked role in the history of American poetics.

²⁸ Martha Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 2.

Forged together in the crucible of the students rebellions, the several different identity knowledges programs shared outlooks and agendas. Student, faculty, and community demand for Black, ethnic, and women's studies programs took seriously the public, research, and liberal arts universities' professed openness and emphasis on training in national liberal culture. Campus activists had heard administrative talking-points. They charged PWIs, as well as minority serving institutions (MSIs), with creating and expanding policies, programs, and fields of study aimed at and overseen by historically underrepresented groups. They sought to supplement and sometimes replace training in national liberal culture with the study of non-hegemonic cultures, inter- and intranational history, and colonial and imperial legacies. Activists were eventually joined (and coopted) by administrations and corporate and government university supporters, who came to feel that liberal antiracism fit the demands of capitalism and a reconsolidated national liberal culture.²⁹ The innovation of identity knowledges gave rise in turn to a new American poetics.

As criticism had been poetry's way into the university, identity knowledges now ushered a new poetics into American campuses. Or as in the earlier case: something that went under the name "poetry" was created there. Multiethnic poets and publishers pioneered this poetics, which was likewise predicated on new forms of engagement with higher education. The creation of identity knowledge departments, centers, journals, presses, and archives increased historically underrepresented groups' claims and access to the university. There were expanded opportunities for students, professors, publishers, and administrators. Not that the increased access was

²⁹ Noliwe M. Rooks, *White Money/Black Power: The Surprising History of African American Studies and the Crisis of Race in Higher Education* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006); Roderick A. Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Fabio Rojas, *From Black Power to Black Studies: How a Radical Social Movement Became an Academic Discipline* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007); Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

uniformly embraced. “Evolution is not,” Puerto Rican–Dominican poet Sandra María Esteves warned in her 1980 collection *Yerba Buena*, “a clenched fist patch / or an altar to Chango / or a proposal to the Ford Foundation.”³⁰ The way forward wasn’t “five credits in indigenous studies.” Nor was it SEEK, Esteves said, the CUNY school system’s educational outreach program, where Adrienne Rich and June Jordan taught the decade before.³¹ Esteves’s concern, explains Urayoán Noel, is that these forms of “institutionalization” emerged from “a politics based on the quest for status, on easily commodified countercultural symbols.”³² But just as earlier generations of poets gravitated to the university, so did many post-sixties poets of color, and poets outside the white mainstream, Esteves’s reservations notwithstanding. And in this way, the poet-scholar became a paradigm for a creative life lived inside the ivory tower.

The figure of the poet-scholar is old, predating the invention of modern poetry. Rudolf Pfeiffer’s two-volume *History of Classical Scholarship* (1968–76), for example, credits poets with founding the discipline of scholarship, at its root “the art of understanding, explaining, and restoring the literary tradition.”³³ Scholarship, he explains, “originated . . . through the efforts of poets to preserve and use their literary tradition.” Tracing the history of this approach, Pfeiffer also traces an ideology that professed the unity of poetry and scholarship. This scholarly ideology, as we might call it, tracks from the collectors and reciters of Homer through the Greek scholar-poets to Petrarch and modern scholars, like Scaliger, Wulf, and Winckelmann, whose

³⁰ Sandra María Esteves, “Staring into the eye of truth,” in *Yerba Buena: dibujos y poemas* (Greenfield Center, N.Y.: Greenfield Review Press, 1980), 45, ll. 43, 45–47.

³¹ Esteves, “Staring,” 45, ll. 57, 60 and Adrienne Rich, “Teaching Language in Open Admissions,” 1972, in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966–1978* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), 55.

³² Urayoán Noel, *In Visible Movement: Nuyorican Poetry from the Sixties to Slam* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 78.

³³ Rudolf Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship from the Beginnings to the End of the Hellenistic Age* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 3.

studies of classical poetry laid the foundation for their research achievements. That tradition ends in the nineteenth century when “historicism and realism” displace humanism as the “driving force” of scholarship.³⁴ But a related tradition emerges almost simultaneously in the Anglophone world. In the latter half of the eighteenth century English literature is “invented” (under the title *Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*) in the university, a process that helps give rise to the modern poet.³⁵ The formalization of canons, literary modes, and critical and creative values, within a system of state-backed education and literacy, supplied Anglophone poets with a vernacular literary tradition to “preserve and use,” much as the poets discussed by Pfeiffer had. While the Scholarly ideology was predicated on belief in the unity of poetry and scholarship, Robert Crawford shows that the modern university created a poet torn between erudition and wildness, learning and inspiration.³⁶ Romantic influence was too widespread to be evaded. That division in the modern poet’s soul engendered an august lineage of waffling over academicization down to Pound and Eliot. “Poets at the blackboard,” Hugh Kenner called them.³⁷

In short, poets coming through the identity knowledge programs adopted an ancient paradigm, entwined with but distinct from the professionalism of postwar poetry. Unlike the reluctant poet-teachers and would-be poet-critics of modernism and its aftermath, multiethnic poets who entered the university under the auspices of these programs were molded by research protocols that impinged on their sense of self and history. For poets whose claimed identity

³⁴ Rudolf Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship from 1300 to 1850* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 190.

³⁵ Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 16–44.

³⁶ Robert Crawford, *The Modern Poet: Poetry, Academia, and Knowledge since the 1750s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1–29.

³⁷ Hugh Kenner, “Poets at the Blackboard,” in *Ezra Pound & William Carlos Williams: The University of Pennsylvania Conference Papers*, ed. Daniel Hoffman (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 3–13, quoted in Gail McDonald, *Learning to Be Modern: Pound, Eliot, and the American University* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), vii.

aligned with their field of study, they were dealing with traditions of scholarship sometimes only recently helmed by the group in question, frequently loaded with the prejudices of problem research—the Negro and Jewish Questions, the Porto Rican Problem, and the like. Here was a chance to control narratives that had controlled them. Poets of color, in particular, were also still overlooked for awards, mainstream publications, and the growing crop of creative writing jobs. It was the perfect recipe for multiple of generation of poets comparatively unambivalent about academic trappings and success. The Scholarly ideology may no longer have had legs, but reconciliation with the academy seemed urgent. They had found some space there; they were not going to relinquish it over qualms about the creative spirit.

Born in the thirties and early forties, Wright and Baraka, Sherley Anne Williams and Michael Harper, the Yale conference participants, lived through and influenced this process. They acted as examples for the generations that followed them, who were the leaders or inheritors of the student rebellions and their achievements. These subsequent generations, for whom those achievements comprised part of the DNA of contemporary poetry, so to speak, have had difficulty recognizing exactly what they gained from their forebears and continue to develop.

Eighteen in the spring of 1968 and enrolled at Harvard, Charles Bernstein was too young to influence developments, but old enough to register the changes when he looked back. In a letter penned three months before the Afro-American Literature seminar at Yale, Bernstein suggested a special issue topic for *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* (1978–81), the avant-garde literary magazine he was planning with Bruce Andrews. “i’m . . . suggesting we look into various modes that for reasons of preserving their own political/sexual/ethnic integrity & tradition have not entered into the ‘mainstream’ (a choice wch has generally meant becoming academic,

incidentally),” he wrote.³⁸ As indicated by later writing, like the essay on official verse culture discussed above, Bernstein is wary of the professionalization that “becoming academic” involves. He stresses he is “not, lest there be concern, suggesting we print bad poetry or anything that smacks of quota liberalism.” Still, there was something about this poetry which intrigued him and his soon-to-be fellow Language writers, Andrews and Ron Silliman. Timothy Yu argues that American avant-gardes underwent “ethnicization” in the post-sixties era. They had seen “how race produces and circumscribes communities” and come to regard “aesthetic innovations . . . as a means of articulating the distinctive social position of an artistic group,” even a white male one like the Language writers.³⁹ In that case, there was much to be learned from the poetry of the white male avant-garde’s perpetual Others.

Yet Bernstein’s captivation by the determinations of race, gender, and ethnicity, the press and power of antagonism and alienation, cause him to overlook the obvious: academicization was “incidental” for no one at that time, least of all marginalized and minoritized poets. Transformations in American literary culture principally affected them since they had less purchase on mainstream US poe-biz than their white male counterparts. More important, those poets “becoming academic” were trying to invent rather than preserve a tradition, sometimes despite their own perception of things.

Compromising Poetry

³⁸ Bernstein to Ron Silliman and Bruce Andrews, March 4, 1977, in *The Language Letters: Selected 1970s Correspondence of Bruce Andrews, Charles Bernstein, and Ron Silliman*, ed. Matthew Hofer and Michael Golston (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2019), 212.

³⁹ Timothy Yu, *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry since 1965* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 162, 161.

The world that Eliot knew, where poets made out on the drudgery of book reviewing, had changed dramatically by the time Bernstein gave a new name to a decades-old complaint. The academicization of American poetry, which at least William Carlos Williams blamed on Eliot, had changed what it meant to be a poet and the means of advancement that allowed one to succeed.⁴⁰ But the critique of official verse culture, the trap of modernism's Janus-face, and even Eliot's vision of the "man of letters'" servitude to print share an origin in modern poetry's founding statements. Before explaining

Before poets worried about condemnation to "endless promotion," Romantic ideology envisioned poetry uncorrupted by the world, professional or otherwise.⁴¹ The blueprint for this ideology comes down from German Romanticism by way of British Romantic aesthetics and poetry. For Friedrich Schlegel, echt German Romantic, poetry (*Poesie*) was the essence of the verbal arts, not a mode of writing. It emanated from "the primeval poetry without which there would be no poetry of words."⁴² As Schlegel writes in the preface to *Dialogue on Poetry* (1800), "poetry bursts forth spontaneously from the invisible primordial power of mankind." Three decades later in England, John Stuart Mill carried forward this line of thought in the essay "What Is Poetry?" opining that "poetry is either nothing, or it is the better part of all art whatever, and of real life too."⁴³ In defining this "better part" of art and life, Mill distinguished poetry and eloquence: "Poetry is the natural fruit of solitude and meditation; eloquence, of intercourse with the world."⁴⁴ More than just language in its essence, approaching the primordial power of "the

⁴⁰ William Carlos Williams, *Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1951), 146.

⁴¹ Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 13.

⁴² Friedrich Schlegel, *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms*, trans. Ernst Behler and Roman Struc (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1968), 54.

⁴³ John Stuart Mill, "What Is Poetry?" 1833, in *Essays on Poetry*, ed. F. Parvin Sharpless (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1976), 5.

⁴⁴ Mill, "What," 13.

earth,” as Schlegel saw it, for Mill poetry expressed human interiority. Poetry is encountered as if by accident, being only incidentally related to the social world. In Mill’s arresting metaphor, poetry is “overheard,” as if sung by a prisoner in a neighboring cell. Seven years later, a posthumous essay by Shelley was published which encapsulated the aesthetic ideology that Schlegel, Mill, and the Romantic poets together created and enshrined. In “A Defense of Poetry,” Shelley argued that poetry was an innate, natural faculty, expressive of the human “imagination” at all times and in all places regardless of social context. “A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth.”⁴⁵ Prior to every possible “instrument” and object of contemplation, the inner “principle” of poetry exceeds poets in their particular—that is, social, economic, psychic—determinations. Their “words,” Shelley says, “express what they understand not.”⁴⁶ For Schlegel, Mill, and Shelley, the Romantic poem aims at an unencumbered, natural unselfconsciousness.⁴⁷

Twentieth-century American poetry is a far cry from textbook Romanticism. Aspects of Romantic ideology, however, persist to the present. “The Romantic position,” writes Jerome McGann, is “that poetry by its nature can transcend the conflicts and transiences” of its context.⁴⁸ Unencumbered by “partisan, didactic, or doctrinal matters,” and guilelessly at ease in a world of words, poetry outlasts its time. While these formulations would be rejected today by poets of a wide range of aesthetic attitudes, the gravitation of American poets to the university since World

⁴⁵ Percy Bysshe Shelley, “A Defense of Poetry,” in *Shelley’s Critical Prose*, ed. Bruce R. McElderry, Jr. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), 10.

⁴⁶ Shelley, “Defense,” 35–36.

⁴⁷ The Romantic desire for natural unselfconsciousness is entwined with the modern trope of the poet caught between barbarism and civilization, alternating between allegiance with the “primitive” or primal creative spirit and erudition, traced by Robert Crawford in *The Modern Poet*. Crawford helpfully underlines the importance for this tradition of the poems of Ossian, presented in the eighteenth century as epics of the medieval Gaelic past, the model for several generations of the folk-primitive in modern poetry. He leaves untouched the theoretical framework discussed above.

⁴⁸ McGann, *Romantic*, 69.

War II has elicited responses that echo the Romantic position. Where the Romantics wanted a poetry that could “transcend a corrupting appropriation by ‘the world’ of politics and money,” poets and critics from across numerous aesthetic divides since the turn of the twentieth century have wanted a poetry that transcends the halls of academe.⁴⁹ The Romantic position was translated into hatred of the academic world.

Hatred of the academic world has changed little about American poetry’s professional predicament but has made its own history hard to relate. The “art-academy antagonism,” to borrow Peter Cole’s phrase, runs deep.⁵⁰ Poets and critics still cling to the belief that poetry transcends the world of petty professionalism that the university exemplifies. This remains true even where transcendence is frowned upon, replaced by notions of radical, outsider, innovative, liberatory, and alternative poetics. These, too, dissemble the same dilemma: how the way of the world can be overcome while being part of it. Listen to Michael Dowdy’s promotional gusto in his introduction to the most recent volume of *American Poets in the 21st Century*: “These poets take readers into the world, beyond academic conversations, by providing unique ways to apprehend, resist, and survive the disasters of the twenty-first century and to imagine emancipatory otherworlds.”⁵¹ Neither Dowdy nor his co-editor Claudia Rankine extend these sentiments to all contemporary poetry (conceptual poetry is “functionally racist and classist”), but at least poetry that “enter[s] the fray” contains emancipatory potential.⁵² “This volume’s poets do not consider poetry a thing apart,” Dowdy writes. “Instead, they create sites, forms, modes, vehicles, and inquiries for entering the public sphere, contesting injustices, and

⁴⁹ McGann, *Romantic*, 13.

⁵⁰ Peter Cole, “Real Gazelles in Imaginary Landscapes: Art, Scholarship, and the Translation of Hebrew Poems from Muslim Spain,” *The Yale Review* 94, no. 4 (October 2006): 52.

⁵¹ Michael Dowdy, introduction to Rankine and Dowdy, *American*, 2.

⁵² Dowdy, introduction, 21.

reimagining dominant norms, values, and exclusions.”⁵³ Here lies the rub. If poetry is not “a thing apart,” then why are these forms of relation only forms of intervention (entering, contesting, reimagining)? What about the invention of poetry in the very world it would remake or destroy? Fashionably claiming the mantle of an immanent poetics, Dowdy nonetheless shows how what is best in poetry seems always to arrive from somewhere else.⁵⁴

⁵³ Dowdy, introduction, 6–7.

⁵⁴ Two responses, sides of the same coin, are possible at this point: (1) Yes, what is best in poetry does come from somewhere else, another world. (2) Actually, what is best in poetry comes from no world at all. The first and more popular response links two influential essays in recent poetry criticism, Nathaniel Mackey’s “Other: From Noun to Verb” (1992) and Hong’s “Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde” (2014). In both essays, the (white) world of poetry is transformed in its encounter with other worlds—Black, brown, colonial, queer, and so on. It is always the latter world whose social coordinates and experience of violence and injustice deform and rewrite the former’s conventions, innovating poetry that is experimental because it is the only possible (formal) response to extreme, destabilizing conditions. Such a notion of response, however, fails to theorize the conditions of encounter. Unless we agree with Carl Schmitt that culture-worlds collide in a zero-sum power contest, where one must eliminate the other, then worlds must somehow meet and interlock. Mackey and Hong theorize encounter as violence and exploitation but barely touch what political scientists call the “soft power” component, the forms of symbolic coercion, most prominent in literacy and education. The writers Mackey and Hong valorize are also those who have reached the highest levels of soft power. In short, they do not bring the weight of another world to bear on the (white) world of poetry; they emerge from that world’s institutions and rites of passage ready to use its tools against it, however ineffective. As Cedric Robinson points out, evasion, not confrontation, was the original form of dissent from settler-colonialism. The second response distills a position lately associated with Afropessimistic thought. Since the concept of world entails ontological coherence, no one who is Black can “have” a world. As such, what emancipatory potential Black poetry has must come from no world. However, this position re-presents the previous one, only from a different perspective: no world rather than another one. Neither Frank Wilderson nor Calvin Warren, to take two frequently cited theorists, have convincingly explained how ~~world~~ relates to world, or, if ~~world~~ voids relation, how non-relation would then function, and when non-relation functions why it does so in a way that is routinely mistaken for relation. Notwithstanding oracular pronouncements, these difficulties remain unresolved. In fact, Fred Moten’s attempt to resolve them (among other difficulties) has led him to another position altogether. Finally, oddly, if Allan Bloom, of Bellovian fame, is to be trusted, then it is the belief in “culture” as such—the joint invention of Rousseau and Kant, and following Raymond Williams, of Herder, democracy, and industrialization—which leads to a belief in the Schmittian conflict of worlds, where the possibility of interaction and communication goes undertheorized because it is less compelling than contact-as-obliteration, and perhaps also to a belief in an absence of world, for there can certainly be no common one. See Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 310–11; Moten, *The Universal Machine* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 185–93, 202–3.

It is not only armchair radicals who wish to escape from the academic world. Conservatives and reactionaries have the same object of scorn. American poets court irrelevance, these tut-tutting critics contend, when they retreat from fine craftsmanship and public life into experiments, navel-gazing, and political rhetoric. They have given up the role of entertainers and sages, trading Robert Frost's homespun wisdoms for Plath's emotional outpourings or John Ashbery's nonsense. Betraying the ruthless logic of the market, this poetry is propped up by the social safety net of the university, whose classrooms provide its only ardent readers. In Joseph Epstein's mocking assessment, today's poets are "neither wholly academics nor wholly artists. They publish chiefly in journals sheltered by universities, they fly around the country giving readings and workshops at other colleges and universities. They live in jeans yet carry a curriculum vitae."⁵⁵

The most famous polemic in this vein comes from the California businessman who headed George Bush, Jr.'s NEA, poet Dana Gioia. Published in *The Atlantic* in 1991, his essay "Can Poetry Matter?" pairs the conservative perspective with historical argument. "Can Poetry Matter?" traces the rise of "the subculture of poetry," Gioia's term for the out-of-touch poetic mode now dominant, which has its origins in creative writing programs, professionalization, and an overall retreat of literary culture into the university.⁵⁶ American poets went from "the fringes of English departments" in the first half of the twentieth century, he argues, to the center of English in the latter half as "the demand for creative writing" grew. "Out of the professional networks this educational expansion created, the subculture of poetry was born."⁵⁷ The gist of

⁵⁵ Joseph Epstein, "Who Killed Poetry?" *Commentary* 86, no. 2 (August 1988): 16.

⁵⁶ Add a "v" to the "subculture of poetry" and Gioia's dog-whistle becomes clear. The allusion to Oscar Lewis's infamous thesis on poverty lets us know who Gioia thinks is bringing down the neighborhood.

⁵⁷ Dana Gioia, "Can Poetry Matter?" 1991, in *Can Poetry Matter? Essays on Poetry and American Culture* (Saint Paul, Minn.: Graywolf Press, 1992), 12.

Gioia's history is right, but the devil is in the details. Creative writing increased demand for professors who could teach the craft of poetry, but the most dramatic surge of such craft classes was limited to the last two decades of the century. Like his leftwing counterparts, Gioia is responding to developments whose history precedes the hegemony of the MFA program. As we saw, poetry's place in the English department was worked out in the interwar era. And what may have begun as a fringe effort entered the heart of the curriculum much more quickly than Gioia admits, criticism—with poetry in stow—having emerged victorious from the era's methodological fracas.

Where leftwing poets and critics seek to escape an overly academic world, Gioia and his less circumspect confederates try to narrate the history of American poetry as if the university were a late intrusion and not one of the institutions that made poetry as we know it. Their lineages of non-academic poetry are moral reproofs that masquerade as history. If the American poet had not lost the art of "public speech," or had followed in the footsteps of Moore or Stevens, runs the implicit claim, then the cultural authority of poetry would not be consigned to the alcoves and carrels of the campus. Changes in American verse culture are attributed to declining talent and ethical failure rather than new economies of scale in print media, rollback of government arts support, and shifting literacies due to education expansion. History is scaled down to moral choices. And so few have chosen rightly.

But this moral history, a decline narrative that treats the past as a series of individual aesthetic missteps, isn't so far from the leftwing escape narrative. Both believe style will save us. The conservative fable that poets relinquished, line by no-good line, the force and beauty of poetry finds a reflection in the endless supply of avant-garde techniques that are provided to rescue poet, poem, and reader alike from the status quo. Although the most lucid exponents of

avant-garde protocol know that trouble lies with systems of literacy, not individual poems, the modernist slogan “make it new” gave generations the idea that subversions of literary convention amount to radical undertakings. Even these most lucid exponents—Ed Roberson and Bernadette Mayer, say, or several of the language poets—take the opportunity to work out their little subversions on the page, though this is not the sum total of what they seek to accomplish. In earnest or out of habit, then, poems become the site of action, and the choices made in poems the means to effect social change. To poets and critics on the right and left, the university signifies the compromised world, or the world of compromise, where poems get written and which they would (or have failed to) change. Hatred of the academic world is bound up with the fear that poems are compromised too. To really dig into their creation, circulation, and reception risks invalidating a site of heroic action, making it prosaic or complicit.⁵⁸ Sueyeun Juliette Lee, for instance, speaks of “movement capture,” the fear that poetry will be “derail[ed]” by the university’s “**power and money**.”⁵⁹ Romantic ideology reemerges in the fear poets experience at being condemned to the world (as it is) along with their poems.

This fear of “movement capture” has led to peculiar investment in poetry as such. In the 1956 essay “The Frontiers of Criticism,” Eliot worried whether the criticism of the day “distract[s] us altogether from *the poem as poetry*.”⁶⁰ More than a half-century later, echoes of the Eliot of “Frontiers of Criticism” are heard in unlikely places: “I want to give *the poetry itself* the attention it deserves”; “the structures of official antiracism in literary studies have

⁵⁸ I owe the formulation of this critique to Gillian Rose. See Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno* (London: Verso, 2014), 166.

⁵⁹ Sueyeun Juliette Lee, “Self Portrait in an Academic Poetry Industrial Complex Mirror,” Harriet Blog, *Poetry Foundation*, April 17, 2019, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2019/04/self-portrait-in-an-academic-poetry-industrial-complex-mirror>.

⁶⁰ T. S. Eliot, “The Frontiers of Criticism,” *The Sewanee Review* 64, no. 4 (Oct.-Dec. 1956): 541 (Eliot’s italics).

increasingly infected *literary texts themselves*”; “this study is about *how literary production is shaped by forces external to it*.”⁶¹ These three quotes signal the continuing salience of an anachronistic Romantic and New Critical belief, a belief that never really went away, in the autonomy and self-sufficiency of literature, and poetry specifically. They are not drawn at random. Maggie Nelson, Jodi Melamed, and Juliana Spahr are poets and scholars whose work exerts notable influence on contemporary literary and poetry studies, and they seem to me representative thinkers and writers.

What these quotes share is the belief that the literary is, indeed, “a thing apart.” “Poetry itself” in the Nelson quote is contrasted with “the normative narratives of literary history,” as well as social history.⁶² The Melamed quote is part of a passage where she claims that a text has itself been determined by the protocols of “neoliberal multiculturalism,” not just read according to them.⁶³ The Spahr quote precedes a statement that her book, *Du Bois’s Telegram*, is the result of an interest in the “long history of *governmental meddling in literary production* and the impact it has on contemporary literature.”⁶⁴ All these quotes evince a reticence toward what Fredric Jameson calls the scandalous fact of causality under capitalism, where “rifts and actions at distance”—economic changes underlying the world of culture—disturb the so-called inner life of art.⁶⁵ Nelson, Melamed, and Spahr reproduce Lukács’s belief in the autonomy of cultural production from ideology and the processes of commodification; they critique a text’s imbrication in repressive discourses or hope to read a text as if without a history or posit literary

⁶¹ Maggie Nelson, *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007), xv; Melamed, *Represent*, xxii; Juliana Spahr, *Du Bois’s Telegram: Literary Resistance and State Containment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018), 26 (my italics).

⁶² Nelson, *Women*, xv.

⁶³ Melamed, *Represent*, xxii.

⁶⁴ Spahr, *Du Bois’s*, 26 (my italics).

⁶⁵ See Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981), 26.

production as external to social forces.⁶⁶ This Lukácsian view compounds what Virginia Jackson, among others, has described as the New Critical hermeneutic tendency to pry verse-texts free of contemporaneous poetics and reading practices, imposing lyric reading as an unmarked, unproblematic interpretive frame.⁶⁷ “Apart” from history, from literary studies, from statecraft, the “poem itself” becomes an isolable artifact, a product of the domain of the literary as a field of autonomous production. The literary text, literary production are sought and found elsewhere than in their compromises.⁶⁸ In this way, the art-academy antagonism appears to be moral as well as methodological imperative.

Triumph—or Wile E. Coyote Before the Fall?

The subprime mortgage crisis was the immediate cause of the 2007–8 global financial crisis. When the housing bubble burst in 2006–7, major banks and investment companies with assets tied to mortgage-backed debts and securities went into freefall. They dragged along the world stock market, employment, and investors, causing the severest financial downturn since the Great Depression. More than a decade later, a consensus is emerging about the long-term causes of the crisis. While “the systematic deregulation of the financial services industry [and] the use

⁶⁶ See Gillian Rose, “The Dialectic of Enlightenment,” recorded lecture, 1977–9? University of Sussex Library, 4163, R8060.

⁶⁷ Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 92–100.

⁶⁸ Michael Szalay makes a similar point. The fact that important modernist literary texts of the thirties and forties were “paid for by the state and the modern corporation is not simply incidental, not simply an ironic page torn from the history of those compromises writers have had reluctantly to endure over the centuries to support their work,” he writes. “The New Deal picked up on the fundamentally corporate desire of the avant-garde.” As Szalay describes in depth, the forms of economic support that the New Deal devised for literary writers directly addressed modernism’s “desire for unity between producer and consumer,” even as it left unresolved attendant contradictions. Szalay, *New Deal Modernism: American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 270.

and abuse of derivatives” have rightly been blamed for precipitating the disaster, “the global crisis [was] a financial crisis driven primarily by global trade and capital imbalances.”⁶⁹

As historian Judith Stein argues, these imbalances date back to the postwar and Cold War consensus on American foreign and trade policy. In the fight against Communism, trade was as essential as containment. Stein quotes the Bureau of the Budget in 1950 as follows: “Foreign economic policies should not be formulated in terms primarily of economic objectives; they must be subordinated to our politico-security objectives and the priorities which the latter involve.”⁷⁰ Chief among these priorities was economic stability and growth for allies. To this end, the US stoked commodity-production abroad and offered itself as a market for foreign goods. It did so in the glow of postwar abundance, which made the country seem immune to basic realities of trade and production. However, the favored strategies—maintaining a strong dollar, tariffs biased toward imports, and allowance of allies’ own domestic protectionism—dealt heavy blows to American manufacture and industry, and in 1971 resulted in “the first [trade deficit] since 1893.”⁷¹ Paired with a series of recessions, the end result of these strategies was a domestic economy geared toward service and consumption. And because the strongest advocates for wage growth were also hamstrung, as old rifts between service-sector and manufacturing unions became aggravated, and the latter lost its clout as industry moved overseas, few noticed that “home values masked wage stagnation and subsidized consumption.”⁷² Stein explains how this all added up:

⁶⁹ Michael Pettis, *The Great Rebalancing: Trade, Conflict, and the Perilous Road Ahead for the World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 3, 2.

⁷⁰ Judith Stein, “Politics and Policies in the 1970s and Early Twenty-first Century: The Linked Recessions,” in *Workers in Hard Times: A Long View of Economic Crises*, ed. Leon Fink and Joan Sangster (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 143.

⁷¹ Stein, “Politics,” 143.

⁷² Stein, “Politics,” 156–57, 154. Rifts between manufacturing and other unions existed already in the thirties and forties, as exemplified by the bitter conflict between the American Federation of Labor (AFL)

[Here] is where finance entered the picture. . . . Consumption was maintained by increased national and household debt and asset inflation, instead of wages. Financial [chicanery] . . . kept the economy going by making ever more credit available. However, as the economy cannibalized itself by undercutting income distribution and accumulating debt, it needed ever larger speculative bubbles to grow. The house-price bubble was simply the last and biggest bubble and was effectively the only way around the stagnation that otherwise would have developed in 2001 in the wake of the high-tech collapse.⁷³

An inability to face the shift away from postwar abundance sowed the seeds for the disaster.

It is no accident that the story of identity poetics coincides with the long arc of the global financial crisis. The same trends that concentrated almost all job growth since the seventies in sectors like government, health care, real estate, finance, and retail funneled people toward higher education as both students and employees.⁷⁴ Universities, too, participated in the era's financial speculations. Beginning in the seventies, universities invested their endowments in the stock market. And around the turn of the century the wealthiest began to diversify their portfolios; they relied on many of the same investment companies that provoked the financial crisis and likewise reaped the benefits until the bottom fell out.⁷⁵ After the boom years of

and its breakaway, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Their merger in 1955 aimed to patch over issues that were more than organizational or personality-driven and thus were not so easily dispelled. "AFL unions grew faster than those of the CIO because the postwar economy produced more work in construction, transportation, and service employment than in manufacturing," Stein observes. Stein, *Running Steel, Running America: Race, Economic Policy, and the Decline of Liberalism* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 17.

⁷³ Stein, "Politics," 154.

⁷⁴ Stein, "Politics," 153, 157.

⁷⁵ Howard Wolinsky, "The Crash Reaches the Universities: The Global Financial Crisis Threatens Private and Public University Funding in the USA and Europe," *EMBO Reports* 10, no. 3 (2009 March): 209.

immediate postwar expansion, American higher education grew only modestly by comparison, but the changing economy, a growing population, and endowment successes (shaken, not wiped out by any of the intervening recessions) masked this reality. Institutions of higher education appeared strong and endlessly capable of growth. Thus the dream of the postwar university persisted as an illusion. And the life and livelihood that poets sought there was as tied to this illusion as the sums trustees expected from their investments. A serious wake-up call lay in store.

When it came, this wake-up call jolted American higher education. One university president estimated that the financial crisis brought down “major research university endowments . . . 25–30% from their highs.”⁷⁶ A trend of enrollment decline in the humanities and social sciences began with students and their families now favoring majors whose career-paths seem more stable. Many universities contracted, cutting staff, departments, and faculty, while the rolling closure of small liberal arts colleges in subsequent years points to continuing aftershocks. In terms of staffing, there was a “sharp contraction in employment activity beginning with academic year 2008/9 and continuing to a steep drop in 2009/10,” again concentrated in the humanities and social sciences.⁷⁷ But the data suggests something more complicated than a simple decline narrative. Estimates indicate that many, if not most major universities recovered their endowment losses over the next few years.⁷⁸ Moreover, overall student enrollments increased, a trend “consistent with research showing that economic contractions lead individuals to enroll in school to obtain additional training.”⁷⁹ When student

⁷⁶ Henry Bienen and David Boren, “The Financial Crisis and the Future of Higher Education,” *Forum Futures: Exploring the Future of Higher Education* (2010): 17.

⁷⁷ Sarah E. Turner, “The Impact of the Financial Crisis on Faculty Labor Markets,” in *How the Financial Crisis and Great Recession Affected Higher Education*, ed. Jeffrey R. Brown, and Caroline M. Hoxby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 189.

⁷⁸ Turner, “Impact,” 176.

⁷⁹ Erik P. Schmidt, “Postsecondary Enrollment Before, During, and Since the Great Recession,” P20- 580, *Current Population Reports*, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, 2018, 13.

enrollments later finally decreased, the losses came entirely from 2-year colleges, leaving 4-year and prestige institutions more sought after than ever. Rather than a decline narrative, then, we might speak of displacement in the wake of the global financial crisis: resources and opportunities in the humanities and social sciences were squeezed, while in other parts of the university they grew; top-tier institutions recovered as smaller ones faced enduring losses; senior faculty hiring returned to pre-crisis levels at many institutions, but junior faculty hiring has continued to decline.⁸⁰ The effects of 2007–8 were felt across the board, but the lasting damage disproportionately affects those who would follow in the footsteps of the poets on whom this dissertation focused.

Where the humanities and social sciences have contracted, and where junior faculty face declining hiring, and where the prestige institutions that give the surest access to academia become even more exclusive, and where smaller institutions that may once have launched careers (as students and faculty) are closed, the conditions of possibility that gave rise to the scholar-poet in the mold of identity poetics cease to exist. This does not mean identity poetics has disappeared, or for that matter scholar-poets. Both in their way preexist the era of identity poetics and so can be expected to outlast it. The forms, techniques, and situations discussed in this dissertation are not unique to the period that began with the student rebellions and ended forty years later. What the period offered were uniquely promising circumstances for the flourishing together of scholar-poet and identity poetics. As repeated many times, a basic dilemma of modern poethood is how to “make it” as a poet, how to both live and work, how to turn profession into vocation. In the age of academe, identity poetics—done a certain, scholarly way—offered a solution, perhaps the most influential in the past half-century.

⁸⁰ Turner, “Impact,” 195–97.

The global financial crisis shook the foundation of that solution. It revealed its precarity—a precarity known to many yet still inhabited. (And this is precisely one of the changes that is being worked out: how many fewer will inhabit it in the coming decades, whose insight will be paired with real exclusion, not just spiritual disaffection.) That state of poethood today to which the whole structure of US economy has contributed, its own structural imbalances contribute to ending. But only if we know from whence we came. The newfound popularity of scholar-poets, poets of color, and poets in the academy but outside the white mainstream, like those discussed in this dissertation, points to the impact of identity poetics in the decade and a half since the global financial crisis. Many of these are poets who debuted from the seventies to the early aughts who are just now receiving their due. They are joined by a host of younger poets who imitate them, making the strategies of identity poetics their own, but increasingly jettisoning the scholarly preoccupations (and occupations) that necessitated their innovation. The history and social basis of the identity poetics we have inherited, but whose time is past, gets lost. It seems a natural approach to race and ethnicity, instead of an invented one.

Even if I am correct that the social basis of identity poetics has been lost, the consequences of this loss are not obvious. In my view, the result, when tied to the Program-ification, the MFA-ization of US poetry, will be a profound class divide. Poets lucky enough and well-enough positioned to secure their place in elite universities will continue to translate ideas and experiences of race and ethnicity (and other social identity categories) into cultural capital by way of identity poetics, while losing the links to the academic mediation of those ideas and experiences which foregrounded their non-identity with actually existing social relations. On the other hand, poets whose ties with the university field fail to advance their work and professional

aspirations will also continue to translate ideas and experiences of race and ethnicity (and other social identity categories) into cultural capital, but without necessarily relying on the techniques and strategies of identity poetics. Their work, I suspect, will recenter issues of class, though not as a social identity category. Rather they will create work and modes of distribution and circulation for that work which attempt to appropriate, transform, and dismantle the logic of cultural capital itself.

Yet there is another possibility in all this, perhaps the more obvious. The recent prestige and success of poets of color and multiethnic poets may suggest identity poetics has adapted to a new era with new conditions. In this view, the loss of its former social basis simply implies its resituation elsewhere, on a different footing—no dystopian future on the horizon. The history in this dissertation would, then, be prehistory: an outline of a transitional period for identity poetics rather than its complete arc. A success story, a triumph.

Still, I am partial to the former view. Although it seems, even to me, the slightly less plausible one, I am buoyed by an image from my childhood: Wile E. Coyote suddenly treading air in hot pursuit of the Road Runner. The physics are cartoon physics, yes, but social physics are hardly more classical or predictable. The only thing that keeps Wile E. afloat is that he does not know the ground has given way beneath him. He needs only to look down to start to tumble. We have not yet looked down.

Chapter 2

Toward an Academic History of Post-Black Aesthetic Poetry

We're wrestling with that issue now; it's afloat and afoot: the issue of dissension and institutions.

—Eugene Redmond

In this chapter, I track a series of engagements around cultural nationalism between poets, scholars, and publishers during and after the Black Arts Movement. These engagements set the stage for a post-Black aesthetic poetry, to borrow Evie Shockley's term, heavily indebted to academic knowledge regimes and now broadly influential. The chapter surfaces tensions and dialogue between Black poetics and the production of scholarly knowledge about African American poetry. It shows how Sarah Webster Fabio's neglected contribution to Black studies and the creation of the academic journal *Callaloo* raised fundamental questions about the frames of reference that structure Black poetics, questions which Shockley, Nathaniel Mackey, and C. S. Giscombe engage in their poetry, scholarship, and editorial efforts from the eighties onward.

Not My Black Arts Movement

In 2013, the publication of *Angles of Ascent: A Norton Anthology of Contemporary African American Poetry* sparked a debate about African American poetry and the legacies of the Black

Eugene Redmond and Jabari Asim, "Conversation," in *The Furious Flowering of African American Poetry*, ed. Joanne V. Gabbin (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 93.

Arts Movement (BAM).¹ In editor Charles Rowell's view, the anthology was offered as an introduction to African American poetry since the 1970s; "the first installment," he called it, in an "accounting" of the contemporary scene. A pre-publication review in *Publishers Weekly* would deem the anthology arguably "the first to give such a full and various account of its subject," calling *Angles* "important if sprawling."² Writing for *The Nation*, Jordan Davis dubbed *Angles* "ideal syllabus-assignment bait, an excellent anthology, a page-turner."³ Syllabus-assignment bait is just right. Given the low sticker-price, wide selection, and Norton's solid reputation in English departments, *Angles* was destined to turn up in many classrooms come the fall. In a single volume of six-hundred-plus pages, Gwendolyn Brooks and Robert Hayden appear alongside Nikki Giovanni and Audre Lorde, Fred Moten, Natasha Trethewey, and Gregory Pardlo with many of those included contributing poetics statements. And for less than thirty bucks. All told, Rowell's affordable, informed, robust anthology was set for success. It would likely have done its intended work without much fanfare, if not for the blowback from one of the poets most amply represented in the volume, Amiri Baraka. His trademark wit and severity on display, Baraka inveighed against *Angles* in the pages of *Poetry* magazine. Giving Rowell a dressing-down, he charged him with animus and prejudice toward the BAM. "It seems," Baraka writes, "that it has been pulled together as a relentless 'anti' to one thing: the Black Arts Movement."⁴ To this polemic Rowell and Norton alike might have replied: No such

¹ I am not the first to identify this debate as an advantageous window onto contemporary African American poetry. In addition to the scholarship discussed below, see Gillian White, *Lyric Shame: The "Lyric" Subject of Contemporary American Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014), 267–68.

² Review of *Angles of Ascent: A Norton Anthology of Contemporary African American Poetry*, *Publishers Weekly*, December 24, 2012, 32.

³ Jordan Davis, "Unsparing Truths: On Lucille Clifton," review of *The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton, 1965–2010*, edited by Kevin Young and Michael S. Glaser and *Angles of Ascent: A Norton Anthology of Contemporary African American Poetry*, edited by Charles H. Rowell, *The Nation*, July 8, 2013, 30.

⁴ Amiri Baraka, "A Post-Racial Anthology?" *Poetry* 202, no. 2 (May 2013): 166.

thing as bad publicity. With Baraka's review, *Angles* became a bona fide touchstone for thinking about Black poetry in the present.

A sign of *Angles*' touchstone status is found in the article's comments section on the Poetry magazine website, which filled with debate after its posting. Comments ranged from Allison Hedge Coke's short and sweet "Thank you, Amiri!" to vitriolic personal insult to a quote from Arnold Rampersad that noted, "'More than any other black poet . . . [Baraka] taught younger black poets of the generation past how to respond poetically to their lived experience.'"⁵ Relevant here is a comment from Tom Weatherly, a significant if neglected Black Arts-adjacent poet and editor. Weatherly used the space to reflect on his career, or career reception. "Too late," he says, for the BAM, he muses that he was "associated with New York School simply because some are friends." Regarding Baraka's review and Rowell's anthology, Weatherly speaks indirectly. Rueful remarks on his own "ideological anthology," *Natural Process: An Anthology of New Black Poetry*, edited with Ted Wilentz in the late sixties, illustrate his discomfort with "making book."⁶ And yet, Weatherly's slightly phobic reaction aside, he seems closer to Rowell than Baraka.⁷ "I suggest you all read more poems, talk less about their semantic content, more about the prosody, the craft that produces them," he writes. Consciously or not, he echoes Rowell in his introduction to *Angles*. A key insight for Rowell about the generation then (circa 2013) coming into its own is that their writing is writing-centered: "What these new poets say about writing and how they write constitutes the beginning of a new discourse on African

⁵ For all comments section quotes, see Baraka's essay on the Poetry Foundation website, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/69990/a-post-racial-anthology>, accessed July 7, 2021.

⁶ See C. S. Giscombe, "Making Book: Winners, Losers, Poetry, Anthologies, and the Color Line," introduction to *What I Say: Innovative Poetry by Black Writers in America*, ed. Aldon Lynn Nielsen and Lauri Ramey (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2015), 1-7.

⁷ Baraka was no less guilty of the ideological work of "making book." His and Larry Neal's *Black Fire* (1968) anthology did much to set the parameters of Black Arts poetics.

American poetry.”⁸ Elsewhere he describes the MFA–higher education nexus in which many of these poets and their predecessors were nurtured as “the world of craft development.”⁹ Beyond labels, debates, and political stances, Weatherly and Rowell suggest, what matters is craft.

However, responses to Baraka’s takedown were not limited to his contemporaries and near-contemporaries. Two years before winning the prestigious Yale Younger Poets Prize, Airea Dee Matthews took to Tumblr to offer thoughts on the Rowell-Baraka debate. Matthews turns Baraka’s against him. She observes that the lack of “any stylistic tendency” in *Angles*, which Baraka decried as revealing the anthology’s arbitrary selection criteria, was in fact “exactly the point.”¹⁰ Encouraging and deeply necessary in Rowell’s anthology is the freedom of expression found in its poetry, including Baraka’s own—freedom of subject matter and style, influence and aims. “May our voices remain our own,” Matthews writes in petitionary conclusion, “resisting causal conscription and assimilation, while forging the winding path to an open space that welcomes our variant songs.”

Poets young and old alike felt moved to reflect on Rowell’s anthology and Baraka’s response. And at least in the case of Matthews and Weatherly, they were moved to consider their position in the debate. But if Matthews and Weatherly give the impression Rowell’s views won out, they are only part of *Angles*’ continuing reception.

Since the immediate responses, mostly from poets and reviewers, the anthology has spurred rethinking of the BAM’s legacy by scholars and critics. “*Angles of Ascent* frames the BAM as a narrow place that had to be repudiated as the ‘ascent’ [of African American poetry]

⁸ Charles Henry Rowell, “Writing Self, Writing Community,” introduction to *Angles of Ascent: A Norton Anthology of Contemporary African American Poetry*, ed. Charles Henry Rowell (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013), xxxi.

⁹ Rowell, “Writing,” xxxiv.

¹⁰ aireaonce, Tumblr, <https://aireaonce.tumblr.com/post/49749018714/a-response-to-amiri-barakas-recent-criticism>, 2014.

occurred,” Margo Crawford writes.¹¹ Crawford’s aim in *Black Post-Blackness: The Black Arts Movement and Twenty-First-Century Aesthetics* is to contest the idea of the BAM “as a narrow place,” to show the varied and inviting nature of the movement. She pushes back mischaracterizations in Rowell’s editorial apparatus, grounding and deepening Baraka’s criticisms. Likewise, Emily Ruth Rutter demonstrates that Rowell underestimated the BAM’s present-day influence.¹² Rutter points to Terrance Hayes and Fred Moten as proof. At times vigorously contesting his anthology, Crawford and Rutter nonetheless further Rowell’s canon-making efforts. Yet only Crawford—along with Matthews among the poets and Davis among reviewers—seems to have noticed a particular bone of contention in Baraka’s review. As we gain distance from them, *Angles*, Baraka’s response, and the artistic and critical reception of the anthology will all show more obviously the looming presence of the university.

For Baraka, everything wrong with *Angles*—omissions, marketing, framing—can be traced back to his debate with Robert Hayden at the 1966 Fisk Black Writers’ Conference:

Hayden and I got into it when he said he was first an artist and then he was Black. I challenged that with the newly-emerging ideas that we had raised at the Black Arts Repertory Theatre School in Harlem in 1965, just after Malcolm X’s assassination. We said the art we wanted to create should be identifiably, culturally Black—like Duke Ellington’s or Billie Holiday’s. We wanted it to be a mass art, not hidden away on university campuses. We wanted an art that could function in the ghettos where we lived.

¹¹ Margo Natalie Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness: The Black Arts Movement and Twenty-First-Century Aesthetics* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 109.

¹² Emily Ruth Rutter, “Contested Lineages: Fred Moten, Terrance Hayes, and the Legacy of Amiri Baraka,” *African American Review* 49, no. 4 (Winter 2016): 329–42.

And we wanted an art that would help liberate Black people. I remember that was really a hot debate, and probably helped put an ideological chip on Rowell's shoulder.¹³

Attention to this passage tends to focus on Baraka's claim to an "identifiably, culturally Black" aesthetic. Less considered is the setting for his confrontation with Hayden—the very "university campus" to which Baraka objects. This passage is one of several in the review that looks unfavorably on academia. Consider the following: "Ascent to where, a tenured faculty position?"; "one of Komunyakaa's early books was sent to me by a university publisher to ask my opinion. . . . in truth I found it dull and academic"; "We wanted to get away from the faux English academic straitjackets passed down to us by the Anglo-American literary world"; "Rowell thinks the majority of Afro-American poets are MFA recipients or professors." Baraka's animosity might seem a natural response to the institutionalization of Black poetry, given the BAM's popular and populist reputation. But already back in 1961—before what is usually considered the onset of the BAM—Baraka wrote revealingly to a friend about an incident at a party: "Like this guy at some party asked me what I meant by the word 'Academic' . . . and I was stumped because I didn't want to sound like one . . . so I sd that word was just a word I'd thot up as a euphemism for weakling."¹⁴ Baraka's maverick status lends this anecdote, and the later shots at Rowell, an aura of radical opposition to academicization. However, like his attendance at the Fisk conference in the first place (the second such conference convened by creative writing program—stalwart John O. Killens), the facts somewhat bely the image.

¹³ Baraka, "Post-Racial," 167.

¹⁴ Baraka to Edward Dorn, March 24, 1961, in *Amiri Baraka and Edward Dorn: The Collected Letters*, ed. Claudia Moreno Pisano (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013), 34.

To start, the “guy” Baraka spoke to at the party was none other than literary critic Alfred Kazin, the first-generation Jewish memoirist a somewhat odd stand-in for “the Anglo-American literary world.” The friend he wrote to, Ed Dorn, was shortly off to the University of Essex on a Fulbright, where he helped the university’s co-founder Donald Davie establish the English Department. And Baraka was at the time teaching composition classes at universities around New York City. Not long after he would enjoy a summer teaching gig at SUNY-Buffalo, arranged by Charles Olson. Baraka was not an academic in the usual (or his own) sense, but nor was he in 1961 or later removed from the university in any definitive way.

Students of the BAM will be familiar with career trajectories that involve circuitous paths through academia. In the late sixties BAM-affiliated and -adjacent writers began to assume academic positions, though the trend picked up in the seventies as the movement wound down. In some cases, writers were employed by universities before, during, and after the movement’s heyday. And while hard numbers might show that relatively few Black Arts writers had long careers in academia, a list of some who did includes key figures Larry Neal, Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, Sarah Webster Fabio, Jerry Ward, Addison Gayle, Lorenzo Thomas, and Sherley Anne Williams. Baraka’s anti-academic animus should be placed within the spectrum of beliefs about academia held by BAM writers, ranging from complete distrust to conditional embrace.

In pointing up Baraka’s animus, alongside his own university affiliations, I want to suggest that the complex story of Black poetry’s shaping in and by the university is just starting to be told. The dust-up over *Angles* provides an opportunity to take things a bit further.

Why start with an anecdote that falls outside my project’s stated period? On one hand, I do so because the continuing reception of *Angles* is just too apposite (and intriguing) not to mention.

On the other, because an aim of this work is to provide a prehistory or genealogy of developments in US poetry since 2008. As both Matthews's part in the debate and *Angles*' circulation in college classrooms indicate, the anthology is a vital interlocutor in conversations about Black poetry now. More to the point, Rowell himself plays an outsized role in the story this chapter tells.

Generally considered one of the two most influential journals of African American literary arts and criticism, *Callaloo: A Journal of African Diaspora Arts and Letters* was co-founded by Rowell in 1976. In this chapter, I argue that *Callaloo* is one creative response to the university's emergence as a major site for poetry, a response that actually carries forward aspects of the BAM by tying "post-black-aesthetic" writing (a term discussed below) to academic scholarship. Beginning with *Callaloo*, this chapter traces two similar responses. First, I discuss the historical conditions that gave rise to *Callaloo* and analyze Rowell's aesthetic agenda as well as his own early verse. Then I turn to Sarah Webster Fabio to consider the relationship between Black studies and African American poetry and the ways her work aligns with and defies scholarly expectations. My last full section addresses Nathaniel Mackey, departing from the usual poetry focus to show how his novel *Bedouin Hornbook* thinks about academic conventions and post-Black Aesthetic writing, before briefly examining his journal *Hambone*. I end with a glance at Evie Shockley and the journal and reading series *Mixed Blood* to project some possible futures of Black poetry in the American university.

Terminological Note

This chapter's title borrows a term from Evie Shockley. "Post-black aesthetic" is a way of conceiving writing that pivots on without being beholden to or doctrinaire about "the black

aesthetic.” Importantly, post–black aesthetic poetry isn’t just defined temporally, a matter of “‘postscribing,’ or writing after, the heyday of the Black Arts Movement.”¹⁵ This is why poetry of the BAM can be written in a post–black aesthetic vein. In this regard, Shockley’s post–black aesthetic resembles the “black post-blackness” recently theorized by Margo Crawford. As Shockley elaborates her views in a short essay—first, building up a case-study of Ed Roberson, then distinguishing post–black aesthetic poetry from kindred concepts forwarded by Thelma Golden and Thomas Sayers Ellis—one realizes that the academy is a defining horizon for this category. This is not to say the academy is the condition of possibility for post–black aesthetic poetry, nor that the concept is restricted to writers in academia. But universities, and the scholarly communities that develop in and around universities, nurtured many writers that fit the bill. For these writers, academic institutions and knowledge regimes are often key—at the level of craft and audience—to their defiant fidelity to *and* faithful defiance of the black aesthetic. Below I will say more about Shockley, as well as the *Mixed Blood* reading series and journal in which she presented her thinking on this topic, but for now my interest is the category of post–black aesthetic poetry and the role of the university in its production. In short, this chapter lays out a history of the category. A partial and tentative history, of course, since so much that is vital in post–black aesthetic poetry can’t be traced to the university. But what ties together all the poets and journals I follow here is a sense of difficult commitment: a readiness to work *with* and *against* the university, and through its scholarly, aesthetic, and institutional forms.

“Sing Better Than You Know”: *Callaloo*’s Rise

¹⁵ Evie Shockley, “Post-Black-Aesthetic Poetry: Postscripts and Postmarks,” *Mixed Blood 2* (2007): 50.

Between 1975 and 1976 a change occurred in African American print culture.¹⁶ It might appear minor, but to writers of the day associated with the Black Arts Movement this change concerned the very condition of possibility of their literary writing. Its lineaments can be traced in the fate of three journals.

In 1975, Dingane Joe Goncalves's *Journal of Black Poetry* (1966–75; renamed *Kitabu Cha Jua* in 1974) ceased publication. While it never attained high circulation, *JBP* was a venerable BAM periodical; practically every poet of the movement published in its pages, from Audre Lorde to Victor Hernández Cruz to Larry Neal (whose first book was also brought out by Journal of Black Poetry Press). But to those outside the circle of subscribers, contributors, and Bay Area black radicals, who constituted the journal's core audience, its end may have gone unnoticed. Not so a year later for the end of Hoyt Fuller's *Black World* (1961–76; originally *Negro Digest*, renamed in 1970). A central organ of the BAM, a typical issue of *Negro Digest/Black World* might contain prose by Amiri Baraka, poetry by Nikki Giovanni, scholarship and criticism by Addison Gayle and Sarah Webster Fabio, and Fuller's own sharply worded reviews and editorials. Although Jonathan Fenderson has urged scholars to rethink the periodization of the BAM, commonly understood to run from 1965 to 1976, the twin demise of these journals plays no small part in the conventional view of the movement's conclusion. Whatever the post-BAM future held, writers would have to adapt to a landscape wherein all the major BAM journals—not just *JBP* and *Negro Digest/Black World*—were gone. That *Callaloo* appeared for the first time in 1976 might make it seem like something of a literary phoenix,

¹⁶ For a related take on 1975–76 as a turning-point in African American literature, see Abby Arthur Johnson and Ronald Johnson, "Charting a New Course: African American Literary Politics since 1976," in *The Black Columbiad: Defining Moments in African American Literature and Culture*, ed. Werner Sollors and Maria Diedrich (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 369–81. For a succinct parallel account, see Jonathan Fenderson, *Building the Black Arts Movement: Hoyt Fuller and the Cultural Politics of the 1960s* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois, 2019), 134.

miraculously rising from the ashes of its predecessors. But we should listen to how Kalamu ya Salaam recently described the situation. “By 1976, there were no more nationally distributed black literary journals that did not cater to the academy,” he explains. “You had to be a part of existing institutions and the lack of independence meant that limitations on the art were set, whereas before there were no limitations.”¹⁷ I will return shortly to Salaam’s criticism, but here his comment serves as a reminder that although *Callaloo* entered the sudden and notable gap left by *JBP* and *Negro Digest/Black World*, the change in black print culture was precipitated by other factors than the demise of two journals, however important. For in fact, the real gap was an economic one. And what entered to fill it was not *Callaloo* per se, but the university.

As the seventies got underway, Black Arts groups and writers who had, in the previous decade, become expert fundraisers and grant-writers watched as antipoverty-linked arts and culture funding dwindled and granting institutions less inclined to support black cultural initiatives.¹⁸ After the Watts rebellions and during the so-called halcyon days of the Great Society, government officials and philanthropists alike rushed to fund arts and cultural initiatives in the “troubled” hearts of US cities.¹⁹ A decade later, the economic crises—including stagflation and recurrent energy crises—that paved the way for Reaganism in the eighties, and the rise of the highly visible and polarizing Black Panthers, combined to give formerly supportive donors and institutions reason and incentive to close pocketbooks. The Black Arts journals and magazines that had not already folded under the normal pressures of ego-conflict and divided and

¹⁷ Salaam, interview with Margo Natalie Crawford, July 12, 2013, quoted in Crawford, *Black*, 109.

¹⁸ Jerry W. Ward, “Unfunding the Arts in the Black Community,” *First World: An International Journal of Black Thought* 2, no. 3 (1979): 21–23 and Tom Dent, “Enriching the Paper Trail: Interview,” by Kalamu ya Salaam, *New Orleans Griot: The Tom Dent Reader*, ed. Kalamu ya Salaam (New Orleans: University of New Orleans Press, 2018), 486–87.

¹⁹ James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). 303.

diminishing energy experienced a funding drought. Indeed, the longevity of *JBP* and *Negro Digest/Black World* probably had everything to do with their alternative business models, which allowed them to remain independent of governmental and organized philanthropic support. Goncalves kept his journal afloat solely through donations, subscriptions, and his own personal income. He made a point of rejecting any and all funds from sources he did not know. In contrast, *Negro Digest/Black World* functioned as a subsidiary of the Johnson Publishing Company (publisher of *Ebony* and *Jet*). The magazine ultimately folded not due to financial difficulties but as a result of Fuller's firing by higher-ups in the company in response to his criticisms of the State of Israel and US support for Israel.²⁰ The post-Black Arts journals and magazines that emerged in the seventies negotiated a new economic landscape, where the dominant model of grant-supported journals and the variously maverick models iterated by *JBP* and *Negro Digest/Black World* were no longer viable.²¹ At this juncture the university offered a new alternative.

²⁰ Though controversy over Fuller's editorial comments on Israel is attested by several to be the reason for Fuller's firing, Johnson's desire for a magazine to compete with the newly founded *Essence* appears to have been a major contributing factor. For an account where both factors dovetail, see Fenderson, *Building*, 123–28.

²¹ Two important journals that defy this narrative are *African American Review* (founded in 1967 as *Negro American Literature Forum*, renamed *Black American Literature Forum* in 1976) and Russell Atkins's *The Free Lance* (1950–80). Both outlast the seventies but are for different reasons distinct from the Black Arts and post-Black Arts journals I discuss. *African American Review* began as a university-based journal, located in Indiana University's Education Department, and as a result its early contributors tended not to be Black Arts writers and critics but figures key to the institutionalization of African American literature and literary criticism in the university, like Darwin T. Turner, George Kent, and Arna Bontemps. A shift under the editorship of Joe Weixlmann beginning in 1976 aligned the journal with—and in fact made it a key organ of—post-Black Arts criticism and scholarship. In contrast, Atkins's *The Free Lance* was an auteur production, a coterie journal. The ties between *The Free Lance* and post-Black aesthetic writing are best understood by way of affinity rather than influence. Atkins had minimal contemporaneous influence on Black Arts and post-Black Arts writers (Baraka being a possible exception), but post-Black aesthetic poets like Evie Shockley and Tyrone Williams have in recent years discovered in his vanguard experimentalism a simultaneously pre- and post-BAM aesthetic precedent.

What the university offered—long-term institutional support, ease of access to printers and distributors, a pool of earnest student assistants and slightly less earnest professors and lecturers—was not viewed by all as an unmitigated good. For every Rowell or Alvin Aubert or Quincy Troupe, there was a Kalamu ya Salaam to warn against the restriction of creative energies that followed institutionalization.²² Disagreements aside, the Rowells and the Salaams alike fully understood the impasse they faced. In the preface to the journal’s first issue, *Callaloo* co-founder Tom Dent notes that the demise of *Black World/Negro Digest* and other “community-based” journals created a pressing “need for a new journal.”²³ Discussing the genesis of *Callaloo*, he gives the following assessment: “Some of these writers, like myself, developed from strong affiliations with community theaters & activist groups—some have stayed fairly close to the traditional university scene, the main source of economic support available to black creative and critical artists.”²⁴ Dent’s matter-of-fact tone signals the apparent taken-for-grantedness of the university as a supporter of “black creative and critical artists.” Whereas Salaam impugns Black writers and critics who hitched their star to the university, Dent suggests the university is simply an option among others and perhaps the most obvious. This is not to dismiss Salaam’s reservations. A cursory look at the first issues of *Callaloo* reveals a more-than-financial departure from the BAM. Whether by accident or design,

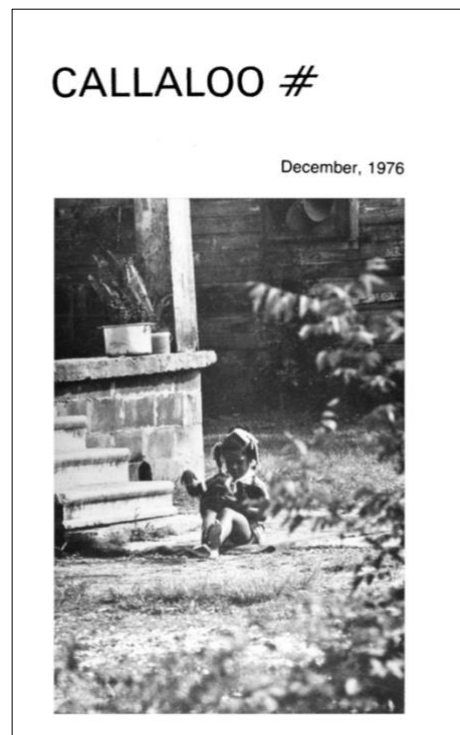


Figure 2-1: *Callaloo* 1, cover. Photo by Roy Lewis

²² Aubert founded *Obsidian: Black Literature in Review* at SUNY in 1975; Troupe spearheaded Ohio University’s short-lived Black studies literary journal *Confrontations*.

²³ Tom Dent, “Preface,” *Callaloo* 1 (December 1976): v.

²⁴ Dent, “Preface,” v.

even the format and dimensions of the first issues—5.5” x 8.5”, perfect-bound and off-set printed—indicate that *Callaloo*’s models were not Black Arts journals and magazines, like *Soulbook*, *Black Dialogue*, *Nkombo*, and *Black Theater*.²⁵ Rather early issues of *Callaloo* have the look of such influential, university-based literary quarterlies as *Southern Review*, *Sewanee Review*, and *Kenyon Review*.²⁶ Roy Lewis’s resonant cover photo for *Callaloo* 1 also announces a departure. In contrast to the bold and highly stylized graphics that grace the covers of Black Arts journals, Lewis’s photo of a girl absorbed in play—ribbons in her hair, framed by greenery—suggests a world apart, but no less political for cultivating an almost spiritual quiet.²⁷ While the university may be, as Dent offers, an option among others, that option perhaps does imply a stance that runs against the grain of Black Power politics.

In any case, the “option” of the university was chosen before the first issue of *Callaloo* ever appeared. Crawford and Salaam have drawn much-needed attention to *Callaloo*’s overlooked fellow co-founders and BAM stalwarts Dent and Jerry Ward, often sidelined in the journal’s origin story. Yet even Dent and Ward approved, or at least understood, the journal’s enmeshment in higher education. We have already noted Dent’s matter-of-factness in this regard, and when we turn to Ward’s reflections on the journal’s early years, there is no indication that a plan for counter-institutional life was thwarted by Rowell’s ambitions. Rather the frustrations

²⁵ Physical copies of *Callaloo*’s first two issues are difficult to come by. I assume, but I have not been able to ascertain if they share the format and dimensions of issues 3 through 23.

²⁶ In a recent retrospective essay, Rowell mentions “*Southern Review*, *Georgia Review*, *Mississippi Quarterly*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, [and] *Sewanee Review*” as journals whose de facto “whites only” policy prompted his decision to create *Callaloo*. Rowell, “*Callaloo*: A Journal of Necessity,” in *The Little Magazine in Contemporary America*, ed. Ian Morris and Joanne Diaz (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 52.

²⁷ This reading is informed by Kevin Quashie’s *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*, which makes the case for the overlooked political (and spiritual) stakes of quiet in histories of Black radicalism. See Quashie, *Sovereignty of Quiet* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 1–10. Thanks to Michelle May-Curry and the Visual Culture Workshop at the University of Michigan for helping me think about this image.

Ward documents in the early years (he criticizes in particular how Rowell shortchanged the journal's first contributors before "rusticating" them) stem precisely from the conflicts of institutional life. In a 2016 blog post, intended to give his side of the story, Ward writes:

It must be noticed that the mailing address for #1 was P. O. Box 9677, Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70813 and for #2–#7, it was Department of English, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky 40506. The change of location included a change in the editorial hierarchy. Dent, Rowell, and Ward were Coeditors for #1. Dent and I did not fail to note that P. O. Box 9677 was not associated with the Department of English at Southern University (Baton Rouge).²⁸

The transition into the university betrayed no original, counter-institutional orientation. Ward's point is that Rowell's change of address obscures the journal's roots in Southern University.²⁹ Indeed, a list of the editors and contributors for the first seven issues of *Callaloo* reveals the involvement of a critical mass of Southern affiliates. Rowell himself taught at Southern University until the eve of the journal's debut.³⁰

²⁸ Jerry W. Ward, "Callaloo," *Jerry Ward* (blog), April 25, 2016, <http://jerryward.blogspot.com/2016/04/callaloo.html>.

²⁹ For support that this is indeed Ward's bone of contention, see the following comment: "Little attention has been given the university as a campground for Blacks seriously inquiring into the nature and development of Black Arts, especially poetry. . . . These notes attempt to indicate Southern is doing much to synthesize academic knowledge with the gut perceptions of the Black Arts." Ward, "Southern/Black Poetry/Notes," *Black World* 23, no. 3 (January 1974): 83.

³⁰ Reiterating Dent's apparently matter-of-fact, if not downright blasé attitude toward the whole episode, he writes in 1977 to Sarah Webster Fabio, "Charles Rowell left southern & went to the U. of Kentucky this year, where he has support for the journal there. Jerry Ward & i are still editors, but Rowell is really doing the work, which is fine with me." Dent to Fabio, November 14, 1977, Sarah Webster Fabio Papers, Box 39, Folder 29, Fisk Special Collections, Fisk University.

That *Callaloo* was in fact always and already an institutional endeavor throws into new light an essay of Rowell's in the first issue, an essay which might serve as a mission statement for the journal as a whole. Skimming "Diamonds in a Sawdust Pile: Notes to Black Southern Writers," it might be mistaken for a straightforward affirmation of "Black Southern" writing. First delivered as a lecture at the Congo Square Writers Workshop, a New Orleans-based group founded by Dent, "Diamonds" is the fourth piece of writing in *Callaloo* 1. Although not labeled an introduction or an editor's note, "Diamonds" reads like a statement of purpose. As Rowell has often said, *Callaloo* was established "to create a forum in which Southern black writers and other black artists ... would have a site from which to speak."³¹ In "Diamonds" that aim is clear. Rowell argues that a return to the South—over and against the BAM's northern, urban orientation—is necessary for "a Black Aesthetic to be developed fully in the written literature and the literary criticism of Black America."³² Such a return, by putting writers in touch with their "roots," would rectify the BAM's "shortcomings," its omissions and intransigencies. But in a foreshadowing of Baraka's criticism decades later, Rowell claims that beyond the BAM's neglect of the South, he takes issue with its elevation of politics over craft. "If we are to be about creating a poem," he writes, "we must realize that we should be about constructing a work of art, not a social or political tract—a work of art, however political or social, that, *because of the consummate integrity of the artist's ideas and craft, will endure and inform.*"³³ This is the point at which Rowell clearly stakes a claim outside the polemic of northern versus southern black

³¹ Charles H. Rowell, "Not Naming the Race: An Interview with Charles Henry Rowell," by Shona N. Jackson, *Callaloo* 30, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 378.

³² Charles H. Rowell, "Diamonds in a Sawdust Pile: Notes to Black Southern Writers," *Callaloo* 1 (December 1976): 4.

³³ Rowell, "Diamonds," 7 (my italics).

writing, as well as their relative neglect or prominence. Here we can learn something about Rowell's poetics, and importantly: how he adapts his poetics in the age of academe.

Elsewhere in the essay, Rowell's terminology of "self-conscious aesthetic construct" and "self-conscious craft" (4, 7) let us know that the kind of "integrity" he refers to has its origin in a New Critical view of the "self-sufficient" poem, one that "stand[s] on [its] own."³⁴ "At times the Black Arts Movement created an anti-art atmosphere," he opines. "Young ranting poets wrote poems with thoughtless slogans and inarticulate screams that were frequently passed off as art by literary pimps. For many young poets it was what was said, not how it was said, that was important."³⁵ The problem for Rowell was that poets were politicking rather than studying the craft; what they wrote could hardly be called poetry ("thoughtless slogans ... inarticulate screams") and it was in no way destined to "endure." Critic and poet Allen Tate held a similarly dim view of his contemporaries half a century earlier. In a 1926 letter to Donald Davidson, Tate accused him of subordinating "poetry" to other concerns, to what scholar Langdon Hammer has called Davidson's "protopolitical ambition."³⁶ "The abnegation of *literary* responsibility," for Tate, was manifested in his friend's desire for "a language that would bypass language, substituting 'Bullets for words,' 'long rifles' for pens, force for discourse."³⁷ The quotes from Davidson's long poem *The Tall Men* (1927) bear a striking resemblance to Baraka's much-celebrated "Black Art" (1966), "the major poetic manifesto of the Black Arts literary

³⁴ Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, "Section 3: Anglo-American New Criticism," *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 159, 160.

³⁵ Rowell, "Diamonds," 7.

³⁶ Langdon Hammer, *Hart Crane and Allen Tate: Janus-Faced Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 81.

³⁷ Hammer, *Hart Crane*, 81 (Hammer's italics).

movement”: “We want ‘poems that kill.’ / Assassin poems, Poems that shoot guns.”³⁸ Both Tate and Rowell, then, respond to their contemporaries by cordoning off the “poetic,” claiming for it an aesthetic distinctness. Tate’s vision—of “the autonomy of the text,” “its refusal to be ‘reduced’ to (to be seen to serve) another discourse”—would at length, Hammer observes, “be absorbed into English department pedagogy, under the rubric of technical expertise, as apolitical criteria.”³⁹ Rowell’s version, which he no doubt learned from the very same English departments that had “absorbed” Tate (he received his PhD in English Language and Literature from The Ohio State University in 1972), never grew those kind of legs, but it clearly informs his vision of the aesthetic as such. In a 2007 interview, Rowell comments on the beauty of his mother’s flower gardens growing up: “Beauty,” he asserts, “was their *raison d’être*.”⁴⁰ To suggest otherwise would smack of ideology, he warns, intimating his views on the aesthetic more broadly. And yet unlike Tate none of Rowell’s own poems adhere to (or even seem to grapple with) these demands of aesthetic purity and integrity. That this is so can in fact be seen in “Diamonds,” which ends by turning (in)to verse.

The differences between Tate’s arch formalism and Rowell’s slightly epiphanic free verse could be endlessly enumerated, but the turn from critical prose to verse in “Diamonds” is easily the clearest affront to New Critical sensibility. Indeed, in his belief in the utter distinctness of “poetry” from all other modes of writing, Tate recalls the Eliot of “The Perfect Critic” (1920), for whom mixtures of criticism and poetry indicated a failure to find appropriate “outlet” for

³⁸ Amiri Baraka, “Black Art,” *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, ed. William J. Harris (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 219, ll. 19–20. See Kalamu ya Salaam, “Black Arts Movement,” in *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, ed. William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster, and Trudier Harris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 71.

³⁹ Hammer, *Hart Crane*, 103.

⁴⁰ Rowell, “Not,” 390.

either the creative or the critical “impulse.”⁴¹ Although the form this mixture takes in “Diamonds” differs from that which Eliot derided in his contemporaries (for him the issue was “impressionistic” prose style), the same kind of violation is at stake: the poetic as a sui generis mode—however defined—cut or mingled with critical discourse. To wit, on the sixth page of the essay, following a section break, Rowell writes in an oratorical tone, “Black South writers, I have come to tell you this.” Five verse paragraphs then follow. I read Rowell’s prefatory sentence to mean that the verse glosses the prose that precedes it, a reversal of the usual expectation that prose should explicate poetry. Essay and verse form a didactic whole here. I quote a few lines to give the gist:

From their graves
in red clay, black loam, and burnished sand,
the ancestors look down the line
and speak to us:
tell us not to break the circle
again....
Under an artificial sun
which shattered our vision
and to a night sound out of key,
we moved like gypped dogs howling at the moon....
This is another day.⁴²

⁴¹ T. S. Eliot, “The Perfect Critic,” 1920, in *Praising It New: The Best of the New Criticism*, ed. Garrick Davis (Athens, Oh.: Swallow Press / Ohio University Press, 2008), 9.

⁴² Rowell, “Diamonds,” 8–9, ll. 1–7, 11–15, 18.

At the risk of glibness, I submit that these verses more or less reiterate Rowell's earlier claim; namely, that black writing needs to return to the South, lest the tradition be broken and the ancestors forsaken. But besides this programmatic sentiment, these final verse paragraphs take up and enact a frisson between "song" and "knowledge" that recapitulates, while evading, Tate's (and Eliot's) belief in the distinct "integrity" of poetry.

To begin, here are the first three lines of the penultimate verse paragraph and the final four of the last, respectively:

With a profound knowing,
study the spacescape
before and behind you. . . .
Sing better than you know,
for it is your right,
your obligation
sacred.⁴³

The first command, to study "with a profound knowing," is somewhat deflated by the second, to "sing better than you know." If in the end the singing leaves behind the knowing, can you blame the student who phones in her studies? Rowell cribs from (or pays homage to) James Weldon Johnson's ode to the inventors of the spirituals, "O Black and Unknown Bards," with his variation on the line "You sang far better than you knew," referenced also in the essay's prose

⁴³ Rowell, "Diamonds," 9, ll. 19–21, 36–39.

portion.⁴⁴ Yet in his turn and return to this line, Rowell raises to the status of a dilemma what in Johnson's ode is beside the point. Immediately after the line, Johnson overturns his previous praises: "You sang far better than you knew; the songs / That for your listeners' hungry hearts sufficed / Still live,—*but more than this* to you belongs: / You sang a race from wood and stone to Christ."⁴⁵ In 1908, both song and knowledge, no less than their tension, diminish before the transfiguration the spirituals effected. From idols to Christ, from violently imposed immobilization to spiritual resilience and living flesh, the transition the spirituals and their creators fostered made strangers in a strange land into a people, according to the ode. But for Rowell in the age of academe, and under the aegis of the New Criticism, not faith but poetry and its attendant knowledges are at stake. And so while the command to sing has the last word in Rowell's verses, the frisson introduced by comparison ("better than") cannot be gainsaid. The first command to study attaches to the command to know, and if someone were curious what is involved in such study—in "profound knowing"—the prose portion of the essay holds the answers: "These are Black South people, patterns, and events—past and present. They have meanings. . . . They are rich materials."⁴⁶ More than simply forming a didactic whole, verse and prose act function in relay, shuttling the reader who wants a gloss of the essay to the former, and then back to the latter for a primer in knowing.

But although practically they form a whole and work in concert, the frisson Rowell figures between song and knowledge is also deeply felt. Early in the essay, Rowell counsels his ideal poet to "sing the song of himself."⁴⁷ On the next page he says that for the BAM to bear all

⁴⁴ Rowell, "Diamonds," 6.

⁴⁵ James W. Johnson, "O Black and Unknown Bards," *The Century Magazine* 77, no. 1 (November 1908): 67, ll. 45–48 (my italics).

⁴⁶ Rowell, "Diamonds," 3.

⁴⁷ Rowell, "Diamonds," 4.

its fruit, “we first must carefully study certain historical events and their effects, and the nature and function of certain folkloristic material in the Black South.”⁴⁸ Neither directive cancels out the other, but the implication of Whitmanian naturalness in the first—the implication that “he” the poet has his own innate song to sing—is finessed, if you will, by the second, which suggests that “the song” isn’t simply available, that it must be found. Or better: recovered. As I suggest above, the poet moved to undertake such discoveries and recoveries has plenty of material to work with in the essay at hand. Imagine reading “Diamonds” in that first issue of *Callaloo*: finishing the essay, on page 9, you are cradling all the heft of the rest of the volume in your right hand. Just start turning pages and you will find more such studies of history and folklore as Rowell’s unofficial mission statement calls for. And less than halfway through you will flip to Bessie Jones’s essay ““You Can Say That Again.”” A fascinating essay in its own right, here I want to highlight one detail that speaks to the situation of the journal and the young creative writers Rowell might have imagined he was speaking to. A study (and appreciation) of black folk idioms, Jones’s essay instances an unconventional approach to folklore studies and ethnography. She explains that her method of collecting is to ask her students for the idioms they grew up with.⁴⁹ In this way, the university classroom becomes a folklore site.⁵⁰

I single out Jones’s essay because it hints at what is live in the tensions animating Rowell’s verse, his aesthetic, and his polemic with the BAM. On one hand, he does assume a

⁴⁸ Rowell, “Diamonds,” 5.

⁴⁹ Bessie W. Jones, ““You Can Say That Again,”” *Callaloo* 1 (December 1976): 25.

⁵⁰ Something similar took place programmatically in Southern Illinois University–East St. Louis’s Experiment in Higher Education in the sixties. Literary critic Eugene Redmond reminisces, “In introductory writing courses. . . our students wrote down passages from the Bible, Shakespeare, folklore, Baldwin, and Hurston. They collected samples of speech from their communities, recorded their own voices on tape, and did contrastive listenings, critiques, and re-presentations of these brands of English.” Redmond, “Griots, Bluesicians, Dues-Payers, and Pedagogues: An African-American, Autobiographical, 1960s’ View of Culture Studies,” in *English Studies/Culture Studies: Institutionalizing Dissent*, ed. Isaiah Smithson and Nancy Ruff (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 117.

kind of Herderian nationalism, building on the belief that the “Black South” has a certain spirit and hence produces a certain way of being.⁵¹ According to this view, you always have the song of yourself at the ready, since that song is the natural expression of the spirit of a people and a place. On the other hand, Rowell calls for “study,” for a curriculum for understanding the distinctiveness of black southern culture. These are not necessarily mutually exclusive positions. The cultural practices Rowell celebrates as distinctly Black South practices (e.g., cooking, quilting, flower-arranging, the use of medicinal herbs, conjure, dress-making) are clearly forms of transmitted knowledge.⁵² To practice herbal medicine in a traditional way, for example, one learns from family and community which herbs and spices will achieve what results. In this way, study plan and native soil go together. Yet the tension (or divide) feels real to Rowell. He insists that his elders “inherited” a strain of African-derived functionalism that is definitive of Black South culture, and that this inheritance, as the metaphor implies, came “without a self-conscious knowing.”⁵³ He valorizes expressive culture not as a form of knowledge but as unselfconscious practice. To return to Jones’s essay on folk idioms, what is striking isn’t that folk knowledge is being collected at an unconventional site, the college classroom. What is notable is that Jones’s method of collecting indicates a transition from a mimetic environment to a scene of diegetic

⁵¹ There is room to debate how much Rowell channels a Herderian nationalist perspective and how much a thesis of African cultural retention à la Herskovits. Whatever the balance, certainly there is something of the former inflecting his belief in the latter.

⁵² All traditionally domestic, decorative, and occult activities, we might begin to gather from what he chooses to celebrate as Black South culture a hint of Rowell’s and *Callaloo*’s underacknowledged queerness. Although Cheryl Clarke, Wahneema Lubiano, GerShun Avilez, and Jonathan Fenderson have strongly revised longstanding views of the hetero-masculinity of Black nationalism in general and the BAM in particular, a question remains whether Rowell’s sexuality and his championing of queer writers (e.g., Melvin Dixon) accounts for some of the hostility he and his projects received from BAM stalwarts over the years. See Clarke, *“After Mecca”: Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2005); Lubiano, “Black Nationalism and Black Common Sense: Policing Ourselves and Others,” in *The House That Race Built: Black Americans, U.S. Terrain*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), 232–52; Avilez, *Radical Aesthetics and Modern Black Nationalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016); Fenderson, *Building*.

⁵³ Rowell, “Diamonds,” 8.

transmission. Mimetic learning is how we learn when we watch and imitate people and things around us. “A way of life,” Haym Soloveitchik says, “is not learned but absorbed.”⁵⁴ Diegetic transmission by contrast occurs through explicit instruction. The distinction goes back to Plato and before. And while too simple, the distinction is provisionally useful. If the BAM—like Rowell, in this case—tended to valorize “real,” folk or mass cultural practices, then one thing was certain: these practices couldn’t be “hidden away on university campuses.”⁵⁵ Nonetheless, we have Jones, who does something much less dramatic than reject the spatial division implied in Baraka’s language—something which, in actual fact, was much more radical: she recognizes the co-constitution of the folk and the university. Gathering her folk idioms from her students, she treats “the folk” as a diegetic construction, one always and already formed by scholarly practice. As well, she suggests that mimetic learning might take place outside the encompassing communities both Baraka and Rowell valorize.

Over the course of three decades and *Callaloo*’s great success, Rowell’s project moved closer to Jones’s position. At the journal’s thirtieth anniversary celebrations, hosted at Johns Hopkins University in 2007, a poet in attendance told Rowell, “I didn’t understand a thing those critics talked about. I wish they would speak English.”⁵⁶ Hearing this, Rowell says he reflected that for years he had heard something similar from the other side of aisle, so to speak. Critic friends complained that contemporary poets weren’t worth the pain it took to read them. In response he initiated the Callaloo Conferences, a yearly retreat for scholars and creative writers, a space for them to get know each other.⁵⁷ “We have continuously brought critical minds and

⁵⁴ Haym Soloveitchik, “Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy,” *Tradition* 28, no. 4 (Summer 1994): 66.

⁵⁵ Baraka, “Post-Racial,” 167.

⁵⁶ Rowell, “*Callaloo*,” 63.

⁵⁷ Charles Henry Rowell, “A Letter from the Editor of *Callaloo*,” *Callaloo* 36, no. 3 (Summer 2013): 724.

creative imaginations together in public and private exchanges on critical and creative matters of production and reading,” Rowell explains. “We have begun to understand each other’s modes of translations of the world, and the media and forms through which we represent them.”⁵⁸ Pursuing a project always implicit in *Callaloo*, Rowell’s response to the poet in Baltimore and to the critics who had complained over the years was to seek ways to diminish the divide between creative and scholarly communities. Like Bessie Jones, he more than rejects the division. For a long time now, Rowell has been in the business of making the university the site of the black poet’s mimetic self-production.

“What It Is to Be Black Here in This Time and Space”

The process that turned the university into a key site of Black poetic production was underway before Rowell came on the scene. Howard-based poet and critic Sterling A. Brown was only the most established academic “to imagine, create, and instruct a literary audience for black writing” before the midcentury.⁵⁹ But it was finally the BAM, and not just its demise, that created the conditions of possibility for *Callaloo*, as well as similar endeavors like John McCluskey’s *Ju-Ju* at Case-Western, Quincy Troupe’s *Confrontations* at Ohio University, and Alvin Aubert’s *Obsidian* at SUNY.⁶⁰ As mentioned, BAM writers were engaged with universities before, during, and after the movement’s heyday. To take some examples, one could point to Sterling Brown’s

⁵⁸ Rowell, “*Callaloo*,” 63.

⁵⁹ Sonya Posmentier, “Blueprints for Negro Reading: Sterling Brown’s Study Guides,” in *A Companion to the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Cherene Sherrard-Johnson (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 121.

⁶⁰ James Smethurst considers the BAM the primary cause of the rise of identity knowledges in universities, as well as the rise of multiethnic literary studies in the English Department. Madhu Dubey claims the BAM “initiated one of the most significant developments in the history of African American literature—its institutionalization as an object of academic study.” See Smethurst, *Black Arts*, 1–22 and Dubey, “The Postmodern Moment in Black Literary and Cultural Studies,” in *Renewing Black Intellectual History: The Ideological and Material Foundation of African American Thought*, ed. Adolph Reed, Jr. and Kenneth W. Warren (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2010), 238.

influence on Baraka during his time at Howard; the fact that Dent was the son of Dillard University's third and longest-serving president and had been raised with the expectation he would pursue an academic career; the founding of landmark West Coast BAM journal *Black Dialogue* at San Francisco State College, where most of its editorial staff met as students; Larry Neal's long residence in academia as student, professor, and administrator at universities ranging from Lincoln and Penn to Yale and Howard; and Keorapetse Kgositsile's and Nikki Giovanni's MFAs from Columbia, the latter having applied with a recommendation letter from Broadside Press editor Dudley Randall. These examples suggest academia's often unremarked presence in the BAM. And beyond the BAM, a faculty member at the University of Wisconsin, Madison in 1977 reported that "Afro-American undergraduate poets . . . with but one exception, write poetry without the benefits of formal creative writing experiences or even more informal poetry group discussions. What they share are courses in Afro-American literature [and] Contemporary Afro-American Poetry."⁶¹ The university as an institution may not have been the only condition of possibility for Black Arts and Post-Black Arts poetics, but we have yet fully to appreciate the postwar college campus—and Black studies therein—as a matrix for Black intellectual and artistic dialogue.

The Wisconsin faculty member I quote was Sarah Webster Fabio, a poet whose legacy is defined by a particularly difficult negotiation of academic life. In the 1976 documentary *Rainbow Black*, viewers can see Fabio in her study, stacks of books piled on the desk behind her. Talking to the camera, held by her daughter Cheryl, Fabio reflects on her career and background, reminiscing about the publishing and university worlds, her contemporaries and aspirations. The

⁶¹ Sarah Webster Fabio, "An Introduction to Roots/Branches/Offshoots," *Black Roots: Roots/Branches/Offshoots: An Anthology of Black Poetry*, p. 1, Afro-American Studies Department and Roots-Festival Africa '77, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Sarah Webster Fabio Papers, Box 7, Folder 16, Fisk Special Collections.

film cuts between close-ups and three-quarter-length shots, the books behind Fabio coming into and going out of focus. At length, the camera pans, letting us read the spines and covers.

Anthologies and criticism from the BAM. A biography of Phillis Wheatley. Alan Lomax and Raoul Abdul's *3000 Years of Black Poetry*. These books were her study texts, her day's work as teacher, reviewer, scholar, poet, musician. Not just a filmic conceit, a way to establish who Fabio was and her bona fides, these books were the mess and meaning of her life.

When remembered at all, Fabio tends to be remembered as a teacher of Black Panther Party co-founder Bobby Seale, who took her classes at Merritt College. But by the end of her life, she was known as the "Mother of Black Studies." The near-absence of a writer and educator who had earned such a moniker from American literary and Black studies institutional history points to several issues in recent historiography. Neglect of the contributions of Black women scholars and poets is paramount. But at least as important here is that oversight this dissertation tries to correct: failure to see the fortunes of identity knowledges and American poetry as intertwined. A look at Fabio's path to become one of the "mothers" of Black studies will show how the postwar university itself became a jumping-off point for Black poets and writers; an analysis of her poetry will show what the scholarly entanglements of Black Arts poetics produced in its aftermath in the university.

The journey to her impressive moniker began in 1928 in Nashville, where Fabio was born and where her papers are held today at Fisk University, her alma mater. After two years at Spelman College in Atlanta and her subsequent matriculation from Fisk, where she met Arna Bontemps, Fabio married Cyril Fabio, an amateur sculptor and dental student. Shortly thereafter, Cyril enlisted in the US Air Force and the Fabios spent the next decade and a half moving around the US and at one point to Germany. During that time Sarah Fabio worked, entertained, and

often took classes at local universities, while raising their growing family. In the sixties, almost two decades after her graduation from Fisk, Fabio was able to enter and finish a graduate program; she received her MA in Language Arts with Creative Writing (Poetry) emphasis from San Francisco State College in 1965. In a biographical statement, she writes:

[In 1965] I had my eyes opened to a different world view and doors opened on career opportunities in several here-to-fore unthought-of directions. I could be a professional writer. I could be a poet full time. But, who with five children could earn a living as a poet, I asked? I found myself being beckoned back to the classroom, but instead of public school secondary level, I found more of a challenge in higher education. . . . I was prepared to enter the traditional English Department structure and I did so. . . . During graduate school and even more so afterwards, I found myself participating, at a fringe level, with the Black Arts West Movement, but actually, I was always more identified with the San Francisco Bay Area Cultural scene. During this time . . . I entered the forum on the educational needs of the Black student. And, then, in 1966 I attended The First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal. The effect was one of integrative insight and serious commitment to the notion of a pluralistic world, truly democratic, with respect for ethnicity without privilege to a chosen few. I became involved with the concept of black studies, with the dream, the struggle, the vision, the day-to-day dedication: I must admit that this was speculatively, at first, then gradually I became personally, totally, serious dedicated.

And so, in 1965, I entered Phase I of my adult life in a role defined outside the province of mother-wife-housemaker-socialite-breadwinner. I was still all of these—and, I was now artist, too.⁶²

From 1965 on, Fabio worked continuously in higher education. It was during this time that she became a key figure in the development of Black studies. While teaching at places like the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the University of Washington, Cornell University, and the University of Iowa, she helped institutionalize Black studies. At nearly every school where she worked Fabio created courses, curricula, and committees for the fledgling field. The California College of Arts and Crafts asked her to spearhead their Black studies curriculum in the late sixties, as did Merritt College and the University of California, Berkeley.⁶³ Already by 1971, Fabio had lectured about or organized seminars on Black literature and language at Iowa, Cornell, and Syracuse University, and founded Berkeley's Black Writer's Workshop.⁶⁴ In the late seventies, she began a PhD in American studies at Iowa under the direction of Darwin T. Turner, then considered, alongside Brown and George E. Kent, one of the major voices in African American literary studies. Somehow, along the way, Fabio also became a writer of note; she published poems and essays that are still anthologized and created four pioneering albums of jazz-spoken word poetry. It was quite a career.

Looking back, there are obvious and less obvious reasons for Fabio's neglect. It is obvious that in legacy, as in life, Fabio encountered barriers to recognition because of her race,

⁶² Sarah Webster Fabio, "An Introduction," np, Sarah Webster Papers, Box 1, Folder 1, Fisk Special Collections.

⁶³ Sarah Webster Fabio, "Vita," Moses and Frances Asch Collection, Series 1, Box 11, Folder 21, Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives and Collections, Smithsonian Institution.

⁶⁴ Fabio, "Vita," 2, 1.

gender, and age.⁶⁵ Less obviously, her chefs d'oeuvre—the four Folkways albums, *Boss Soul* (1972), *Soul Ain't Soul Is* (1973), *Jujus/Alchemy of the Blues* (1976), *Together to the Tune of Coltrane's "Equinox"* (1977), recorded with multi-talented studio engineer and executive Moe Asch—were disadvantageously both behind and ahead of their time. The heavy use of funk, then in commercial ascendance, apparently left critical observers cold, many of whom were still bemoaning the eclipse of jazz, while the scholarly and pedagogical elements, which fit so well the Folkways catalog, could hardly have endeared them to those seeking either plain poetry or tunes. At a time when poets produced some deeply awkward musical-poetic collaborations, as even sympathetic observers acknowledge, Fabio produced a series of albums that combine music and poetry to tremendous effect.⁶⁶ Indeed, the Don't Fight the Feeling band that backs her was composed of her children and their partners and friends, which goes some way to explaining the smart, warm, dynamic sound. As Fabio told Asch, "It has been an extended Family affair."⁶⁷ This is in contrast to her written texts, which with some exceptions do not reach the same heights. Many feel incomplete, several are awkward, and most decidedly minor.⁶⁸ Even the poems that serve as the basis for her albums wilt a little without accompaniment. However, I want to offer a reading of one album, the better to understand the work Fabio does in her written

⁶⁵ For a discussion of Fabio's career and these barriers to her recognition, see Michael J. New, "Panther Teacher: Sarah Webster Fabio's Black Power," *Meridians* 17, no. 1 (September 2018): 51–81. Regarding her age, Fabio was a decade or more older than many of the poets who have come to represent the Black Arts movement.

⁶⁶ See Aldon Lynn Nielsen, *Black Chant: Languages of African-American Postmodernism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 177–78.

⁶⁷ Fabio to Moe Asch, December 15, 1971, Moses and Frances Asch Collection, Series 1, Box 11, Folder 21, Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives and Collections.

⁶⁸ Some of Fabio's best poems, however, include "A Tree Is a Landscape: A Landscape Is a Point of View," "Of Puddles, Worms, Slimy Things (A Hoodoo Nature Poem)" with the author's note, "Juju for Grandma," and "Evil Is No Black Thing."

texts. The albums demand a rethinking of what is called or recognized as scholarly, a rethinking that must in turn be applied to the poetry.

A concept-album of sorts, *Boss Soul: 12 Poems by Sarah Webster Fabio, Set to Drum Talk, Rhythm & Images* ranges across African Diaspora musical styles and idioms, at times narrating and always enacting the development of Black music in the New World. Fabio and the Don't Fight the Feeling band play and explore oral, rhetorical, and musical forms and practices, like the dozens, calypso, military roll, and signifyin(g); they perform and at the same time historicize, explicate, and theorize the music through narration. Refusing the distinctions between these modes—analysis, theorization, performance, embodiment—Fabio sidesteps a fundamental trait of Western scholarship: the meta stance that treats the investigator as one who stands above or apart from the material. This stance finds a precedent in the Greek root *skholé*, which means leisure and suggests detachment from all those pressing and potentially implicating matters that arise in human life, as Bourdieu explains.⁶⁹ Objectivity is one of leisure's many dreams. Fabio belongs to a long line of Black feminist thinkers whose theory and criticism has been denied claim to those terms because it refuses this detached, objective stance.⁷⁰ It is thinking, scholarship done in the madding crowd rather than far from it. In Fabio's case, employed by the university, though often contingently, she disturbs what leisurely perspective she has by playing the music about which she talks. By playing the talking off the playing.

⁶⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 10, 12.

⁷⁰ See June Jordan, *Civil Wars* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981); bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston, Mass.: South End Press, 1989); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000); M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Saidiya V. Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019).

On the track “Work It Out,” the narrator, Thomas Fabio, reading his mother’s words, delivers the album’s thesis:

Drum talk, moving rhythms, slant/slick rhymes, liberated minds, soaring spirits having visions filled with concrete images, earthy associations, street idiom, combine to give us the metaphor of what it is to be black here in this time and space.⁷¹

Taking drum talk and the rest as examples of African American vernacular and musical expression, Thomas Fabio explains that together they provide a representation of Blackness, circa 1972. The music and language performed and expounded on *Boss Soul* disclose “what it is to be black here in this time and space.” They limn the modes and meanings of Blackness at a specific historical juncture. Though broad, it is a thesis with roots in cultural studies and ethnomusicology.⁷² It would have been familiar in the Black Power era as a version of Baraka’s thesis in *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. The basic conceit of that study was that the history of so-called Negro music (spirituals, seculars, blues, jazz) reflected and hence documented changes in the collective psyche of Black folk in America. Close study of the music from its origins to the present, Baraka claimed, would unfold in song the entire history of African America. It seems as if Fabio adapted Baraka’s thesis to focus on the present. Baraka’s end-goal became her first purpose: to bring the present’s past to life. But despite the closeness of their projects and Fabio’s avowed admiration for Baraka, *Blues People* was not her primary model. *Blues People* broke new ground for popular audiences, but its insights were prepared by several

⁷¹ Sarah Webster Fabio, “Work It Out,” track 1 on *Boss Soul*, Folkways Records Album No. FL9710, 1972, 33 1/3.

⁷² To be sure, Fabio worked in academia just before the generalist disposition was completely finished off by hyperspecialization.

earlier scholarly works, most famously Melville J. Herskovits's *The Myth of the Negro Past*. However, Baraka appears not to have known the monograph closest in argument and subject matter to his book. By contrast, it was Fabio's model.

The dedication for Fabio's major work *Rainbow Signs*, a seven-volume poetic sequence published in 1973 that charts the Black past in order to imagine a Black future, opens as follows: "To Miles Mark Fisher IV and to his father, the late Dr. and his work *Negro Slave Songs in the U.S.A.*"⁷³ To understand the high esteem she had for the Fishers, and Miles Mark Fisher, Sr.'s 1953 monograph in particular, you only need to see whom they precede in the dedication. Fabio goes on to dedicate *Rainbow Signs* to Margaret Walker and Gwendolyn Brooks, to Sterling Brown, Arna Bontemps, and Langston Hughes, to Moe Asch, to her family, and to the community at Oberlin, where she worked and through whose New Media Workshop the volumes of *Rainbow Signs* were published. To repeat, topping this list of important people and institutions are the Fishers.⁷⁴ Fabio's high admiration begins to make sense when we realize everything said about *Blues People* applies to *Negro Slave Songs*, and that the latter exerts tremendous influence over *Boss Soul*. A brief account of the book and its arguments will show what Fabio borrowed from it.

"Had every spiritual been preserved," Fisher writes in *Negro Slave Songs*, "a complete story of every emotion of American Negroes would be available."⁷⁵ Here in a sentence is the

⁷³ Most volumes of *Rainbow Signs* have two dedications. One is a dedication for the particular volume, the other, always the same, the series dedication. This line opens the latter.

⁷⁴ In case the point needs stressing, another indication of Fabio's esteem is found in an exams reading list from her time at Iowa. On a list that includes Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction*, Herskovits's *Myth of the Negro Past*, Alain Locke's *The New Negro*, and books by Fanon, Césaire, Faulkner, and James Weldon Johnson, *Negro Slave Songs* again appears first. Fabio to Chadwick Hansen, May 21, 1976, Sarah Webster Fabio Papers, Box 3A, Folder 4, Fisk Special Collections.

⁷⁵ Miles Mark Fisher, *Negro Slave Songs in the United States* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968), 180.

book's main thrust. Already an academic, author, and pastor, Miles Mark Fisher, III returned in 1945 to the University of Chicago, where he had studied as an undergraduate, to earn his PhD in church history.⁷⁶ At that time Chicago's Divinity School, influenced by Joachim Wach, a refugee from Nazi Germany, was busy recentering its curriculum on the history of religions. History of religions departed from theology and confessional study of religion, emphasizing instead the humanistic dimension of religious practice and experience, responsive to scientific—properly speaking, *Wissenschaftliche*—analysis.⁷⁷ Appropriately, the dissertation that became *Negro Slave Songs*, written partly under Wach's direction, took inspiration from Fisher's study of the historical development of the Psalms. According to Ray Allen Billington, the Psalms' development led Fisher to a new understanding of the spirituals he grew up with and now sang with his congregations. Rather than unselfconscious, transcendent outpourings, as both pious and neo-Romantic readings saw them, the spirituals were specific, motivated, deliberate responses to their time and circumstances. History had left its mark on them. "The idea that spirituals might be more than folk music," Billington quotes Fisher, "haunted me."⁷⁸ This sense must have attracted Fabio; his intuition that the spirituals were—and could be proven to be—a record of Black history in America, her focus too in *Rainbow Signs*. It is also the same conclusion Baraka arrives at a decade later.

⁷⁶ Biographical information comes from Lenwood G. Davis, "Miles Mark Fisher: Minister, Historian and Cultural Philosopher," *Negro History Bulletin* 46, no. 1 (January-February-March 1983): 19–21. However, Fisher's educational history seems to depart from what has been written about it. Davis claims Fisher earned his PhD from Chicago in 1938, but his dissertation committee included a faculty member who did not join the department until 1945. In the foreword to *Negro Slave Songs*, Ray Allen Billington claims Fisher submitted his dissertation in 1945. It was submitted in 1948 and Fisher was awarded his degree the same year.

⁷⁷ Joseph M. Kitagawa, *The History of Religions: Understanding Human Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 138–41.

⁷⁸ Ray Allen Billington, foreword to Fisher, *Negro*, vii.

Yet unlike Baraka, Fisher's interest was less in showing Black life reflected in Black music than proving slave songs were legitimate historical documents. Instead of tracing the ebb and flow of musical expression across time (Baraka's often-invoked notion of "the changing same"), Fisher set out to transform a scholarly imaginary.⁷⁹ "At the organizational meeting of the American Folklore Society at Harvard University on January 4, 1888," he recounts,

the wish was expressed "that thorough studies . . . [be] made of Negro music and songs." It was thought that such inquiries would be difficult to make and would be impossible in a few years. The Society at once became so popular because of its endorsement by Professors Francis J. Child, Franz Boas, and George Kittredge, as well as others from great universities, that Negro songs were ever afterwards called folk music.⁸⁰

Here is the pernicious flipside of Bessie Jones's recognition that the folk and university are mutually constituted. Fisher draws his readers' attention to a moment when American scholars—given imprimatur by hugely influential scholars of poetry (Child), literature (Kittredge), and anthropology (Boas)—decided Black cultural expression should be read under this sign of the folk. "Folk music," Fisher argues, became synonymous with the mythical and ahistorical—timeless expressions of a people-mind. Moreover, folklorists and other scholars newly interested in, and yet entirely unfamiliar with Black music, exposed their preconceptions as students almost exclusively weaned on Anglo-Saxon materials. The motifs, refrains, schemes, and spirit of the music were referred back to Anglo-European contexts. Building on precedents like Herskovits's

⁷⁹ See Baraka, "The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)," 1966, in Baraka, *LeRoi*, 186–209.

⁸⁰ Fisher, *Negro*, 18.

remarks on African musical survivals, Fisher aimed to resituate and reframe the study of the spirituals.⁸¹ As he lays out in a concise methodological statement:

The primary function of African music was to give the history of a people. African Negroes were transplanted to the Americas along with their gifts of song. The first extended collection of slave songs was advertised as historical documents from the Negro people. . . . Negro spirituals are best understood in harmony with this historical interpretation.⁸²

Fisher sought to wrest back control of the scholarly narrative by foregrounding history. A people's story was encoded in song, yes, but the mental constructions therein were neither naïvely transcribed nor unchanging. Not only must any approach to the spirituals focus on their synchronic and diachronic contexts, they had themselves to be regarded as historical documents created by individuals for specific and determinate purposes. (These were not primarily agents of spiritual transfiguration, like one finds in Johnson's "O Black and Unknown Bards.") Historicity of method and object coincide in Fisher's investigation.

Alongside Fisher's specific arguments, such coincidence plays a key role in Fabio's writing. Fabio viewed poetry—the poetry she taught and that which she wrote—as the “folkloric

⁸¹ See Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 261–69.

⁸² Fisher, *Negro*, 25–26. Compare Fisher's statement with one of his advisor Wach: “Interpretation of expressions of religious experience means an integral understanding, that is, full linguistic, historical, psychological, technological, and sociological enquiry, in which full justice is done to the intention of the expression and to the context in which it occurs, and in which this experience is related to the experience of which it testifies.” Wach, *Types of Religious Experience: Christian and Non-Christian* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1951), 28–29, quoted in Kitagawa, *History*, 141.

form which the Black Experience has most often molded itself into.”⁸³ She includes under the category of poetry the spirituals analyzed by Fisher, as well as folk tales and seculars. “For a people without the resources for printing presses and publishing companies,” Fabio writes, “for a people who were forbidden through custom and law ready access to the master’s language and his language arts skills, a song in the heart became a survival tool for the race’s cultural roots.”⁸⁴ Leaning into that double-edged language of the folk, she suggests that poetry is a form of knowledge, a vehicle of knowledge-transmission for the African Diaspora. Fabio helpfully draws out this idea’s implications in the context of academia and the nascent field of Black studies. In a breakdown of the uses to which she puts her own poems, Fabio describes one as a “Poem–socio-anthropological mini lecture,” another as “Poem–biography,” and a particular series as “Poem–critique.”⁸⁵ And she says, “my greatest piece of scholarship to date is distilled into a poem-linguistic study.”⁸⁶ Participant and co-creator in the university field, Fabio’s learning unlocks poetry, which turns out to be itself a mode or method of learning. Consequently, for her, the paradigmatic scholar is other than a university professor, just as Fisher’s model historian was not a member of the American Folklore Society. The analogue to Fisher’s inventors of the spirituals is an ancestor in Fabio’s work—a grandmother, to be precise.

In the rest of this section, I will read “grandmother poems” by Fabio. These poems feature some of her sharpest discursive strategies, used to create a scholarly poetics that renders the familial unfamiliar, the personal conventional. Her aim is simple: to do scholarship in verse. The result is anything but simple. Fabio turns university knowledge into (a representation of)

⁸³ Sarah Webster Fabio, “Introductory Notes,” *Jujus and Jubilees* (Oberlin, Oh.: New Media Workshop, 1973), iv.

⁸⁴ Fabio, “Introductory,” iv.

⁸⁵ Fabio, “Introductory,” v.

⁸⁶ Fabio, “Introductory,” iv.

social identity, and vice versa. And the ancestor, the grandmother, figures the impossibility of holding these things apart, of returning to some time when they were separate.

A track from *Boss Soul* reveals the central dynamics present in her grandmother poems. At the top of “Soul Through a Lickin’ Stick,” Thomas Fabio recites: “Echoes of songs of childhood rhymes for work, play and teaching: ‘Sticks and stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me.’”⁸⁷ In the liner notes, this line of thought continues: “With ‘Yo Grandma’ as background, ‘Soul Through a Lickin’ Stick’ is about this experience.” When Thomas concludes, the light drumming on wood block and bells accompanying him fills the silence. Vicki Jordan and Carolyn Fabio enter singing “Yo Grandma.” Their voices, the “Yo Grandma” refrain, and the drumming recall The Dixie Cups’s 1965 performance of “Iko Iko,” accompanied by drumming on metal chairs, as they sang, “My grandma told / Your grandma,” and so on. At length “Yo Grandma” fades away and Sarah Fabio herself begins:

Then,
she can
brush off
the bruises
and really
get Down
deep
into her
pot and

⁸⁷ Sarah Webster Fabio, “Soul Through a Lickin’ Stick,” track 3 on *Boss Soul*.

cook—

I mean

Burn

a lot.⁸⁸

“Yo Grandma,” taking the role of the echo of childhood song Thomas Fabio mentions, gives way to what he calls “ancestor worship” elsewhere on the same track—“an attitude toward our ancestors and elders,” reverent and at root religious, learned from the continuous oral tradition that Fisher claimed grounds Black music. The form ancestor worship takes in Fabio’s song is a sketch of her grandmother’s theory and labor.

bell hooks once said, “I came to theory because I was hurting.”⁸⁹ In “Soul Through a Lickin’ Stick” the grandmother’s business is dealing with hurts and getting down to cooking. The title’s “lickin’ stick” refers to the ladle grandma uses to sample her kitchen labors and to give the younger generations tastes. When Vertamae Grosvenor claims in *Vibration Cooking* that she never measured when she cooked, but instead “cook[ed] by vibration,” she did not say she cooked by instinct.⁹⁰ Grosvenor refers to a practice of culinary improvisation learned at the sipping end of a ladle. To cook involves theory and judgment of taste; it demands calculations so deeply ingrained they may seem like natural intuition. The “lickin’ stick” is the stick the learner licks. It is also the stick that gives licks. “She can / lay as good / a whipping / on your behind / as if she’d used / some / Georgia / pine,” Fabio chants. This is a side of things hard to stomach. But while Grandma wields the stick, the licking she delivers is not hers alone. The bruises and hurts

⁸⁸ Line breaks follow the line notes.

⁸⁹ bell hooks, “Theory as Liberatory Practice,” *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 4, no. 1 (1991): 1.

⁹⁰ Verta Mae [Grosvenor], *Vibration Cooking; or, The Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970), xxxvii.

from which theory offers refuge do not equate without remainder with those inflicted by family.⁹¹ In “Notes of a Native Son,” James Baldwin narrated his realization that his father’s cruelty was inextricable from his struggle with anti-Blackness: “How to prepare the child for the day when the child would be despised and how to *create* in the child—by what means?—a stronger antidote to this poison than one had found for oneself.”⁹² The “soul” the licking stick imparts is part theory and judgment of taste, part theory and practice of survival. Beneath the pot, the fire burns. Grandma’s theory—gained from her foremothers (“Her Ma / and her / Ma’s ma / taught her”), just as she transmits it in turn—originates in the dangerous and productive place where metal conducts heat. This is theory as ancestor worship. At stake are knowledge and its conditions of transmission and reception in a family context overdetermined by survival struggles.

In “Sassafras Toned, My Grandma Sat,” the stakes and problems of knowledge established in “Soul Through a Lickin’ Stick” are worked through in the mode of scholarship. At a glance, “Sassafras Toned” looks like a dedicatory poem to a grandparent, like Hart Crane’s “My Grandmother’s Love Letters” or Robert Lowell’s “Grandparents,” in which the poet-child desires and courts the grandparent’s approval. Unlike “Soul Through a Lickin’ Stick,” “Sassafras Toned” is not complicated by the juxtaposition of print, performance, and liner note versions; hence, it runs a greater risk of being interpreted as lyric. But a lyric reading of “Sassafras Toned” will miss the accent Fabio places on the indeterminacy of voice, what Gillian White calls a discursive “deconstruction of ‘voice.’”⁹³ Moreover, it will miss the scholarly poetics at work.

⁹¹ hooks, “Theory,” 1–3, 12.

⁹² James Baldwin, “Notes of a Native Son,” in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 106 (Baldwin’s italics).

⁹³ White, *Lyric*, 86.

While “Sassafras Toned” appears invested in the personal, it is actually an exploration of language conventions that set person and personality in extra-personal perspective. The poem is dedicated to Fabio’s grandmother Elizabeth Storey, who was born into slavery, and gives a portrait of the matriarch in eight stanzas of regular, declarative verse. Lines like “Stolidly silent, squaw-like, / thirty years past her promised / three-score and ten” mix descriptive and biographical detail.⁹⁴ But Storey is a more than familial figure in Fabio’s work, her significance irreducible to mimetic representation or memorial recollection. In reference to a critical anthology she assembled, Fabio comments that Storey was the “basis of my home training and understanding of the folk lore [sic] and customs which are a part of our Black Heritage.”⁹⁵ It was through Storey that she routed her critical understanding of the Black past, taking “biographical-autobiographical approaches to socio-historical meaning,” as she says in a paper written during her coursework at Iowa.⁹⁶ Accordingly, the grandmother withdraws from the portrait drawn of her and appears instead as a kind of composite of the history she lived. The phrase “three-score and ten,” for example, comes from Psalms. It is an idiom that means “a full life,” but also sets the grandmother in the Bible-focused culture that made her who she was. Likewise, proverbs attributed to her, like “The Lord giveth and taketh” and “Pretty is as pretty does,” are stock phrases.⁹⁷ Her words of wisdom are not hers; they teach moral lessons from within a common social and linguistic context.

⁹⁴ Sarah Webster Fabio, “Sassafras Toned, My Grandma Sat,” *Boss Soul* (Oberlin, Oh.: New Media Workshop, 1973), 11, ll. 1–3.

⁹⁵ Sarah Webster Fabio, “Storey Family Story,” np, Sarah Webster Fabio Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, Fisk Special Collections.

⁹⁶ Sarah Webster Fabio, paper abstract, “We the People... A Nineteenth Century South Carolina Retrospect,” December 1975, np, Introduction to American Civilization, Sarah Webster Fabio Papers, Box 12, Folder 8, Fisk Special Collections.

⁹⁷ Fabio, “Sassafras,” 11, ll. 6–7, 10.

Such interfaces of the personal and the extra-personal come to a head near the poem's end, when the grandchild plays "Down by the Riverside" on the piano. The refrain prompts a confession that the grandchild is worried about the grandmother's love of this song. The worry comes from a literal reading of the spiritual, which opens "Gonna lay down my sword / and shield, down by the riverside." "Often, I'd wonder how she'd / manage that in Tennessee / where rivers were scarce [sic]."⁹⁸ In a sense, the perceptual divide is between a child's literalism and adult double-meaning; an absence of actual rivers frustrates the former's comprehension. In another sense, however, the divide is rooted in the worlds from which child and grandmother come. Sometimes called "Ain't Gonna Study War No More," the spiritual's chorus goes: "I ain't gonna study war no more / Study war no more / Ain't gonna study war no more." It is a triumphant number, the refusal to "study war" a prelude to the last laying-down-of-arms once across the River Jordan. Of course the chorus takes on redoubled significance for us since it alights on the idea of study. What kind of study is this? And what studies might replace it in the long meanwhile before the crossing of the river?

Most straightforwardly, in a poem dedicated to a Black woman born before the Civil War, this is a study of those arts of survival June Jordan called "Life Studies" and Black studies interchangeably.⁹⁹ The chorus of "Down by the Riverside" indexes a moment in the history of feeling, as Fisher and Baraka would argue. But as Fabio, her grandmother Elizabeth, and Jordan well knew, the meaning of this history of feeling does not simply turn over to "the originators of certain songs" as Fisher contends, especially when his candidates for authorship turn out mostly

⁹⁸ Fabio, "Sassafras," 11, ll. 22–24.

⁹⁹ See June Jordan, *Life Studies, 1966–1976*, ed. Conor Tomás Reed and Talia Shalev, *Lost & Found: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative*, series 7 (New York: City University of New York, 2017).

to be men. It is equally untenable for the spiritual's meaning to reside in a collective psyche implicitly figured by Baraka as male.

Fabio's thesis on the album *Boss Soul*, her claim that an exploration of musical forms can get at what it means to be Black, is present also in her printed poetry. In "Sassafras Toned" she augments the exploration of call-and-response and musical ancestor worship in "Soul Through a Lickin' Stick," adding a printed engagement with the spirituals, and perhaps more importantly, stressing the meaning of feeling for Black women. If there is going to be a consideration of feeling and Blackness, then it must consider what it means to be a Black woman. In "Soul Through a Lickin' Stick," one is given the first part of an argument, so to speak. Its subject matter is an elderly matriarch and her cooking and teaching, and also the banter of a pair of matriarchs. We know, then, that Fabio wants the listener to hear something about how theory, knowledge, and memory are crafted and transmitted. But in the reference to "Down by the Riverside" Fabio goes further. Anchoring us to a specific spiritual, she reemphasizes women's primacy of place in the history, tradition, and transmission of Black music, dwelling on the memory of a woman whose affection for the song became translated in a form of living and dying. It is impossible to ignore Baraka's claim that the "complete story of every emotion" of Black Americans is "the product of the black *man* in this country."¹⁰⁰ Fabio rebuts the constitutive misogyny of Fisher's and Baraka's account of Black music's structures of feeling. In this way, she connects her scholarship to the scholarship by-any-other-name of grandma Elizabeth Storey, who transmits, by her example, the real history of Black music. It is through her poetry that Fabio alchemizes this kind of griotic scholarly lineage; unbound by the strictures of scholarly discourse, her verse practices rework what being a scholar means.

¹⁰⁰ Amiri Baraka, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Perennial, 2002), 17 (my italics).

“*thru rather than about*”: Mackey, *Hambone*

Some readers will have noticed that the dimensions I gave for the early issues of *Callaloo* (5.5” x 8.5”) are slightly smaller than those of a typical scholarly journal. But pick up a copy of *Callaloo* today and you will see that is no longer the case. Around the time Rowell and the journal moved from the University of Kentucky to the University of Virginia, John Hopkins University Press took over the printing of *Callaloo*. In 1985 JHU press added a few extra inches all around to give the journal the dimensions it has now. Between this shift to more conventional proportions and Rowell and the journal’s transfer from a fine public university to an esteemed one, *Callaloo* completes its transformation from a tail-end-of-the-BAM journal of arts and research to one of the two premier post-Black Arts, African American studies-oriented creative and academic journals. Around this time as well, a young Californian, not quite a decade out from his PhD, published in *Callaloo* two excerpts from a novel which had begun as an epistolary poem. (In view of its origins as a poem, and because of what it can tell us about the “becoming academic” of a major late-twentieth-century poets, I will slightly break pattern here to discuss a novel.) The book from which they were taken, *Bedouin Hornbook*, published in 1986, was the first volume in Nathaniel Mackey’s ongoing novel-sequence *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*. Mackey’s epistolary novel was the second installment in the *Callaloo* Fiction Series. Although ostensibly about a jazz outfit in the Bay Area, *Bedouin Hornbook* contains a surprising number of subtle and not-so-subtle connections to the American academic world in which Mackey, a UC Santa Cruz professor, and *Callaloo* alike were embedded. Both at the level of plot and content, the novel seems to describe forms of negotiation with academia then available to a black poet.

The first clue to the academic world *Bedouin Hornbook* ambivalently inhabits appears even before the first page of the novel. In a bibliographic gesture, the novel's acknowledgments page is almost totally given over to a list of books from which Mackey cites in the course of the book. This is notable because, under US copyright law, works of fiction have to acknowledge only books from which epigraphs are drawn, following longstanding fair-use guidelines. Moreover, works of fiction that do make broader acknowledgments of sources tend to do so in a less pronounced way. *Bedouin Hornbook's* acknowledgments are featured on a stand-alone page, in regular-sized type, whereas most novels will use small type to fit such acknowledgments on the copyright page. I don't claim to know why these acknowledgments appear so prominently in Mackey's book. Chances are he had no say in the matter, to the point he may not have even wanted such acknowledgments to appear. Maybe Rowell or an editorial assistant decided to err on the side of (legal) caution.¹⁰¹ Yet appear they do, and prominently so, ranging from works of poetry and autobiography to general nonfiction and scholarly monographs. For present purposes, works that stand out include anthropologist Victor Turner's classic study *The Forest of Symbols*, ethnomusicologist John Miller Chernoff's *African Rhythms and African Sensibility*, and Marcel Griaule's landmark and much-scrutinized book *Conversations with Ogotemmêli*. Each explicitly appears in the novel only briefly, but their very presence suggests that the dialogue and conversation that run throughout *Bedouin Hornbook*—those happening between N., the narrator, and his correspondent, Angel of Dust, and between the novel's other characters, as well as those between the instruments and the music they play—are informed by this body of scholarship. An

¹⁰¹ For comparison, *Djbot Baghostus's Run*, the second in Mackey's novel sequence, published in 1993 by Douglas Messerli's influential LA-based Sun & Moon Press, contains no comparable acknowledgments page. Neither do the volumes that precede and follow *Bedouin Hornbook* in the Callaloo Fiction Series, Rita Dove's *Fifth Sunday* and Charles Frye's *The Peter Pan Chronicles*, published in 1985 and 1989, respectively.

example of this occurs when Aunt Nancy, one of the band members, insists that the band read Chernoff's ethnomusicological study. It transpires that Chernoff's book serves to underscore, or "footnote," Aunt Nancy's ongoing argument with a fellow band member about whether or not the group needs a drummer.¹⁰² The study joins the debate, a debate held as much in the band's jamming as in their discursive parleys. It also turns out that Chernoff's study helps N. finish a lecture, "The Creaking of the Word." And on that note, the book as a whole may, in fact, be said to move precisely toward the performance of this lecture.

Although one would be hard-pressed to cite a single culminating event in *Bedouin Hornbook*, about halfway through N. accepts an invitation to a conference, and his preparations for this conference occupy no small part of the ensuing narrative. Before discussing the conference and N.'s preparations, I want to highlight a comment Mackey once made about his position in the academy. Asked by an interviewer how his sense of poetic community differs from that of some of his predecessors, Mackey gave the following reply:

One big difference is that I pursued an academic career, which meant that I was not in a situation that caused me to seek out a community of writers in the way I otherwise might have. I was already in a kind of community, a community that increasingly included writers in a way that it didn't for, say, [Robert] Duncan and his generation. Of course, the antiacademicism of some of the writers I've been influenced by made for some perturbations on my part about what in the world I was doing in academia. That was something that had to be worked through, and I worked through it.¹⁰³

¹⁰² Nathaniel Mackey, *Bedouin Hornbook* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1986), 144.

¹⁰³ Nathaniel Mackey, "Interview," by Brent Cunningham, in *Paracritical Hinge: Essays, Talks, Notes, Interviews* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018), 323.

Without merely mapping autobiography onto the work, I want to suggest that N.'s lecture (or "metalecture") negotiates—or works through, to borrow Mackey's turn of phrase—"what in the world" he's doing in an academic space. To be sure, N. isn't an academic, strictly speaking. Nor is *Bedouin Hornbook* a campus novel, which may be why it approaches a rapprochement with the academy which the typical campus novel forgoes in favor of irony or complacency. And while that rapprochement is important to Mackey for obvious personal reasons, he convincingly argues that his working through of academia isn't just his, nor that of his generation of writers. Pointing up Cecil Taylor's post-bebop innovations, which separated the legendary musician from a previous generation of avant-garde jazz, he notes that Taylor's stylings owed much to his time in conservatory. "Cecil Taylor comes also after an academic experience in conservatories devoted to Western art music that Bud Powell didn't have," Mackey remarks. "In his way of accommodating that conservatory, academic background of his with the improvisational tradition that his music is performed in the context of, [Taylor] would be one of the models that I have had in mind. I'm post-bebop.¹⁰⁴" Declaring himself post-bebop, it behooves us to hear Mackey out and investigate how he, like Taylor, "accommodat[ed]" his academic background.

N.'s lecture "The Creaking of the Word" is a curious document and performance of academic protocols. It articulates a stance in and toward the academy, one defined by tactical distance and generic disruptiveness, as well as play and participation. When N. receives his invitation to the conference, he is laid up in hospital with a case of vertigo. His hospital stay is a kind of narrative lull after a series of letters leading up to the band's wild gig with the mysterious Crossroads Choir ensemble. The invitation comes from an old friend now teaching at Cal Arts,

¹⁰⁴ Nathaniel Mackey, "Interview," by Edward Foster, in Mackey, *Paracritical*, 279.

who researches Miles Davis's "postural kinematics."¹⁰⁵ Derek's research, N. explains to Angel of Dust, was suggested by Joseph Jarman, a member of the Art Ensemble of Chicago:

Jarman, it seems, turned to a horn player at one point and asked him to stand up and play something. The horn player stood up but before he could start playing Jarman stopped him, saying, "Wait a minute. Notice the stance. It's a statement. The instrumentalist as sculpture. *Notice* it. We usually take it for granted but we can *use* it."¹⁰⁶

To start, Derek's character is admittedly portrayed in a tongue-in-cheek fashion. For example, he is the author of "two or three monographs" on a single, super-specialized topic, namely Miles Davis's tendency to turn his back to the audience. The jargony title of the conference to which he invites N. is "Locus and Locomotivity in Postcontemporary Music." Both his research and the conference title trope common stereotypes of academia: fascination with minutiae and needless verbiage. (Another stereotype at work might be the academic as artist manqué.) Despite this note of teasing, neither Derek nor the conference are ironized overmuch. Part of the reason N. mentions the invite is to extend an invite to Angel of Dust as well. And for the rest of the novel, he frequently returns to his preparations for the lecture. Finally, Derek's obsession with "stance" isn't his alone. N.'s gradual realization that "The Creaking of the Word" is in fact (or also) a metalecture pivots on the idea of stance. The lecture turns out to be as concerned with his delivery as with what he has to say.

¹⁰⁵ CalArts bears comparison to Black Mountain College, both of whose commitments to experimental pedagogy have proven influential. Unlike Black Mountain, CalArts still exists and has weathered a number of shifts in institutional vision, but even outside its most radical era (the early 1970s), it serves as an example of the university as a site of conflict and negotiation between experimental creative practice, academic norms, and business interests.

¹⁰⁶ Mackey, *Bedouin*, 111 (Mackey's italics).

To this end, “The Creaking of the Word” is, first and foremost, an experiment in reflexivity. To wit, “Creaking” narrates an arrival at its own occasion. Let me explain. The lecture describes a certain “Jarred Bottle’s” sojourn to the podium to give a lecture at a conference. The narrative begins as he approaches the podium and ends when he arrives. To borrow N.’s own terminology, “Creaking” is both performative and constitutive. It’s a lecture about giving a lecture. One quite obvious conclusion is that N.’s is not an academic paper in any conventional sense. There are no scholarly citations, no clear argumentative stakes, no explicit analysis. This makes sense considering that N. isn’t an academic. But the absence of academic convention is so thoroughgoing that it hints at an author who knows just what to leave out to bypass such convention entirely. For in addition to a lack of explicit argument or analysis, there is no critical “appreciation,” there are no anecdotes, and no rhetorical claim for one or another musical form’s importance. None of these approaches would be out of place in a practitioner’s nonacademic reflections. By contrast, Jarred Bottle’s journey consists of reveries, impulses, snippets from his speaking notes, micro-interactions on his way to the podium, and self-conscious reflections on his movement. N.’s evasion of convention goes down to the level of language. Indeed, a linguistic usage as basic as propositional statement seems troubled here. Lines that approximate propositional statements, like “He was there to announce that the creaking word, the rickety, crackpot word, was at the root of all music, its motivating base,” are repeatedly qualified and negated.¹⁰⁷ That the statement is prefaced by the fact he’s announcing it already worries the category of proposition. Moreover, when we reach the end of the paragraph we find this: “The opportune creaking of the word (as he now put it) was almost too tidy, too providential, perhaps a betrayal of the ricketiness he’d set out to endorse. Endorsability itself, he

¹⁰⁷ Mackey, *Bedouin*, 154–55.

would end his talk by admitting, was by now more or less openly a ‘lie,’ too true to be good.” At this point the very desire to say anything about “the creaking word,” to “endorse” it as something special (“the root of all music”), comes under fire. At every level, then, what N. delivers at the conference is a presentation radically at odds with critical convention of various stripes, but especially scholarly convention. He doesn’t rail against them, though. He out-and-out ignores them.

But this evasion of scholarly convention is belied by what we learn of “Creaking” and its genesis over the course of many letters. For one, though the lecture itself gives no hint of an object of study, we know N. wants to analyze a piece of Chadian music, a harvest song of the Tupuri people.¹⁰⁸ He admits he doesn’t know what to make of the piece, or if he can do it justice, but singles out for further scrutiny how the song resonates with and honors the materials the players’ instruments are made of (animal parts, minerals, vegetable matter).¹⁰⁹ N. pursues this idea about materials and the songs they make (or make possible) through Rastafarian musician Count Ossie, poet-scholar Kamau Brathwaite, and the Dogon people. In another letter, he mentions that Chernoff and Victor Turner are helping him formulate his thoughts.¹¹⁰ In short, his range of reference is broad, and his aims at least tentatively analytic. He could have written a conventional lecture, but chooses not to do so. This choice is addressed in the text itself. In the same letter where he mentions Chernoff, he writes: “Let me say first of all that I see no necessary conflict between performative and constitutive modes. It almost goes without saying that each endures the risk of an appetite for meaning it tends to answer if not annul. It’s for this reason that

¹⁰⁸ Mackey uses the French spelling *Toupouri*, whereas I follow the standard American English transliteration *Tupuri*, except in quoting.

¹⁰⁹ Mackey, *Bedouin*, 112–13.

¹¹⁰ Mackey, *Bedouin*, 144–45, 157.

I've decided to speak *thru* rather than speak *about* the Toupouri piece."¹¹¹ N. doesn't define his terms, but from context one can roughly understand "constitutive" to mean propositional and analytic. A constitutive mode would be a conventionally academic one, because it privileges discursive reasoning. What is significant about this decision is that while N. chooses one mode, neither excludes the other. In fact, they entail each other. This is a version of J. L. Austin's conclusion about constative and performative speech. Austin ends his famous lecture series *How to Do Things with Words* by admitting the distinction between them with which he begins is not a hard and fast one, and that, further, all forms of speech to some extent state or describe *and* do or perform.¹¹² N.'s decision to privilege the performative mode highlights the performative elements of academic convention. He literally orchestrates a performance of the Boneyard Octet, the Crossroads Choir, and his own band to go along with his lecture. (A similar performance occurs within the text of "Creaking.") He doesn't perform scholarship in the ways academia typically recognizes, but neither is his performance a refusal of scholarship or analysis. And, of course, his orchestration and metalecture both ultimately take place within, even as they break with the expectations of, an academic conference. In this fashion, N. expands the repertoire of academic convention, letting the university host him and his commitment to speaking *thru* rather than (just) *about* a Tupuri harvest song. N. takes a participatory stance while also making space for himself and his work, disrupting genre expectations while also playing (along) with them.

As I said, the significance of this conference seems slightly out of step with *Bedouin Hornbook's* reputation as a novel about jazz. And yet much of the latter half of the novel moves toward N.'s presentation, including some of the band's actual performances, which turn out to be

¹¹¹ Mackey, *Bedouin*, 146 (Mackey's italics).

¹¹² See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975).

dry runs of their performance at the conference. It's odd, then, that we get no account of the conference in the way we do for the band's various gigs. Instead N. sends Angel of Dust a video of the lecture, which, he writes, "will spare me the effort of trying to describe all of what went on."¹¹³ He writes in summary: "'The Creaking of the Word' and the entire symposium came off beautifully. What took place exceeded my wildest dreams." That sidestep might suggest the conference isn't as important as I make out. But for the last thirty pages of the novel everything centers on N.'s lecture. The letter where he announces the success of the lecture and the one following are given over to reflections on the presentation, even if no narrative account of the presentation is forthcoming. After these letters, the novel ends with a long reworking of "Creaking" with the subtitle "an after-the-fact lecture/libretto from the symposium 'Locus and Locomotivity in Postcontemporary Music.'" No more a typical academic paper than its predecessor, this "after-the-fact lecture/libretto" is an extension of "Creaking," a "reconstruction of the spectral serenade which infiltrated the presentation," and a draft of sorts for an opera.¹¹⁴ The "spectral serenade" N. mentions refers to the performance of his band's singer, Djamilaa. "I'm still haunted by Djamilaa's *envoi*," he writes. "I can't seem to rid my thoughts of the way it despaired of an elusive congruity between itself and my recited text."¹¹⁵ So it comes as no surprise that the second version of "Creaking" features a character named Djamilaa, who reflects at length on the upcoming "lecture/demonstration" of a band (perhaps and/or in fact, a one-man band) called Flaunted Fifth, previously known as Jarred Bottle. At the start we learn Djamilaa received a letter from Flaunted Fifth announcing the lecture/demonstration. What she quotes

¹¹³ Mackey, *Bedouin*, 185.

¹¹⁴ Mackey, *Bedouin*, 189.

¹¹⁵ Mackey, *Bedouin*, 188.

from the letter reveals it to be a fairly conventional academic paper. I quote at length to give the flavor of the passage:

The rhythmic density of Patton's music is exceptional, even in an idiom as rhythmically oriented as blues, and so is his frequent use of thirteen-and-a-half-bar verses. According to the anthropologist and blues researcher David Evans, these apparent idiosyncrasies are rooted in pre-blues music. Evans noticed that in the hill country djust [sic] east of the Delta, where much archaic black music has been preserved, fife and drum bands, guitarists, and young musicians playing a homemade, one-stringed children's instrument called the djitterbug [sic] generally structure their performances around repeating one-measure patterns.¹¹⁶

While there isn't any more in this vein, the mere presence of such an analytically inclined passage underscores with what deliberateness Mackey decided to have N. avoid academic convention. But just because the rest of the piece doesn't go in for this style of exposition doesn't mean it's not thickly researched. As the discussion of the first version of "Creaking" prepares one to see, N. has chosen here to speak *thru* rather than (just) *about* his subject, whether that subject is the blues or a Tupuri harvest song, or both. A great deal of what matters about this reworking is that "Creaking's" first version was marked by a feeling of inadequacy so intense N. had to revisit it. The lecture/performance bucks academic convention without necessarily finding a "congruity" with Djamilaa's singing. In a similar vein to the Rowell verses above, song, as the seeming "other" of analysis, still leaves N. behind. As if in response to this sense of inadequacy,

¹¹⁶ Mackey, *Bedouin*, 190–91.

the narrative of the second “Creaking” is set in a dystopia where public speech is forbidden, almost as though the only way to imagine research as a radical endeavor were to outlaw its presentation. In this, the satire seems to cut both ways. For one, it pokes fun at a certain kind of Western academic who imagines himself (the pronoun is used advisedly) working in a dangerous world. That is not to say some academics aren’t exposed to dangers because of their work. This is a point stressed by the fact this version of “Creaking” ends with Flaunted Fifth’s arrest, though not in fact for giving his lecture, but for relieving himself in an empty lot on his way to the conference, or bluntly put, for existing while black. However, the satire also deflates pretensions about bucking convention. There is a danger, Mackey seems to be hinting, in imagining that academic conventions are analogous to the laws of a police-state. One isn’t heroic for giving a paper at a conference, at least if the sole measure of heroism is how much you refuse to abide by genre expectations. Finally, though we know much less about the research that went into the second version of “Creaking” than we do about the first, one reference text stands out for those who know Mackey’s body of work. In the narrative Djamilaa feels a ghostly hand while at the same moment Flaunted Fifth’s right hand goes numb. Here Mackey borrows and puts to work Wilson Harris’s notion of “phantom limb,” a figure for the severance of the African in the Middle Passage from the past.¹¹⁷ N.’s desire for congruity between his text and Djamilaa’s vocalization is figured, but not required or resolved, as phantom limb. For Harris, the phantom limb facilitates a connection to something lost, or else it marks a felt loss of connection. In either case, it becomes, for N., a stirring image-concept for what he calls elsewhere “*the fallacy of*

¹¹⁷ See Wilson Harris, “History, Fable, and Myth in the Caribbean and Guianas,” *Caribbean Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (June 1970): 1–32 and Nathaniel Mackey, “Limbo, Dislocation, Phantom Limb: Wilson Harris and the Caribbean Occasion,” in *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 162–79.

adequation” and “*the lack of any absolute fit.*”¹¹⁸ This is how one speaks *thru* rather than (just) *about*. Mackey and N.—at different levels, to be sure—commit themselves to research and, instead of explicating or analyzing their subject matter, perform or fictionalize it. They allow their scholarly pursuits to manifest in ways that aren’t always legibly academic.

My alighting upon a Wilson Harris reference isn’t accidental. Mackey’s encounter with Harris and his work, and his subsequent championing of the Guyanese writer, illustrate the kinds of connections American higher education could facilitate in the latter half of the twentieth century.¹¹⁹ In 1972, Harris began the first of several stints at the University of Texas at Austin as visiting professor and writer-in-residence. He made an impression on at least one of his undergrads, since, several years later, and now in grad school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, he thought to recommend Harris to a new junior faculty member. Heeding this student’s recommendation, Mackey was quickly besotted. All Harris’s books he could get his hands on, he read. A few years later, back on the West Coast, Mackey attended a lecture by Guyanese historian Ivan Van Sertima at USC. Chatting after the lecture, Mackey discovered they were both admirers of Van Sertima’s fellow countryman, and the historian gave him Harris’s address in New Haven and encouraged him to write. After a few years corresponding Mackey and Harris met in person in 1981 at a conference at the University of Dijon. Two years after that Mackey nominated Harris for a Regents Professorship at Santa Cruz, which allowed the university to bring him in for two weeks. Their correspondence, which had begun in 1979, continued until Harris’s death in 2018. During that time Mackey often returned to Harris in his criticism, early on contributing to an important symposium on his work and in 1995 editing a

¹¹⁸ Mackey, *Bedouin*, 150 (Mackey’s italics).

¹¹⁹ Much of the information in this paragraph is gleaned from Nathaniel Mackey, “Interview,” by Paul Naylor, in Mackey, *Paracritical*, 332–33.

special issue for *Callaloo*. What runs throughout all these encounters is, of course, the university, down to the Wisconsin-Madison library where Mackey no doubt first found Harris's books. At this point the university has become one of the matrices of diaspora like those Brent Hayes Edwards studies in *The Practice of Diaspora*, which allow black writers and intellectuals to find and connect with each other. And the *Callaloo* special issue is a perfect symbol of the condition of Mackey and Harris's connection: their artistic-intellectual relationship, mediated by the US university system, enshrined in a premier scholarly journal for the study of African Diaspora literary arts and research. But if that makes their relationship sound impersonal, consider that there is something like another version of the *Callaloo* special issue in Mackey's own auteur and unimpeachably avant-garde literary journal *Hambone*.

In 1986, the same year Rowell midwived the publication of *Bedouin Hornbook*, Mackey brought out *Hambone* 6, which contained a special feature on Harris. Mackey had by then been publishing *Hambone* for four years consistently, but the journal's origins date back to 1974. Originally conceived as an organ for the Committee on Black Performing Arts at Stanford, the editors included Mackey, poet Al Young, and bell hooks (then Gloria Watkins). A graduate student in the English Department, Mackey took the reins when the previous head editor stepped down at the last minute. Some have emphasized the differences between this first version of *Hambone* and its successor as Mackey's solo project, but there are important continuities. To start, the debut issue featured four writers who would return in later issues (five including Mackey), which indicates abiding artistic criteria and interpersonal connections. And while Mackey chose to open the journal to non-black writers when he revived it, *Hambone* retains a strong emphasis on black cultural production. Finally, the journal remains something of a West Coast publication, continually making room for the likes of Will Alexander, Duncan

McNaughton, David Meltzer, Harryette Mullen, and David Henderson, poets who were either born or made their home in LA, Santa Cruz, and the Bay Area, like Mackey himself. Sarah Fabio also appeared in the debut issue. In fact the clearest differences between the first and second incarnation of *Hambone* were its break with Stanford and Mackey's introduction of a section of reviews and criticism, sometimes labeled the Commentary section. Of course, the break with Stanford didn't necessarily entail secession from the academy. UC Santa Cruz employed Mackey during much of the journal's run, and once in a while a notice appears to the effect that a certain issue was brought out with the support of a grant from the university. Even so this point is important. Mackey could have easily turned *Hambone* over to Santa Cruz's English Department and remained head editor while letting the university employ graduate assistants to handle other aspects of the operation.¹²⁰ His decision to retain independent control of the journal (each issue features the barebones masthead, "Editor: Nathaniel Mackey") allowed him practically complete artistic and editorial freedom. With this freedom, I'd like to stress, he chose, first of all, to set aside space for reviews and criticism, albeit not in every issue. That was one of many choices he made, but a significant one, especially given the scholars who would make use of that space.

¹²⁰ When Mackey moved with the journal to Duke University, he did procure the services of a graduate student assistant. I do not know if he had similar aides during his time at Santa Cruz.

But taking a look now at the special feature on Harris in *Hambone* 6, you will notice right

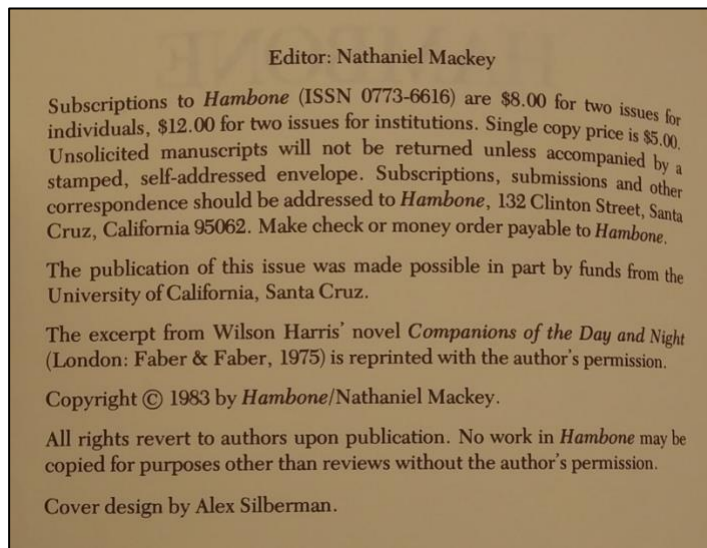


Figure 2-2: *Hambone* 3, Fall 1983, copyright page

away that unlike the prose and poetry selected for the rest of the issue, the criticism Mackey elected to include isn't exactly avant-garde. Indeed, while over the years experimental or at least bold prose pieces find their way into the Commentary section—for example, a selection from Don Byrd's *The Poetics of Common Knowledge* or a review of Susan Howe in a pastiche of Howe—often the reviews and criticism are conventional, even if also thoughtful and well-written. But three of the contributors to the special feature—Hena Maes-Jelinek, Jean-Pierre Durix, and Joyce Sparer Adler—were at the forefront of Harris scholarship, and indeed are responsible for making Harris's work known in academic circles. In fact, if the articles seem conventional, this may be because Mackey was in part inspired by a previous special issue on Harris in the *Journal of World Literature in English* in 1980, in which he was included along with Jelinek, Durix, and Adler. One imagines he could have put together a special feature made up of novelists' and poets' "takes" on Harris, but instead we get an academic conversation brought into a resolutely experimental context. Academic criticism and avant-garde poetry jostle each other in the pages of one and the same journal. Two of Harris's own pieces in the issue hail from an academic context, his essay being the text of a lecture he gave while a Regents Professor at Santa Cruz in 1983, the other a transcript of a public conversation held during the same visit. The public conversation is a fitting illustration of the kind of intellectual community Mackey curates in

Hambone, bringing together scholars such as Kristin Ross, James Clifford, Susan Willis, and Norman O. Brown with an artist-critic like Harris. All this, nonetheless, suggests an unevenness between the artistic-intellectual and scholarly-critical dimensions of the journal, even as plenty of pieces cut this distinction, clearly doing both kinds of work.¹²¹ In a way, *Hambone* is the mirror image of *Callaloo*: the one prioritizing the literary arts, the other scholarly and critical work. But this unevenness reflects the newness of the situation, the unprecedented nature of the imbrication of scholarly and creative production in the university. Mackey is right that his relation to the antiacademicism of his inspirations, like Robert Duncan, is inflected by the university's newfound but still uncertain openness to creative types.

Makings of the Poet-Scholar

Sarah Webster Fabio and Nathaniel Mackey have received entirely different responses to their “working through” of academia. Fabio is forgotten now, Mackey admired and fêted. In part this must be the effect of Fabio's early death. Diagnosed with colon cancer the same year her daughter filmed her documentary, she died three years later in 1979. Had she lived longer would Fabio have appeared in later issues of Mackey's *Hambone* journal, as did other West Coast contributors to the first issue, like Al Young and David Henderson? Would Rowell have set aside a special issue for her life and work as he did for Mackey in 2000? Her death at 51 foreclosed these possibilities. In this, Fabio belongs to the company of Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Sherley Anne Williams, Barbara Christian, and Toni Cade Bambara. Black women called upon to establish, support, and administer programs and curricula during the heyday of Black Studies, often without proper compensation or recognition but “always brightly there behind our

¹²¹ In particular, M. NourbeSe Philip's selections from *Zong!*, a chapter from Fred Moten's *In the Break*, Rachel Blau DuPlessis's *Draft* poems, and the essays of Brent Edwards.

blindness.”¹²² All carried off by cancer in their fifties; the exception, Jordan, at 65. Before her death at age 56 of complications from lung cancer, Christian told her students, “The University killed me. Don’t let them do this to you.”¹²³

The quotation above (“always brightly there behind our blindness”) comes from an Evie Shockley poem, “good night women (or, defying the carcinogenic pen),” dedicated in memory of the writers mentioned (with the exception of Fabio) and in addition, Claudia Tate and Nellie McKay, two pioneering critics of African American literature. Though Shockley doesn’t name the university as a culprit in “good night women,” it looms behind these names, while the subtitle’s “carcinogenic pen” seems to hint at studies linking increased cancer risks to sedentary occupations like those that depend on “pens,” whether for writing poems or grading papers. The act of defiance Shockley’s unconventional elegy enshrines also no doubt refers to these writers’ refusal to be penned in by the antiblack racism endemic to US academia, and to their writerly and activist responses to that deadliest of our national carcinogens. In this way, one cannot help noticing that Shockley, as a black woman poet-scholar in the university, is staging her own defiance of such a death sentence. The women her poem memorializes become constellations—“andromedas fighting their own monsters,” Shockley writes—serving as guides (“beaconing us to a north we bring along / in our pockets”) and teachers (“dipping into history and wisdom, / filling to overflowing the big and little gourds”) for those like herself, who come after. That “after” necessarily includes the aftermath of the desegregation of PWIs from the fifties onwards. Desegregation came for the most part not at the expense of the universities, which were allowed

¹²² Evie Shockley, “good night women: (or, defying the carcinogenic pen),” in *the new black* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 12.

¹²³ See Jennifer Lisa Vest, “What Doesn’t Kill You: Existential Luck, Postracial Racism, and The Subtle and Not So Subtle Ways the Academy Keeps Women of Color Out,” *Seattle Journal for Social Justice* 12, no. 2 (2013): 471.

to do the bare minimum in terms of redistributing resources and challenging their own racist structures of hiring, evaluation, enrollment, and support, but rather, at the expense of black and brown women's physical and mental wellbeing.¹²⁴ Shockley's defiance of "the carcinogenic pen," then, may in part be her hope that they *did* change the university, that the university will not kill her as it did her forebears.

But how much has the university changed? Macro-level developments in the university and the larger economy—for example, neoliberalization—affect not only PWIs but all venues of higher education in the US. If some forms of racism have subsided in the halls of academe, others now assert themselves with comparable carcinogenic deadliness. Microaggressions, casualized labor, and death-by-paperwork and (service) -overwork, which disproportionately affect black, brown, women, and queer academics, make neoliberal academia at times as unlivable as the Great Society-era university. This doesn't mean nothing has changed. Forgotten by far too many, Fabio and her efforts nonetheless touch all those who attend the institutions where she fought to innovate the curriculum, and beyond. And while Mackey deserves even greater attention and appreciation than he has so far received, his poetic and scholarly works have been both pathbreaking and foundational, setting a standard for the study of US poetry and poetics. That journals like *Callaloo* and *Hambone* exist attests to the presence of robust and developing social networks in and on the outskirts of academia. Though Shockley's first monograph, *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry*, published in 2011, falls outside the temporal range of this study, I want to end by returning to the Mixed Blood reading series and journal where she published an early essay in

¹²⁴ See Grace Kyungwon Hong, "'The Future of Our Worlds': Black Feminism and the Politics of Knowledge in the University under Globalization," *Meridians* 8, no. 2 (2008): 102–4.

the spirit of that book, the essay mentioned at the start of this chapter, “Post-Black-Aesthetic-Poetry: Postscripts and Postmarks.”

Consisting of only three issues, *Mixed Blood* documents a remarkable project. Begun at Penn State in 2002 under the editorship of C. S. Giscombe, William J. Harris, and Jeffrey Nealon, the journal serves as a record of talks and readings given by poets brought to speak on campus under the auspices of the Mixed Blood reading series.¹²⁵ In this way, *Mixed Blood* is a kind of cross between *Callaloo* and *Hambone*, combining critical-scholarly writings and poetry, and while, like Mackey’s project, focusing on poetry and poetics, also a decidedly institutional affair, like Rowell’s. (The journal eventually followed Giscombe to Berkeley, adopting the Holloway Series in Poetry, which began in 1981, for its new source material.) In a post for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*’s Lingua Franca series, Giscombe described the modus operandi of *Mixed Blood* as follows:

We’re hoping that *Mixed Blood* is something different, more than one more literary magazine—we invite poets to the UC campus to give public readings of their work and to give talks as well about the connections (or lack thereof) between the languages of race and the languages of poetic innovation. The whole thing’s called the Mixed Blood Project; the publication, *Mixed Blood*, is a record of the continuing conversation about that unlikely pairing—that is, we publish the talk the writer gives during her visit as well as samples of the writer’s poetry.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Another Penn State faculty member, Aldon Lynn Nielsen, is named an editor only in later issues, though he is thanked in the first.

¹²⁶ C. S. Giscombe, “The Mixed Blood Project,” Lingua Franca (blog), *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 15, 2003, <https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/linguafranca/the-mixed-blood-project>.

Though Giscombe refers to race here generally, *Mixed Blood*, in line with the scholarship of its editors, emphasizes African American poetry and poetics, having printed in its pages the work of Shockley, Ed Roberson, Meta DuEwa Jones, Howard Rambsy, and Erica Hunt.

In an introductory essay for the second issue, Aldon Lynn Nielsen connects the poets invited to the Mixed Blood readings to the poet-critics of the BAM. This seems apt, except that “poet-scholars” might be the truer designation. The setting alone, Penn State and State College, indicates that this is an academic space. One of the captivating aspects of the Mixed Blood project, the invitees’ essays on poetics, looks less like a nod to the poet-critics of the fifties through the seventies than like a flex in the spirit of a recent form of research-thick poetry, often (but not always) tied to academic training. This is not to say these poets or their poetics are straightforward products of English or Black Studies programs, but in both setting and approach the Mixed Blood series hardly shies away from academia. Consider the end of Shockley’s essay, where she compares her notion of “post-black-aesthetic poetry” with curator Thelma Golden’s idea of post-black art and Trey Ellis’s New Black Aesthetic.¹²⁷ Like these frames, post-black-aesthetic poetry refers to a wide range of writing that responds (without adhering) to a certain idea of the black aesthetic tied to the sixties and the rise of black consciousness writing. Despite their different terms, Shockley, Golden, and Ellis all home in on trends in black visual and literary arts aimed at expanding and revising the dominant aesthetic of the BAM. As discussed, Shockley is careful to distinguish her notion from theirs. But what interests me about this distinction is the co-presence of another, unarticulated difference. If Golden derives her analysis from the contemporary art world, and Ellis from the literary scene and his experience as a working novelist and essayist, Shockley seems to get her idea from her experience as a working

¹²⁷ Shockley, “Post-Black-Aesthetic,” 56.

poet as well as her research as a literary scholar. Her main object of analysis in the piece, Ed Roberson, is still writing, yet her reading of him does not turn on recent work (for example, the poems he published a few years before in the first issue of *Mixed Blood*). Instead she focuses on a poem from his first collection, published in 1970. That she will go on to include a chapter on Roberson in her first monograph comes as no surprise. She writes here as a scholar whose job is the study of texts usually, though not always, at somewhat of a historical remove. And yet the poems published alongside this essay trouble the autonomy of that category of scholar. They suggest that the concerns of working poet and literary scholar are, for the moment at least, indistinguishable.

Mixed Blood makes for an awkward end-point to this chapter. It is not well known, lasting just three issues, and not officially focused on black poets or poetry. And yet these qualities may clarify the trajectory this chapter traces. Though black poets were negotiating academia during the whole of the twentieth century and before, the BAM and its aftermath are the preconditions for the engagements I have charted from the sixties to the mid-aughts. Like Shockley's post-black-aesthetic poetry, *Mixed Blood* takes the black aesthetic as a "point of departure."¹²⁸ But that aesthetic is only one point of reference among others. That the journal is not well known outside a scholarly sub-community is in part a function of the general refusal to recognize these kinds of projects, to condemn the university out of hand as a site that restricts, curtails, and dries up the energies of poetry and poetics. The few issues and the series' somewhat indeterminate nature at present—seven years and counting since the last issue appeared—point to its experimental and tentative quality. The editors are trying something out. They are trying to see what happens when they make space with the space available—in this case, the environs of

¹²⁸ Shockley, "Post-Black-Aesthetic," 51.

the university—for innovative poetry that thinks about race. Some forty years plus after Sarah Webster Fabio headed to Berkeley to lay the groundwork for their Black Studies program, Giscombe, Harris, Nealon, and Nielsen brought *Mixed Blood* to Penn State. Whatever changes occurred in the intervening years, they seem to grapple with the same question: How do I live and make poetry in and out of this place.

Chapter 3

Schooling Puertorriqueñidad

there is nothing
wrong with you,
keep sending us copies
of literary efforts
for consideration,
in the mean time
get yourself a job
to make ends meet

—Pedro Pietri

In this chapter, I explore exchanges and cleavages between Puerto Rican–Diaspora poetry and the US academy. The chapter charts the emergence of a Puerto Rican identity poetics fashioned from engagement with Puerto Rican studies, sociology, and anthropology. This poetics turns Puerto Ricanness (*Puertorriqueñidad*) into a form of “transcultural capital,” as Israel Reyes calls it, and at the same time creates divides in Puerto Rican poets’ professional and artistic lives.

Pedro Pietri, “telephone booth number 465,” in *Papiros de Babel: Antología de la poesía puertorriqueña en Nueva York*, sel. Pedro López-Adorno (Río Piedras, P.R.: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1991), 464.

Beginning with Miguel Algarín and Piri Thomas, whose ambivalent relationships to the academy are deemed exemplary, the chapter surveys how poems, collections, and chapbooks by Victor Hernández Cruz, Judith Ortiz Cofer, and Aracelis Girmay, alongside Nicolás Kanellos's academic journal *Revista Chicano-Riqueña*, attempt to bridge scholarly debates and creative endeavors.

“Climbing into Bed at Five O’clock”: A Commute

In 1974, Miguel Algarín faced a dilemma. The Manhattan-raised Puerto Rican poet was waking up almost too tired to get to his classes. The drive from the East Village to Livingston College, Rutgers University took at least an hour. He needed to leave at seven, but his routine was against him. “I’d be climbing into bed at five o’clock,” he later remarked.¹ Despite the early morning commute, Algarín hosted gatherings of local poets and artists that went well into the night. The gatherings were occasions for music, drinking, recitations of poetry. His teaching obligations across the Hudson vied with his commitment to these evenings with friends. A professor in the morning, Algarín was an MC at night.

His life had not always been like this, caught between worlds. The gatherings began in 1973, when Algarín moved into his East 6th Street apartment. “I made one mistake,” he has said. “I invited the poets in.”² An invite to his housewarming party became a standing invitation. Writers, musicians, and painters living on the Lower East Side turned the modest ground-floor apartment into a bohemian salon. Crossing Houston Street, they descended on Algarín’s apartment on weekends and weeknights, indiscriminately. In less than a year, his living room had

¹ Miguel Algarín, “The Algarín Sessions, Vol. 2,” YouTube video, 3:48, posted by Dharma Sutra, August 29, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=58&v=EEH-CB8pM8g.

² Algarín, “Algarín.”

become a vibrant arts space. It was the first incarnation of what would soon be known as the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. While its activities took place in his apartment, the nascent institution divided Algarín's artistic and professional life. Yet the contradictions the Cafe generated were, finally, the conditions for its growth. Without the pressure of dueling commitments, the Cafe may never have left his apartment.

Since its origins in an East Village living room, the Cafe underwent several transformations. Over the decades, the Cafe moved, closed, and reopened. It went from a coterie haunt to the focus of MTV and *Village Voice* profiles. It was a slam poetry Mecca, where Paul Beatty, Edwin Torres, and Mariposa cut their teeth on open mic nights. Ishmael Reed and Ntozake Shange premiered plays in its tightly packed rooms. At one time a mainly Puerto Rican and Latinx space, the Cafe developed into a multicultural venue. It became, at length, what no one could have expected: a Manhattan landmark. But in 1974 the Cafe was still a raucous arts salon that convened at night in Algarín's apartment, and he had work on weekday mornings. "The cultural nightlife going on in my living room was untenable," he told a reporter in 1994. "If I kept going like that, I was going to end up in a hospital."³ He decided to relocate the Cafe. He and his friends scouted locations and scrounged for funds. By October 1975, they had picked out a bar just down the street. There the Cafe assumed its recognized form. Removed from Algarín's cramped quarters, the Nuyorican Poets Cafe began to exert a shaping influence on late twentieth-century US poetry and poetics.

This story illustrates an aspect of the Cafe's origins which goes overlooked: its connection to the emergence of Puerto Rican studies as a discipline and department in the

³ Mary Talbot, "Uplift on the Lower East Side," *New York Now*, January 4, 1994, 47.

mainland research university.⁴ Most accounts of New York–Puerto Rican poetry—Nuyorican poetry, to use the term popularized by Algarín and his compatriots—and Puerto Rican–Diaspora poetry writ large begin in 1975, when the Cafe transitioned from a semi-private to a counterpublic space.⁵ Some point to sixties Puerto Rican Movement politics and the rise of the Young Lords in 1968, drawing attention to earlier rhetorical and print performances by neglected activists, journalists, musicians, artists, writers, and publishers.⁶ These more holistic accounts, like accounts beginning with the Cafe in 1975, gloss over the rise of Puerto Rican studies. But Algarín’s job at Livingston College of Rutgers was in the Puerto Rican studies program, recently established through the efforts of student-activists, professors, and liberal administrators. The year he moved to East 6th Street, the program became a full-fledged department, one dedicated to “recover[ing] cultural identity, language, and heritage, thereby affirming Puerto Rican consciousness from a sound knowledge-base.”⁷

When Algarín chalked up the demise of the Cafe’s first incarnation to a conflict between his workaday and his artistic life, he was not rehashing the dilemma of US poetry’s Janus-faced

⁴ Academics on the island did not teach anything like Puerto Rican studies prior to the sixties. Certain traditions of insular scholarship nonetheless paved the way for stateside scholars who would champion Puerto Rican studies as a sui generis academic field. In turn, stateside developments created new opportunities for scholars on the island, who had long been shackled by the US and Hispanic orientation of island scholarship. María Teresa Babín, “A Gap in Puerto Rican Education,” *San Juan Review* 2, no. 5 (June 1965): 27–28 and “Los estudios puertorriqueños (en los Estados Unidos),” *Cahiers du monde hispanique et luso-brésilien* 18 (1972): 29–41.

⁵ Jorge Duany, “Nuyorican and Diasporican Literature and Culture,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, January 2018) and Miguel Algarín and Miguel Piñero, with Richard August, eds., *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings* (New York: William Morrow, 1975).

⁶ See Felix Cortes, Angel Falcón, and Juan Flores, “The Cultural Expression of Puerto Ricans in New York: A Theoretical Perspective and Critical Review,” *Latin American Perspectives* 3, no. 3 (Summer 1976): 117–52; Patricia E. Herrera, *Nuyorican Feminist Performance: From the Café to Hip Hop Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020); Soledad Santiago, “Notes on the Nuyoricans,” *The Village Voice*, February 19, 1979, 1, 13–15.

⁷ María Josefa Canino, “Dr. Maria Canino’s Remarks at LHCS’s 40th Anniversary Celebration,” YouTube video, 30:35, posted by Department of Latino and Hispanic Caribbean Studies, November 17, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ePO2kp4RZME>.

modernism, to use Hammer's framework. His issue was not, like Robert Lowell's or Sylvia Plath's, an agon between "the professionalism of postwar poetry," symbolized in and by the university field, and a modernist experimentalism supposed to give release from that field but in reality deeply implicated in it.⁸ Pierre Bourdieu has observed that the invention of the artist as a bohemian depended "on [a] distance from the world and from . . . ordinary existence," mirroring that of "university life."⁹ For Algarín, his obligations in the East Village and in Piscataway, New Jersey were, in fact, dual or twinned. His job at Livingston College bankrolled his life as a bohemian artist. It was the need to preserve his professional life and the bohemian existence it supported, not just his personal health, which led him to separate (the social life of) art from (personal) life. Rather than give up one or the other—bohemian salon or university career—Algarín channeled the spirit of Puerto Rican studies, if you will. He held onto both by transforming the Cafe into another institution. In short, university life gave downtown art its means and structure.

When the Poets Cafe moved from Algarín's apartment to a bar down the street, the tension and connection between his interrelated sets of obligations, which had registered materially in his exhaustion, in his drowsy commute, became harder to recognize. It appears here and there, for example in the publication venue and paratext of Algarín's 1981 article "Nuyorican Literature."¹⁰ Published in the journal of the Society for the Study of Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States, *MELUS*, the article can be taken as an attempt to lend academic bona fides to the study of a body of texts that Algarín himself helped name and canonize. In this context, an almost negligible generic feature of the academic article becomes salient: the note of

⁸ Langdon Hammer, "Plath's Lives," *Representations* 75, no. 1 (Summer 2001): 61 and *Hart Crane and Allen Tate: Janus-Faced Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 211–32.

⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 224.

¹⁰ Miguel Algarín, "Nuyorican Literature," *MELUS* 8, no. 2 (Summer 1981): 89–92.

the author's institutional home. Although "Nuyorican Literature" is not an academic article per se, the words "Livingston College/Rutgers University" that runs beneath Algarín's name still does what it is meant to in scholarly contexts. This institutional gesture secures the author's status as an accredited and creditable figure in the university field. Mixing analytic or categorical claims ("the Nuyorican esthetic [sic] has three elements to it") and cultivated expressions of naivety ("The four-hundred-year plus history of Puerto Rico is really a very simple story of greed and amorality"), the article plays a street-wise tune in an academic setting.¹¹ In this way, Algarín admits the twin fields of obligation to which his morning exhaustion once testified. As I said, his conflict does not duplicate that of Lowell or Plath, or the many, mostly white US poets of the previous two generations, who felt split between profession and poetic practice. But it does resemble the conflict of Hammer's Janus-faced modernism, a fact we miss when the tug-and-pull of East Village and Livingston Collage is forgotten.

I begin with this minor, anecdotal history to render visible a series of exchanges and cleavages between Puerto Rican–Diaspora poetry and poetics and the university field. In this chapter, I follow a handful of mainland writers and poets, including Piri Thomas, Victor Hernández Cruz, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Aracelis Girmay, and the journal *Revista Chicano-Riqueña/The Americas Review* (1973–99), as they navigated new forms of academic life and poetic practice before and after 1973. I am interested in the ways that research, scholarly disciplines, and university employment establish some of the conditions of possibility for Puerto Rican–Diaspora poetry. By showing how they negotiated the worlds they inhabited—how knowledge from one world makes its way to another, or abolishes the binary altogether—I am trying, so to speak, to shorten Algarín's commute from the East Village to Livingston College.

¹¹ Algarín, "Nuyorican Literature," 91, 89.

The P(r)oem as a Sign of Science

Deep in the drafts of *Down These Mean Streets*, the memoir that launched his career and Nuyorican literature, Piri Thomas's spirits were buoyed by a fresh set of notes on his manuscript.¹² Contacted by Angus Cameron, Thomas's editor at Knopf, the lauded anthropologist Oscar Lewis had read the manuscript. And he was enthusiastic.¹³ What this meant to Thomas can be gathered from the acknowledgements for *Down These Mean Streets*: "Oscar Lewis, *gracias con todo mi corazón*. When I most needed assurance as a writer, your letter came."¹⁴ In light of Lewis's infamy as the originator of the culture-of-poverty thesis, which, alongside the Moynihan Report, "shifted the terrain of [social policy] debate" in the US from economics to individual habits and mores, laying the groundwork for fictions like the "welfare queen," we may be hard-pressed to remember that Lewis was an ideal reader for Thomas.¹⁵ At the time, Lewis garnered widespread praise and approval for his methodologically innovative

¹² There is disagreement on the genre of *Down These Mean Streets*. The first book-length study of Nuyorican literature Faythe E. Turner's *Puerto Rican Writers on the Mainland*, which draws on interviews Turner conducted with Thomas and other writers, refers to the book as a novel. More recently, both Efraín Barradas and Lisa Sánchez-González have called *Down These Mean Streets* "an autobiographical novel." Against these critical views stands a practical reality. The book is shelved under history, not literature, according to the Library of Congress call number system, and while the first edition refrains from labeling the book a memoir, more recent reprintings promote it as a "lyrical memoir." Because the first edition contains no "all persons fictitious" disclaimer, I have chosen to refer to *Down These Mean Streets* as memoir in what follows. However, I still distinguish between Thomas the author and Piri the character, using last name and first name respectively. See Faythe Elaine Turner, "Puerto Rican Writers on the Mainland: The Neoricans: A Thematic Study," PhD dissertation, University of Massachusetts, 1978; Efraín Barradas, "North of the Caribbean: An Outline for a History of Spanish-Caribbean Literature in the United States," in *Partes de un todo: ensayos y notas sobre literatura puertorriqueña en los Estados Unidos* (San Juan, P.R.: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1998), 13; Lisa Sánchez-González, *Boricua Literature: A Literary History of the Puerto Rican Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 103.

¹³ Cameron to Piri Thomas, July 28, 1967, Piri Thomas papers, Box 3, Folder 14, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library.

¹⁴ Piri Thomas, *Down These Mean Streets* (New York: Knopf, 1967), vii.

¹⁵ Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 182.

ethnographic research; he would soon publish his best-known work, *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York*. This finely crafted portrait of a Puerto Rican family, arranged as a continuous narrative, alternating between first- and third-person, earned him a National Book Award in 1967.

With Lewis near the end of his career, and Thomas at his start—and both writing their most famous book—the two had much in common in subject matter and style. Indeed, the “graphic realism” of Thomas’s memoir must have resonated with Lewis, whose work aimed to expose the grim consequences of neocolonialism in Puerto Rico.¹⁶ And the up-and-coming memoirist clearly felt a kindred interest in the anthropologist; Thomas’s praise for Lewis might pass as a mission statement for his own memoir:

PUERTORRIQUENOS, *La Vida* serves a positive purpose by bringing to light a stick of living that exists not only in Puerto Rico and Nueva York, but throughout the whole world. Ugliness is ugliness and you cannot hide it under the corner of the proverbial rug. . . . We must understand that in our zeal for our people to rise, we must also recognize the presence of the ugly conditions and the reality of these mean streets. . . . The horrified conditions of poverty are a screaming reality.¹⁷

Thomas gives his stamp of approval by linking his and Lewis’s work through an allusion to the title of his own memoir (“these mean streets”). As he writes in a letter to Lewis, “*Mi hermanito*,

¹⁶ Urayoán Noel, *In Visible Movement: Nuyorican Poetry from the Sixties to Slam* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 3.

¹⁷ Piri Thomas, “My Own Thoughts in Answer to Criticisms of *La Vida* by Oscar Lewis,” n.d., pp. 1–2, Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, 1944-76, Box 61, University of Illinois Archives, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

if you are asked to defend your book, invite me too. We fight *por la verdad* together.”¹⁸ This soon-to-be spokesman of the Nuyoricans was proclaiming his kinship with Lewis in the midst of a furious response to *La Vida* among the Puerto Rican well-to-do and intellectuals on and off the island, who considered the book’s focus on slums, poverty, and sex-work a smear. University of Puerto Rico president Jaime Benítez’s affront at the airing of such dirty laundry was representative: “Why did Oscar have to do those studies, and write that book to say what everyone knew? If a man wishes to write a book like that he does not need a typewriter. He can write it with his penis!”¹⁹

The iconoclastic ideological kinship Thomas and Lewis shared in turn raises questions about their stylistic kinship. As handled by Thomas and Lewis, ethnography is almost realist narrative in disguise, and vice versa. The issue is not only one of influence, mutual or otherwise. Beyond their direct engagement with each other’s work, Lewis and Thomas’s contact and kinship were part of a larger ongoing conversation. *Down These Mean Streets* channels discourses of anthropology and sociology beyond just Lewis’s work. Indeed, the connection between the budding writer and the famous anthropologist exemplifies how Puerto Rican–Diaspora writers became publicly engaged in rethinking the disciplinary discourses that aimed to explain them and the Puerto Rican Question (or Problem) writ large.

This is confirmed in a tongue-in-cheek way in a chapter of *Down These Mean Streets* appropriately titled “Barroom Sociology.” Midway through the memoir, Piri and his friend Brew enter a bar in Norfolk, Virginia, at the start of a journey through the American South. They are approached by an academic named Gerald Andrew West, who is “writing a book on the Negro

¹⁸ Thomas to Oscar Lewis, April 18, 1967, Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, Box 61, University of Illinois Archives.

¹⁹ Stan Steiner, *The Islands: The Worlds of the Puerto Ricans* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 362, quoted in Turner, “Puerto Rican,” 128.

situation,” and who in an unpublished draft of the book is jokingly referred to as “Penn State” and “the Man from Penn State.”²⁰ The chapter revolves around a heated confrontation between Gerald, who is mixed and light-skinned, and Brew, a Black New Yorker originally from Alabama. Shortly after they meet, Brew begins to needle Gerald for his refusal to identify as Black; Gerald in turn pontificates that race is a figment of the imagination, a burden of which he is free. The episode is played for laughs. Brew’s jibes and name-calling and Gerald’s passive-aggression combine to make the latter, as well as his book project, seem ridiculous if well-intentioned. It’s another bitterly comic episode in Thomas’s at once uproarious and devastating memoir. (An earlier draft was more aggressive in tone, turning Gerald into a target of homophobic derision.)

Yet the episode also stages some of the book’s major tensions. Piri, like Gerald, is a mixed-race writer interested in “the Negro situation,” which is why he wants to visit the South. But again like Gerald, he is unsure where he fits in the narrative of Black struggle. From a certain angle, Piri and Gerald look like doppelgangers. Indeed, Brew himself makes a similar point in the unpublished draft of the chapter.²¹ However, the different origins of their ambiguous and ambivalent status is equally important: Gerald is light-skinned and was raised to believe himself a mix of every race and ethnicity, and not Black per se, while Piri begins the novel believing that being both Black and Puerto Rican is a contradiction, or that the latter identity category subsumes the former. More than this, Gerald’s conclusion that because race is imagined he can choose to identify how wishes is the polar opposite of Piri’s eventual conclusion. For Piri, race is as real as the effects of racism. As a result, he realizes that he needs to affirm his

²⁰ Thomas, *Down*, 170 and draft of Chap. 19, “Barroom Sociology,” c. 1965–66, pp. 238, 247, Piri Thomas Papers, Box 3, Folder 6, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

²¹ Thomas, draft, 240.

Blackness. If he doesn't, he will be destroyed by the same self-hatred his father experienced as a young Black Puerto Rican, who clung to his Puerto Ricanness in the face of antiblack racism. Piri and Gerald, then, look less perhaps like doppelgangers than mirror images, their qualities reflected and inverted. And each in his own way improvises on the color line.

Their mirrored qualities throw into new light the less obvious vocational affinity. While Gerald is easy to laugh off as a figure of the absent-minded, inefficacious scholar—"dead from the waist down," as A. D. Nuttall put it, following Robert Browning—how different is he from Thomas the author?²² Supported by grants from the Louis M. Rabinowitz Foundation, which sponsored historians Eugene Genovese and Herbert Aptheker at that time, and which he received in part due to a letter from Oscar Lewis, Thomas set out in the early sixties to write a book that used his own life—his upbringing in Harlem, his family, dreams, aspirations, addiction, and incarceration—to document the "stick of living" that was the lot of New York Puerto Ricans. Though *Down These Mean Streets* is his story, the memoir records the social scene of the barrio with as much range and precision as Lewis's *La Vida*, conveying the reader from the welfare office to school to the prison block to cramped apartments and hospitals. Thomas may be a member of the community about which he will choose to write, but in adopting the position of social observer he establishes the distance characteristic of the scientific researcher. More than on the color line, Piri, too, improvises on the line between scientific and literary discourse.

This scientific-literary discursive dance is not confined to the memoir's narrative prose. Urayoán Noel contrasts Thomas's efforts in prose and verse as follows: "Here [in the poetry], representation is no longer about the unsparing documentary realism of *Down These Mean Streets*; instead, it is about the performer's ability to manage and self-reflexively embody a

²² A. D. Nuttall, *Dead from the Waist Down: Scholars and Scholarship in Literature and the Popular Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 9.

multitude of contradictions.”²³ Noel is right that Thomas’s verse-writing offers him different affordances than his prose does. Yet he leaves unaddressed the verse prelude that opens *Down These Mean Streets*, which resists a clean split between these modes of writing. The “documentary realism” of the memoir can’t be entirely separated from Thomas’s performative poetics. In fact, prose and verse in *Down These Mean Streets* perform complementary functions of scientific discourse. The first-person verse prelude, or “proem,” is mostly unmetered and end-stopped, with some subtle slant rhymes; the style is declarative, recalling Thomas’s penchant for declamatory oral delivery.²⁴ Here are a few lines to give a feel for the text:

This is a bright *mundo*, my streets, my *barrio de noche*,
With its thousands of lights, hundreds of millions of colors
Mingling with noises, swinging street sounds of cars and curses,
Sounds of joys and sobs that make music.
If anyone listens real close, he can hear its heart beat—²⁵

The proem serves to introduce the memoir as a whole. The lines quoted follow two verse-paragraphs that indicate the proem’s adopted perspective, both in terms of a persona (““Hey, World—here I am. Hallo, World—this is Piri. That’s me””) and a spatial location and time of day (“Man! How many times have I stood on the rooftop of my broken-down building at night and watched the bulb-lit world below. / Like somehow it’s different at night, this my Harlem”).²⁶ The proem seems, at first glance, an expressive performance of identity; Thomas gives us a name

²³ Noel, *In Visible*, 4.

²⁴ Noel, *In Visible*, 3–4.

²⁵ Thomas, *Down*, ix, ll. 10–14.

²⁶ Thomas, *Down*, ix, ll. 2, 5–6.

and a setting, and later ethnic and racial identifiers, as if to prepare the reader for his tour-de-force, poor Puerto Rican coming-of-age narrative. Let me highlight some of the crucial differences between the proem and the prose to indicate why another reading is more appropriate.

To begin, the proem's rooftop setting indicates the elevated vantage of Piri's perspective. Rooftops appear at crucial moments in the prose narrative, but in those cases the focus is more directly their social function in dense urban environments. Rooftops are where parties happen and junkies shoot up; the spaciousness and semi-publicness allow for communal and illicit activities. In the proem, nothing happens except Piri watching the city below. The typical social functions of the space are downplayed, even, for the moment, rendered moot. Additionally, the proem is set at night, and while the book as a whole contains plenty of nighttime scenes, the specific effect here noticeably differs from the prose narrative. Whereas in the prose narrative the night is another period of activity—like the rooftop, nighttime gives cover to covert actions and interactions—in the proem night obscures and softens the city's material harshness: "There ain't no bright sunlight to reveal the stark naked truth of garbage-lepered streets. / Gone is the drabness and hurt, covered by a friendly night. / It makes clean the dirty-faced kids."²⁷ Night seems to mitigate the grittiness that is a signature feature of *Down These Mean Streets*. Without sunlight to "reveal" graphic truths, an approachableness settles over everything ("this warm *amigo* darkness"), inviting and unveiling friendly complicities and panoramas.²⁸ Finally, the proem declares identity, whereas the rest of the book approaches identity as a dynamic process.²⁹

²⁷ Thomas, *Down*, ix, ll. 7–9.

²⁸ Thomas, *Down*, ix, l. 15.

²⁹ This declarative style is found in other poems. In the intriguingly titled "Fruits of Identity," Thomas writes, "I am a poet, I am an ex-con, / I am a painter, I am an ex-drug addict, / I am an ex-gang leader, I am a writer, / I am a human being." Thomas, "Fruits of Identity," *The Rican* 1 (Fall 1971): 2.

From his name (“I am ‘My Majesty Piri Thomas’”), the depths of which, in the course of the memoir, are sounded only gradually and anxiously, to ethno-national and racial identity markers (“I’m a skinny, dark-face, curly-haired, intense Porty-Ree-can”), which prove shifty identifiers at best, the proem prefers a declarative mode to the narrative’s introspection.³⁰ This all adds up to the classic concept of the scientific observer: Piri is elevated, able to look past details for a sense of the whole, and occupies a defined subject-position. The proem is more than a piece of trumped-up prose, an intriguing “poetic” moment; it plays up the condition of possibility of scientific discourse, the dialectic of subjective and objective analysis. Instead of naïve, expressive identity, the proem marshals a particular subject-position, that of the “observer fixed on the edge of a space, looking in and/or down upon what is other.”³¹ Yet unlike the kind of ethnographer Mary Louise Pratt describes, Thomas hasn’t forgotten how to mediate between fieldwork and formal description. His proem, like the prose narrative, adjudicates the relation of “face-to-face field encounter” and “objectified science.”³² Only here, in contrast to our prevailing ideas about poetry, the proem rather than the prose aligns more closely with the pole of “objectified science.” Here the poem is a sign of science.

³⁰ Thomas, *Down*, x, ll. 16, 17. This is not to say Piri’s name and self-portrait in the quoted lines are straightforward. Why he pairs his name (and not his full “government name,” John Thomas, at that) with the honorific “My Majesty” is open to interpretation, as is the reason “Porty-Ree-can” is given in the orthography of an American English mispronunciation. Rather the point is that these are still grammatically declarative sentences and thus invite an “identity thinking” largely absent in the prose narrative, an identity thinking centered on the function of the copula. As discussed in the Introduction, the copula (“is”) yokes the subject to its predicates, yet the very subject-predicate separation that the copula bridges reveals their non-identity; that is, the copula reveals a need to realize or rationalize the identity of subject and predicate. The declarations of the proem, as opposed to the novel’s more circumlocutory style, bring to the fore the assertive rationality of identity. According to Gillian Rose, that assertive rationality is not incidental, but in fact, a function of involvement in the sphere of capitalist social relations. See Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodore W. Adorno* (Verso: London, 2014), 56–66.

³¹ Mary Louise Pratt, “Fieldwork in Common Places,” in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 32.

³² Pratt, “Fieldwork,” 33.

Regarding the poem as a sign of science (social science, to be exact), a return to Oscar Lewis is in order. Though I have treated his and Thomas's kindred feeling only briefly, I find it important to acknowledge because of Lewis's notoriety. It's hard to overstate Lewis's influence on the Puerto Rican imagination, an influence that hasn't been "imaginary" in the slightest. His work has shaped national self-image, if mostly by opposition, as well as government aid and intervention. The depiction of the "subculture of poverty" in *La Vida* is the stuff of public policy and legend, a dual legacy no doubt owed to the fact that neither policy works nor most of Lewis's original critics appear to have read farther than the introduction. For example, the introduction's anticolonial critique goes mostly overlooked by parties on both sides of its reception. Half-a-century from the book's publication, *La Vida* is more recognizable as a singular accomplishment. Nearly seven hundred pages long, *La Vida* reads like "some turn-of-the-century naturalist novel," its characters "tossed about by forces that, though of their own making, remained beyond their control," as Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé memorably describes.³³ The book alternates between chapters in the first-person from the perspective of Lewis's subjects (their speech drawn from hundreds of hours of ethnographic tape recordings), and chapters in the third-person consisting of minutely observed "days in the life." The laughter and rancor, ribaldry and wit of Fernanda, Cruz, and Soledad—and the many others "characters" who populate the narrative—enfold the quotidian and often bleak episodes through which their lives are recounted. In a move from which the years will have taken some of the shine, *La Vida* works from the insight that the subjects who are studied are best equipped to comment on their own condition. In this respect, Lewis simply radicalized the principle of ethnography by which the researcher must learn from those observed. Rather than fold that learning back into a more evidently neutral

³³ Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé, *Queer Latino Testimonio, Keith Haring, and Juanito Xtravaganza: Hard Tails* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 102.

discourse of science, he put on the hat of an editor and attempted to let Puerto Ricans speak for themselves.

As many have noted, “letting” the subject speak for herself is at the very least troubled and troubling method. And these critiques are well taken. But the example of Thomas’s memoir and proem suggests that another critique is more pertinent. Lewis’s signal failure in *La Vida* isn’t his presumption in “allowing” his subjects to speak, an allowance for which they have no need. Where he failed the logic of his own methodological insight was in not giving Fernanda and her family the chance to write the book’s introduction. Using the introduction to explicate his methods and insights, and to peddle an undertheorized idea of the “culture of poverty,” Lewis preserves a last refuge of unobjectified objectivity.³⁴ In short, the assumption persists that while his Puerto Ricans subjects may be the acutest observers of their own lives, they can’t be trusted to convey the theoretical overview. That remains the social scientist’s prerogative. And this view, while evidenced in Lewis’s introduction, appears still more poignantly in another context. In all the archives with which I am familiar, where the Lewis-Thomas correspondence is preserved, there is an absence that takes on almost palpable dimensions: there exists not one letter from Oscar Lewis to Piri Thomas. There is reason to believe such letters were written, but evidence to suggest they may not have been. All the extant correspondence in which Lewis comments on Thomas’s work is directed to Angus Cameron, who acted as editor for both of them, Knopf having been acquired by Random House. The archives, as they stand, give the impression that Lewis viewed Thomas not as a creative writer, or an intellectual, his peer or soon

³⁴ Susan M. Rigdon, *The Culture Facade: Art, Science, and Politics in the Work of Oscar Lewis* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 52–56 and Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 1–71.

to be one, but as the author of “raw” ethnographic material. The social scientist Thomas saw as “a helluva man” may have seen Thomas as a subject, if not, in fact, an object of study.³⁵

About a decade after Thomas went to bat for Lewis against his Puerto Rican critics, and published a memoir that repurposed sociological conventions, poet Victor Hernández Cruz revisited Lewis’s legacy, which was by then forever tied to the “culture of poverty” thesis and its repercussions. “Side 20” of the serial poem–miscellany “New York-Potpourri” hints at a sea-change in the relationship between the researcher and his subjects of study:

You can’t leave your house
These days without finding
Something new
I found Oscar Lewis’
Tape recorder
Behind a pizza shop in the Bronx
And they wouldn’t give me
Ten dollars for it
At the pawnshop.³⁶

This satirical jab at Lewis and his legacy contains something more than mere dismissal. On one hand, the poem registers the devaluation of Lewis’s work, only six short years since his death in 1970. As critics like Pamela Lewis argue, the discovery of his tape recorder in an alley and the

³⁵ Thomas, “My Own,” 1.

³⁶ Victor Hernández Cruz, “Side 20,” in *Tropicalization* (New York: Reed, Cannon & Johnson Communications Co., 1976), 32, ll. 1–9.

pawnshop's pitiful offer are Lewis's just deserts, in a sense, for his pernicious theories, which helped to dictate degrading public policy in the cityscapes where Cruz's early writings were set.³⁷ On the other hand, though the pawnshop won't pay much for the tape recorder, its value was immediately recognizable. Indeed, the point might be that it is not valued highly enough, that what Puerto Ricans talk about when they talk about themselves still isn't appreciated. The breezy, anecdotal style of "Side 20" doesn't give us many details on which to mount a reading (is there a tape in the recorder? is it just the device?), but it does depict a scenario that invites further consideration. For in a way, it is Cruz himself peddling his wares, his New York–Puerto Rican "records" (the poem is "side" 20 on a disc of apparently infinite dimensions). The one who ought to be making money and getting acclaim for putting Puerto Rican "voices" on tape is Cruz. And in fact the poem contains a motto for a Puerto Rican–Diaspora poetics: Cruz revises the Modernist slogan "Make It New" in the phrase "finding / Something new." The tool of Lewis's ethnographic trade, the tape recorder he used to record hundreds of hours of subject interviews, now signals an investment in the vernacular, the local. A modern-day Aeolian harp, symbol of the Romantic poet "tuned" so that the wind of inspiration flows through her to create song unaided by human hands, the tape recorder that made *La Vida* possible had proven that in the barrio all you need to do is hit record. Everything would flow from there.

There is a savviness here, and an added wariness, that does not assert itself in Thomas's writings. Younger than Thomas by two decades, Cruz appears on the scene at the same moment Puerto Rican studies emerges as a department and field of study. The rise of Puerto Rican studies formalized a reality already implicit in the sociological conventions of *Down These Mean*

³⁷ Pamela Masingale Lewis, "Victor Hernández Cruz," in *Afro-American Poets Since 1955*, vol. 41 of *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, ed. Trudier Harris and Thadious M. Davis (Detroit, Mich.: Gale Research Co., 1985), 82.

Streets, and even in the narrative bulk of *La Vida*: that Puerto Ricans were always subjects who study, even as they were studied. “The people who get up and go to work every day get up and go to school every day,” as Fred Moten has said. They are “the keenest dialecticians.”³⁸ They were and are also the keenest social scientists, and Puerto Rican studies institutionalizes that insight, decking out in academic regalia, as it were, the New York Puerto Rican who puts Lewis’s tape recorder to good use. And while Cruz is more historian than social scientist, as we will see, “Side 20” testifies to a newly legible research-orientation in Puerto Rican–Diaspora poetics that his career as a whole bears out. It is in this context too that we will have recourse to Israel Reyes’s concept of transcultural capital, according to which characters in contemporary Latinx literature “attempt to transform the transcultural capital derived from their diasporic experience and heritage culture into economic capital in US dominant culture.”³⁹ Reyes’s concept of transcultural capital provides us a framework to understand how in the context of the university Cruz leveraged what Frances Negrón-Muntaner identifies as Puerto Rican “ethno-national identity,” that is shared attachment to “sites of ‘colonial’ shame and resources to counter them” by way of “investments, memories, aesthetics, and aspirations.”⁴⁰ In this regard Cruz, building on concerns already present in earlier writers like Thomas, sets the pattern for countless Puerto Rican poets after him.

Cruz in the Classroom: Puerto Rican Studies at Lehman College

³⁸ Fred Moten, *Black and Blur* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 154.

³⁹ Israel Reyes, “Decolonizing Queer Camp in Edwin Sánchez’s *Diary of a Puerto Rican Demigod*,” *College Literature* 46, no. 3 (Summer 2019): 519.

⁴⁰ Frances Negrón-Muntaner, *Boricua Pop: Puerto Ricans and the Latinization of American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 6.

Standing before his students at the University of Puerto Rico in September 1979, fiction writer and *cronista* José Luis González delivered a lecture that is permanently stuck in the Puerto Rican imaginary. A political exile, the Dominican–Puerto Rican intellectual had lived in Mexico since the fifties. His returns to the island were infrequent, and since he had given up his American citizenship, they were sometimes contingent on the scrutiny with which airport officials examined his papers. This time González had made it through and he was now teaching a seminar in Latin American studies. He invited his students to picture Puerto Rico as a building, each floor a layer of the nation. At the top, he said, were the wealthy beneficiaries, on and off the island, of Operation Bootstrap, governor Luis Muñoz Marín’s US-backed industrial development program. In short, business owners, investors, and high-ranking bureaucrats. Construction on their penthouse was nearly complete. Their loud footfalls, González explained, echoed through the floor beneath them, built in the nineteenth century. This floor held the petit bourgeoisie, the *criollo* elite, who had battered on the island’s resources while blaming Spanish rule for local dysfunction. When Spain lost the island to the US in 1898, their aspirations to power came to an end. Descending again, one met a throng of Spanish, French, Portuguese, Italian, and German peasants. These were the poor immigrants who were encouraged by the Crown, in the Real Cédula of 1815, to settle and whiten Spain’s colonial outpost. And finally, González concluded, there was the ground floor. The ground floor, *planta baja*, was where the slave and free Black

population and their Afro-Boricua descendants could be found. Here, he said, was the cultural and economic base of Puerto Rican identity.⁴¹ Here lay the foundation of a four-story country.⁴²

If 1979 seems a late date to discover the island's Black foundations, this belatedness must be weighed against the long, ideologically driven record of affirming the island's synthetic Black, European, and Taíno Indian heritage. The issue was not Anglo-American-style denialism, the refusal to "see" race, but rather, a glib opportunism which functioned to deny the distinctiveness of the Afro-Boricua legacy in favor of the dream of a collective mixed past. This is why, less than a decade after González delivered his lecture, Governor of Puerto Rico Rafael Hernández Colón could say, with audacious ignorance, "The contribution of the black race to Puerto Rican culture is irrelevant."⁴³ Indeed, it was the political acumen of González's vision, his no-bullshit takedown of the ideological pieties of Puerto Rican mixedness, which caused his lecture, "El país de cuatro pisos," to stick in the intelligentsia's craw, so to speak. That lecture, the title essay of the collection *The Four-Storeyed Country*, today boasts a long line of critical

⁴¹ Where, then, does González locate the indigenous contribution to Puerto Rican identity? If anywhere at all, the Taíno Indian heritage rests underneath the building. The historical record, González felt, showed no trace of indigenous presence on the island beyond the century after conquest. To invoke the Taíno heritage was sheer romanticism. Present-day historical anthropologists and cultural archaeologists deny indigenous presence was so completely erased. Shona Jackson's work on the anti-indigeneity of labor discourse suggests González's oversight may not have been accidental, but was arguably a constitutive feature of his Marxist historicism. See Sherina Feliciano-Santos, "Negotiation of Ethnoracial Configurations among Puerto Rican Taíno Activists," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 42, no. 7 (2019): 1149–67 and Jackson, *Creole Indigeneity: Between Myth and Nation in the Caribbean* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

⁴² The lecture is, of course, the basis for González, "Puerto Rico: The Four-Storeyed Country (Notes Toward a Definition of Puerto Rican Culture)," in *Puerto Rico: The Four-Storeyed Country and Other Essays*, trans. Gerald Guinness (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishing, 1993), 1–30.

⁴³ Arlene Torres, "La Gran Familia Puertorriqueña 'Ej Prieta de Beldá' (The Great Puerto Rican Family Is Really, Really Black)." In *Blackness in Latin America and the Caribbean: Social Dynamics and Cultural Transformations*, vol. 2, ed. and comp. Arlene Torres and Norman E. Whitten, Jr. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 286.

and appreciative responses.⁴⁴ But for many on the mainland, González's claims were old news. Indeed, they were the stuff of daily life.

Translated from the island's enduring Hispanic racial caste system to stateside Black-white racial hierarchy, the terms "Black" and "Puerto Rican" became near-synonyms.⁴⁵ Piri and his father in *Down These Mean Streets*, and the Ríos family who were the subject of Lewis's *La Vida*, for example, all experienced this replacement of ethno-national identity by racial identity. This is not to do away with all experiential distinction, but rather, to draw attention to what Claudia Milian calls "black-brown passage": "the detours Latinoness and Latinaness take—through blackness, dark brownness, indigence, Indianness, 'second-tier' Latino status, and unmappable southern geographies."⁴⁶ Growing up in Spanish Harlem, later migrating south to Loisaida, Victor Hernández Cruz received a practical education in racial formation; he noticed how Puerto Ricans who would never have seen themselves as Black on the island were perceived as such on the mainland. In Cruz's case this experience determined his emergence as a Black Arts writer. He earned the designation, in part, by where he published, with whom he worked, and his tenure as co-editor of the famed Black Arts journal *Umbra*, though he never himself consistently identified as Black. James Smethurst notes, "When Nuyorican artists did join in Black Arts activities, as did Felipe Luciano and Victor Hernández Cruz, it was generally with the

⁴⁴ See Juan Flores, "The Puerto Rico that José Luis González Built," 1984, *Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1993), 61–70; Juan Manuel Carrión, "Etnia, raza y la nacionalidad puertorriqueña," in *La Nación puertorriqueña: ensayos en torno a Pedro Albizu Campos*, ed. Juan Manuel Carrión, Teresa C. Gracia Ruiz, and Carlos Rodríguez-Fraticelli (San Juan, P.R.: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1993), 3–17; Torres, "La Gran," 285–306.

⁴⁵ See Pablo "Yoruba" Guzmán, "Before People Called Me a Spic, They Called Me a Nigger," 1971, in *The Afro-Latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the United States*, ed. Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 235–43.

⁴⁶ Claudia Milian, *Latining America: Black-Brown Passages and the Coloring of Latino/a Studies* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 2.

sense that they were in some way black, not just ‘of color’ allies.”⁴⁷ But what cements Cruz’s status as “a poet in the Afro-Latin tradition,” as Roberto Márquez says, was that he took up, *avant la lettre*, González’s Afrocentric thesis.⁴⁸

Take a look at “Moving” from his first full-length collection *Snaps*:

tho we know not yet

not yet

 shadows left behind

& mozab mozab mozambique

 thru the veins

 & mozambique

 thru the veins

to the heart the heart/&

 after⁴⁹

Alongside the “bebopping arawaks” that appear elsewhere, mambo and conga drums mark time in “victor’s” veins, defining his inner rhythm. This inner rhythm derives from an African inheritance, the “mozambique” of the passage quoted, both mambo and conga being products of Black cultural practice on the island. This is one of the collection’s few “snaps” to explicitly reference such African inheritance. Indeed, the earlier chapbook *Papo Got His Gun*, published in

⁴⁷ James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 358.

⁴⁸ Roberto Márquez, “Victor Hernández Cruz,” in *Puerto Rican Poetry: A Selection from Aboriginal to Contemporary Times*, ed. and trans. Roberto Márquez (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 430.

⁴⁹ Victor Hernández Cruz, “Moving,” in *Snaps* (New York: Random House, 1969), 129, ll. 72–80.

1966, contains no such references, while subsequent collections will proliferate with them. In fact the transition from *Papo Got His Gun* to *Snaps* contains *in nuce* Cruz's subsequent development: from barrio lyric, detailing the joys and miseries of the block, to what we might dub modern-day areyto, an indigenous ritual-song-performance that has an analogue in griotic chant, a combination of "religious observance, historical chronicle, war chant, genealogical memoir, and general entertainment."⁵⁰ "Moving" is modern-day areyto insofar as it imitates pulsing dance beats and recuperates genealogical memory. It takes a broader historical view of the very viewpoint of his barrio lyrics, connecting the situation of young Puerto Ricans trying to live and thrive in the city to the "afterlife of slavery."⁵¹ Yet by locating an African inheritance in rhythm and blood, Cruz traffics in the racist invocations of tempo and inner spirit, which Erin Kappeler and Virginia Jackson trace in turn-of-the-century American free verse and poetry scholarship.⁵² Responding to the anxieties of an amorphous poetic outpouring and national indefiniteness, early anthologists and theorists of twentieth-century American poetry, and especially free verse, like Harriet Monroe, Amy Lowell, Louis Untermeyer, and Francis Barton Gummere, fell back on the ideas of the previous century's "scientific racism" to "construct[] a fictional generic coherence for the new poetry based on the idea that it was an organic product of the American people."⁵³ Modernism's influence, via the New American Poetry, on sixties-era literary nationalism registers, in part, in an odd uptake of this "racialist thinking." Hence Cruz's unnerving emphasis on blood and inner rhythm, the sticking points of an idea of racial spirit.

⁵⁰ Roberto Márquez, "Aboriginal Beginnings: The *Areyto*," in Márquez, *Puerto Rican*, 3.

⁵¹ Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 13.

⁵² Virginia Jackson, "The Cadence of Consent: Francis Barton Gummere, Lyric Rhythm, and White Poetics," in *Critical Rhythm: The Poetics of a Literary Life Form*, ed. Ben Glaser and Jonathan Culler (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 87–105 and Erin Kappeler, "Editing America: Nationalism and the New Poetry," *Modernism/modernity* 21, no. 4 (November 2014): 899–918.

⁵³ Kappeler, "Editing," 900, 902.

But Cruz, like most Black Arts writers, developed through and away from this influence. His subsequent writings mediate the Afrocentric base of Puerto Rican identity not with modernism's pseudo-scientific and romantic theories of racial spirit but with history and social theory. This is evident already in his 1973 collection *Mainland*, where his fore-dialogue with González, so to speak, becomes apparent. Rather than just recognizing the African contribution to Puerto Rican identity, as happens in "Moving," the collection demonstrates a newfound conversance with the model of national identity with which González would soon take issue. A brief account of this model will explain what materials Cruz was working with, and how he came to be familiar with them.

"La gran familia puertorriqueña"—the big ol' Puerto Rican family, if you will—emerged as a trope in nationalist discourse in response to the 1898 US invasion. Arlene Torres traces the trope to its roots in the late nineteenth century when it was attached to the jíbaro, the quintessential farmer of Puerto Rican lore. The island's mixed-race, criollo elite, bridling under Spanish colonial rule, fashioned themselves "paternalistic and benevolent" landowners and projected a vision of a "great jíbaro family," tying their fortunes to those of the peasantry, against the colonial overseers.⁵⁴ In the wake of annexation, however, the elite found in US corporate interests a new competitor for the island's wealth and resources. In response, they expanded their "family" to include "the marginalized black laborer on the coast." "The argument was made that all members of the Puerto Rican family suffered under U.S. tyranny."⁵⁵ This image of the Puerto Rican national family, now including the creole landed gentry, poor farmers of European stock, and Black laborers, became mingled with the ideology of mestizaje, in which

⁵⁴ Torres, "La Gran," 294 and Ángel G. Quintero Rivera, *Music, Social Classes, and the National Question of Puerto Rico* (Washington, DC: The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1989), 23.

⁵⁵ Torres, "La Gran," 295.

indigenous ancestry was prized, and thus “la gran familia puertorriqueña” was born. They were, in short, a great big European-African-Taíno family, bound together by common oppression. It was precisely this vision that outraged José Luis González. When the beloved independentist Pedro Albizu Campos called for a return to “the old collective happiness,” González rightly understood this as an invocation of la gran familia ideology, the previous century’s violent and exploitative social order grossly misremembered as a united front of European, Indian, and African against colonial depredation.⁵⁶ As his thesis of the four stories suggests, any grand Puerto Rican family deserving the name would have to be, as Torres says, “really, really black.”

The Blackness of the Puerto Rican ethno-nation, the Africanness of Puerto Ricanness, so to speak, is what Cruz gets at in *Mainland*. The question is how he came in contact with the somewhat rarified historiographical debate just described. To give an answer, we have to make our way to the Bronx, where the nation’s first Puerto Rican Studies program was established at Lehman College, CUNY in 1969, and where Cruz, a nineteen-year-old poet-prodigy and high school dropout (he had already published his first book with Random House) took a handful of classes in the newly established program. During the 1969 winter semester a group of student-activists at City College occupied the president’s office and issued a list of demands to fight funding cuts to programs that benefitted Black, brown, and poor students. Their occupation burgeoned at length into a student rebellion that rocked the school system to a standstill. At the top of the list of demands was the establishment of a School of Black and Puerto Rican Studies. To the surprise of many, the student rebellion proved so onerous (and embarrassing) to the CUNY school system that trustees and administrators actually met some of their demands. While a projected School of Urban and Third World Studies, which would include Black and Puerto

⁵⁶ González, “Puerto Rico,” 4.

Rican Studies programs, never materialized, CUNY's Lehman College in the Bronx was tasked to create a Puerto Rican Studies program.⁵⁷ Plans were well under way by spring 1969, but it was thanks to María Teresa Babín that the program was up and running by the fall. Beseched by mainland colleagues to spearhead the program, the eminent cultural historian had come from Puerto Rico that summer, at which point she promptly sat down with student-activists to discuss their needs. Since Babín's efforts are little known, I quote her at length:

I will never forget how difficult it was at first, when I met those young pioneers of Puerto Rican Studies, to understand the urgency and eagerness in their tear-choked voices. There were two young women and two young men. They were later joined by a woman who would turn out to be the most militant of the bunch—a revolutionary to the bone, brilliant, astute, and exceptionally charismatic. Together, in a spirit of fellowship, we made plans for the program of studies, mainly including humanities and sociology courses. We projected a series of conferences on social, economic, and political issues. In fall 1969 we started classes. From then until 1971 the program has continued to grow; it now reaches numerous students in both undergraduate and graduate school. Seminars have been held for local teachers on the cultural history of Puerto Rico. . . . We tried to bring together in Puerto Rican Studies hands-on approaches, having students participate in the lived reality of Puerto Ricans in the United States, and the fundamentals for understanding any culture: art, literature, history, economics, politics, social sciences, etc.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Christopher Gunderson, "The Struggle for CUNY: A History of the CUNY Student Movement, 1969–1999," n.d., https://eportfolios.macaulay.cuny.edu/hainline2014/files/2014/02/Gunderson_The-Struggle-for-CUNY.pdf.

⁵⁸ Babín, "Los estudios" 34–35 (my translation).

Cruz was one of the first to take advantage of the program's course offerings. He took classes with Babín herself, as well as folklorist Carmen Puigdollers. Several years later Babín and her co-editor Stan Steiner included previously unpublished writings by Cruz in their anthology *Borinquen: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Literature*, the most robust anthology of its kind in English upon its publication in 1974. What he studied in Babín's classes only a syllabus would reveal, but her extensive scholarship holds some clues. A topic on which Babín focuses is the very tale of synthesis González was shortly to debunk. "The blood and the suffering of conquest and resistance," she waxes poetically in the introduction to *Borinquen*, "made the land somber until the dawn of a new day in which the surviving forces of man and nature gave rise to the first generation born on our soil, the offspring of the Spanish, the Taino, and the African."⁵⁹ In a later historical text aimed at English-language readers, she elaborates on how "Puerto Rico was settled with human beings whose roots became entwined in a rich cultural pattern."⁶⁰ If Cruz seems conspicuously tuned in to the academic historiography of la gran familia ideology, that's probably because Babín and taught it, and certainly she contributed to its dissemination in her own well-regarded historical scholarship. But his vernacular knowledge of the entwinement Blackness and Puerto Ricanness was what allowed him to see past "the old collective happiness" to González's still-yet-to-be-formulated Afrocentric thesis.⁶¹

⁵⁹ María Teresa Babín, "The Path and the Voice," introduction to *Borinquen: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Literature*, ed. María Teresa Babín and Stan Steiner (New York: Knopf, 1974), xi.

⁶⁰ María Teresa Babín, "A Special Voice: The Cultural Expression," Chapter 16 in *Puerto Rico: A Political and Cultural History*, by Arturo Morales Carrión with María Teresa Babín, Aida R. Caro Costas, Arturo Santana, and Luis González Vales (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1983), 319.

⁶¹ A study published earlier than *The Four-Storeyed Country* that treads similar territory is Isabelo Zenón Cruz's *Narciso descubre su trasero: el negro en la cultura puertorriqueña*, published 1974–75. Yet Cruz's writing in this vein predates even Zenón Cruz's book. For a discussion of *Narciso descubre su trasero*, see Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, *Queer Ricans: Cultures and Sexualities in Diaspora* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 5–9.

A look at *Mainland* will give a sense for how all this plays out on the page. It is no coincidence, for instance, that Cruz opens *Mainland* with an epigraph from Luis Palés Matos, thus establishing himself as a poet in the tradition of *poesía negra*, an Afro-Caribbean literary movement and style similar in outlook to the New Negro Renaissance.⁶² But Cruz hasn't fallen for Palés Matos's negrophilia. In Cruz's work, unlike his white forebear, there is no essentialization of Black culture. History always mediates cultural expression. His ode to Vertamae Grosvenor, "En La Casa De Verta," is a case in point.⁶³ In writing about one of the era's most brilliant food writers, no one would have faulted Cruz for including a culinary litany, an enumeration of dishes, ingredients, and flavors. But in the course of eighteen lines one finds only a mention of bodegas selling "avocado and tomato juice" before Verta's cooking is given in four to-the-point lines: "hot sauce / street beans / caribbean rice on the fire / with african juice."⁶⁴ The real locus of "En La Casa De Verta" aligns with strains of Afrofuturism. The street outside Grosvenor's apartment is lined with "space / ships," her visitors hailing from Mars, Jupiter, the Moon. Her kitchen is a rocket ship: "here we all are in Vertas / soul space kitchen / taking off."⁶⁵ The flipside of this Afrofuturist vision is the long history that prepared the space travel with which "En La Casa" ends: "warming / the centuries and centuries / of sea exploration and mixing."⁶⁶ Rather than praise and luxuriate in Black cooking in a fetishistic and presentist vein, Cruz links soul food to the centuries of imperialist exploration and Middle Passage

⁶² See Laurence A. Breiner, Michael Dash, Benjamin A. Heller, and Ineke Phaf-Rheinberger, "Poetry of the Caribbean," in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Roland Greene and Stephen Cushman, 4th ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 203. Since "El dolor desconocido," the poem Cruz takes his epigraph from, was published in 1925, it technically predates Palés Matos's first foray into *poesía negra*. Yet given Palés Matos's indelible association with *poesía negra*, as one of its inaugurators and exemplars, the authorship alone serves to shore up Cruz's connection.

⁶³ Victor Hernández Cruz, "En La Casa De Verta," in *Mainland* (New York: Random House, 1973), 22.

⁶⁴ Cruz, "En La Casa," 22, ll. 4, 10–13.

⁶⁵ Cruz, "En La Casa," 22, ll. 16–18.

⁶⁶ Cruz, "En La Casa," 22, ll. 13–15.

displacements which preceded and made possible the making of such food. “Mixing” doubles as something a cook does in the kitchen and something peoples do, willingly and not, in the New World. Voyages in sea and space, in and out of this world, frame the horizons of Grosvenor’s cooking. Thus history mediates even taste.

Later in the collection a kind of rewrite of “Moving” from *Snaps* appears. Midway through the poem “Loíza Aldea,” Cruz turns, as he does in “Moving,” to conga drums beating out the body’s inner rhythm:

Drum/in motion tumba The song
jumps on the head—the head jumps
like the leg/sounds like the drum
drum talk to body tumba
Body talk for drum⁶⁷

In contrast to the earlier poem, here he refuses to collapse blood and rhythm into an image of racial spirit. To start, Cruz wisely drops any “blood” language. More significant, the imagery in “Loíza Aldea,” as the title suggests, is emplaced: Loíza is a northeastern coast town in Puerto Rico known for its African heritage and famous as a birthplace of Black musical practices. “It is the African heart of Puerto Rico,” as Cruz elsewhere avers, and “the last port of entry for slaves in Puerto Rico,” according to Faythe Turner.⁶⁸ The strength of African survivals in Loíza—registered by Cruz in his references to the town’s music, customs, and festivals—was due to the

⁶⁷ Cruz, “Loíza Aldea,” in *Mainland*, 67, ll. 40–44.

⁶⁸ Victor Hernández Cruz, “The Circle of Our Dance: To Victor Rosa,” in *The African Presence and Influence on the Cultures of the Americas*, ed. Brenda M. Greene (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), 96 and Turner, “Puerto Rican,” 30.

concentration of sugar plantations in the area. Before any “drum talk,” Cruz inquires into the place where the music he loves is born. “Loíza / Who is there,” the text opens.⁶⁹ And the first verse paragraph ends, in bent repetition, with the question-statement “Loíza—who was you.”⁷⁰ As “Loíza Aldea” moves toward the musical section quoted above, flashes of the town’s vibrant festival culture appear as well: “She hears laughter and song / she hears all the salsa that / is played on her ground”; “Lit up with la Fiesta de / Santiago”; “Horses dressed with gown / Coconut faces parading.”⁷¹ The way the text enters deeper and deeper into the landscape of the music as it progresses constitutes an implicit critique of “Moving.” “Moving’s” setting is never stated, but one gathers from the music and dancing (and the tenor of *Snaps*) that it takes place in a club. The danger in the club is that the origins of the music can be forgotten, that Black music’s history can be soft-pedalled to ease enjoyment. That wasn’t such a problem in New York’s majority Black clubs like the Savoy Ballroom, but as, for example, boogaloo got popular, it meant you could hear the music without heading to Harlem or ever going below East Houston Street. No such forgetting or soft-pedalling is possible in *Loíza Aldea*. Rather than making a straightforward claim on the Africanness of Puerto Ricanness, as he does in “Moving,” Cruz forces the reader to wait until the provenance of the music is established. “Loíza,” he concludes, “you are always there / silent with your African swing.”⁷²

Those familiar with Cruz’s work will notice the coup de grâce has been held in reserve. One of his most anthologized pieces of writing, “African Things” first appeared in *Negro Digest*

⁶⁹ Cruz, “Loíza Aldea,” 66, ll. 1–2.

⁷⁰ Cruz, “Loíza Aldea,” 66, l. 13.

⁷¹ Cruz, “Loíza Aldea,” 66–67, ll. 25–27, 30–31, 34–35. By the time Cruz wrote *Mainland* *Loíza Aldea*’s festivals had been subject of scholarly study for nearly two decades, largely due to the efforts of anthropologist and archaeologist Ricardo Alegría. As it happens, Alegría recommended Babín for her post as director of Lehman’s Puerto Rican Studies program and was a consultant for the program. His work appears alongside Cruz’s in Babín and Steiner’s *Borinquen* anthology.

⁷² Cruz, “Loíza Aldea,” 68, ll. 71–72.

in November 1969, before being included in *Mainland*. The title suggests an inventory. Instead the poem—one of several “grandparent poems” discussed in this dissertation—revolves around questions of knowledge and transmission. Much in the vein of “Moving,” the text mentions “african spirits” “carrie[d] in soft blood,” though the layout also allows one to read “carries” as an intransitive verb; references to “latin boo-ga-loo” and “conga drums” also appear.⁷³ These aside, though, the “things” of the title seems deliberately vague. “what was Puerto Rican all about,” Cruz writes, “grandmother speak to me & tell me of african things.” He concludes: “dance and tell me black african things / i know you know.”⁷⁴ Dance, blood, spirits, music, space travel all appear in “African Things,” as we might expect. But the crux is knowledge: who knows what he wants to know? He thinks that his grandmother might. Cruz thus recalls Afro-Boricua poet Fortunato Vizcarrondo’s famous poem, “Y tu agüela, aonde ejtá?” which lampoons white (or white passing) Puerto Ricans’ shame in their Black ancestry.⁷⁵ Yet we never do hear what Cruz’s grandmother has to say, and what Puerto Rican is “all about” isn’t much clearer by the end. The reader is left unenlightened. If that seems self-defeating, then bear in mind that this condition of not-knowing (or not-yet-knowing) nevertheless mirrors the poet’s own situation. “African Things” orients us to how Cruz’s social theory, his social history, depends on finding things out that aren’t given in any natural inheritance of blood or spirit. The very “african things” he thinks might hold the answer to his questions have themselves to be sought out. What *Mainland* and later writings depict is a search for knowledge. They depict not oppressive social conditions, or not only oppressive social conditions, as readers of Cruz have sometimes held, but

⁷³ Victor Hernández Cruz, “African Things,” in *Mainland*, 64, ll. 4, 11–12.

⁷⁴ Cruz, “African Things,” 64, ll. 6, 10, 15–16.

⁷⁵ See Fernando Fortunato Vizcarrondo, “En Yo Granma, Where She At?” in Márquez, *Puerto Rican*, 195–97.

a search for kinds of knowledge such conditions may keep out of reach. Blood reveals little, but what is revealed in tracing blood's history is another story.

It overstates the case to say Cruz writes exclusively about African inheritances in *Mainland*. In fact, there are only a few other pieces in this vein in the collection. But after focusing on "En La Casa De Verta," "Loíza Aldea," and "African Things," what becomes apparent is that Cruz is guided by an insight quoted above: "Loíza you are always there / silent with your African swing." When he invokes bomba or congas, clave or salsa, the sea, identity, history, knowledge, and so on, he invokes a panoply of survivals, histories, traditions, and elective affinities that emerge from racial slavery and Black collective practice, though, crucially, they might need to be learned about in order to be recognized. This is one way to do social theory: writing the present's past. Because of where Cruz was born, and the processes of racial formation he witnessed and that shaped him, this past has to be Afrocentric.

For Cruz, imaginative writing doesn't reflect social conditions. It is reflexive, borrowing from social history as readily as from social life. There is a disciplinary orientation to his work, one learned, in part, from Puerto Rican studies's mainland inaugurator. This disciplinary orientation is not canceled out by vernacular knowledge. Rather disciplinary orientation and vernacular knowledge have a supplementary relationship in the Derridean sense, which is to say, rhetorical opposition masks their real interdependence. Cruz is as an unaccredited social scientist, a renegade social historian. The ambivalence of such designations—literally yoking together two realms of valuation, academic and vernacular—hints at the large-scale shift this chapter traces: the entrance of mainland Puerto Ricans into the university field. Undegreed, Cruz would teach at universities for the better part of the seventies and eighties. His Puerto Ricanness, his poetry, his background had become legible and legitimating goods in the academic

marketplace, in no small part because of the growing legitimacy of Latina/o Studies as a whole. He is able, as Reyes describes, to put “diasporic experience and heritage culture” to work in the service of transcultural capital. Cruz’s connection to Babín, to González, extended beyond his contribution to a topic of scholarly interest. He was learning to be like them. He was learning to take part in the university.

Puerto Rican Intellectuals, Puerto Rican Whitman: *Revista Chicano-Riqueña*

Such negotiations between literary endeavors and university life were not uncommon in the era. Cruz was only the best-known example, and one of the best, too, at dissembling his scholarly and academic savvy as unselfconscious ethno-national poetic expression. Reyes focuses on how characters in Latinx literature put transcultural capital to work, but what interests me here is how authors do it. The poem “Puerto Rican Intellectual,” published in the fall 1976 issue of *Revista Chicano-Riqueña* (renamed *The Americas Review* in 1986) (*RCR* and *AR* subsequently), is illuminating precisely because it appears in no survey of Puerto Rican–Diaspora poetry.⁷⁶ Its author, Frank Villalobos assumes no special status in literary history. The non-canoncity of poem and author is salient to the discussion. Gillian Rose, quoting Theodor Adorno, reminds researchers that they “must not limit [themselves] to examining only those works which attain wide dissemination, because ‘[If] works of art . . . do *not* attain any important social effect, this is a social fact just as much as the opposite case.’”⁷⁷ The “social fact” of Villalobos’s obscurity is irreducible to a single cause. One factor, however, could be his brazen identification of an ambivalence at the heart of the journal where he was published. “Puerto Rican Intellectual”

⁷⁶ Frank Villalobos, “Puerto Rican Intellectual,” *Revista Chicano-Riqueña* 4, no. 4 (Fall 1976): 42–44.

⁷⁷ Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno* (London: Verso, 2014), 146 (Adorno’s italics).

scrutinizes the emergence of Puerto Ricanness, *Puertorriqueñidad*, as a legible and legitimating form of cultural capital in the academic marketplace, hinting at an enduring concern of *RCR*. The poem ironizes the idea of transcultural capital, specifically as it is transacted on a college campus. This focus may have made Villalobos less amenable to literary recognition (and later, recovery) than another contributor discussed below: the openly radical David Hernández, whose overt criticism of institutionalization hides a consent to fundamental operations of academic life.

Adopting a confessional mode, Villalobos's poem depicts a marginalized student's experience of marginalization:

Someday I'll write an autobiography
that really tells you
how embarrassing it was for me
to admit how little I know. . . .

Not knowing about the inside
Yiddish jokes
that faculty and students shared
at Bronx Community College

Being laughed at
by an ultracultured professor
who called me a silly barbarian
because I didn't know about
Gog Magog and Caliban.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Villalobos, "Puerto Rican," 42, ll. 1–4, 18–26.

In first-person perspective, the poem narrates a Puerto Rican student's alienation from his learning environment. The "genre" of experience, as it were, that is invoked is common in US multiethnic life writing: the student of color's meeting with the white (school) world. As Erica Hunt explains in "Notes for an Oppositional Poetics": "In general, for a person of color . . . school is the first place where she is encouraged to exchange the richness of her experience and the values of her community for standards that run directly counter to her sense of solidarity. Even a child knows the terms of the exchange are unjust."⁷⁹ In "Puerto Rican Intellectual," the values that rule the school are established through exclusion. The inside jokes and cultural references that elude Villalobos's "I" determine who possesses proper knowledge (note that each of the quoted lines pivot on lack of knowledge). In response to this unequal value-exchange, he affirms his value (or virtue) in another world, the "streets": "Carrying a 32 -caliber gun / and walking *badd* / so that no one / would fuck with me."⁸⁰ Yet this counteridentification quickly gives way to a desire to excel on the terms of the establishment. He will outperform those who set the terms of intellectual performance. He decides at length to major "in British / Seventeenth Century / Metaphysical / Poetry," drawing out the terms in a showy, self-mocking display.⁸¹

Cycling through forms of marginalization (exclusion, unequal exchange) and responses to them (counteridentification, excellence), Villalobos sketches the conditions for a transformation of transcultural capital in the academic world. What the latter half of "Puerto Rican Intellectual" explores is the irony of fetishization, which is not the opposite but an aspect of marginalization. While Villalobos's "I" was acculturating to the norms of the white

⁷⁹ Erica Hunt, "Notes for an Oppositional Poetics," in *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*, ed. Charles Bernstein (New York: Roof Books, 1990), 199.

⁸⁰ Villalobos, "Puerto Rican," 42, ll. 14–17 (Villalobos's italics).

⁸¹ Villalobos, "Puerto Rican," 43, ll. 64–67.

(academic) world, leaving his “bad ass” back in Harlem on the edge of Columbia’s campus, the white (liberal) world got wind of writers Piri Thomas and Claude Brown:

Then

came

Claude Brown

and

Piri Thomas

And the bad ass . . .

was [now] in style

You were a Byronic hero

if you survived Harlem

and/or El Barrio . . .

Suddenly

at last

hey

I’m an expert

On Something⁸²

⁸² Villalobos, “Puerto Rican,” 43, ll. 45, 49–52, 56–60. Although this dissertation focuses on Black, Puerto Rican, and Jewish poetry, I have suggested that analysis of other groupings of poets along social identity lines would reveal parallel developments. In this respect, consider the (not-so-surprising) similarity of these lines from Villalobos’s poem to a comment made by Native American Renaissance writer N. Scott Momaday: “To be an Indian on the Berkeley campus now [in 1970], is to be *somebody*. Everybody listens to you. They are curious about you, and they look at you with a great deal of respect.” Indeed, their similarity of sentiment might indicate that Villalobos’s poem should not be read autobiographically, but archetypally, as the formulations of a “type” of minoritized subject in PWIs. See Momaday, “The Man Made of Words,” in *Indian Voices: The First Convocation of American Indian Scholars* (San Francisco: Indian Historian Press, 1970), 71 (Momaday’s italics), quoted in Mark McGurl,

Thomas and Brown, famous for their portrayals of poor Harlem and Spanish Harlem experience in the forties and fifties, instigate a sea-change in the halls of academe. “Suddenly,” El Barrio is interesting. Expected to be a first-hand observer, the Puerto Rican student is now an “expert.” He is granted a recognized role (“Resource Person / in charge / of explaining / my culture”), and an “identity crisis” to boot—Juan Everyman (“Juan de los Paslotes”) from the island, caught between worlds.⁸³ The school-wide about-face, however, does not bring the Puerto Rican student back to his counteridentification with “the streets.” In the midst of Bronx Community College’s infatuation with Thomas and Brown, he gets hip to “American facts,” fact number one being that the people who made fun of him, whom he got smarter than, were fakes all along.⁸⁴

In the final lines of “Puerto Rican Intellectual,” tables are turned on the former arbiters of value. It is revealed that the diasporic subject is the one who genuinely possesses knowledge. A distinction unfolded in the poem between lack of knowledge and lack of feeling makes this clear. Lack of knowledge, like that experienced by Villalobos’s “I,” can be remedied, for example by picking up an anthology of metaphysical verse. Lack of feeling is a more intractable problem: “vultures of culture / are incapable / of feeling / Bomba y Plena / Julia de Burgos / Luis Palés Matos / Cortijo.”⁸⁵ Naming forms of Puerto Rican music and dance, the foremother and forefather of modern Puerto Rican poetry, and the island’s most legendary percussionist, respectively, Villalobos suggests that, even if the “culture vultures” knew about them, they still would not feel them. This inability to feel—the rhythm of drums, of Caribbean poetry—is the

The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), 198.

⁸³ Villalobos, “Puerto Rican,” 43, ll. 68–71, 75, 77.

⁸⁴ Villalobos, “Puerto Rican,” 44, l. 85.

⁸⁵ Villalobos, “Puerto Rican,” 44, ll. 86–92.

sign of an ignorance profounder than any lack of knowledge. It is the ultracultured students and professors who can “draw [no] parallels / between / Donne’s malefic poems / and / brujería.”⁸⁶ Only the student who sees how Donne and Caribbean magic go together, only she is a bona fide “intellectual.” Indeed, the “Puerto Rican” of the title does not modify but completes the noun “Intellectual.” In the end, Donne and the cultural capital he represents are inherited by the diasporic subject alone. Against the fetishization of the native informant, Villalobos poses a Puerto Ricanness that, rather than just possessing itself, possesses the whole Western heritage.

Of course, this sort of overturning is easier said than done. More easily written in a poem than put into practice. There remains a faintly mocking quality to Villalobos’s “Puerto Rican Intellectual.” The changes in value and taste, the counteridentifications and reorientations, occur almost too rapidly, too conspicuously, as if the point were not a gesture at any kind of confession or autobiographical verse, but satire. Is the desire for cultural capital so uncomplicated? As Reyes, again, explains: “while an accumulation of transcultural capital ostensibly gives agency to the Latinx subject, it can also reproduce . . . hegemonic structures of power.”⁸⁷ The journal where the poem appeared, *RCR*, founded by Nicolás Kanellos and Luis Dávila in 1972, stood at such a crossroads. *RCR* was a university-based journal that advanced the literary and intellectual agendas of Latina/o, and specifically, Chicana/o and Puerto Rican writers, artists, and scholars. Tied to the academic world by mission, funding, and operation, it served as a nexus for the accumulation of cultural capital. As a result, the higher education connection sometimes dictated *RCR*’s concerns, to the frustration of those anxious about cooptation. While the journal could influence production and distribution of cultural capital more effectively than a poem published in its pages, doing so required strategic maneuvering.

⁸⁶ Villalobos, “Puerto Rican,” 44, ll. 93–97.

⁸⁷ Reyes, “Decolonizing,” 519.

From the journal's title down to its origins, *RCR* bore the imprint of its moment. Founded by Kanellos and Dávila under the auspices of Indiana University (IU), Bloomington's Latin American Studies Department, the journal originated as a response to student demands for Chicana/o and Puerto Rican academic-intellectual outlets. Similar demands for Puerto Rican, Chicano, and La Raza studies (which only later coalesced as Latina/o/x studies) had sprouted up on campuses across the nation since 1968. Students were demanding equitable redistribution of material and intellectual resources. If that was impossible, they wanted at least a curriculum and resources that reflected the real makeup of student bodies. *RCR* aimed to meet these demands. The journal also emerged from the editors' desire "to provide a national forum" for Latina/o writers.⁸⁸ Kanellos had gotten his start assembling "small publications of literary work" by IU Northwest students and members of the Latina/o community in Gary, Indiana. It was on the basis of that work that he received a grant from IU "to start a magazine."⁸⁹ Headquartered in a local newspaper office, Kanellos, the students, community members, graphic artist José González, and the recently recruited Dávila printed and distributed the first issue of the journal in spring 1973. The title (*Chicano-Rican Review*) reflected the demographics of the Northwest Indiana Latino community where Kanellos had been working. From another perspective, the title merged the identities of the scholars who shared the masthead: Dávila providing the "Chicano," Kanellos the "Rican."

In the course of its 25-year run, *RCR/AR* became a leading publication for Latinx writing and scholarship. At the height of its popularity, 5,000 copies were printed per issue, a feat for an

⁸⁸ Nicolás Kanellos and Luis Dávila, "Nota Preliminar," *Revista Chicano-Riqueña* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1973): np (my translation).

⁸⁹ Nicolás Kanellos, "Revista Chicano-Riqueña and Arte Público Press: An Interview with Nicolás Kanellos," *Diálogo* 20, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 135.

academically oriented journal.⁹⁰ The journal was held in high regard, no doubt due to the consistently impressive array of creative writing, visual art, criticism, and scholarship published in its pages. Writers and critics who appeared in the journal included Alurista, Tino Villanueva, Evangelina Vigil-Piñón, Sandra Cisneros, Efraín Barradas, Tato Laviera, Luz María Umpierre, Julia Alvarez, Miguel Piñero, and Pat Mora; among the artists were Vivian Poey, Fulgencio Lazo, and Antonio Martorell. One special issue of *RCR* doubled as a landmark anthology of Latina/o poets and visual artists from Chicago. And just before the 1986 name-change, Kanellos and Dávila assembled a memorial issue for an early contributor, Chicano writer Tomás Rivera, author of *...y no se lo tragó la tierra*. As a later editor, Lauro Flores remarked: “*TAR* [sic] has been largely responsible for fostering the recognition of Latino and Latina literary and artistic activities in the United States.”⁹¹ Yet *RCR/AR* never lost sight of its institutional placement or the role of the university as a sometime-sponsor, sometime-antagonist in its mission. Kanellos and Dávila aimed to provide recognition and resources for Latinxs in higher education, and they clearly understood how an academic journal could advance the cause. They performed what is in retrospect an impressive balancing act, working to please all who were invested in the journal, from department sponsors to interested readers.

In pursuit of such (ultimately precarious) balance, the journal operated on multiple social and discursive levels during its existence. “We were actively selling *RCR* at street fairs, festivals, theater performances, and thus working with such organizations as the Young Lords in Chicago, TENAZ in California, and the Crusade for Justice in Denver,” Kanellos recalls.⁹² Fights for bilingual education were waged in the same offices where conferences and book fairs were

⁹⁰ Kanellos, “*Revista*,” 138.

⁹¹ Lauro Flores, “An Urgent Appeal from The Editor,” *The Americas Review* 24, nos. 1–2 (Spring–Summer 1997): 7.

⁹² Kanellos, “*Revista*,” 138.

organized. In his institution-building zeal and attachment to the verbal and visual arts, Kanellos resembles Charles Rowell, the editor of *Callaloo* discussed in Chapter 2. Like Rowell, Kanellos eventually maneuvered his journal to a better-resourced university; moving the journal to the University of Houston in 1980, where he took a professorial position. *RCR/AR* boasted real and deep connections with community organizations and regularly promoted academically unaffiliated writers, but the journal operated equally well in academic environments. In addition to the \$500 grant from IU that launched the journal, an early boon came in the form of “free advertising” in the established academic journal *Hispania*. According to Kanellos, “that’s what led to our first couple of hundred subscriptions to *RCR*.”⁹³ Despite how casually he speaks of it, wrangling that free advertising, in fact, attests to Kanellos’s talents as an academic networker. The journal did eventually fold, in part due to Kanellos’s focus on the associated publishing house Arte Público (founded in 1979), but also because of cutbacks in funding from the NEA, following right-wing attacks on the organization’s endowment.⁹⁴ Its demise notwithstanding, *RCR/AR* assumed a prominent place among the journals and presses since the midcentury which used university resources to put cultural capital behind Latinx literature.⁹⁵ The journal’s relative longevity and its reputation as a launching-pad for Latina/o/x writers who earned recognition in mainstream venues attests to Kanellos and Dávila’s successful maneuvering in (and around) the university field.

Further, the journal’s success in the university field corresponded to and advanced ongoing developments in US multiethnic literature. In the seventies writers outside the white mainstream, both in the MFA world and wider US literary culture, were increasingly invested in

⁹³ Kanellos, “*Revista*,” 136.

⁹⁴ Flores, “Urgent,” 7.

⁹⁵ See John Alba Cutler, *Ends of Assimilation: The Formation of Chicano Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 84.

the kind of academic cultural capital *RCR* generated. In the sphere just of Latinx literature,

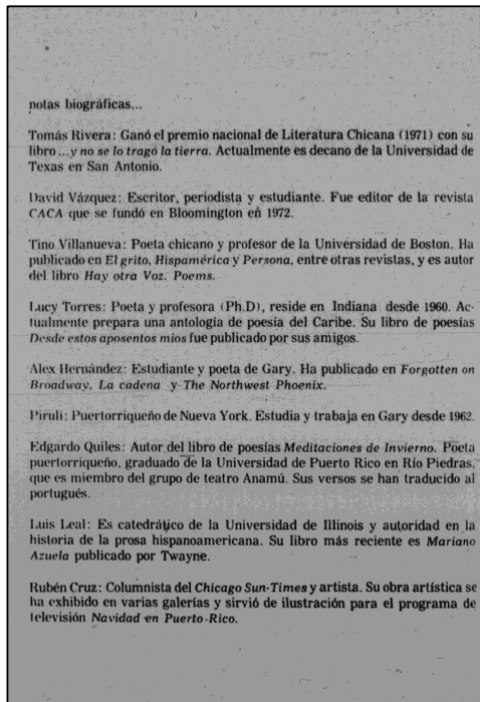


Figure 3-1: Revista Chicano-Riqueña 1, no. 1 (Spring 1973), contributor notes

consider the contributor notes at the back of the debut issue. Of nine named contributors, five explicitly reference academic degrees or employment in their notes. Tomás Rivera, for example, mentions that he is “dean of the University of Texas at San Antonio.” Among those who do not reference their academic degrees or employment, three refer to themselves as students, with two possibly using Gary, Indiana —“Estudiante y poeta de Gary,” “Estudia y trabaja en Gary”—as a metonym for IU Northwest. Rivera and Chicano poet Tino Villanueva, who also appeared in the debut issue, had no need to pad a

contributor’s note. Both had books out and were published in journals and magazines by 1973. More to the point, they were literary writers coming out of the modernist tradition; as such, they might have wanted to avoid compromising entanglement with the university, a potential threat to aesthetic autonomy. What, then, was the point of such self-fashioning? Rivera, for one, was committed to the university as a path to self-determination for Chicana/os; his commitments eventually led him to the chancellorship of the University of California, Riverside. For him, literary and institutional achievement were dimensions of the same aspiration. Rivera’s example is, well, exemplary, for he blurs the line between aesthetics and institutional politics. He was part of an emerging trend of Latina/o writers who turned to the university as a support rather than a hindrance to their work.

Although Kanellos and Dávila, and later Lauro Flores, prided themselves on *RCR*'s status as a literary publication, the journal, as mentioned, functioned more to legitimate in the academic than the aesthetic field. More to the point, *RCR* served to legitimize and make legible literary writing by Latina/o writers and scholars in an era when, “without any [substantive] access to the book trade”—whose gatekeepers considered Latina/o literature commercially unprofitable and unlikely to win major awards—the university provided writers a measure of job security and an environment conducive (at least on its face) to literary production.⁹⁶ The journal's immediate audience were, indeed, students and scholars in the fields of Puerto Rican studies and Chicana/o studies, adjacent fields like English and Latin American studies, and Latinx writers getting their degrees or employed at universities. To prove the journal's worth, editors pointed to the inclusion of *RCR* contributors in textbooks and syllabi. Wittingly or not, writers published in the journal lent their work to its legitimating operations. They lent themselves to being identified with the work of the university, its formations and processes of cultural and social capital.

Not all contributors were equally sanguine about this reality. Some were provoked to resistance by the proximity to higher education. David Hernández, a Puerto Rican Chicago poet, is a case in point. When Hernández died in 2013, he was eulogized in outlets like the *Chicago Tribune* and the Poetry Foundation's Harriet blog. *La Voz del Paseo Boricua*, the Chicago Puerto Rican newspaper, was one periodical that mentioned the island-born writer's title as Chicago's “unofficial” Poet Laureate. Famous for delivering his poetry backed by a jazz band, Hernández fashioned himself “a Puerto Rican Whitman, singing fiercely democratic and populist hymns.”⁹⁷ His work was, by the usual standards, far from academic. His poem “Fame,” for example,

⁹⁶ Nicolás Kanellos, interview by Connie Doebele, C-SPAN, January 24, 1999, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?119049-1/publisher-interview>.

⁹⁷ Marc Zimmerman, *Defending Their Own in the Cold: The Cultural Turns of U. S. Puerto Ricans* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 97.

published in the winter 1977 issue of *Revista Chicano-Riqueña*, takes classroom reading strategies to task.⁹⁸ Yet the poem ends up revealing the unexpected reach of such classroom reading. Hernández's radical remove from the university proves illusory at best.

"Fame" is a satirical litany that targets literary success and the lifestyle and attitude changes that often follow it. It is also poem whose context undermines its intentions. The poem appeared in the *RCR* special issue on Chicago Latina/o writers and artists. The special issue consisted of an anthology for a group of who called themselves *Nosotros*. The poem's misgivings about "fame" thus immediately either gain piquancy or lose conviction, given that anthologization is typically regarded as a form of literary success. Without a doubt, *RCR* elevated Hernández's and his compatriots' work. A collective statement at the start of the issue reads: "Our most earnest gratitude we extend to *Revista Chicano-Riqueña* and especially to its editor Nicolás Kanellos, who in the spirit of brotherhood and understanding maintained faith in our project and cleared the path to our success."⁹⁹ Moreover, if we recall the discussion of *RCR* above, the "fame" the poem lampoons is likely inextricable from the processes of academic legitimation that could help make a Latinx author "famous" at that time. From the establishment of programs in Puerto Rican and Chicana/o studies, through the founding of archives and research centers like Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños and the academic journals and presses *Aztlán* at UCLA in 1970 and *The Bilingual Review/La Revista Bilingüe* at City College in 1973–74, to the publication of anthologies like Luis Valdez and Stan Steiner's *Aztlán: An Anthology of Mexican American Literatures* and Babín and Steiner's *Borinquen*—the canonization of US

⁹⁸ David Hernández, "Fame," *Revista Chicano-Riqueña* 5, no. 1 (Winter 1977): 11–12.

⁹⁹ *Nosotros*, statement, *Revista Chicano-Riqueña* 5, no. 1 (Winter 1977): np.

Latinx writing was proceeding apace, with the research university its primary driver. In “Fame,” we might grant, Hernández asks what such academic incorporation leaves by the wayside.¹⁰⁰

While classroom reading practices are a particular target of Hernández’s satire, his own lyric reading strategies ultimately determine that he misconstrue the situation of his writing. “now that i have been discovered,” Hernández wryly begins, “i will no longer write nasty poems about America.”¹⁰¹ The line “now that i have been discovered” is “Fame’s” refrain. Between its repetitions a litany of everything the poet will or won’t do after being “discovered” unfurls. It is easy to see that Hernández is putting his readers on when the following pledges appear:

i will no longer scream that the only good system
is the chicago sewer system even though it clogs up at times. . . .
now that i have been discovered
i shall write for life magazine . . .
have a casual affair with ann landers
martha mitchell
betty crocker
or even john wayne.¹⁰²

“Fame” goes on in this fashion, each suite of mock-solemn assurances offset by the refrain, until the poem swerves into a meta-reflection. In the final lines, a class pores over the poet’s work. Of

¹⁰⁰ A comment by Kanellos proves telling: “El renombrado poeta David Hernández declaró que ya los escritores no necesitaban ser descubiertos por la junta exclusivista que controla las publicaciones en esta nación; los latinos estaban descubriéndose ellos mismos con actividades como ésta.” Kanellos, “Primera Feria Nacional del Libro Latino,” *Revista Chicano-Riqueña* 7, no. 4 (Fall 1979): iv.

¹⁰¹ Hernández, “Fame,” 11, ll. 1–2.

¹⁰² Hernández, “Fame,” 11, ll. 4–5, 11–12, 15–18

course, their formal analysis misses the essence of the poem, which he must supply: “that i was high on grass / drinking gin / and wired-up on cocaine.”¹⁰³ What patient scrutiny overlooks is the experience the poet conveys, experience that is missed in the attention to minutia. What actually matters is “carefully le[ft] out” of the reading.¹⁰⁴ The last nine lines migrate across the page, forsaking the regularity of the left-hand margin for an open-field improvisation, perhaps a formal reflection of the critique of classroom-reading these lines embrace.¹⁰⁵ To conclude, Hernández brings back the refrain, this time enjambed as follows: “now that / i have / been discovered.”¹⁰⁶ (The severe enjambment brings out another meaning: not discovered as in “made famous” but as in “found out, exposed.”) Bridging the syntax between “carefully leaving out / that i was high on grass” and this final refrain, the implication is that the action of “leaving out” is accomplished precisely because the poet has “been discovered.” On the one hand, this echoes the earlier skepticism of formal reading strategies. On the other hand, “carefully” suggests a purposeful, directed action, as if someone—maybe an instructor (or a scholar)—censored the text. More than this, there is a hint that what is visible or legible in the poet’s work is changed by its being in a position to be read. Being anthologized, in other words, determines what a reader can even expect to find in the poem.

Whatever the case, something essential is lost. And the culprit is the classroom. Four lines in “Fame” flesh out the classroom scene that precedes the denouement. They run as follows:

i will be discussed in english-classes

¹⁰³ Hernández, “Fame,” 12, ll. 41–43.

¹⁰⁴ Hernández, “Fame,” 12, l. 40.

¹⁰⁵ Hernández, “Fame,” 12, ll. 40–48.

¹⁰⁶ Hernández, “Fame,” 12, ll. 46–48.

the types of rhyme i used
the deep-hidden meanings in my lines and
how inspiration hit me in a chicago rain.¹⁰⁷

Few as they are, I put weight on these lines for two reasons. To start, they precede and prompt the turn which brings “Fame” to conclusion. This should be reason enough to grant them added significance. Further, these lines help to answer a question that might have arisen at the outset: how and by whom has the poet been recognized? Remember that “Fame” mostly consists of pledges to action or restraint. Each line until l. 34 uses an active verb construction: “i will join...,” “i will ride...,” “i shall wear...” Each concerns what the poet will do or refrain from doing. Line 34 (“random house will publish my anthology”) is the first in which the grammatical subject is not the poet. This is followed by an analogous formulation regarding the Encyclopedia Britannica. Two lines later the first passive construction (“i will be discussed...”) appears. While these lines, like most of the rest, point to the future, their grammar tells us who, in the past, has recognized the poet. The first line quoted above is the only line in “Fame” to share the passive construction of the refrain, suggesting an affinity between readers in the class and the poet’s recognition. The implicit agent of such recognition has its analogue in the other primary grammatical subjects in the text: the publishing house and the encyclopedia. What I am getting at is that the poet’s “discovery,” in the form of the refrain, resembles, at the level of the grammar, the work of publisher and classroom reader. At stake, for Hernández, is the misreading that comes with being discovered, and these are the agents who, by finding the poet, lose the poet’s meaning. In this way, seemingly against Hernández’s intention, the crux of “Fame” appears in

¹⁰⁷ Hernández, “Fame,” 11, ll. 36–39.

the penultimate section rather than the conclusion. His assertion of an experience that has been or will be missed—the supposed essence of the poem—pales next to the actual scene of misrecognition. That scene of misrecognition is the classroom, where students use analytic tools to ferret the “poetry” out of poems, as in the old Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren saw: “*thinking of a poem as a piece of writing which gives us a certain effect in which, we discover, the ‘poetry’ inheres.*”¹⁰⁸ It seems that to “have been discovered” means subjection to certain forms of reading.

It is ancillary whether the classroom in “Fame” is a high school or a college classroom. At a certain point in the history of poetry pedagogy in the US the latter begins to model the former, handing down textbooks like Brooks and Warren’s *Understanding Poetry* (first edition 1938) and generating lite-reincarnations, including Laurence Perrine’s *Sound and Sense* (first edition 1956). More to the point, the same relation to the text is being taught. As Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins argue, “the college classroom became the community of readers ideally positioned to resolve the contradictions” of “lyric” poetry. When John Stuart Mill said that “poetry is *overheard*,” the poet “unconscious[] of a listener,” he left an enduring formulation for the view that all verse writing is, essentially, dramatic monologue.¹⁰⁹ “Students were addressed by poems,” Jackson and Prins continue, “precisely because they were taught that they could all ‘overhear’ the poet speaking to herself.” This returns us to Hernández’s satirical rebellion, for he actually reifies the misrecognition he pokes fun at. By representing the poet as a lonely, stoned bard, misunderstood by all who would read him, and hoping, at the same time, to correct this misunderstanding by making explicit what the classroom will miss, he produces a Chicago

¹⁰⁸ Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, “Introduction to *Understanding Poetry*,” 1938, in *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 188.

¹⁰⁹ Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, introduction to Jackson and Prins, *Lyric*, 5, 3.

Puerto Rican version of Mill's already more than century-old image: the poet alone singing, his audience forever separate and removed. The new flourish is an added layer of self-consciousness, which is not, however, most apparent in the final lines where the stoned poet sprawls in Chicago rain. Instead, Hernández's anxiety about misrecognition is dissimulated in and as a critique of the classroom.

An example of Hernández's inability to get past the very paradigm that "Fame" criticizes is the failure to include in his satirical litany the most obvious site of misreading: the very academic journal in which the poem was published, where every three months scholars and critics would perpetuate the kinds of misreading he laments. In fact, they often took as their subject Latino poets like himself. What could sound more ominous in this context than editor Lauro Flores's business-like justification of *RCR* two decades later:

scholars proudly lay claim to the inclusion of their articles and essays in our publication. This has become a standard and accepted part of the rationales they use as grounds to defend their cases for tenure and promotion in the demanding research institutions where they labor, and where they also use the primary texts published in the journal and through Arte Público Press, as part of their curricular offerings.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Flores, "Urgent," 7.

Flores speaks on behalf of the journal in consummately professional language; “primary texts,” like Hernández’s “Fame,” become part of a curriculum, and their analysis in a dissertation chapter, say, a piece of a job application.

Closer to Hernández’s self-estimation is the cover of the *Nosotros* anthology, where Chicago is depicted as a kind of Babylon. Enormous dark buildings rise in the background under a menacing sky, the cityscape below dense and claustrophobic. In the foreground, the head of the artist, Gamaliel Ramírez, sticks out of a garbage can,



Figure 3-2: Gamaliel Ramírez, Self-Portrait (1976), *Revista Chicano-Riqueña* 5, no. 1 (Winter 1977)

like an old-school social scientist’s fever dream of the barrio. But where it might suggest a discrete terrain separate from the university, Ramírez’s Chicago also reminds one of the “‘blighted’ urban spaces” created by university expansion; the “mass displacements” of the poor that set the projects beside the ever-expanding project of the university.¹¹¹ It is useful here to bear in mind what Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls “organic praxis,” kinds of thinking that stem from “the recognition that the street has always run into the campus.”¹¹² The mean streets, as Piri Thomas would say, are not separate from the university; they are part of it. Puerto Rican Whitman or not, Hernández is part of it, too. Unlike Ramírez’s still unsettling self-portrait,

¹¹¹ Paul R. Mullins and Lewis C. Jones, “Race, Displacement, and Twentieth-Century University Landscapes: An Archaeology of Urban Renewal and Urban Universities,” in *The Materiality of Freedom: Archaeologies of Postemancipation Life*, ed. Jodi A. Barnes (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2011), 252, 250 and Fred Moten, “The Gramsci Monument,” in *Thomas Hirschhorn: Gramsci Monument*, ed. Stephen Hoban, Yasmil Raymond, and Kelly Kivland (New York: Dia Art Foundation with Koenig Books, 2015), 329.

¹¹² Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Public Enemies and Private Intellectuals: Apartheid USA,” *Race & Class* 35, no. 1 (1993): 73.

however, Hernández's barbaric yawps are as classroom-domesticated as the Whitman of *Dead Poets Society*. You will recall the famous scene, where students rip out pages from Perrine's *Sound and Sense*. All they prove, of course, is that the lessons of lyric reading—poetry as lonely, intimate expression that exceeds the classroom walls, speaking directly to the soul—that these lessons are already inscribed on their hearts.

Ortiz Cofer's Metadiscursive Resistances

In December 1984, less than a decade after the appearance of the *Nosotros* anthology, a writer cut from a different cloth entirely, Judith Ortiz Cofer, learned from Kanellos's new co-editor Julián Olivares that Arte Público was interested in the book manuscript she had submitted. To be published in 1987, *Terms of Survival* was Ortiz Cofer's first full-length poetry collection to appear in print.¹¹³ Having just passed the fifth anniversary of its founding, Arte Público, RCR/TAR's associated publishing house, had discovered in Ortiz Cofer one of its most successful authors. At a glance Ortiz Cofer looks like the poet Hernández never wanted to be. Her books were published by Arte Público, FSG, Norton, and University of Georgia Press, the lattermost the press of her home institution, where she rose from adjunct teaching to an endowed professorship in the English Department. She received her MA in English and studied at Oxford (a fact she liked to include in her author's notes). In 1989 and 1993 she was nominated for a Pulitzer, and her writings received Pushcart and O. Henry Prizes and were reprinted in *Best American* anthologies. In short, Ortiz Cofer was a known and successful writer, even if she never achieved the highest levels of literary fame. Importantly, she appeared to be a Latina poet at ease

¹¹³ *Reaching for the Mainland*, which was published as part of a collective text *Triple Crown: Chicano, Puerto Rican, and Cuban-American Poetry* (Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe, 1987) is based on an earlier manuscript. It appeared the same year as *Terms* due to publishing delays.

in the university field. Suffice it to say, this is a view that leaves much to be desired. For all the formal convention of her verse and professional self-fashioning, there is, from the beginning, an undercurrent of resistance to the protocols of the research university and lyric reading alike.

In the same letter in which she expressed her pleasure at Arte Público's interest in her manuscript, Ortiz Cofer enclosed a selection of poems for the journal. One that eventually appeared in the Summer 1986 issue, "So Much for Mañana," serves as an early example of what I discuss in the Introduction, following Gillian White, as "metadiscursive" reading.¹¹⁴ A "metadiscursive style," however, White explains, is "one in which ethical research and critique into poetic forms of attention depend on narrative and expressive modes whose subtly foregrounded discursive character tests most of the assumptions we tend, through Williams and Olson and certainly post-Language, to accord to those modes."¹¹⁵ If the "expressive subject" is *persona non grata* in avant-garde poetry criticism, it's because (according to a certain politics of form) the subject is politically inefficacious, if not downright reactionary. White's tour-de-force rereading of Elizabeth Bishop and other late-twentieth century poets demonstrates the hollowness, or incompleteness, of such a politics.

White's notion of metadiscursive style is especially apt here because Ortiz Cofer's plain-looking verse belies the welter of voicings and interpretive situations it elaborates and invites. "So Much for Mañana," for instance, contains a brief narrative and then fragments of letters from a mother to her daughter, and vice versa. In the narrative portion we learn that the mother has returned to the Island, "after twenty years in the mainland."¹¹⁶ She writes her daughter as follows:

¹¹⁴ Gillian White, *Lyric Shame: The "Lyric" Subject of Contemporary American Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014), 58.

¹¹⁵ White, *Lyric*, 58.

¹¹⁶ Judith Ortiz Cofer, "So Much for Mañana," *The Americas Review* 14, no. 2 (Summer 1986): 42, l. 1.

Stop chasing your own shadow, niña,
come down here and taste the piña,
put away those heavy books,
don't you worry about your shape. . . .
On every holy day,
I burn candles and I pray
that your brain won't split
like an avocado pit
from all that studying.
What do you say?¹¹⁷

Before looking at the daughter's reply, let's pause to note that the sing-song quality of the rhymes here isn't typical of Ortiz Cofer. There are, to be sure, more slant rhymes in *Terms of Survival* than in any subsequent book, but even so, this kind of heavy, outright rhyming represents a noticeable stylistic departure. However, "So Much for Mañana" is not a complete anomaly. "Mamacita," also in *Terms*, and "The Native Dancer," from her 1981 chapbook of the same title, share in lesser and greater degree, respectively, the same rhyming tic. "Mamacita" additionally shares a mother figure, as if, early in her career, the figure of the mother prompted Ortiz Cofer to a loss of formal control evident in such unpolished, almost naïve rhymes. How "The Native Dancer" fits into my claim I will explain shortly. To return to "So Much for Mañana," the daughter replies to her mother:

¹¹⁷ Cofer, "So Much," 42, ll. 11–13, 17–22.

“Someday I will go back
to your Island and get fat,
but not now, Mami, maybe mañana.”¹¹⁸

With this, “So Much for Mañana” concludes. And here too the meaning of the title is disclosed: the promise or possibility of an island-future, an island-tomorrow, has disappeared. The daughter is forevermore a mainlander. But what exactly forecloses this horizon of possibility? Consider the mother’s prayers and appeals: “put away those heavy books,” “don’t worry about your shape,” “I pray / that your brain won’t split / ... / from all that studying.” In the absence of further clues, we might imagine the daughter in a library, in an office at a research university, at a desk. Better: we may imagine the mother imagining her in such places. She is anxious about a certain subject-formation, that of the student. The university student submits and adheres to a regimen of knowledge, which, at least in the popular imagination, means living in books and neglecting the body. In a deeper sense, the student-subject is the subject-position of the university writ large (with the telling exception of staff *and* boards of directors). Even the professor is a student, for the professor also submits and adheres to the rule of institutionalized knowledge, as the monk to monastic rule. The professor is only a more advanced pupil. And the mother is right to be anxious insofar as she is unable to reproduce in her daughter the dream of return, the “native” subject-position, which at length brings her “back to the Island / to let her

¹¹⁸ Cofer, “So Much,” 42, ll. 25–27.

skin / melt from her bones / under her *native* sun.”¹¹⁹ She is unable to compete with the subject-formation of higher education.

From the late seventies through the early eighties, around the time she wrote “So Much for Mañana,” Ortiz Cofer taught as an adjunct instructor at three Florida colleges; like many adjuncts, often picking up courses at more than one institution in the same semester. Busy with endless grading, raising a kid, she sometimes found herself composing her lectures in the car on the way to class. It was around this time as well that Ortiz Cofer committed herself to a writing practice. In a late interview she explains how this practice came about:

At some point I felt a need to declare myself a writer. That didn’t mean that I would give up everything and go lead the bohemian life. It meant that I understood that you actually have to imagine yourself as an artist before you can become an artist. And the way that I did it was getting up at five o’clock in the morning and writing for two hours every day before everyone else woke up. . . . The point of the story is that you have to allocate a place and time to become an artist. . . . And so incorporating writing into your schedule is the very first act in becoming a writer.¹²⁰

This should sound familiar with a gendered twist. At the start of the chapter we met Miguel Algarín wiping sleep from his eyes. Where Algarín found himself falling asleep at 5am with classes only a few hours off, a thousand miles and change down the coast Ortiz Cofer was getting up. The bohemian life Algarín led was neither desirable nor an option for Ortiz Cofer, but

¹¹⁹ Cofer, “So Much,” 42, ll. 2–5 (my italics). My understanding of reproduction as a quasi-literal pedagogical strategy I owe to my colleague Shira Schwartz.

¹²⁰ Judith Ortiz Cofer, “Judith Ortiz Cofer answers questions about writing,” YouTube video, 10:02, posted by Heinemann Publishing, June 20, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gxw0QUZtDcM>.

both began to approach the morning in search of a way (to return to my earlier expression) to make the commute. For the Rutgers professor who hadn't lost his common touch, the issue was how to separate and therefore make livable a bohemian lifestyle and the university work that bankrolled it. For the adjunct instructor trying to raise a daughter and become a writer, the issue was how to thrive and cultivate her aspirations under the conditions of casualized academic labor.

Reflecting on her practice, Ortiz Cofer writes, “the initial sense of urgency to create can easily be dissipated because it entails making the one choice many people, especially women...feel selfish about making: taking the time to create, *stealing it* from yourself if it's the only way.”¹²¹ We should hear in this advice an echo of Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's counsel that “the only possible relationship to the American university today” is one of theft.¹²² Stealing from yourself, like stealing paper and ink from the department supply closet, is not necessarily a radical act. But in the context of higher education's intellectual economy, in which the student (and the professor) produces herself as “abstract social labor power,” stealing time from yourself can be a form of theft from the university.¹²³ When Ortiz Cofer began her early morning heists, no one could have guaranteed they would eventually accrue value for an institution such as the University of Georgia, which, like all research universities, remains ever-vigilant for prize winners and nominees to help swell the ranks of its creative writing classes and MFA program. Ortiz Cofer's “So Much for Mañana” registers at a thematic level discomfort with the subject-formation of the university, its goad to produce abstract social labor power.

¹²¹ Judith Ortiz Cofer, “5:00 A.M.: Writing as Ritual,” in *The Latin Deli: Poetry and Prose* (New York: Norton, 1995), 168 (my italics).

¹²² Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 26.

¹²³ Tiziana Terranova and Marc Bosquet, “Recomposing the University,” *Mute* 1, no. 28 (Summer/Autumn 2004), <https://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/recomposing-university>.

More than this, the sing-songy rhymes the mother bears frustrate—at a stylistic level—the elegant formal control so characteristic of Ortiz Cofer’s work, so much the reason for her institutional elevation. Writing as a Puerto Rican woman whose literary “excellence” “leave[s] behind ethnic writing,” as Ilan Stavans so shamefully says in his blurb for *The Latin Deli*, formal control becomes her path to legitimation and recognition in a university field otherwise skeptical of her contributions. The development of that control can be traced from her chapbook *The Native Dancer* (1981)—and its paratextual authorial self-fashioning—through *Terms of Survival* to *The Latin Deli* (1993), her first book of poetry published by University of Georgia Press.

A photo of the author graces the cover of *The Native Dancer*. She is in profile, her line of



Figure 3-3: Cover, *The Native Dancer* (1981).
Photo by John Cofer

sight meeting the fore-edge of the book outside the frame, the fore-edge the reader will soon thumb to open the book. Inside on the recto of the first page the photo is repeated, smaller now. This repetition echoes the doubling of the author’s face in the photo itself. The side of her face turned away from the viewer is reflected in a mirror set in grainy wood beside her. Although the line of her face perfectly parallels the photo’s frame, the wood is cut away to reveal the mirror in a diagonal slice that tricks the eyes so that I see her reflection tilted. Artfully captured in black and white,

John Cofer’s photo is a study in contrasts. Ortiz Cofer’s

thick black hair shrouds the left side of the photo in darkness; a coil of hair falls forward from the rest dividing neck from face. As you scan to the right the light grows in intensity. Her lips are set in a line. She is calm or contemplative. Or serious. Or posed, poised. She is all of the above.

And despite her later protestation to the contrary, there is more than a hint of the bohemian in this image. Finally, beneath the photo on cover and first page alike runs the title in majuscules: THE NATIVE DANCER. And beneath the title, the attribution: By Judith Ortiz Cofer. One way to read this should be obvious, but Ortiz Cofer gives us a hint anyways: “I always knew that I needed a creative outlet. When I was a little girl I used to dream about being a dancer.”¹²⁴ Ortiz Cofer is the native dancer, and the native dancer her creation. She is herself her own project, the project of being an artist.

Only the project is not hers alone. John Cofer’s photo is a husband’s contribution to her self-creation as an artist, lending his talents to Ortiz Cofer’s self-fashioning. Patricia Lieb and Carol Schott—the Bourbonnais, Illinois duo responsible for publishing the chapbook—serve as Midwestern arts impresarios. They produce for her a handsomely designed chapbook, another feather in her artist’s cap. Not all who contribute to her self-fashioning do so in a welcome way, however. ““We really like your work but it has so much Spanish in it and the material is so *exotic* that we do not think that we have a public for it,”” Cofer reports she was told when she began pitching her first full-length collection.¹²⁵ The word “exotic” is important here. Indeed, she repeats it in the same discussion, commenting, “my work became too exotic.” The word also appears in the title poem of *The Native Dancer*. In the opening lines Ortiz Cofer writes,

Into elegant rooms crowded with dialog
she filters like exotic incense
a circle forms to let her dance

¹²⁴ Edna Acosta-Bélen and Judith Ortiz Cofer, “A *MELUS* Interview: Judith Ortiz Cofer,” *MELUS* 18, no. 3 (Autumn 1993): 93.

¹²⁵ Acosta-Bélen and Ortiz Cofer, “*MELUS*,” 94 (my italics).

as in a trance they watch her move.¹²⁶

The “they” of these lines is never specified, but their relation to the dancer is clear: she is a token to them, an “exotic incense” to spice up “elegant rooms.” The native dancer is a spectacle, an alluring indigene from nowhere they have ever been. One way to read these lines is to say that they symbolize Ortiz Cofer’s relationship with the mainstream publishers who admired her work in quarterlies and magazines—relishing in how her subject matter livened up these “mainly white” spaces, to borrow Spahr and Young’s phrase again—but unwilling to go the length of publishing her in book-form. More interesting, though, is to see in these lines her elaboration of a structure of relations, one which includes her work and experience but also goes beyond it. I’m referring, of course, to the structural relation of tokenism, of an additive rather than substantive incorporation of the variously marginalized into the very fields that produce their marginalization. Ortiz Cofer’s project of self-creation is inflected by her reception. She learns what it means to be an “exotic” even if she contests her tokenization, the spectacularization of her biography. The girl who dreamed of becoming a dancer learns that she must be a “native” dancer if she is to dance anywhere but her bedroom. “The Native Dancer” negotiates the terms of her self-fashioning.

While the native dancer “filters” into the rooms of those who pay her to entertain them, making herself available to her onlookers, she nonetheless holds something of herself in reserve. To begin, she silently scorns her benefactors: “in her soul there is only scorn / for their lust and easy living.”¹²⁷ They cannot see past her formal display—her “entic[ing]” arms, her motion and

¹²⁶ Judith Ortiz Cofer, “The Native Dancer,” in *The Native Dancer* (Bourbonnais, Ill.: Lieb/Schott Publications, 1981), 16, ll. 1–4.

¹²⁷ Ortiz Cofer, “Native,” 16, ll. 12–13.

“gesture[s],” in short, her artful dance. Here you might be reminded of Hernández’s frustration with the classroom of readers who will not glean the true significance of his poem, the ecstatic high that lies behind it. But Ortiz Cofer places her emphasis elsewhere. The line after the ones quoted reads, “and in her art there is no giving.” A gloss on the line might come in the form of an idiomatic inflection: there is no “give” to her art. The dancer’s art does not “give” access, nor does it “give” when pressed; it neither reveals nor grants intimacy. In a word, she lacks an inside. Another way to say this is that Ortiz Cofer’s native dancer is “not a lyric subject to be reclaimed as an identity but a medium for cultural exchange.”¹²⁸ Jackson and Prins are, of course, referring to the Victorian Poetess, who, they argue, made “subjectivity” available as convention, as “lyrically generic.” Certainly Ortiz Cofer wrote in the era of lyric’s preeminence, a preeminence the Victorian Poetess tradition both preceded and in part inaugurated, so hers is a variation on rather than an uptake of the Poetess’s “conflicting conventions.”¹²⁹ But seeing past self-expression to the terms of an expression of self, if you will, is useful here. Indeed, such a view proves essential as we come to the concluding lines of “The Native Dancer,” where the something of herself held in reserve assumes its most telling formulation:

they do not know
what they see is only a shadow
for the dancer’s lovely form
is nothing but an empty vase
in which to place

¹²⁸ Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, “Lyrical Studies,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 27, no. 2 (1999): 523.

¹²⁹ Jackson and Prins, “Lyrical,” 524.

the paper roses of their praise.¹³⁰

Unlike Hernández's expression of plenitude, what lies behind, so to speak, the dancer's artform is an object to be filled. As a result, reversing my earlier line, the native dancer doesn't lack an inside per se. Rather her inside is not content-ful but fillable. The "lovely form" serves as a receptacle for "paper roses"; her inside, then, not determined by any essential content but by the contents it takes. And yet the empty vase still resists determination, since its emptiness functions in opposition to the onlookers' assumption of some "exotic" interior. They do not realize they will find only what they have already placed there. And yet—after and in advance of the last "and yet"—this remains a portrait of the artist as a young native dancer. Hers is the self-determination of a modern writer, so that these are also the terms of her entrance into the world of US letters. And here we should return to the question of Ortiz Cofer's clumsy rhymes.

I said above that the figure of the mother seems to unsettle Ortiz Cofer's formal mastery, introducing an inelegant sing-songiness into her verse. But while cringe-inducing rhymes abound ("there is only scorn / for their lust and easy living / and in her art there is no giving") is in "The Native Dancer," the question is where the mother is in these verses.¹³¹ Ortiz Cofer is herself the mother, as I will explain.

The Native Dancer is a work of writerly self-fashioning—its verses for the most part woodshedding exercises, its publication an item on Ortiz Cofer's resume, and its paratext a series of claims to poethood. That writerly self-fashioning, however, functions as a simultaneous affirmation and disavowal of what Arlie Russell Hochschild and Anne Machung famously termed "the second shift," the domestic labors often foisted on women in addition to their work

¹³⁰ Ortiz Cofer, "Native," 16, ll. 15–20.

¹³¹ Ortiz Cofer, "Native," 16, ll. 12–14

outside the home. This is part of my point in raising the circumstances that gave rise to Ortiz Cofer's writing practice. When she discusses her 5am writing ritual, its intimacy with the concerns of domesticity and women's work becomes strikingly apparent. I quote at length:

Once I finished graduate school, I had no reason to stay at the library that extra hour to write poems. It was 1978. My daughter was five years old and in school during the day while I traveled the county, teaching freshman composition on three different campuses. Afternoons I spent taking her to her ballet, tap, and every other socializing lesson her little heart desired....

After trying to stay up late at night for a couple of weeks and discovering that there was not enough of me left *after a full day of giving to others*, I relented and did this odious thing: I set my alarm for five. The first day I shut it off because I could: I had placed it within arm's reach. The second day I set two clocks, one on my night table, as usual, and one out in the hallway. *I had to jump out of bed and run to silence it before my family was awakened and the effort nullified.*¹³²

Given the amount of unpacking this quote requires, I italicized what I want to focus on. First, notice that graduate school is, oddly enough, the scene to be recreated, the lost condition of possibility of artistic creation. Second, her labor, in the classroom as well as for her daughter, is characterized as a "giving to others," a self-giving that leaves Ortiz Cofer spent at day's end. Finally, the reason her alarm-trick works is due to concern *for* and *about* her family: on the one hand, the fear of losing her alone-time, and on the other, unstated but discernible, of disturbing

¹³² Judith Ortiz Cofer, "5:00 A.M.," 166–67 (my italics).

their slumber. The 5am writing ritual, then, is a charm against the family and a recovery of alone-time lost when she finished grad school. The idea of “a room of one’s own” appears frequently in Ortiz Cofer’s writing, including in her 1989 novel *The Line of the Sun*, when her stand-in Marisol scares her brother out of claiming the room with the writing desk built into the wall in their new house.¹³³ Yet it would be more accurate to say her concern was “a time of one’s own.” I referred to her early morning writing sessions as heists from the university, but they double as thefts of



Figure 3-4: Illustration from *The Native Dancer* (1981). By Kyra

herself from her family. Becoming an artist, a “native dancer,” means suspending her roles as wife and mother as much as it means withholding herself from the demands of abstract social labor power. This vexed self-creation, which requires Ortiz Cofer to steal *from* herself and steal *herself* from her obligations, is emblemized in the illustration that precedes the text of *The Native Dancer*: an illustration of a pelican, the emblem of the self-devouring and self-giving Christ. This sacrificial model of authorship is reiterated at the level of verse: the tools of self-creation turn out to be tools of self-mastery, and that self-mastery a form of control that develops as ever more rigorous excision. Excessive rhyming is the first thing to go. And with each volume of verse, Ortiz Cofer cuts away more and more excrescence, finally leaving only the polished surface whose sheen belies the violence of its burnishing.

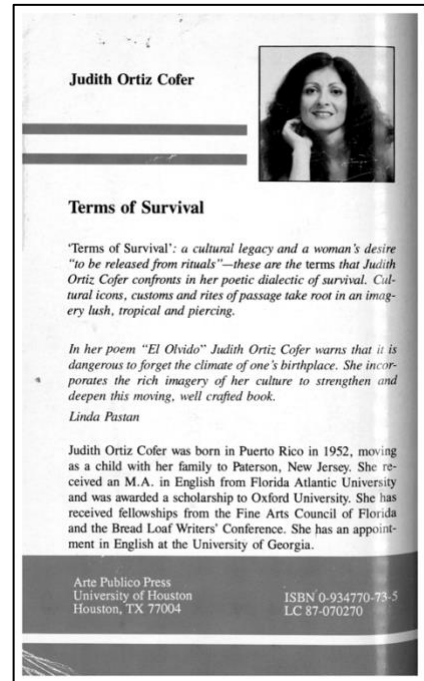
¹³³ Judith Ortiz Cofer, *The Line of the Sun* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 283.

The author's photo I analyzed above bears an immense amount of scrutiny. In fact, I hardly exhausted the description



Figure 3-5: Author photo, *The Native Dancer* (1981). Photo by John Cofer

it warrants. Now I want to suggest that the great scrutiny it is able to bear comes to seem a too-muchness as Ortiz Cofer develops her craft and image. The same goes for the author's photo that concludes *The Native Dancer*. A full-



length shot, the reader is invited to inspect Ortiz Cofer from head to toe, as well as the scene in which she stands. Compare this to the heavily cropped author's photo she used in *Reaching*

for the Mainland and *Terms of Survival* (both published in 1987). A front-view head-shot, the breadth of descriptive signification in this photo has been severely tailored. What it lacks in descriptive signification, however, it makes up for in professional signification. Instead of directing the viewer inward, to read the details of the photo, the tight frame directs the viewer to the rest of the cover, where text (including a biographical note) fills out our "picture" of the author and ties her to her work.¹³⁴ This diminishment of descriptive signification is carried even

¹³⁴ To the charge that I read too much into paratextual matters over which Ortiz Cofer had no control, my response is twofold. For one, my interest is *precisely* the ways in which a publisher would try to make Ortiz Cofer legible to its readers, how it would attempt to fit her to the conventions of the contemporary poetry scene. That being said, Ortiz Cofer's correspondence with Arte Público reveals a writer painstakingly concerned with her self-presentation and keen to control as many aspects of her image as possible. An 1997 e-mail finds the poet negotiating which images she would like used in a forthcoming volume as well as correcting her bio, requesting among other things, "Change Assoc Professor to Professor of English and Creative Writing since my promotion will be finalized within the next month."

further by Ortiz Cofer’s *A Love Story Beginning in Spanish*, published by the University of Georgia Press in 2005. The back cover of the paperback edition features another heavily cropped image of the author, but this time she is in ever-so-slight three-quarters view, as if retreating from the directness of the earlier front-view. And the textual apparatus, for its part, has become even more professionalized. Rather than give any direct description of the book, the back cover is devoted to blurbs from respected authors commenting on Ortiz Cofer and her work. Here at last the book and author alike are fully legible as part of the network of contemporary US poetry. The text beside her photo is the crowning achievement, noting in four brief lines her enviable

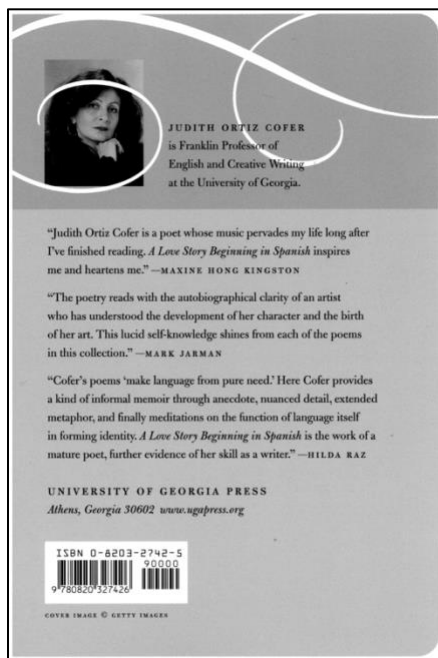


Figure 3-7: Back cover, *A Love Story Beginning in Spanish* (2005)

institutional emplacement: “JUDITH ORTIZ COFER / is Franklin Professor of / English and Creative Writing / at the University of Georgia.”

Figure 3-6: Back cover, *Terms of Survival* (1987)

Turning to the collection’s ars poetica, we find it begins, “Her calling is to carve all the truth / she finds on single grains of rice.”¹³⁵ It is a fitting image of the author’s dilemma: to tailor her scrawl to fit in everything in a space that calls for radical excision.

The “Mainly White Room” and Its Alternatives

Although Ortiz Cofer wrote the kinds of poems for which MFAs, fairly or not, tend to be reviled or admired—crafted, pensive, syntactically complex, but approachable—she was not herself an MFA recipient. A Diasporican poet of a younger generation Aracelis Girmay, on the other hand,

Ortiz Cofer to Marina Tristan, April 8, 1997, Judith Ortiz-Cofer: Manuscript Collection, Arte Público Hispanic Historical Collection: Series 2.

¹³⁵ Judith Ortiz Cofer, “Rice: An Ars Poetica,” in *A Love Story Beginning in Spanish* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 35, ll. 1–2.

whose work, it has been said, displays an uncommon “fearlessness” in the Program Era, received her MFA from NYU in the early 2000s.¹³⁶ For the most part in this dissertation I leave aside the MFA program for the precise reason that, being an historically white space, it was not as pivotal to the development of US poetics in the academy as its current ubiquity might suggest. But in concluding this chapter I briefly turn to Girmay and the MFA as a way of considering some of the legacies of Diasporican poetry’s sojourn in academia.

“Most of the students in my creative writing classes in college (both graduate & undergraduate school) were white,” Girmay noted at a roundtable on Latina/o poetry at Harvard in November 2011. “I grew tremendously in these workshops—so many of my fellow students taught me by example. They risked, loved, tried, floundered, celebrated, mourned in their writing. They responded to my work. Each other’s work. Still, there were many times, too, that their responses revealed a strange bewilderment or confusion about race dynamics, references. The position I was writing from revealed a complicated center.”¹³⁷ As Girmay goes on to explain, her “complicated center” became a site of complication. In workshops she encountered resistance from fellow students for whom her offerings were “foreign, sooo ethnic &, thus, too hard to enter.” Such reception, she says, led her to doubt the utility of talking about race and ethnicity in the workshop. “Deep learning can happen from [workshop] discussions—but I remember that we often skirted around race.” It was with these experiences in mind that I read Girmay’s “Scent: Love Poem for the Pílon.”¹³⁸ In this poem of thanksgiving to the Puerto Rican kitchen (“I thank God,” “I am thankful” regularly punctuate the stanzas), Girmay praises the

¹³⁶ Martín Espada, foreword to *Teeth*, by Aracelis Girmay, xv.

¹³⁷ Rosa Alcalá, Eduardo C. Corral, and Aracelis Girmay, “Latino/a Poetry Now: 3 Poets Discuss Their Art,” *Poetry Society of America*, c. 2013, https://www.poetrysociety.org/psa/poetry/crossroads/interviews/roundtable_talk/#print.

¹³⁸ Aracelis Girmay, “Scent: Love Poem for the Pílon,” in *Teeth*, 81.

market, the vegetables, the cooking utensils, and the scents, sounds, and rituals which together compose that kitchen's elements. In the final stanza, she introduces the pilón of the title, writing,

& I thank God for the pilón
that burst the knots of garlic,
thankful for the way it always worked & worked
under a fist. How, even now, after washes with limes
& soaps, the scent of what it's opened
still lingers there.¹³⁹

I single out "Scent: Love Poem for the Pilon" for the way it turns the pilón into a metonym for Puerto Ricanness. According to an expression on the island, a Puerto Rican always has "la mancha de plátano." It could be a gesture, an accent, an article of clothing, or a word, but la mancha de plátano always shows through somewhere, somehow, revealing a Puerto Rican. The indelible garlic scent of a pilón is one such "stain." If in reading Girmay, I can fall back on my own sense-memories of a pilón, your average workshop participant isn't necessarily so equipped. And trying to look up the word, you will notice that the object of memory that Girmay and I share isn't the first result, or even the second or third. Mortar and pestle aren't by any means uniquely Puerto Rican, but the pilón has a particular resonance on the island, one which Girmay here plays up. Was "Scent: Love Poem for the Pilon," which first appeared in *Ploughshares* in 2005, the poem that one of her fellow workshoppers told her "was holding him at a distance because it was so ethnic & he couldn't enter into it, he couldn't access it"?¹⁴⁰ If not

¹³⁹ Girmay, "Scent," 81, ll. 22–27.

¹⁴⁰ Alcalá, Corral, and Girmay, "Latino/a."

“Scent,” then certainly a poem like it. And then, the question: how *many* poems like it? Just how many times did a classmate wonder aloud, Could she make it more accessible? Why does the poet assume we know what she’s talking about? Is this really the proper subject matter for a poem? And what happens to the spirit—what happens to *craft* even—when musings like these are aired time and again? The summer after grad school, Girmay had the opportunity to join a space established in response and as an alternative to such questions: Cave Canem.

In 1996 Toi Derricotte and Cornelius Eady, with Sarah Micklem, held Cave Canem’s first summer retreat, at Mount Saint Alphonsus monastery, a two-hour drive north of the city in New York. They had founded Cave Canem as an alternative to the MFA program, the workshop, and their experiences generally as black poets in the US educational system, as students and professors. Eady shares the longing that drove them in the form of questions: “*Wouldn’t it be great to build a space where you didn’t have to apologize? Where you didn’t have to explain?*”¹⁴¹ The point was not to battle the MFA program but to escape it, to fashion a space and a network—and some time away—for black poets to rest, recover, and revive with each other. A place to bear and unburden themselves for a while, and hopefully, to carry away something sustaining too. For Girmay, that is exactly what it turned out to be. “Cave Canem has held me up,” she said during the roundtable, “let me know that there are people who want my voice to say some things, to try, to wrestle—that there’s a place where my work will be deeply questioned & considered & lived with.”¹⁴² Going that first summer to Cave Canem she had in her possession a manuscript, the fruit of her labors at NYU. “Maybe two of those poems ended up in *Teeth*,” she

¹⁴¹ Cornelius Eady, Toi Derricotte, Elizabeth Alexander, and Harryette Mullen, introduction to *Gathering Ground: A Reader Celebrating Cave Canem’s First Decade*, ed. Toi Derricotte and Cornelius Eady with Camille T. Dungy (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 2.

¹⁴² Alcalá, Corral, and Girmay, “Latino/a.”

told an interviewer.¹⁴³ During the retreat, “another body of work” became possible. In part, this was due to her audience, but in part, as Girmay explains, “There was something about having a poem due every day that messed me up in the most beautiful way. . . . I would work until two in the morning and on as many drafts as I could, but the subject of the poems got really, really wild because I didn’t have time to say, ‘No, no, no. You can’t get in.’ It was like my bouncer was asleep.” What the space and time that Cave Canem offers, and the space-time that is Cave Canem, together make possible, is alternative-institutional escape. Not the forsaking of institutions per se, not even an alternative to the university, but a field of positivities in, beside, and under the university.

More than a decade after the founding of Cave Canem, Girmay would lend her talents to an organization modeled in its image: CantoMundo. Established in 2009, CantoMundo fashioned itself a Latinx Cave Canem, gathering under the auspices of the University of Texas at Austin for several years, until a recent move to Columbia University. Since its founding, Girmay has served various roles in the organization, including as a faculty member and prize judge. In a sense, then, she has helped facilitate another alternative-institutional escape, one that Ortiz Cofer, no doubt, would have cherished as a young poet. In another sense, CantoMundo is a way to shorten the commute I began this chapter by considering. Uneasily, even contradictorily joined, the gathering of artists (now, not necessarily bohemians) and academics (now, not necessarily student radicals) in the space and field of the university, yet in its alternative as well, which Algarín couldn’t quite envision, assumes one form in CantoMundo. In its workshops are poets with nine-to-fives, MFAs, even PhDs, perhaps like Cruz would have had had his schooling not been so hostile. Both Frank Villalobos and David Hernández would fit in, though Hernández

¹⁴³ Aracelis Girmay with Claire Schwartz, “Aracelis Girmay in Conversation with Claire Schwartz,” *Bennington Review* 2 (2016), <http://www.benningtonreview.org/girmay-interview>.

might chafe at the workshop form. Imagine Piri Thomas talking a walk around Austin during the summer, thinking he might have to add another chapter to the Deep South journey in *Down These Mean Streets*: a Southwest sojourn. There maybe he would meet a Chicana-Rican folklorist, someone a little more hip than Gerald Andrew West, who would give him the special issue of *Revista Chicano-Riqueña* on the corridos.

At any rate, the commute is not so long these days. And this is so only in part because a certain class of Diasporican writer now materially benefits from the forms of displacement that affect the black, brown, im/migrant, and working poor communities they might once have been part of—that is, only in part because a certain kind of Diasporican poet is now a beneficiary of gentrification. More pointedly, the commute is shorter these days because the circuits of transcultural capital have smoothed the drive. It still takes at least an hour to get from the East Village to Rutgers, but the cultural distance Algarín was also travelling—from Loisaida to the research university, from ethnic poethood to the professoriate—has diminished in direct proportion to the accrual of recognition that Latina/o Studies and literatures receive in the academy. The advice Pietri relates in the epigraph “keep sending us copies / of literary efforts / ... / in the mean time / get yourself a job” comes to us today with a different tone than the one he no doubt intended. What was a council of irony and despair and necessity for the underappreciated Nuyorican poet, who needed a job to pay the price of *being* a poet, has become a piece of practical advice. A Diasporican writer with a job as a professor actually has a chance of “making it” as a poet. If you can leverage your transcultural capital, you can “make ends meet.” You can make the ends of poetry meet those of the university.

Chapter 4

The Jewish Studies Inheritance

Vehatken atzmakh lilmod Torah, she'ayna yerusha lakh. And get yourself ready to learn Torah, for it does not come as an inheritance to you.

—Ethics of the Fathers 2:12

In this chapter, I turn to modes of ethnic-religious identification that developed in Jewish American poetry via identity knowledges. The breakdown of mimetic self-fashioning among American Jews, documented by historian Haym Soloveitchik, prompted poets in the postwar era to search for new ways to claim and authenticate their Jewishness. The rise of Jewish studies offered scholarly knowledge as a means to do just that. The chapter surveys how David Meltzer's magazine *Tree* and Jerome Rothenberg's *A Big Jewish Book*, as well as poems and prose by Benjamin Hollander and Nomi Stone, and in Marc Dworkin's magazine *Shirim*, use Jewish studies scholarship as material to fashion discursive "Jewishness."

Identity Embarrassment

Jacob Neusner, *Torah from Our Sages: Pirke Avot: A New American Translation and Explanation* (Chappaqua, N.Y.: Rossel Books, 1984), 74.

To understand why white Jewish American poets not only deserve a place in a literary history focused on poets of color and multiethnic poets, but perhaps even an outsized place, a return to the origins of the term identity poetics is required.¹

Anxiety and embarrassment about identity poetics is noticeable among Jewish American poets and critics, who were crucial to the term's circulation. Some of the earliest documented uses of the term are found in Charles Bernstein, Bob Perelman, Hank Lazer, and in writing on Adrienne Rich and Gertrude Stein. A brief review of these uses will reveal a pattern. In 1996, Bernstein discussed Stein's resistance to "group-identity poetics."² He claimed that Stein's formal strategies and her "triple marginalization" (as a Jewish lesbian woman) frustrate the claims of identity. "In our current poetics landscape, identity is something the poet asserts the better to celebrate. Stein celebrates her suspension of identity," Bernstein writes. Lazer concurs. Quoting Stein's remark "one has no identity . . . when one is in the act of doing anything," he counterposes her poetics to "the identity politics and identity poetics that continues to dominate American poetry."³ These views also dovetail with Bernstein's assertion that identity talk encourages a typically American form of consumerism. Chosen as if from the supermarketplace of social forms, identity has little radical potential. Hesitant to appear reactionary, Bernstein adds, "'Identity' isn't something I'm against, but there is this rhetorical conception that if you're not holding a sign up, that you're against it."⁴ Around the same time, Perelman located one of the

¹ Not all Jewish American poets are white. It is enough to mention Adah Isaacs Menken, Bob Kaufman, Jack Marshall, Michael Castro, and Hilda Raz in case this fact is not already known. My qualification highlights how poets who were, or identified as, white, turned to Jewishness as a marker of ethnic and religious difference to construct an identity poetics along the same lines that African American and Puerto Rican poets did.

² Bernstein, "Stein's Identity," *Modern Fiction Studies* 42, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 484–88.

³ Lazer, "Learning the Lessons of Early Modernism," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 79, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 182–88.

⁴ Bernstein, Ann Lauterbach, Jonathan Monroe, and Bob Perelman, "Poetry, Community, Movement: A Conversation," *Diacritics* 26, no. 3/4 (Winter 1996): 209.

paradoxes of Language writing in its internal commitment to “group structure” while “externally, group identity is disavowed.” “Given the deep disinterest in poetics of identity,” he observes, “the creation of literary labels would hardly be desirable.”⁵ Furthermore, articles on Rich from the eighties and nineties suggest that she developed an identity poetics in counterreaction to women of color’s radicalism. Her late work is an attempt to start over from the loss of the site of enunciation that was “Woman.”⁶

Bernstein’s defensive and embarrassed protestations, like the anxiety projected on Rich, and the superciliousness in Lazer and ascribed to the Language writers by Perelman, all register wariness of con- or ascription, of being (able to be) grouped, in the face of actual or potential group identification. As discussed below, Jewish anxiety and embarrassment about identity poetics may relate to the fact that in the first half of the twentieth century group identification kept Jewish writers out of the academy, the very vehicle of the turn to identity poetics in the latter half of the century. But unlike similarly marginalized groups, that collective identity became in turn the basis for their prominence in literary culture when, as a consequence, Jewish writers gravitated to (and flourished in) mainstream publishing and periodicals. A mark of exclusion and inclusion, centrality and marginalization, identity is embarrassing; it is the sign of a social form that once overrode aesthetic excellence and then perhaps underwrote cultural achievement. If identity poetics had not existed, in short, Jewish poets might have had to invent it to explain their situation. (And perhaps they did.)

⁵ Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 36.

⁶ Nancy K. Miller, “Changing the Subject: Authorship, Writing, and the Reader,” in *Feminist Studies, Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 110 and Lynda K. Bundtzen, “Adrienne Rich’s Identity Poetics: A Partly Common Language,” *Women’s Studies* 27, no. 4 (1998): 331, 343

White Jewish poets were not *de facto* excluded from the “mainly white rooms” of the MFA program, nor were they on the outskirts of a mainstream literary culture prejudiced against them. Another entry in the long tradition of outsiders-become-gatekeepers, Jews were intimately tied to the book market because, until the forties, they were barred from most tenured positions in the humanities. “Could a Jew realistically plan on a university career? The consensus [before World War II] was that especially in certain fields he could not,” Diana Trilling once observed.⁷ Without a parallel to the island university system for Puerto Rican poets, or HBCUs for African American poets, which fostered limited academic opportunities and a small but influential class of scholars, laying the groundwork for later large-scale engagement with PWIs, Jewish poets were slower to respond to the lure of the university and its identity knowledge programs. They clung to the literary market, even as their friends, patrons, and publishing venues dwindled during the decline of poetry publishing discussed in Chapter 1.

Because the institutions of the American book market were concentrated in the East Coast—their epicenter, New York City—Jewish writers who clung to the market, like everyone else, did so longest and most successfully there. As a result, this history of Jewish identity poetics begins on the West Coast and focuses almost exclusively on poets who made their careers outside NYC. Parallels existed from early on in New York City (the underappreciated Allen Mandelbaum comes to mind), parallels that would throw into greater relief the tension between NYC and, well, everywhere else. Indeed, it would magnify divides even between universities in the city and the prevailing book market. But for the purposes of this chapter, the striking difference yielded

⁷ See Terry A. Cooney, *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals: “Partisan Review” and Its Circle* (Madison, Wisc.: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), 233.

by a look at NYC's perpetual competitors for US cultural capital, the Bay Area and Los Angeles, is more to the point. We will make stops in Western New York and Maryland, but otherwise the story told fastens on California.

We begin in LA and San Francisco, where David Meltzer, a late beat and New York–transplant, founded the literary magazine *Tree* (1970–75). In its mélange of poetry, mysticism, and academic scholarship, the magazine demonstrates the growing interest in and influence of Jewish studies even among poets who were not trained in—and in fact resistant to—the university. Next we look to the 1978 epic assemblage poem–cum-anthology *A Big Jewish Book*, edited by Jerome Rothenberg, Harris Lenowitz, and Charles Doria. Primarily assembled by Rothenberg in the Allegany Seneca Reservation in Western New York, the book reveals how a poet and scholar with academic bona fides, but educated prior to the rise of Jewish studies, made use of that emerging body of scholarship. Further, both *Tree* and *A Big Jewish Book* document Jewish American poetry's incorporation of tropes, forms, and language from the Jewish mystical traditions—its Kabbalization, so to speak—revealed to be connected to attention to mysticism as a branch of research in Jewish studies. We then return to LA to examine another literary periodical, *Shirim* (1982–present), founded and edited by Rabbi Marc Steven Dworkin. Poems published by Dworkin and Jewish college students in the journal's first decade, when *Shirim* was supported by Hillel, a Jewish campus organization, register growing consensus about the content of “Jewish” poetry. To poets schooled since the late sixties, “poetry of Jewish reference,” the journal's main criterion for fit, signified themes and language increasingly drawn from the Jewish studies curriculum. In the chapter's final leg, two poets writing in the aughts are set beside each other: Benjamin Hollander, a West Coast writer, and Nomi Stone, a Marylander who attended college in New York City. As his book *Rituals of Truce and the Other Israeli* shows,

Hollander’s ambivalence toward the university as a site of poetic labor let him grasp its effect on Jewish American poetics. It also kept him from reaching a wider audience. Stone’s 2008 debut collection *Stranger’s Notebook*, by contrast, exemplifies a full embrace of Jewish identity poetics. Its unselfconscious, unostentatious embrace of identity poetics, worlds apart from Hollander’s meta-poetic and meta-critical probing, brings Jewish American poetry level with African American and Puerto Rican poetics on the eve of the global financial crisis. Yet Stone’s discursive strategies also exhibit more starkly than in previous chapters the shortcomings of identity poetics. Last to reach the finish-line, if you will, Jewish American poetry may best put in perspective how far US poetry traveled—and what it left behind.

From the Study of Judaica to Jewish Studies

Enclosed in four concentric rings, the Hebrew word *shemo* appears on the cover of *Tree 1*. Each issue of *Tree*, David Meltzer’s short-lived West Coast literary magazine, features this same design. Only the words inside the rings change to reflect “the subject of the respective journal.”⁸ In this first issue, “his name” (the name of God) lies at the center of the Tree of Life, the titular “tree” of Meltzer’s title. Picking up *Tree 1* in 1970, the design told initiated readers what the magazine was about: Jewish mysticism and letters. *Tree* was published



Figure 4-1: *Tree 1*, front cover

alongside a bevy of sixties and seventies periodicals that emerged from lively engagement with

⁸ Christine A. Meilicke, “The Forgotten History of David Meltzer’s Journal *Tree*,” *Studies in Jewish American Literature* 22 (2003): 56.

heterodox Jewish mysticisms, such as *European Judaism*, *Turtle*, *Tzaddikim*, *Dafka*, and *Holy Beggars' Gazette*.⁹ It “was a spiritual and literary undertaking,” as Christine Meilicke observes. That undertaking, still little recognized, helped fashion Jewish American poetry as we understand it today. Published in its pages were Jerome Rothenberg, Jack Hirschman, Mark Mirsky, Kathy Acker, Paul Auster, Howard Schwartz, Rose Drachler, David Gitin, T. Carmi, Rochelle Owens, Deena Metzger, Nathaniel Tarn, Edouard Roditi, Andrei Codrescu, Charles Stein, and Stuart Perkoff, as well as early translations of Edmond Jabés, Else Lasker-Schüler, Paul Celan, and Malka Heifetz Tussman. All were assembled under the auspices of Meltzer’s Jewish mystical poetics.

The route to mysticism was a windy one. No aspect of Meltzer’s background guaranteed he would be drawn to this dimension of Jewish cultural practice. Born and raised in New York, Meltzer and his father moved to Los Angeles in 1954. The next year, when Meltzer turned eighteen, the LA-based artist and filmmaker Wallace Berman printed his poetry in *Semina* (1955–64), a landmark assemblage-art zine. Through Berman and his coterie crew, the precocious writer and musician became acquainted with various painters, writers, and oddballs in the LA experimental arts scene. From these beginnings, he would go on to become a prolific and influential figure in Jewish and West Coast poetry. A beat writer who lived long enough to assume the role of living ancestor, Meltzer connected several generations of American poets to the legendary counterculture scene through his teaching, mentorship, and books like *Beat Thing* (2004) and *When I Was a Poet* (2011), both partly memoirs in verse. The publication of his selected poems, *David’s Copy* (2005), as part of the Penguin Poets series attests to his stature in American letters. But half a century earlier, as a twenty year-old poet, he made the second

⁹ Meilicke, “Forgotten,” 55.

important step in his career, moving from LA to San Francisco in 1957. In San Francisco, he worked at the Discovery Bookshop, where his circle of friends and associates grew to include Stan Brakhage, Michael McClure, and Joanne Kyger.¹⁰ In 1964, Robert Duncan, a regular customer at the Columbus Avenue store, encouraged Meltzer to read Gershom Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*.¹¹ A second-hand account reports that Duncan found a copy in the bathroom. He was scandalized to find it there; profaned and out of circulation at once. "I thought, since Robert was so excited, I'd better check this out."¹² In this way, Meltzer discovered a driving obsession: the Jewish mystical tradition.

Still considered an embarrassing trove of superstitions through the early and midcentury, Jewish mysticism barely featured in the daily life and education of secular and religious American Jewry. Meltzer was not alone in learning little about it in his upbringing. It took the recommendation of Duncan, raised in the Christian occult and hermetic traditions, to get him to reevaluate his interest in that branch of Jewish knowledge. Duncan's personal charisma aside, his recommendation tapped into the spiritual currents of the sixties counterculture. Religious seekers anxious for alternatives to American imperialism, capitalism, and materialism dabbled in Hindu,

¹⁰ Christopher Luna, ed., *The Flame Is Ours: The Correspondence of Stan Brakhage and Michael McClure, 1961–1978*, in *Big Bridge* 15 (Spring 2011): 253, http://www.bigbridge.org/BB15/2011_BB_15_FEATURES/Luna_McClure_Brakhage_Feature/THE_FLAME_IS_OURS.pdf.

¹¹ Meilicke, "Forgotten," 55. Duncan's role in turning Jewish American poets (writing in English) onto the Kabbalah remains to be investigated. Jerome Rothenberg too credits Duncan with introducing him to Gershom Scholem's writings. For his part, Duncan mentions Scholem as early as 1958 in his correspondence with Denise Levertov. Jerome Rothenberg, "Robert Duncan: A Memorial," 1988, in *Poetics & Polemics, 1980–2005*, ed. Jerome Rothenberg and Steven Clay (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2008), 197 and Duncan to Levertov, September, 15, 1958, in *The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov*, ed. Robert J. Bertholf and Albert Gelpi (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 137.

¹² Steve Dickison, "Eight Occasions, September–October 2015, Part 1," San Francisco State Documentary Film Institute (website), November 23, 2015, <https://docfilm.sfsu.edu/news-announce/clone-news-announcement>.

Buddhist, and Native American spiritualities, as well as the mystical side of the Abrahamic religions. Just as crucial was the sea-change in the academic study of Jews and Jewry that Scholem’s wartime lectures represented. The scorn poured on Jewish mysticism by the nineteenth-century *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (“Science of Judaism”) had been slowly and painstakingly combatted by Scholem and Martin Buber, among others. The 1931–34 publication of the Soncino edition of the *Zohar* made available to English-language readers the major text of medieval Jewish mysticism, if only a portion of it. In the fifties and sixties, as formal Jewish studies developed, Jewish mysticism emerged as a significant field of inquiry. These developments were a precondition of Meltzer’s turn to Jewish heterodox spiritualities. When he

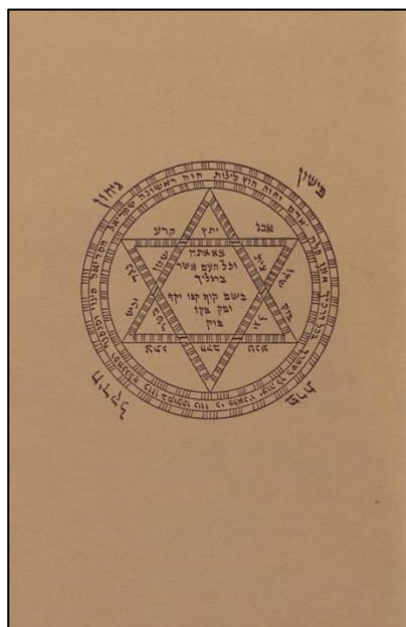


Figure 4-2: *Tree 1*, back cover. Designed by Wallace Berman

and Jack Hirschman began studying and writing about Jewish mysticism in the mid-sixties, the ground of their mystical poetics became (alongside a great deal of esoterica) scholarly and academic books.

Yet a tension existed between the academic influence on Meltzer and the countercultural, occult one. Wallace Berman, who had included a teenaged Meltzer in *Semina*, also became a fellow-traveler in Jewish mysticism. Berman’s oeuvre exhibits a fascination with Hebrew letters reminiscent of gematria, the mystical hermeneutic practice that derives and composes hidden

meanings from the numerical value of letters.¹³ Stephen Fredman, however, distinguishes

Berman’s “‘intuitive Kabbalah’” (borrowing a coinage Meltzer applied to his late friend) from

¹³ Tosh Berman, *Tosh: Growing Up in Wallace Berman’s World* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2018), 165.

Meltzer's and Hirschman's own "serious study" of Jewish mystical texts.¹⁴ The countercultural mysticism in Berman's work is unassuming, even unstudied. While more systematic in approach, Meltzer also aimed for naturalness. *Tree*'s plain design and esoteric flourishes (like Berman's hermetic design on the back cover of *Tree I*) suggested that mystical knowledge lay between the covers, not labored learning. A "Checklist" at the back of *Tree I* recommends a mixture of serious academic research, classics of Judaica scholarship, occult books, and counterculture publications. Meltzer read studiously but did not want to forfeit an "intuitive" relationship to Jewish mysticism. Attachment to a naturalized mystical tradition—figured as an inheritance, but in fact an invented one—became prevalent in Jewish American poetry after this period.¹⁵ Meltzer's mystical poetics helped Kabbalize Jewish American poetry, if you will, turning mysticism into a shared marker of Jewishness on the page.

Contributions to *Tree* registered the conflicting sources of its inspiration. This is especially the case in Jack Hirschman's epistolary prose poem "JAH 2 DM RE KBL ChNG," whose title, decoded, reads "Jack A. Hirschman to David Meltzer regarding Kabbalah and the I Ching." Text justified, so that it runs from the left margin to the right, "JAH 2 DM" is punctuated by three spaces between every phrase. This "threespaced form" resembles punctuation and a kind of enjambment, allowing Hirschman to spotlight standalone words and

¹⁴ David Meltzer, "The Door of Heaven, the Path of Letters," in *Wallace Berman Retrospective, October 24 to November 26, 1978: An Exhibition*, ed. Hal Glicksman (Los Angeles: The Fellows, 1978), 100, quoted in Stephen Fredman, *Contextual Practice: Assemblage and the Erotic in Postwar Poetry and Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 121.

¹⁵ The only member of Meltzer's entourage with anything like a natural relationship to Jewish mysticism was Israeli-born artist Bruria Finkel, whose grandfather was a Kabbalah practitioner. Finkel provided Meltzer, Hirschman, and Jerome Rothenberg translations of Hebrew mystical texts which they studied and sometimes re-translated. See Jorge Casuo, "Kabbalah, Jewish Mysticism and The Divine Chariot," *The Outlook*, July 28, 2009, https://www.surfsantamonica.com/ssm_site/the_lookout/news/News-2009/July-2009/07_28_09_Kabbalah_Jewish_Mysticism_and_The_Divine.html and Bruria Finkel, "Works on Paper," Bruria Finkel: Artists and Curator (website), via Internet Archive: Wayback Machine, [web.archive.org, https://www.bruriafinkel.com/painting/on_paper/works_on_paper.html](https://www.bruriafinkel.com/painting/on_paper/works_on_paper.html).

expressions, introduce puns, and interrupt and resume the train of the thought.¹⁶ Its odd form

notwithstanding, the piece

looks like a letter to David

Meltzer about “JAH’s”

study of Jewish mysticism

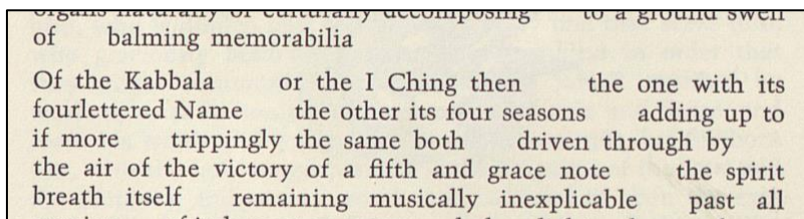


Figure 4-3: Jack Hirschman, "JAH 2 DM," detail

and the I Ching, a Chinese divination text compiled before the tenth century. Hirschman uses his authorship “JAH”—a signature and character that resembles without reducing to the author—to identify the sources of his interest in Jewish mysticism.¹⁷

Early receptions of a passionate and deeply reincarnating grand mother and synagogal disciplines but most of all an unrealized then waving undercurrent of the mysticism of the year set me on Zohars course which I discovered in college while reading Novalis and Blake and Boehme suggested by ironically two Irish apostates of verbal magic¹⁸

Citing the example of his grandmother and “synagogal disciplines,” JAH also admits the indispensability of the faddish, countercultural atmosphere described above. “The mysticism of the year” was whatever tradition lately caught the attention of spiritual seekers and half-baked intellectuals. When the Jewish mystical tradition’s fifteen minutes arrived, a text JAH had

¹⁶ Jack Hirschman, “JAH 2 DM RE KBL ChNG,” *Tree 1* (Winter 1970): 5.

¹⁷ The concept of authorship as a signature and character bound yet irreducible to the author comes from Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 3–84, where Rose uses it to read the pseudonymous and autobiographical writings of Kafka and Kierkegaard. For a parallel in poetry studies, Gillian White’s chapter on Bernadette Mayer in *Lyric Shame* might be understood as a reading of Mayer’s many authorships (154–209).

¹⁸ Hirschman, “JAH,” 7.

encountered in college, the Zohar (“suggested by ironically two Irish apostates”), became a touchstone. As the letter unfolds, JAH’s “grand mother” and his Irish teachers are revealed as contrary but inseparable figures for connection to Jewish knowledge. Their intersection marks a moment in Jewish literary history when “textual mediation is sublimated into an organic figure,” as Yopie Prins writes in another context.¹⁹ In this case, the Jewish grandmother, who bridges Old World and New and gifts Jewish knowledge as a blood-inheritance, sublimates recurring scenes of instruction in Jewish mysticism. But in Hirschman, as in *Tree* as a whole, a process of sublimation which becomes reflex in subsequent Jewish American poetry, here happens haltingly and self-consciously, drawing attention to itself.

Most striking is Hirschman’s refusal to decide between these figures. In a brief, undated memoir-cum-letter to Jan Herman, Hirschman remembers “toral Saturdays” from his childhood, that is, Sabbaths in synagogue when the Torah was read aloud.²⁰ “That was minor,” he writes parenthetically, “until later; after a while I began to visit my grandmother in a slum apartment, where I would listen to her complain in a language I could not understand. She was the first truly magical character outside of my own home and the neighborhood I played in.” As in “JAH 2 DM,” memories of grandmother and synagogue mingle, the former somehow lending the latter its significance. The bonds tying together spiritual practice, religious knowledge, and family inheritance in Hirschman’s autobiographical piece are at work in JAH’s missive, too. JAH acknowledges “feeling early on that the Zohar held something authentic for me being Jewish and all.”²¹ The ambivalence of that shrugging phrase (“being Jewish and all”), an

¹⁹ Yopie Prins, *Victorian Sappho* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 6.

²⁰ Jack Hirschman, “Vowel Points,” n.d., p. 2, Jan Herman Archive, Box 13, Folder 13, Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University.

²¹ Hirschman, “JAH,” 7.

ambivalence that disappears in Hirschman's later writing, flags his self-consciousness as he tenders a claim to "authentic" connection with Jewish mysticism. That self-consciousness resolves into an admission of the scene of instruction that the grandmother almost supplants. In fact, the "reincarnating grand mother" becomes his Irish teacher. JAH marvels "how it comes to pass that a bantamweight Irishman . . . should become my Jewish Mother."²² The "magical" grandmother, his "grand mother," reincarnates as an Irish apostate-cum-Jewish mother. When JAH elsewhere remarks that "All institutions . . . doctoral or doctored help . . . separate poet from poem," his skepticism of institutional learning is tempered by this attempt to relink "poet [and] poem," to bridge the gap between schooled knowledge and unselfconscious text by making school personal, familial.²³

Here form is pertinent to the question of the personal. Hirschman claims that his writing took three forms after 1968: lyric poem, "atomal breathspace," and letters.²⁴ While "JAH 2 DM" fits uncomfortably in any one category, it is a sort of letter. As it happens, letters evoke Hirschman's distrust. He deems letters a "home of the falsely personal." "The 'friendship' of this language is a sham," he writes. "I associate this language . . . with universities, with posthumity, as though I had already become historical."²⁵ These put-downs fail to rescind what emerges, at the same time, as the privileged status of the epistolary mode. Describing the origin of his atomal breathspace—"breath language which decomposes composingly"—Hirschman inadvertently suggests that his "total language" resembles letter-writing.²⁶ "I began to set down my works across the page, becoming my own transcription. . . . I was returning to the notations of my

²² Hirschman, "JAH," 13.

²³ Hirschman, "JAH," 10.

²⁴ Hirschman, "Vowel," 1.

²⁵ Hirschman, "Vowel," 1.

²⁶ Hirschman, "Vowel," 6, 7.

father in childhood, those fragments, bits of news.”²⁷ These “notations” refer to newsletters and correspondence that Hirschman’s father produced during World War II. I quote at length from Hirschman’s description:

He wrote . . . an incredible amount of letters to soldiers during the Second World War, through the channel of his [Masonic] Lodge of ‘brothers’. . . . He also wrote a newspaper that went out every couple of weeks, to servicemen and lodgebrothers alike. . . . By 1943, I recall an immersion into the typewriter: my father was writing his ‘Letters.’ He was trying to communicate with 52 men a week; he was composing a newspaper in which he would report news of people. I recall the newspaper was full of the names of people, of couples, of families, of servicemen. Dot-dot-dot. And there would be another fragment of news. He served as a sort of reporter-rabbi.²⁸

It is easy to see how the elder Hirschman’s letters and reportage—names, notices, snippets of information composing a social world, like a pointillist painting—might translate into a kind of total language, able to turn “pure” verbiage into life. This discursive inheritance belies the son’s dismissal of epistles, of the language of “biography, the entertainment of personality, the solace of a history I am not altogether ready to accept.”²⁹ Skeptical, even disdainful of the “falsely personal” language of correspondence—an academic legerdemain, he repeatedly asserts—it is nonetheless that language that renders possible his vision of a total language in atomal breathspace. When he describes his valorized “atomal” poetics, he falls into language that could

²⁷ Hirschman, “Vowel,” 6.

²⁸ Hirschman, “Vowel,” 2–3.

²⁹ Hirschman, “Vowel,” 8.

as easily describe correspondence (or lyricization): “I share with . . . souls separated by physical distance yet closer than sound itself.”³⁰ What Hirschman’s rejection of letters does accomplish is critical to this literary history. The falseness of letters becomes, unexpectedly, an asset, when he “announc[es] the ‘family’ as fiction.” This decisive act, which grants him psychic access to his desired mode of writing, places the family, the personal, the familiar in entirely discursive terrain. It is a “sham,” but a productive one.

The sham of the personal is everywhere evident in *Tree*. What appears closest, most familiar in Meltzer’s “intuitive” Kabbalah, his “serious study” of the same deflects into larger political and social contexts. The late book-length poem *Beat Thing* (2004) distills this approach, as Meltzer casts his personal, memorial history of the Beats under the shadow of World War II and the suppression of radicalism in fifties USA. As *Tree*’s content suggests, academic and disciplinary contexts too are critical to any elaboration of the personal. Less momentous than Cold War politics and the nuclear arms race, higher education was no less vital to Meltzer’s day-to-day life. From the late seventies until shortly before his death in 2016, Meltzer taught at the New College of California in San Francisco. Never a doctrinaire academic, degree-less and without tenure, teaching was nonetheless his livelihood for half his life. His attraction to scholarly materials even in the years when he made his living as a bookseller and a folk musician boded well for a career in a poetics program. *Tree* evades the wishy-washy mysticism of the sixties counterculture primarily because its “intuitive” elements were tempered by a literary and scholarly disposition. As a site of literary writing, the mystical language used resists appropriation as a transparent medium for spiritual journeying. Its scholarly bias kept the mysticism from seeming user-friendly, so to speak. Yet *Tree*’s obvious Jewishness, even if

³⁰ Hirschman, “Vowel,” 7.

Meltzer insisted that the journal was not exclusively Jewish, is a reminder that an idea of the personal, of identity still mattered to its poetics. This apparent dichotomy resolves with the recognition that the identity poetics which anchored the journal—and the work of many contributors—was intended “not so much to discover or exploit identity (in the ethnic/tribal sense) but to put identity into doubt or question.”³¹ As we will see, being put into “doubt or question” does not abolish identity in Jewish American poetry; it highlights identity’s discursive character.

Shortly before *Tree* 1 appeared, the Association for Jewish Studies (AJS) was founded during a September 1969 colloquium at Brandeis University. Its emergence crystallized the peculiar moment in Jewish studies in which Meltzer’s journal participated. Although by no means the first organization of its kind (the American Academy for Jewish Research was founded in 1920), AJS led the field in an era when Jewish studies entered the “academic mainstream.”³² It arose as a response to the postwar boom in higher education and changing self-perception among American Jews between 1945 and the seventies.

At the close of World War II, there were less than 20 tenure-track Jewish studies positions in the United States. Twenty years later there were sixty.³³ This threefold increase stemmed partly from the overall growth of higher education in the period. As discussed in the

³¹ Jerome Rothenberg, “The House of the Jews: Experimental Modernism and Traditional Jewish Practice,” in *Radical Poetics and Secular Jewish Culture*, ed. Stephen Paul Miller and Daniel Morris (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2010), 35.

³² Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 330.

³³ Sarna, *American*, 329. With one notable exception, the term “Jewish studies” did not come into popular use until the sixties. The American Communist Party founded the School of Jewish Studies in New York in 1945, with a branch later established in Los Angeles. A 1948 denunciation of the School as a Communist front by the US Attorney General may partly explain why “Jewish studies” would require another twenty years to gain currency. For a discussion of the School of Jewish Studies, see Stephen H. Norwood, *Antisemitism and the American Far Left* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 102–3.

introduction, rising enrollments of military veterans on the GI Bill, as well as the general population, enlarged college classrooms nationwide. But more than this, desire to learn about the Holocaust stimulated academic and lay interest, prompting demand for expanded course offerings in Jewish history and culture.³⁴ Geopolitical events in the summer of 1967 further fueled interest in Jewish pasts and futures. The fear Arab nations might decimate Israel in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War stoked anxiety among those who feared a “second” Holocaust. Their fear was supplanted by vicarious pride when Israel emerged victorious. Historians have seen the emotional whiplash of those six days in July as a watershed moment that led to an upsurge of individual and collective Jewish pride.³⁵

Changes in self-perception critical to the rise of Jewish studies are only partly explained by these events and processes. Early claims that the Six Day War singlehandedly brought the Holocaust to Jewish American consciousness and resulted in an embrace of Jewish identity have been substantively revised. “The politics of consensus was giving way to the politics of identity,” Jonathan Sarna observes. “Americans of all kinds came to focus on roots, race, ethnicity, and gender. Jews ascribed to the Six Day War the identity changes they experienced, but they may actually have been more influenced by these domestic developments, which affected Jews and

³⁴ Judith R. Baskin, “Jewish Studies in North American Colleges and Universities: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow,” *Shofar* 32, no. 4 (Summer 2014): 11. For the now-standard rebuttals of the myth of silence, the myth that American Jews mostly ignored the Holocaust until the sixties, see Hasia R. Diner, *We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust, 1945–1962* (New York: New York University Press, 2009) and David Cesarani and Eric J. Sundquist, eds., *After the Holocaust: Challenging the Myth of Silence* (New York: Routledge, 2012). For a literary studies rebuttal, see Anita Norich, *Discovering Exile: Yiddish and Jewish American Culture during the Holocaust* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

³⁵ See Jack Wertheimer, *A People Divided: Judaism in Contemporary America* (New York: Basic Books, 1993) and Dana Evan Kaplan, “Trends in American Judaism from 1945 to the Present,” in *The Cambridge Companion to American Judaism*, ed. Dana Evan Kaplan (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 61–78.

non-Jews alike.”³⁶ Pivotal was the influence of the cultural nationalist and national liberation movements (Black Power, in particular) which provided models for Jewish “ethnic” pride.³⁷ In his introduction to the inaugural AJS colloquium proceedings, Brandeis Director of Jewish Studies Leon Jick saw the “resurgence of ethnic consciousness (especially among Black Americans),” as well as “a growing quest for recognition of diverse cultural elements” as precedents for the flourishing of Jewish studies.³⁸ While the rise of Jewish studies on campuses did not result primarily from student and political activism, as was the case with other identity knowledge programs, histories of Jewish studies centers and departments attest that faculty, community members, and financial sponsors who spearheaded campaigns for Jewish studies strove for the institutionalization of the field in the wake and context of these better-known struggles.³⁹

The origin of Jewish studies in parallel struggles around identity knowledges dictated its formation and uptake in ways that reflections on the field regularly overlook or underappreciate. Quite different in some respects, Susannah Heschel and Nathan Rotenstreich are equally representative in their focus on the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, the Science of Judaism scholars of nineteenth-century Germany as the field’s formal originators.⁴⁰ More broadly, Jewish studies

³⁶ Sarna, *American*, 317.

³⁷ Steven T. Rosenthal, “Long-Distance Nationalism: American Jews, Zionism, and Israel,” In Kaplan, *Cambridge*, 213.

³⁸ Leon A. Jick, introduction to *The Teaching of Judaica in American Universities: The Proceedings of a Colloquium*, ed. Leon A. Jick (Waltham, Mass.: Ktav Publishing House and the Association for Jewish Studies, 1970), 3.

³⁹ Todd M. Endelman, “A History of the Frankel Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Michigan,” pp. 4–5, Jean and Samuel Frankel Center for Judaic Studies (website), <https://lsa.umich.edu/judaic/resources/frankel-center-history.html>.

⁴⁰ Nathan Rotenstreich, “The ‘Science of Judaism’ and Its Transformation,” in *Teaching Jewish Civilization: A Global Approach to Higher Education*, ed. Moshe Davis (New York: NYU Press, 1995), 11–15 and Susannah Heschel, “Jewish Studies as Counterhistory,” in *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*, ed. David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susannah Heschel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 101–15.

has been seen as the latest manifestation of two thousand years of continuous Jewish knowledge and learning, dating back to the Biblical and Rabbinic hermeneutics of antiquity. Assimilated to the “domestic developments” to which Sarna points, the founding of AJS proves not the latest manifestation of a transhistorical scholarly tradition but an organization responsive to contemporary struggles around identity in the US academy.

As Lou Silberman argued at the colloquium, Jewish studies, understood in its relationship to these struggles, could function as a source of intellectual unity. Where Jewish knowledge had once been parceled out between different fields and disciplines, like religious studies, Near Eastern history, and Germanic languages, the formal institutionalization of Jewish studies meant “Jewish learning” could now be centralized. For Silberman, American higher education was both a site of possibility and hostility for Jewish identity knowledge. Inherited modalities of Christian thought, alongside legacies of antisemitism, at US colleges and universities disposed them unfavorably to the construction of scholarship and identity on non-hegemonic terms. “I suggest that beyond and beneath the fustian and rhetoric of the blacks’ demand for black studies,” Silberman writes, ham-fistedly but revealingly, “is just such an awareness of this reality.”⁴¹ The conceptual move was typical of the era: Black rebellion’s forms and arguments were regularly translated into the idiom of other group struggles.⁴² Silberman overlooks how in the “period of

⁴¹ Lou H. Silberman, “The University and Jewish Studies,” in Jick, *Teaching*, 15.

⁴² Sometimes this was a two-way street. In the twentieth century, Jewish American national imaginaries were, of course, transformed by Zionism and the founding of the State of Israel, but also by encounters with the Black Panthers and the whole panoply of national liberation movements. But a century earlier Jewish nationalists gave Pan-Africanists the concept of diaspora, as Paul Gilroy rather infamously observes. Indeed, the discomfort this reception can evoke was presaged a few years before Gilroy in a comment by Stuart Hall whose weirdness remains to my knowledge undiscussed. Uneasily blending the rhetoric of Christian antisemitism and Jewish nationalism, Hall writes in “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”: “I use [diaspora] here metaphorically, not literally: diaspora does not refer us to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must return at all costs.” The creepy, ecclesiastical tone is heightened by Hall’s refusal to actually name “Jews,” referring instead to “the fate of the people of Palestine at the hands of this backward-looking”

cultural synthesis that had called for the opening of the public university”—inaugurated in 1954 by the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, but seizing American college campuses in earnest only in the late sixties—“the proceeding was accompanied by the threat of injury, bodily and otherwise,” as Hortense Spillers writes.⁴³ This was not the systemic experience of American Jews as religious minorities.⁴⁴ What was shared in their divergent encounters with the university, however, was desire for a space of inquiry orthogonal, so to speak, to the prevailing lines of intellectual practice. That space of inquiry would have to be grounded in an idea of what could not be (or had not yet been) encompassed by the university. It required a centering vision.

Meltzer’s *Tree* was likewise created according to a centering or unifying vision.

Silberman urged his audience to conceive of the “gestalt” of Jewish studies, its “wholeness of form and matter” as an intellectual field. A year later, when *Tree* began to appear, Meltzer advanced his own idea of a Jewish gestalt. The journal emerged from his “quest for a ‘mystery tradition embedded in Judaism,’” he told one scholar.⁴⁵ Explaining his editorial principles, Meltzer writes, “I was trying to put in dialogue the classical kabbalistic texts w/ modernist &

form of diaspora, in a kind of second-degree metonym. Why a self-evidently multiracial, multicultural, and transcontinental “Jewish” diaspora of two-thousand years’ vintage, only lately and incompletely cathected to the dream of a modern nation-state, should be excluded from conversation (and theory) raises questions which may seem less than urgent but whose implications are grave, as diagnosed by George L. Mosse, Moishe Postone, and J. Kameron Carter, among others. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 205–12; Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 235; Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism* (Madison, Wis.: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2020 [1978]); Postone, “The Holocaust and the Trajectory of the Twentieth Century,” in *Catastrophe and Meaning: The Holocaust and the Twentieth Century*, ed. Moishe Postone and Eric Santner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 81–114; J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁴³ Hortense J. Spillers, “Writing and States of Emergency,” in *The Power of Writing*, ed. Christiane Donahue and Kelly Blewett (Hanover, N.H.: Dartmouth College Press, 2015), 59.

⁴⁴ But for a compelling argument that classical and premodern anti-Jewish antagonism created the conditions for modern anti-Blackness, see Carter, *Race*.

⁴⁵ Meilicke, “Forgotten History” 55.

postmodernist poets, writers, artists, as a demonstration of continuity, not division or fracture.”⁴⁶ As a result, *Tree* juxtaposes contemporary poets and ancient texts, medieval commentaries and modern translations—not just juxtaposing, but really bringing them together. Inclusion of writers who were not Jewish notwithstanding, the magazine’s guiding fiction was a transhistorical Jewish mystery tradition. Meltzer found in mysticism what some of his contemporaries were finding in the nascent field of (formal) Jewish studies: a way to marshal thousands of years of texts and cultures from far-flung regions under one rubric. His apparently iconoclastic use of Jewish scholarship—borrowing ideas, objects, and claims from disparate monographs and journal articles—mimicked the procedures of academic study. He was clearing the same path from miscellaneous Judaica to Jewish studies as such.

Becoming Part of the Ceremony

Meltzer was far from alone in his project. In *Tree* 5, he published Jerome Rothenberg’s “Salamanca,” a “prophecy” in eight brief lines of verse:

1
a city on
a turtle’s back
a longhouse
/
was like Jerusalem
’s temple resting

⁴⁶ Rothenberg to Christine Meilicke, June 16, 1999, quoted in Meilicke, “Forgotten History” 60.

on a whale

2

impossible to bring it all

together⁴⁷

Is the final couplet a sigh of defeat or satisfaction? It is hard to tell whether the cities, and the cosmic creatures on which they rest, have been left to their immensity or frustrated a desire to map and corral them. What is certain is that Rothenberg began to compose a book that tried “to bring it all / together” while living in the titular Salamanca, a city leased from the Allegany Seneca Reservation in Western New York. Between 1967 and the late seventies, Rothenberg lived for long stretches in Salamanca with his wife, the cultural anthropologist Diane Rothenberg. There in a former steel and railroad town, closely connected to the Seneca Indians, he began the assemblage-anthology *A Big Jewish Book: Poems and Other Visions of the Jews from Tribal Times to the Present*, published by Anchor Press and Doubleday in 1978.⁴⁸ Nearly seven-hundred pages of prose, verse, commentary, and images, this long poem–cum–assemblage text–cum-anthology represents Rothenberg’s idiosyncratic curation of two millennia of Jewish texts. The book runs the gamut from the Dead Sea scrolls to medieval Iberian poets to Adrienne Rich and Allen Ginsberg, interspersed with notes, quotes, parables, and diatribes by the editors.

⁴⁷ Jerome Rothenberg, “Salamanca: A Prophecy,” *Tree* 5 (Summer 1975): 209, ll. 1–8.

⁴⁸ See Jerome Rothenberg, “from *A Big Jewish Book* (a.k.a. *Exiled in the Word*),” in *Writing Through: Translations and Variations* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 124–25 and Diane Rothenberg and Jerome Rothenberg, “From Ethnopoetics to Omnipoetics,” interview by Uri Hertz and John Solt, *Third Rail: International Arts & Literature* (website), n.d., <http://literatureandarts.com/rothenberginterview.html>.

A “letter” from Rothenberg to Meltzer included in *A Big Jewish Book* finds him wondering “what this *zeitgeist* is / ... / that brings you when my thoughts are bound / with yours.”⁴⁹ While the occasion was Meltzer’s visit to Rothenberg’s Milwaukee home, the question of the *zeitgeist* that “bound” them encompasses as well the reasons Meltzer published *Tree*, why he printed Rothenberg in its pages, and why Rothenberg spent almost a decade composing his anthology. They may have chalked it up to a late efflorescence of the counterculture, but they were without a doubt also a part of the *zeitgeist* around academic identity knowledges. They were “tuned in” to the rise of Jewish studies. It is this field-context that underlies Rothenberg’s (and Meltzer’s) desire “to bring it all / together”—to find the through line of Jewish identity and culture. To explain, in the US context, what Salamanca has to do with Jerusalem.

The *zeitgeist* around identity knowledges was clearly connected to the counterculture. According to Shaul Magid, the ethnic and group pride that arose among American Jews after the midcentury was a form of disassimilation. Jewish studies, Magid claims, derived energy from first-wave disassimilation, which took place from the sixties to the nineties and included the Jewish spiritual counterculture. “The rise of Jewish Studies in the American academy,” he writes, “began to produce scholars who were offering more nuanced and complex studies on the history of Judaism and the Jewish textual tradition.” He continues: “Representing a new approach to Judaism unmoored from religious life or practice, academic Jewish Studies provided resources for a new generation in search of a way to define ‘Jewishness’ outside the confines of institutional religion.”⁵⁰ In short, American Jews looking for “roots,” who had been drawn to

⁴⁹ Jerome Rothenberg, “Commentary (1): from ‘the notebooks,’” in *A Big Jewish Book: Poems and Other Visions of the Jews from Tribal Times to the Present*, ed. Jerome Rothenberg with Harris Lenowitz and Charles Doria (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1978), 66.

⁵⁰ Shaul Magid, introduction to *American Post-Judaism: Identity and Renewal in a Postethnic Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 9. 10.

traditional observance, mysticism, and intentional communities, could now find what they were looking for in Jewish studies. David Meltzer and Jerome Rothenberg became engaged with certain aspects of Judaism through the counterculture, as *Tree*'s mystical emphasis attests. The rise of Jewish studies allowed them to deepen and expand their interests, even while they remained formally unaffiliated. And as the West Coast counterculture gradually fizzled out, their reliance on Jewish studies resources grew more overt.

The overlap of counterculture and Jewish studies has been missed in the case of Rothenberg's *A Big Jewish Book*.⁵¹ Since its publication, the anthology has achieved a measure of cult status and underground influence in avant-garde poetry circles.⁵² What the veneer of uncompromising avant-gardism hides—and what Rothenberg's comments on the anthology rarely highlight—is the book's impressive scholarly underpinnings. "I have seen the work of this book as itself an act of *poesis*," he writes in the Pre-Face, "the creation—from all possible sources & attempts at definition—of 'a big Jewish book,' a composition & collage that would project my vision of the Jewish mysteries."⁵³ This statement is useful for understanding the

⁵¹ In the *New York Times* review of the anthology, Jonathan Cott contrasts the editors' approach to "the typical lifelessness of academic translations of ancient texts," but this is the extent of his acknowledgment (if that is what it is) that the editors are academics, two of whom even scholars of ancient texts. Cott, "In the Beginning Was Aleph," *The New York Times*, April 23, 1978, 15, 39.

⁵² In an August 1976 letter, Charles Bernstein admits that the anthology, which Rothenberg must have shared with him in manuscript, contained "some interesting stuff," despite the title. References to *A Big Jewish Book* appear in the letters of Bernstein, Silliman, and Bruce Andrews; they speculate about excerpting the text in what would become *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine. A decade later Silliman used the anthology to drive home his point in a somewhat infamous letter to New Directions, haranguing the company for publishing Douglas Messerli's "*Language*" *Poetries* anthology: "Imagine Ezra Pound editing *The* [sic] *Big Jewish Book* (he was, after all . . . *more qualified* than the present editor [read: Messerli, not Rothenberg]—and his take on the subject hardly more curious)." Bernstein to Ron Silliman, August 15, 1976, in *The Language Letters: Selected 1970s Correspondence of Bruce Andrews, Charles Bernstein, and Ron Silliman*, ed. Matthew Hofer and Michael Golston (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2019), 141; Hofer and Golston, *Language*, 183, 207; Silliman to Bernstein, June 9, 1986, Charles Bernstein Papers, Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California, San Diego, quoted in Timothy Yu, *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 58 (Silliman's italics).

⁵³ Jerome Rothenberg, "Pre-Face," preface to *Big*, xl.

anthology as an original composition, guided by artistic not historical criteria, by idea and vision rather than rote chronology. It is less useful for understanding its scholarly foundations. This is par for the course. Consider that Rothenberg's remarks on the anthology almost uniformly sideline a crucial dimension of the project: *A Big Jewish Book* was a collaboration with two scholars of ancient languages, Harris Lenowitz and Charles Doria. More significant than merely sidelining his collaborators, their relative absence in the book's reception underlines the general amnesia regarding the scholarly and institutional networks and contexts out of which *A Big Jewish Book* came.

Rothenberg is not alone responsible for this amnesia. Nothing suggests he intended to hide the book's full intellectual context. For that matter, Rothenberg never hid his own tutelage and career in the academy. A first-generation Polish-Jewish kid from Brooklyn and later the Bronx, Rothenberg grew up in a cultured, book-fond family, a child of the interwar years.⁵⁴ Like so many Jewish immigrant households, his parents were secular, but elements of observance persisted, in this case through his grandmother's presence. In 1948, just shy of seventeen, Rothenberg entered City College near the end of its reputation as the Harvard of the Proletariat, where Jewish students went whom quotas had prevented from attending the Ivy League schools of their choice. City College was changing from the "haven of Jewish minds" it had been before the war; the philosopher Morris Raphael Cohen no longer walked the halls like a rebbe, students clinging to his fringes.⁵⁵ For Rothenberg, the milieu was fine, if uninspired, and perhaps mildly

⁵⁴ Jerome Rothenberg, "An Interview with Jerome Rothenberg," by Mark Weiss, *The Mud Proposal* (website), February 27, 2010, <http://kaurab.tripod.com/themudproposal/rothenberg.html>.

⁵⁵ Irving Howe with Kenneth Libo, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 283, 286. Frank Villalobos's "Puerto Rican Intellectual," discussed in Chapter 2, reflects on the City College that emerged after Jewish quotas at most American universities were removed. Despite CCNY's history, Jewish students and professors themselves became gatekeepers in the fifties and sixties, when Black and Puerto Rican students sought admission and representation.

stultifying since the New Criticism's sway in the English department clashed with his devotion to Gertrude Stein.⁵⁶ Observing a New York intellectual tradition, he hung out at the City College cafeteria with his compatriots, poets like Seymour Faust, Robert Kelly, and fellow Jewish Brooklynite, David Antin.⁵⁷ A bachelor's degree in hand, Rothenberg left for Ann Arbor to take an MA in English at the University of Michigan and postpone army service in Korea. He was drafted on return to New York, but the war was almost over; he was stationed in Germany for a year and a half.⁵⁸ Back in the States, he spent three years in a PhD program at Columbia on the GI Bill, then briefly taught at his alma mater, the first in a series of lectureships and professorships which would take him across the nation during the next six decades.

In those six decades, Rothenberg, like Meltzer, became a link between generations of poets. Besides the anthologies I discuss below, his poems and essays, like *Poland/1931*, *Gematria*, and *Writing Through: Translations and Variations*, have been published by small and university presses, as well as New Directions, establishing him as a central figure in the afterlife of modernism and the New American Poetry. Rothenberg and Pierre Joris's massive University of California Press *Poems for the Millennium* anthology (now up to four volumes) is hailed as a sweeping achievement and indispensable resource. My focus here is *A Big Jewish Book*, begun while Rothenberg was living in Allegany and finished during stints at San Diego State and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Center for Twentieth-Century Studies. Its content and the

⁵⁶ Jerome Rothenberg, "Jerome Rothenberg—An Interview," by Barry Alpert with Charles Morrow, January 2, 1974, *Vort* 3, no. 1 (1975): 93.

⁵⁷ Rothenberg, "Jerome," 96.

⁵⁸ Jerome Rothenberg, "A Chronology & Memoir for Azougue Editorial (Brazil)," *Poems and Poetics* (blog), April 10, 2011, <http://poemsandpoetics.blogspot.com/2011/04/jerome-rothenberg-chronology-memoir-for.html>.

circumstances of the book's composition offer a compelling glimpse into the making of Jewish American identity poetics.

A Big Jewish Book was the fifth anthology edited by Rothenberg. Starting with the publication of *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, and Oceania* in 1968, he had established the historical anthology as a form of long poem, an epic “found” assemblage text.⁵⁹ “My voice emerg[es] sometimes as translator, sometimes as commentator,” he explains, “but still obedient to the other voices” in the assemblage.⁶⁰ The anthologies—*Technicians of the Sacred* (1968), *Shaking the Pumpkin: Traditional Poetry of the Indian North Americans* (1972), *America a Prophecy: A New Reading of American Poetry from Pre-Columbian Times to the Present* (1973) (co-edited with George Quasha), and *A Big Jewish Book* (1978) (co-edited with Lenowitz and Doria)—little resemble the postmodernist long poems written by his friends and contemporaries, including Susan Howe, Edward Dorn, and Armand Schwerner. They eschew narrative, fragmented or otherwise, obsessed instead with cultural constants. Their “obligation toward the difficult whole”—which alongside narrative, Brian McHale argues, distinguishes postmodernist long poems—presumes an unreconstructed (or undeconstructed) whole, more modernist than postmodern.⁶¹ Perhaps Rothenberg's early espousal, with Robert Kelley, of Deep Image poetry explains his surprising “adherence to a ban on narrative in poetry,” surprising given his era, style, and social circles.⁶² Even *Poland/1931* and *A Seneca Journal*—books of interwoven poetic sequences, unconstrained by anthology

⁵⁹ Rothenberg excerpts *Revolution of the Word: A New Gathering of American Avant Garde Poetry 1914-1945* (1974), though he gives no explanation why. Rothenberg, “Anthologies,” 143.

⁶⁰ Jerome Rothenberg, “On Anthologies,” in *Pre-Faces and Other Writings* (New York: New Directions, 1981), 143.

⁶¹ Brian McHale, *The Obligation Toward the Difficult Whole: Postmodernist Long Poems* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 3–17.

⁶² McHale, *Obligation*, 3.

conventions—often progress image-by-image or through word- and sound-association, only intermittently adopting Menippean satire (the Esther K., Cokboy, and Beaver sections), a chief source of postmodern narrative strategies.⁶³ In a statement published in the June 1979 issue of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, Rothenberg describes using anthologies to track “crypto-traditions,” lines of transmission from forgotten pasts to an unfolding present—“a means for exploring and keeping before us the dimensions of our humanness.”⁶⁴ In the seventies, he directed his techniques “inward,” as it were. His subject became the Jewish crypto-tradition, a legacy of thieves, fools, mystics, and poets.

In this sprawling work, a twelve-page sequence captures Rothenberg’s approach. Midway through *A Big Jewish Book*, we successively encounter a scandalous account of the birth of Ben Sira, a selection from the Yom Kippur service, a poem by Yehuda Amichai, and a found poem by Rothenberg on the ancient rites of the Temple in Jerusalem with his commentary appended. The juxtaposition creates links across languages, time-periods, genres. Rothenberg and his co-editors arrange the texts in this sequence to achieve a kind of continuity. They create the crypto-tradition they seek to track. Following the chain of associations reveals the poetics that informs the anthology—Rothenberg’s pursuit of a Jewish “unconscious,” or “the contemporaneousness or synchronicity of Jewish (and all other) culture,” as Norman Finkelstein puts it.⁶⁵

The least seemingly invented link in the chain of associations puts Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai in conversation with the Yom Kippur service. The selection from the service is a piyyut, a liturgical poem by Meshullam ben Kalonymos, the major religious poet of the tenth

⁶³ McHale, *Obligation*, 4.

⁶⁴ Rothenberg, “Anthologies,” 141.

⁶⁵ Norman Finkelstein, *Not One of Them in Place: Modern Poetry and Jewish American Identity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 96.

century, whose poems are amply represented in the Yom Kippur prayers. The piyut memorializes the beauty of the high priest as he would conduct the Yom Kippur service in the days of the Temple: “like the star / called brightness / at the limits of / the east / was the appearance of the priest.”⁶⁶ Regarding a gesture made during the service, a quotation from the Zohar which follows the poem informs the reader that “when the priest spreads forth his hands it is forbidden to look at them.”⁶⁷ The custom not to look still holds today; the priestly blessing (*birkat kohanim*) is performed beneath a shawl during the Yom Kippur service. Amichai’s poem, excerpted from a long poem, turns on just this custom, known to most who have observed the holiday. “I looked at them [the priests’ hands] / and God didn’t thunder,” he writes, “I looked at them and my eyes were not blinded / ... / the appearance of the High Priest is like the sun, / like an onyx, a topaz. The appearance. Also your body / is Urim and Thumim. The nipples, the eyes, / the nostrils, dimple, navel, mouth, your mouth—all these blaze for me like the Priest’s breastplate.”⁶⁸ The tone slides from sardonic to awed as impish transgression morphs first into an echo of Meshullam’s piyut and then a blazon on a lover’s body. Superstition is rejected, the custom violated. But not only does the sight of the priests’ hands not blind, nor summon God’s punishment; the Priestly garments evoke a naked body. Amichai profanes the sacred. Or else he reveals the sacred in the profane.

For the uninitiated, these connections depend on juxtaposition. A reader unfamiliar with the liturgical poem, or the prohibition on viewing the priestly blessing, would miss the allusive,

⁶⁶ Meshullam the Great ben Kalonymos, “A Poem for the High Priest, Sung Thereafter on the Day of the *Kippurim*, as He Was Celebrated Also in *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*,” trans. Jerome Rothenberg, in Rothenberg, *Big*, 254, ll. 53–57.

⁶⁷ See Jerome Rothenberg, “Commentary (1),” in *Big*, 255.

⁶⁸ Yehuda Amichai, “from *Travels of a Latter-Day Benjamin of Tudela*,” trans. Ruth Nevo, in Rothenberg, *Big*, 255–56, ll. 5, 8, 24–29.

teasing thrust of Amichai's poem. The question is whether the anthology's framing elides or confronts the knowledge-gap readers might experience. Amichai's reference to the Yom Kippur service assumes knowledge of Jewish practice, on the one hand; his riff on the piyut, on the other, assumes you know its content and its place in the liturgy. Is all this part of the "tradition," a Jewish reader's expected inheritance? Is the reader meant to assume Amichai's perspective? Is that combination of lived experience and ritual-textual knowledge the basis for the anthology's concept of continuity? Real-world practices—the allusive practices of modern Hebrew poetry as well as the ritual practice of the priestly benediction—appear seamlessly integrated in the anthology, mutually reinforcing aspects of a Jewish poesis transmitted across generations.

This illusion of seamlessness is elsewhere less convincing. Before the piyut and the poem, Rothenberg and his co-editors place an excerpt from "The Alphabet of Ben Sira."⁶⁹ This scandalous, parodic account of the birth of Ben Sira, the second-century BCE scholar who composed the *Wisdom of Sirach*, contends that he was the child of his mother and his grandfather. The absurd story relates how after the grandfather ejaculated in a bath house pool, his daughter became pregnant from bathing in the pool. Improbably, the story connects to the selection from the Yom Kippur service. The title of Meshullam ben Kalonymos's piyut is "A Poem for the High Priest, Sung Thereafter on the Day of the *Kippurim*, as He Was Celebrated Also in 'The Wisdom of Ben Sira.'" In other words, Meshullam's description of the high priest comes from the book composed by Ben Sira, whose origins the "Alphabet" claims to relate. This unlikely connection sets the precedent for Amichai's mockery and sexualization of the priestly blessing; his sacred-profane reversal is itself part of the tradition. So juxtaposition leads one to

⁶⁹ "from *The Alphabet of Ben Sira*," trans. Jerome Rothenberg and Harris Lenowitz, in Rothenberg, *Big*, 248–51.

believe. “The Alphabet of Ben Sira” is in fact a satirical medieval text which was read by rabbinic scholars but belongs to no canon of sacred or authoritative texts.⁷⁰ In modern times the narrative has circulated almost exclusively through scholarly and academic accounts and translations. The version consulted by Rothenberg, Lenowitz, and Doria appeared in a scholarly edition of the text published in 1926. Did Amichai know the story? Perhaps he did. Yet absent an actual allusion in Amichai’s poem, the “Alphabet” here seems to introduce another function of juxtaposition. The story does not supply the reader with an intertext or cultural information that Amichai himself had in mind. Instead of making explicit his intentions, the editors suggest that the poet inherits or extends an irreverent counter-tradition. He and the anonymous author of the “Alphabet” transmit a spirit of effrontery as vital and deep as Meshullam’s piety. To achieve the sense of continuity between them (and between them and Meshullam), assemblage and juxtaposition are critical. Rothenberg and his co-editors collapse time and space by nestling these texts together. The textual continuum that *A Big Jewish Book* presents—unconnected texts, or texts only tangentially connected, but made resonant by proximity—does more than reflect a tradition of Jewish poesis. The anthology invents—as much as it tracks—lines of transmission between past and present. Recalling Prins above, the editors figure their anthology as “organic,” an example of Jewish poesis naturally manifesting through time, when the truth is that the claimed tradition has been painstakingly assembled from the resources of Jewish studies and studies in Judaica.

The nature-invention dichotomy comes to a head at the end of this sequence,

Rothenberg’s own “The Children of the Flowers of the Priesthood: 4 Poems with Commentary

⁷⁰ See Norman Bronznick, introduction to “The Alphabet of Ben Sira,” in *Rabbinic Fantasies: Imaginative Narratives from Classical Hebrew Literature*, ed. David Stern and Mark Jay Mirsky (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 168.

for the Temple.”⁷¹ As the title indicates, the text has two parts: four partly “found” poems that describe aspects of temple ritual and conduct, followed by a verse commentary. Borrowing from folklorist and historian Raphael Patai’s 1947 monograph *Man and Temple in Ancient Jewish Myth and Ritual*, the poems home in on what may seem like strange, illicit, ecstatic moments in otherwise customary activities. The wicks of the Temple’s candelabrum, we are told, were made from the priests’ “drawers.”⁷² Onomatopoeic representations of shofar sounds are cryptically labeled “Song of the Cockcrow.”⁷³ By way of these moments, Rothenberg illustrates what Patai states: a lost dimension of Temple rites was “an appeal to the supernatural,” a belief in the power of heavenly bodies which rabbinic Judaism would later bury.⁷⁴ Instead of supplying this information, as one might expect, the verse commentary that follows adopts a meta-textual, autobiographical stance. “that I would write a poem called / Children of the Flowers of the Priesthood,” Rothenberg writes, “made out of memory / of some incredible racial unconscious / how can I rip it from my chest?”⁷⁵ The desire to rip “it”—an incredible racial unconscious—from his chest admits and attempts to banish the anthology’s well-hidden struggle with essentialism. All his anthologies, Rothenberg asserts, concern a search for the human, and *A Big Jewish Book* could be no different. But the imagined space for which he yearns in his commentary, a space “where there is neither Greek or Jew,” remains unrealizable.⁷⁶ It is unrealizable because that version of the human, as the phrase’s history bears witness, is the goal

⁷¹ Jerome Rothenberg, “The Children of the Flowers of the Priesthood: 4 Poems with Commentary for the Temple,” in *Big*, 257–59.

⁷² Rothenberg, “Children,” 257, ll. 10–15.

⁷³ Rothenberg, “Children,” 258, ll. 25–27.

⁷⁴ Raphael Patai, *Man and Temple in Ancient Jewish Myth and Ritual*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1967), 10–11, 19–20.

⁷⁵ Rothenberg, “Children,” 258, ll. 35–39.

⁷⁶ Rothenberg, “Children,” 259, l. 59.

of Christian supersession, a vision of the Jew made human by salvation. The “racial unconscious” at the heart of his Temple poem is inexpugnable short of self-betrayal. He would rather remain “exiled in Salamanca / & driven mad by / Image of the Temple,” the poem’s closing lines.⁷⁷

Of course this is partly bunk. The conceit of a memory from “some incredible racial unconscious” is incredible, full stop. Without rehearsing Walter Benn Michaels’s takedown of cultural memory, we can observe that a poem “found” in a monograph at least foregrounds the question of the origin of such memories.⁷⁸ Indeed, the solution to Rothenberg’s dilemma lies in that observation, which ties together the preceding readings. The scholarly text that provides the coordinates to his “racial memory” is not racial but textual. Not unconscious, learned. It is unclear when this fact dawned on Rothenberg, whose previous anthologies appear, in retrospect, somewhat tortured by, while also outstripping their ethnographic orientation. Looking back on *A Big Jewish Book* the year after publication, he wrote: “It isn’t the idea of (so-called) ‘Jewishness’ that most concerns me—rather a specific set of language plays, feats of word magic & language-centeredness . . . that come to a visible point within the illusion of the ethnically specific. . . . What it brings me to in this [anthology] . . . is a place where I can deal with the grapheme, the written word & image as such.”⁷⁹ This seems straightforward enough: Rothenberg’s focus is the textual construction of Jewish identity, his very own identity poetics. Yet the anthology remains hung up in a way. The “idea of (so-called) Jewishness” is an illusion, but not an arbitrary one. In a prose commentary that appears some pages later, Rothenberg and his co-editors remark that the

⁷⁷ Rothenberg, “Children,” 259, ll. 60–62.

⁷⁸ See Walter Benn Michaels, “Race into Culture: A Critical Genealogy of Cultural Identity,” *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 4 (Summer 1992): 655–85.

⁷⁹ Rothenberg, “Anthologies,” 143.

advent of supersessionist Christianity and the tradition of “blood libel” “locked [Judaism] into a system of thought, of action & response,” the rabbis forced “to bring all into the domain of the written” in order to protect the “ethnos” in a time of persecution.⁸⁰ According to Rothenberg, what the rabbis sequestered—dangerous practices, ideas, a Pandora’s box of popular antinomian beliefs—the textual tradition freely gives: “a secret transmission or kabbala that kept alive a poetics of liberation . . . a continuing dream of freedom in a world in which ‘a fence was built around the Law.’”⁸¹ The (Jewish) dream of freedom is that “incredible” memory, so inaptly labeled racial and unconscious. Of course this too is invention, though far from bunk.

The second prose commentary to “The Children of the Flowers of the Priesthood” offers a fitting conclusion to my reading. It is reproduced in full below:

Leopards break into the temple and drink to the dregs what is in the sacrificial pitchers; this is repeated over and over again; finally it can be calculated in advance, and it becomes a part of the ceremony.⁸²

The commentary is Kafka’s parable “The Leopards in the Temple”—no more, no less. For the editors, the parable explain how “outbursts of sexuality” and “ecstatic dances” were absorbed in temple ritual. The found poems’ strange, illicit moments represent traces of supernatural worship for Patai, a subterranean, liberatory spirit for Rothenberg; they are eruptions of alien practices, domesticated by repetition. Such undercurrents make for the maddening beauty of the Temple.

⁸⁰ Rothenberg, “Commentary,” in *Big*, 265.

⁸¹ Rothenberg, “Commentary,” 265.

⁸² Franz Kafka, “The Leopards in the Temple,” trans. Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins, in Rothenberg, *Big*, 260.

But as always in Kafka, there is another reading. Consider how a tradition emerges through recognition and prediction. Kafka lets us see the moment of its emergence, but his parable should in turn alter our sense of the ceremony. What appears impossibly strange, leopards shattering vessels and loping through the temple, becomes perfectly natural in the eyes of later worshippers. “How could something so foreign have been turned into something so familiar?”⁸³ It may seem a stretch to say Rothenberg, or other poets in this chapter, “invented” any trope or aspect of Jewish American poetry, especially when, as in the Amichai poem, shared cultural practices enter the picture. The parable suggests we develop a certain suspicion of the natural, the obvious. In *A Big Jewish Book*, Rothenberg takes scholarly texts composing a nascent Jewish studies and fashions them into material for an identity poetics, one that assumes and advances the legibility of certain myths, motifs, and practices as integral to a Jewish imaginary. His “incredible” memory serves as a template for much subsequent work, if not a direct influence. The poetics of the anthology correspond less to an anthropological category of “Jewish experience” than to an academic and discursive world, where “Jewish” is whatever gets studied under that rubric in books, classrooms, journals, and departments.⁸⁴

Let us now circle back to the “city on / a turtle’s back” that opens Rothenberg’s “Salamanca: A Prophecy.” In an interview with Uri Hertz and John Solt, Jerome and Diane Rothenberg relate how they were affected by their time in Salamanca and by the relationships they established there. When the interviewers ask, “Were the Seneca you lived among still practicing the old ways?” Diane Rothenberg’s response is instructive:

⁸³ See David Roskies’s essay on the Havurah movement, “The People of the Lost Book: A Cultural Manifesto,” *Orim: A Jewish Journal at Yale* 2, no. 1 (Autumn 1986): 8.

⁸⁴ For a vigorous polemic against the anthropological biases of Jewish literary studies, see Benjamin Schreier, *The Impossible Jew: Identity and the Reconstruction of Jewish American Literary History* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

No, most of them were Christians. But the whole American Indian Movement (AIM) was really active and there were things happening. People started getting interested in being Indians. People came back to the longhouse, not so much to participate themselves but to get their kids Indian names, which came through the longhouse.⁸⁵

“People started getting interested in being Indians.” Substitute Jews for Indians and this provocative statement becomes a slogan for *A Big Jewish Book* and most of the rest of the texts discussed in this chapter. In “Salamanca,” the “city on / a turtle’s back” is “a longhouse,” paralleled in the next stanza by “Jerusalem / ’s temple.” The longhouse serves not as a metonym of the “old ways,” as Diane Rothenberg explains, but communal invention and reinvention. The temple, likewise, cannot be reduced to some origin of transhistorical Jewishness. In a sense, the idea that Jerome Rothenberg turned his ethnopoetics “inward” in *A Big Jewish Book* misses the context out of which the project grew. Living in Allegany, studying his wife’s research, he would have realized that the ethnos has no inwardness. To “be” Seneca was a political and self-conscious act. To be Jewish, then, involved no restoration of lost wholeness. It demanded a will to invent from materials foreign and familiar. It meant at once claiming and making an identity in verse.

“Poetry of Jewish Reference”

A few years after *A Big Jewish Book*, Jerome Rothenberg published “Yaqui 1982,” a poem with commentary on a Yaqui Indian Easter celebration. In the Easter pageant the Yaqui performed,

⁸⁵ Rothenberg and Rothenberg, “From Ethnopoetics to Omnipoeitics.”

attended by Rothenberg, Jews (“never named as such”) appeared with beards, drooping eyes, and egg-heads—“a world of fantasized Jews,” he writes in an appended note.⁸⁶ The poem’s epigraph reads “the eye of performance is cruel,” but Rothenberg refrains from saying whether the pageant disturbed or provoked him. What he offers instead is a question about who “fantasizes” whom. In previous anthologies Rothenberg had directed his attention to the myths, rituals, and writings of other peoples; *A Big Jewish Book* studied inheritances apparently his own. Now in an Easter pageant, he was experiencing the gaze of others upon Jews. Their fantasies, perhaps “cruel.” That he was himself an observer on a scene of observation, an Ashkenazi Jewish onlooker on a Mexican Native American dramatic performance, compounds the layers and difficulties of perspective.

The publication venue for “Yaqui 1982,” however, suggests a response to that gaze, a desire even to wrest back the power of fantasy and extend the work of *A Big Jewish Book*—Jewish self-invention in verse. That venue was *Shirim: A Jewish Poetry Journal* (1982–present), whose 1982 debut issue contained Rothenberg’s poem. Editor and founder Rabbi Marc Steven Dworkin promoted *Shirim* as “the first Jewish poetry journal in the United States.” During its first decade (1982–92) *Shirim* published more than a hundred Jewish poets from the US and abroad, including Rothenberg, Meltzer, Hirschman, and Amichai, as well as Malka Heifetz Tussman, Deena Metzger, Dahlia Ravikovitch, Rukhl Fishman, Hank Lazer, Neeli Cherkovski, Myra Sklarew, Shirley Kaufman, Robert Mezey, Stanley Moss, Marcia Falk, Gabriel Levin, and Carl Rakosi. An unpretentious, small press effort, issues of *Shirim* ranged from 30 to 50 pages. The debut issue contains no preface, introduction, or editorial note; nothing to indicate the new journal’s designs and ambitions. After the copyright and the table of contents, the poems begin to

⁸⁶ Jerome Rothenberg, “Yaqui 1982,” *Shirim: A Jewish Poetry Journal* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1982): 15.

appear and, uninterrupted, they follow each other until the last page. Contributor notes are first included in the third issue. Neither book reviews nor advertisements ever appear. Though *Shirim* develops in other ways—editorial notes and statements of aesthetics eventually joining contributor notes—the no-frills attitude remains the same.

Besides the title, the only hint of the journal’s orientation in that debut issue is its location. Submissions are directed to Dworkin’s place of employment and the journal’s source of funding until 1989: a Los Angeles branch of Hillel, a campus organization dedicated to Jewish student life, learning, and faith. Assisted by several writers and rabbis in the LA area, like Rabbi Stanley Chyet, a historian and director of the Magnin School of Graduate Studies at Hebrew Union College, Dworkin spearheaded a journal holistic in its conception of “Jewishness” but especially attuned to verse that thematically foregrounded Jewish identity. “Yaqui 1982” differs from much of what would be published in *Shirim* over the next decade; it presents Jewishness in the third-person rather than the first, as it were. It focus on what Jews look like to others. Yet at the same time, Rothenberg’s concern—the power of fantasy, the will to invent—was shared by those who gravitated to the journal. Its debatable claim to be the “first” Jewish poetry journal in the US aside, *Shirim*’s contributors were eager to project their own images of what Jewish poetry was and looked like. They were eager to invent themselves.

“I’d go to a bookstore specializing in poetry, and no matter what major city I was in, I’d find the publications for Jewish poets very limited.”⁸⁷ This is an origin story Dworkin once gave for *Shirim*, the reason it needed to be created. In 1982, Dworkin was six years graduated from the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, working at Hillel Macor, a multi-campus

⁸⁷ Diane Margolin, “Rabbi’s Journal Provides an Outlet for Jewish Poetry,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 24, 1984, H1.

Jewish outreach program situated near the UCLA campus. The problem was that while Jewish poets no longer viewed themselves as poets who “happen to be Jewish,” the opportunities for publishing distinctively Jewish verse were still practically nonexistent. Dworkin’s interest in poetry dated back to the sixties, when he was a student at Johns Hopkins University taking creative writing classes. His sense that poetry offered insight into culture had been shaped by Florence Howe, founder of the Feminist Press, who taught at nearby Goucher College. In Howe’s view, poetry registered and reflected social change with unique sensitivity. In his work with Hillel Macor and the LA Hillel Council, Dworkin coordinated local and national events and funding aimed at “exploring Jewish identity through the arts.” Combining his interest in poetry and Howe’s insights, this work lay behind the effort to do something about the institutional situation of Jewish poetry in the US. With support from Hillel and working alongside Stanley Chyet, he spent 1981–82 putting *Shirim* together. When the fall 1982 issue appeared, a journal had formed which would record and facilitate ongoing developments in Jewish American poetry and poetics.⁸⁸

A pressing question during the journal’s first fifteen years was “What *is* Jewish poetry?” Attempts to provide a baseline for Jewish poetry led to the publication of a series of statements on “Jewish aesthetics” and adoption of Chyet’s coinage “poetry of Jewish reference” as a journal slogan. Already in the debut issue, Dworkin’s own poem “My Grandfather’s Tefillin” makes explicit a model of “poetry of Jewish reference” which came naturally to many during these years. Dworkin’s poem is the kind of “grandparent poem” caricatured by critics of US identity

⁸⁸ Biographical information and details about the journal’s editing and funding in this and subsequent paragraphs comes from Rabbi Dworkin, phone conversation with author, September 23, 2020.

poetries.⁸⁹ Written in the first-person, the poem concerns a grandchild's relation to the grandfather, alternating between wishful and factual memories. The poem opens, for instance, with an action flagged as invented:

I never
saw your arm tightened
white by the straps, your
forehead centered by the black
box, and your hand wrapped
by a shin, davening up and
down with an aged prayer
book on your fingers.⁹⁰

This counterfactual memory of the grandfather donning tefillin (or phylacteries) is fabricated by the grandchild, who later admits: "I have made you into / a fiddler / ... / But you sold wool waste."⁹¹ In this way, Dworkin repeatedly shifts from near-stereotypes of Old World Jewish patriarch, pious and larger than life, to muted remembrances of the "real" man: "you sat with the others, silent / and motionless, in rows of / pews without song."⁹² This image of the

⁸⁹ See Charles Bernstein, *A Poetics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 6. Marilyn Chin self-critically expresses the prevailing skepticism of such poems when she says about one of her poems, "It was one of those obligatory Chinese American 'grandparent' poems." Chin, "A Mentor's Words and Words on Her Words," in *Views from the Loft: A Portable Writer's Workshop*, ed. Daniel Slager (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2010), 95.

⁹⁰ Marc Steven Dworkin, "My Grandfather's Tefillin," *Shirim* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1982): 16, ll. 6–13.

⁹¹ Dworkin, "My Grandfather's," 16–17, ll. 25–26, 29.

⁹² Dworkin, "My Grandfather's," 16, ll. 16–18.

grandfather—imposing on one plane two distinct realities—seems the product of an unspecified “guilt,” a guilt objectified in the poem’s controlling locus, the tefillin. “My guilt is / your tefillin,” the first lines starkly state.⁹³ The source and nature of this guilt invites speculation. Is it guilt for the need to idealize an average man? Guilt over some break in cultural continuity? Ultimately, these questions lead us away from an almost insignificant detail in the opening lines, one that is closer to the heart of this discussion than the poem’s own apparent focus. “My guilt is / your tefillin / left on the shelf,” the first lines continue, “next to the hard bound / Graetz’s *History of / the Jews*,” before proceeding into the counterfactual “but I never / saw your arm tightened,” etc.⁹⁴ There is a danger in reading too much into this reference to Graetz, but it must be balanced by the loss in treating it as incidental, for it constitutes here a *seme*, as Barthes said, a unit of signification—like tefillin and fiddlers—of the “Jewish” poem.⁹⁵

Graetz’s history does not return in the poem, but it suggests a framework for everything that follows: Jewish history. In this framework, the poem’s generational relations become mediated by the arc and sweep of history, the personal made impersonal in the crucible of larger events and processes. Graetz’s *Geschichte der Juden*, which appeared from 1853 to 1870, took the Jews from the provinces of ecclesiastical, confessional, and universal history to the heights of their own national history.⁹⁶ There were modern Jewish historians before him, yet after Graetz “one could no longer think except historically,” so felt many of his contemporaries.⁹⁷ But the invention of Jewish history was as much ascent as fall, as Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi has shown.

⁹³ Dworkin, “My Grandfather’s,” 16, ll. 1–2.

⁹⁴ Dworkin, “My Grandfather’s,” 16, ll. 1–7.

⁹⁵ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 17.

⁹⁶ David N. Myers, *Resisting History: Historicism and Its Discontents in German-Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 27.

⁹⁷ Myers, *Resisting*, 28.

“The modern effort to reconstruct the Jewish past begins at a time that witnesses a sharp break in the continuity of Jewish living and hence also an ever-growing decay of Jewish group memory,” Yerushalmi observes.⁹⁸ “The decline of Jewish collective memory in modern times is only a symptom of the unraveling of that common network of belief and praxis through whose mechanisms . . . the past was once made present.”⁹⁹ The tefillin in Dworkin’s poem may index one such mechanism of memory and thus explain the grandchild’s guilt. The guilt is not for not wearing them (an alluring biographical conflation would suggest the “grandson,” a rabbi, certainly does); it is for wishing that the grandfather had worn them and in that small way kept the memory alive. In a manner delightfully counter to Horace Kallen’s meaning, Dworkin ends in agreement with that ur-theorist of cultural pluralism: you cannot change your grandfather.¹⁰⁰

But if Yerushalmi’s diagnosis is correct, then irony of ironies, we need the history to perceive the tefillin’s function. Where mimetic reproduction of Jewish lifeways no longer guarantees their continuity, the project of a journal like *Shirim* is more than publishing Jewish poetry. In a real sense its project is to create it. And what “My Grandfather’s Tefillin” does in microcosm, Dworkin’s editing tries to enact on a larger scale. “Reference” fills in (or it tries to) where memory dwindles. Graetz gets incorporated as a node in another “common network,” this one a network of texts, writers, genres, myths, and motifs which connote Jewishness. To create such a network, however, exceeds the capacity even of a supremely influential poetry journal. There are larger pressures at work.

⁹⁸ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (New York: Schocken Books, 1989), 86.

⁹⁹ Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 94.

¹⁰⁰ See Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 10.

Indeed, Graetz's presence in Dworkin's poem suits a notion of reference inescapable since the institutionalization of Jewish studies in American higher education. "Poetry of Jewish reference" is a slogan that evokes the scholarly and academic convention of citation. Perhaps this was at first a muted connotation (Chyet first coined it in 1977, five years before *Shirim* began), but as higher education continued to expand and as poets, Jewish or otherwise, increasingly gravitated to academic positions, that sense of the word could only grow more salient. The academic connotation of reference became the primary one in the Spring 1988 issue of *Shirim*, which published the winners of a national poetry contest for Jewish college students. The contest called for "poetry of Jewish reference" and was judged by Grace Schulman and Gerald Stern. In the selections of poems from seventeen contest winners, we can see the lines along which Jewish American poetry was developing in its youngest generation, and we can see exactly what "Jewish American" meant to poets whose only experience of higher education post-dated the rise of Jewish studies. "Our hope," Dworkin writes, "was to stimulate young writers to examine and draw from their Jewish experiences."¹⁰¹ He continues: "Their Jewish interests and experiences range from memories of grandfathers to the land of Israel, from holiday and religious experiences to being Jewish in an American society." These themes seem personal, even familiar or familial. They were—or were becoming—part of a shared lexicon of Jewish poetry.

What follows is an inventory of tropes that can be found in the poems: "People with blue numbers / on their bare arms" metonymize Holocaust memory in Marilyn Talal's "Being Children"; an Arab funeral with "kafiyaed mourners" watched by tourists stages the Palestinian-Israeli conflict for Janet Kaufman; a father's recollection of Treblinka in a poem by Leilani Ruland emblemizes the transmission of traumatic memory, influentially dubbed "postmemory"

¹⁰¹ Marc Steven Dworkin, "Editorial Note," *Shirim* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 18.

by Marianne Hirsch; vocal impairment at a Passover meal suggests broken (and repaired) generational continuities in Lila Hanft's "The Passover Mute"; a 1959 Yom Kippur service lets Leonard Kress meditate on assimilation and Jewish-gentile relations in the American suburb; the piece of Jerusalem stone examined in Ronit Rosen's "Planned Pieces" anchors a history of Jewish life in Palestine from King Solomon until the Bar Kokhba revolt; a great-great grandfather's photo is a window onto family history for Alyssa Turner; Leza Lowitz's "Dividing the Landscape" represents barriers to the Jewish past through German language and politics; and the sound of approaching "soldier's boots" evokes the long record of Jewish fugitivity in Ken Denberg's "A Jew Hides in the Woods, Poland 1914." No image, event, or place mentioned in this inventory should surprise a reader of Jewish American poetry today. Each fits the prevailing vocabulary and preoccupations of current Jewish poets. They read as unambiguously Jewish. As Schulman and Stern pored over the contest submissions, they were no doubt guided by their own taste and aesthetic standards. But these poems must also have struck them as fulfilling the call for "poetry of Jewish reference." What then piques curiosity is the institutional affiliation affixed to them. We are repeatedly reminded that the authors hail from Brandeis, Cornell, SUNY Albany, Iowa, Ohio State, Houston, and so on. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to give detail on these universities, but even cursory research will reveal that in the years preceding the *Shirim* poetry contest they saw the establishment or growth of Jewish studies departments, classes on the Holocaust, Israel exchange programs, chairs in Jewish history and literature, and Judaica-focused special collections archives. Whatever "poetry of Jewish reference" was interpreted to mean, we should remember that "literature is never indifferent to its institutions," as Charles Bernstein says.

What each student in fact experienced of these developments would surely be revealing. Here a conjecture on one poem, the First Prize winner, will have to suffice. David Gewanter's "tuO eM teL" treads familiar ground with its depiction of parents who use Yiddish to keep their children from understanding them.¹⁰² The heimish or homey "mother-tongue" divides generations, instead of bridging or reproducing them. Before the clichéd conclusion, where a personification of the language is mourned as lost ("this kitchen spinster / Won't enter my home, but die with my parents"), an unusual moment intrudes: "I'd almost move home again to make them // speak it / ... / instead, I mail them / Yiddish tapes or books."¹⁰³ The poem's title is inspired by the books, it turns out. Their right-to-left layout makes the letters read like a message scrawled on a mirror in reverse: "Let Me Out." This is an unusual moment because it is the one who is trapped on the other side—of language, of the Old-New world divide; reflected but not reproduced in the parents' image—who has access to the message, the books. In the poems of a late-twentieth century Yiddish American writer like Malka Heifetz-Tussman, or in Cynthia Ozick's famed short fiction "Envy; or, Yiddish in America," the Yiddish writer is the sole possessor of the message, the language, the books, which mold in attics or desk drawers for the want of interest of succeeding generations. Gewanter is by no means the savior-translator that Ozick's Edelshtein desires; he knows no Yiddish. But somehow he has got his hands on tapes and books, and not those in the attic or on the shelves at home. He sends them to his parents hoping for—well, his goal is unclear. At stake, though, may not be the question of why, but how. Gewanter's institutional affiliation holds a tantalizing clue: UC Berkeley, where in the eighties the so-called Berkeley School of Jewish Studies was finding its legs. If you were going to take an

¹⁰² David Gewanter, "tuO eM teL," *Shirim* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 19.

¹⁰³ Gewanter, "tuO," 19, ll. 12–13, 14–15.

interest in Yiddish, Berkeley was the place to do it. There you could learn that Yiddish was not the sum of dirty phrases and off-color jokes which American popular culture imagined, but actually, for a long time, a language that sustained some of the best that has been thought or said by European and American Jews. It was a school that would sustain and create a body of scholarship that feels more integral to Jewish American literature and culture every passing year. Berkeley was a site of “Jewish reference” in the making, the kind of place that made the Jewish past present, to recall Yerushalmi, by producing it. Perhaps the Yiddish-less child who sends parents Yiddish books is trying to do the same.

Familiar Things Kept Unfamiliar

On December 3, 2001, Benjamin Hollander delivered a lecture in the *Academica Judaica* series in the Jewish Studies Department at San Francisco State University. The lecture was a version of the first half of *Rituals of Truce and the Other Israeli*, a multigeneric prose poem published by Steve Dickison’s Parrhesia Press in 2004. Combining letters, e-mails, quotes, verse, imagined dialogues, and citations, *Rituals of Truce* attempts to see anew the impasses in Palestine-Israeli dialogues (and possible solutions), especially in the wake of 9/11 and the intensification of national security projects. An untenured instructor without the stamp of a PhD, a poet whose work tended toward essay, Hollander was at once an odd and an appropriate choice for an academic lecture. For one, he was ambivalent about his place in the increasingly academic scene of contemporary American poetry. Unlike Jewish poet-scholars such as Norman Finkelstein and Alicia Ostriker, he had not pursued a record of scholarly publications alongside his creative work. Letters from the eighties contain Hollander’s bitter jokes about faculty job search rejections. He wondered if he would ever join the club of poet-academics to which his friends

and acquaintances were being admitted. He eventually did, spending his final years at Chabot College in Hayward, California. But his outsider status persisted and his observations about the poetry world which was developing around him were sharper as a result. Hollander's lecture evinced an attentiveness to its institutional setting: a Jewish studies department. Two and half years after the lecture, what was got included in *Rituals of Truce* retained traces of the original occasion: "You have it. I have it: it is the unasked question between us, when a public speech is framed by an audience's private experiences. I ask it. You ask it: 'Who are you?' 'Can I trust you?'"¹⁰⁴ These questions and ruminations seem to arise from Hollander's anticipation of both audience and reader reception. Can the Jewish studies scholars in the room "trust" someone whose experiences, but not his training or education, dispose him to discuss the Palestinian-Israeli conflict? Is the Ashkenazi Jew, a child of German refugees, made (academically) legible through the bevy of "citations and references—literary, political, and personal" which pepper the lecture and book? And what does "identity" allow Hollander to say in a setting where research overrides, if it does not supplant the authority of the personal? These questions lead us back to the issue of reference and citation, and specifically the role of scholar-poet that citation subtends.

Stated at the book's start, the credo of citation, reference, and identity that guides *Rituals of Truce* reads as follows:

A public confession about where one comes from and where one moves to is more than historical, more than documentation, more than "for the record": it is the knowledge one shares, the names one names, the gaps in consciousness one acknowledges after the

¹⁰⁴ Benjamin Hollander, *Rituals of Truce and the Other Israeli* (Berkeley: Parrhesia Press/Listening Chamber, 2004), 10.

fact(s) to say: ‘I have sacrificed the ‘gifts’ of family and tribe to ‘return there’—I have given back my experience, my decision, my belief.’¹⁰⁵

This passage calls for some careful unpacking. The “public confession” to which Hollander refers is in part his own, the starting-point and preoccupation of the book at hand: who the man is who arrogates the authority to speak on Palestine-Israel.¹⁰⁶ In the next section, for example, Hollander will detail his birth (“in Haifa, Israel”), his ethnic-religious identity (“Ashkenazi Jew”), his immigration to the US at age six, and his early film-going experiences, all of which, he suggests, inform his response to the conflict. This is what he means when he says that such a confession is “more than ‘for the record.’” Sometimes minor or insignificant, these facts matter to “one’s” view of a situation and how they dispose others to trust or distrust “one.” So this confession consists in the kind of information Hollander provides in the next section, but equally in “the names one names.” On Palestine-Israel, the implications of naming are stark: Israel, Palestine, disputed territories, occupied territories, the West Bank, Judea and Samaria, the War of Independence, al-Nakba. These names and terms carry history that locates and positions the one using them. And in an extended sense, “the names one names” also refers to one’s interlocutors. As the book progresses, Hollander will cite and discuss James Baldwin, Raja Shehadeh, Groucho Marx, Walter Benjamin, and Edward Said, all of whom similarly locate and position the one who cites them. Thus he situates himself, inviting engagement on a terrain mapped in advance by his references and citations. All this does more than fill in (or fill out) the author or person behind the lectern and provide pertinent information about identity and

¹⁰⁵ Hollander, *Rituals*, 11.

¹⁰⁶ On the necessity (always embarrassing) to arrogate authority, see Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle*, 3–50.

intellectual affinities. Recall that the end goal is to say: “I have sacrificed the ‘gifts’ of family and tribe to ‘return there.’” The point is to give back the authority of the familiar—the right to speak granted by family, tribe, experience, or belief. Not just to give them up either, but to “return there” with another right, another authority. This right—whatever it is called—is what is gained when familiar things are kept unfamiliar, to recall Rankine and Loffreda. In *Rituals of Truce* Hollander aims to give back his birthright and seize it again more deeply.

“My ‘lecture’—as non-academic as the institution’s walls will bear.”¹⁰⁷ This is how Hollander described his *Academica Judaica* lecture to his brother. “As non-academic as the institution’s walls will bear,” but after all they bore it. Indeed, Jewish studies is a site where the kind of estrangement Hollander avows can take place. As an identity knowledge program in the American academy, Jewish studies (ideally) foregrounds without essentializing identity; it reroutes the “authority of birth” into analysis, research, examination. Going on, Hollander writes in the email to his brother:

Who will they trust to tell them a different story? Who will they trust long enough to listen before “they develop argument in order to speak.” I’m looking at the whole thing from the perspective of someone who has, literally and figuratively, almost a native’s accent but no vocabulary.¹⁰⁸

Hollander’s “they” is inclusive. In a broad sense, he refers to every potential reader who has formed an opinion or taken a stand on Palestinian-Israeli conflict. At the same time, the

¹⁰⁷ Hollander, *Rituals*, 18.

¹⁰⁸ Hollander, *Rituals*, 19.

pronoun's deictic properties adhere it to the original occasion, so that Hollander still seems to be speaking of his soon-to-be Jewish studies auditors at SFSU. The phrase "almost a native's accent but no vocabulary" alludes to the leitmotif of Hollander's ambiguous Israeliness. Raised in Israel to the age of six, he speaks naturally without actual fluency. Yet the occasion again suggests another reading: he can almost speak the language of the academy, perhaps even the language of Jewish studies. The question is how convincingly? "I "get" what's happening but can't speak it convincingly enough to shake people out of their arguments." Hollander admits numerous impediments to getting people "to develop trust before 'develop[ing] argument in order to speak.'"¹⁰⁹ Yet he speaks only obliquely about the impediment his ambivalent attitude toward the academy—and its disciplinary norms—poses. "I have just enough nativity to make sense but too much distance from the region to be believed or to be taken "at my word.""¹¹⁰ Hollander's continued neglect in the fields of American poetry, Jewish American literature, and Jewish studies suggest that his iconoclasm did hamper his influence.

Born a generation later, Hollander would have been less hamstrung by academicization. Of course his perceptiveness about American poetry came from being slightly out of step. Nomi Stone, three decades Hollander's junior, exemplifies Jewish American poetry in full lock-step with identity poetics. Stone is at home in the university. A scholar-poet, she represents the tail-end of Jewish American poetry's swing to a poetics that African American and Puerto Rican poets were already perfecting in the eighties. In her work, "poetry of Jewish reference" derives directly from the protocols and expectations of Jewish studies. Unlike Hollander, she speaks the language of the academy and Jewish studies fluently. Stone "gets" it well enough to be

¹⁰⁹ Hollander, *Rituals*, 20 (Hollander's brackets).

¹¹⁰ Hollander, *Rituals*, 19.

recognized and legitimated, as her inclusion in—and Hollander’s absence from—*The Bloomsbury Anthology of Contemporary Jewish American Poetry* might indicate. And yet like her peers at this time, Stone also points to the disentanglement of identity poetics from their former basis in identity knowledge programs.

During a Poetry Fulbright that began in 2003 on the island of Djerba off the coast of Tunisia, Stone began the manuscript that formed the basis of her 2008 collection *Stranger’s Notebook*. The LA-born Marylander spent her fellowship writing poetry and conducting fieldwork in the local Jewish community. When she attended Oxford to take an MPhil in Modern Middle Eastern Studies, she turned her fieldwork into the basis for a thesis on Djerban Jewry. She wanted to know “To what degree is Djerba now, in the 21st century, *home* for the Djerban Jews?”¹¹¹ A short five years separate the poetry she was writing in Djerba from *Stranger’s Notebook*. In the interval she graduated from Dartmouth and began and finished her MPhil at Oxford. Stone has gone on to earn a PhD in Anthropology at Columbia and secured a postdoctoral fellowship at Princeton. As the book’s origins and Stone’s trajectory hint, *Stranger’s Notebook* is equal parts poetry and anthropology, maybe classifiable as verse ethnography. Verse autoethnography might be more accurate, for the work concerns Stone as much as the Jews of Djerba. It is about the Jewish “stranger” that Stone is and becomes.

Like other poets in this dissertation, Stone literalizes that dismissive or liberal-sympathetic claim that the literature of multiethnic writers and writers of color is “immediately expressive of the author’s *experience* as a representative member of some social group.”¹¹²

¹¹¹ Naomi Stone, “*Bilad Al Haqaniya?* Otherness and Homeland in the Case of Djerban, Tunisian Jewry,” p. 4, Master’s thesis, Oxford University, 2006.

¹¹² John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 10 (Guillory’s italics). Guillory does not present his own view; he is assessing the consequences for literary criticism of the collapse of author biography into the demands of representation.

She—the Jewish anthropologist studying Jewish people—seems transparently to transcribe her experience in verse. But like everyone else in this dissertation, the literalness with which she embodies the critique of ethnographic or sociological identity poetry is a function of her training in one of those disparaged categories. She literally is an ethnographer. Throughout *Stranger's Notebook* the reader encounters questionnaire surveys, tape recorders, and contextual information in notes and paratext, things we would expect an anthropologist to use. The whole book could be imagined as a field notebook transcribed in verse. Indeed, “The Stranger, Preparing for a Long Journey, 2003,” initially reads like a poem of departure in uncomplex second-person:

Bring your yellow backpack, your
blank books, enough to remind you of
yourself . . .
You have never seen
this island. But it is like an itch.
A whiff. Someone else's memory came
in.¹¹³

¹¹³ Nomi Stone, “The Stranger, Preparing for a Long Journey, 2003,” in *Stranger's Notebook* (Evanston, Ill.: TriQuarterly Books/Northwestern University Press, 2008), 7, ll. 1–3, 5–8.

Ostensible subject of “you” and the title’s epithet “The Stranger,” Stone, budding anthropologist, packs for her trip to Djerba.¹¹⁴ The year even aligns with the Stone’s own biography.¹¹⁵ A few pages later, however, “La Ghriba (‘The Stranger’) Tells How and Why” throws a wrench into this reading. The addition of “la Ghriba,” a French rendering of local Arabic vernacular, recalls some salient information from the book’s preface: “Many Djerbans tell that the temple [their largest synagogue, called La Ghriba] is named after an anonymous young girl who arrived alone to the island. When the girl’s isolated hut spontaneously burned, she was named a saint, and the synagogue was erected over the sanctified spot.”¹¹⁶ The poem, then, appears to tell this girl’s story. As a result, the “stranger” of the earlier poem is no longer so obviously Stone herself. Anachronisms notwithstanding (“yellow backpack,” “tourists”), the stranger is at least both Stone and the anonymous girl turned local saint. The title of the book, too, takes on new meaning. “Stranger’s notebook” not only refers to the anthropologist’s research notes; it may indicate that what lies between the covers is someone else’s record—Stone’s counterpart, *al-Ghriba*, the anonymous girl.

Despite the biographical framing, Stone maps only unevenly onto the book’s “you” and Stranger. The revelation that anthropologist and anonymous girl alike are the Stranger is only the first link in the dizzying chain of signification constructed by *Stranger’s Notebook*. In the preface, for example, we learn that the girl is La Ghriba only because she gives the largest local

¹¹⁴ In case this reading seems to result from my own idiosyncratic, biographically inflected criticism, see the following sentence accompanying Stone’s contribution to the Bloomsbury contemporary Jewish poetry anthology: “Her first book of poems, *Stranger’s Notebook* chronicles her time living in one of the last cohesive Jewish communities in North Africa.” “Nomi Stone,” in *The Bloomsbury Anthology of Contemporary Jewish American Poetry*, ed. Deborah Ager and M. E. Silverman (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 266.

¹¹⁵ See Stone, *Stranger’s*, np, 67 and “*Bilad*,” 7n12.

¹¹⁶ Stone, preface to *Stranger’s*, np.

synagogue its name. In other words, La Ghriba, or El Ghriba, is a temple too. Which plausibly makes the title's "notebook" an account of the social life of Djerban Jewry, documenting goings-on beneath the synagogue roof. Still further, Stone mentions in her master's thesis a legend where the island of Djerba is called Ghriba. The story goes that this name was given by Jews who arrived during the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE.¹¹⁷ They called their new home "stranger." The notebook would then become the island's history, told in anecdotes, asides, and meditations. But the chain of signification goes further than national history. Stone avers that the Shekhinah, God's feminine aspect in the Kabbalistic tradition, is identified in Djerban Jewish consciousness with the girl-saint al-Ghriba.¹¹⁸ The Shekhinah is the aspect of God that dwells with the Jewish people in exile. She is a stranger in a strange land like her people. In this reading, the notebook may even record divine or cosmic history. Returning to earth, so to speak, there remains a last signification. According to a legend to which Stone alludes, El Ghriba synagogue was built on the foundation of a door brought from the First Temple.¹¹⁹ In some tellings, they brought a stone. Coming full circle, the foundation of the temple is a stone is a Stone is a stranger—an alien element or foreign object and at the same time an unhomed piece of home. The notebook is a story of the Stone.

Where does this chain of signification leave us? For one, the familiar modes of lyric reading are a shambles. The view that Stone's autoethnographic verse texts are "expressive objects that 'speak' to the reader," that they have a "dramatic structure" that centers on a speaking subject," as White describes the paradigm, encounters impasses when the speaker is

¹¹⁷ Stone, "*Bilad*," 89.

¹¹⁸ Stone, "*Bilad*," 98–101.

¹¹⁹ Abraham L. Udovitch, and Lucette Valensi, *The Last Arab Jews: The Communities of Jerba, Tunisia*, photographs by Jacques Pérez (New York: Harwood Academic, 1984), 8.

indeterminate, plural, perhaps not even human or singular.¹²⁰ A dramatic monologue of the stone is conceivable, but not when the means to distinguish stone from Stone—temple from local saint or God—are missing. And yet “avant-garde antilyricism’s refusal of the figure of expression and voice” is also insufficient, for Stone’s poems are expressive, voiced, strangely consistent, if not definitively cohered.¹²¹ It would be a step too far to compare Stone to Bernadette Mayer in White’s reading, a poet who “explores processes of lyric reading rather than . . . naïve[ly] embrac[ing]” them.¹²² Stone carries us back to a moment usually thought to occur before a poem gets read. Despite my presentation, the tour-de-force chain of signification her book creates is not all that overt. It is possible to read the book exactly as the Bloomsbury anthology of contemporary Jewish American poetry suggests, when it states “*Stranger’s Notebook* chronicles [Stone’s] time living in one of the last cohesive Jewish communities in North Africa.”¹²³ That is—as book-length expressive lyric. What awkward or pedantic disposition would incline one to read Stone otherwise? Precisely a disposition that inclines one to spot, trace, and synthesize the clues that all is not as it (lyrically) seems in *Stranger’s Notebook*. A reader, in short, equipped with a working knowledge of Jewish culture. The bewildering polysemy of the “Stranger’s” connotations is both recognized and tamed in advance by a network of reference and knowledge that sets it within a Jewish symbolic system. It requires not a Jewish reader per se, but a Jewish studies reader, if you will.

Stone herself places *Stranger’s Notebook* within the symbolic system created by Jewish studies and earlier traditions of Jewish scholarly knowledge. Consider the references she

¹²⁰ Gillian White, *Lyric Shame: The “Lyric” Subject of Contemporary American Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014), 2, 3.

¹²¹ White, *Lyric*, 208.

¹²² White, *Lyric*, 208.

¹²³ “Nomi,” *Bloomsbury*, 266.

employs in the book and in her master's thesis to elaborate her chain of significations. She cites Gershom Scholem, the pioneering scholar of Jewish mysticism to whom Meltzer and Rothenberg were indebted; Scholem's student Moshe Idel, whose revisions of his teacher's claims are widely accepted; S. D. Goitein and Norman Stillman, authorities on the Arab Jewish world, whose scholarship inspires the poetry of Peter Cole and Ammiel Alcalay (whom she cites as well); and Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, the post-structuralist savants of Jewish identity. These and other lesser known Jewish studies and proto-Jewish studies scholars embed *Stranger's Notebook* in an ecology of reference and citation that helps make sense of its signifying chains. More than just making sense of the Escher-like Matryoshka doll that is Stone's "Stranger," this ecology puts Jewish identity itself in transcultural context. Studies that range from European medieval Jewry to American Jewishness to the worlds of Arab Jews also place these subjects in a kind of Jewish continuum.

This continuum's implications are shown in the final poem in *Stranger's Notebook*. In a gesture we should remember from Victor Hernández Cruz's epitaph for Oscar Lewis, "In the Songs and in the Homes" introduces the anthropologist's tape recorder. Where Cruz appropriated and pawned Lewis's tape recorder, Stone uses the device to abolish, not overturn, the distinction between subject and object of study: "The tape clicks. I turn over the tape // We are by ourselves now. You are telling me your story and / I am listening, or it is the other way around."¹²⁴ These lines suggest everything we have read until now could be tape transcription. Yet this is a minor revelation compared to the conjunctive reversal, "I am listening, or it is the other way around." Who listens to whom? Is the listener the anthropologist, as expected, or the native informant? That the anthropologist's conversation partner might be her sister, and not a research subject in

¹²⁴ Nomi Stone, "In the Songs and in the Homes," in *Stranger's*, 65, ll. 7–9.

the usual sense, compounds the complexities. Here anyone may be listening to anyone—family member, friend, researcher, researched, foundation stone, temple, nation, God—and anyone might be speaking.

This is not just a radical anthropologist's pipe-dream, a utopian glossolalic situation. As Benjamin Schreier argues, this is the condition of Jewish studies as an anthropological enterprise, wherein "the abstract Jewish subject that oversees the field is inevitably [and transparently] discoverable in all the objects and phenomena that the field comprises."¹²⁵ In her thesis, Stone explains: "I define identity in the sense of David Snow's collective identity: 'a shared and interactive sense of *we-ness*.'"¹²⁶ She continues, quoting Snow: "we-ness is constituted by 'shared perceptions of a common cause, threat or fate' and is 'anchored in real or imagined shared attributes and experiences among those who comprise the collectivity.'" Their polysemy aside, the book's subjects are all Jewish—this is the basis of their collective identity, their interchangeability. The "we-ness" that anchors *Stranger's Notebook* is the product of a textual, symbolic, political ecology that lets an American Jew tell a story of Djerban Jewry as a thinly veiled, self-flagellating allegory of post-Zionist American Jewish awakening. "The collection as a whole," Stone writes, is "profoundly influenced by ideas of messianism within Judaism" linked to Zionist myths of return to the Land.¹²⁷ Though the ambivalence of Djerban emigration to Israel is the supposed locus of book and thesis alike, it is the broader question of home and exile in Jewish diaspora that guides Stone's Jewish imaginary. Djerban and American Jews face the same dilemma, *Stranger's Notebook* suggests: How to reimagine Jewish life beyond the teleology of return? This awkward conflation or elision unifies an otherwise

¹²⁵ Schreier, *Impossible*, 26.

¹²⁶ Stone, "Bilad," 5.

¹²⁷ Nomi Stone, "Acknowledgments and Notes," in *Stranger's*, 68.

kaleidoscopic book because Jewish identity is a transcultural, transhistorical phenomenon. So an enervated legacy of identity poetics and identity knowledge implies.

This is the language Stone speaks and that Hollander spoke unconvincingly. On the eve of the global financial crisis, Jewish identity poetics was well established enough that—given the right education—one could simply adopt it, in no small part due to the efforts of poets discussed in this chapter. The frames of reference were in circulation and one's precedents increasingly had pedigree. The change that occurred after 1968 had less to do with, say, Emma Lazarus's choice of subject matter (she wrote about the Spanish Expulsion), or Charles Reznikoff's (he memorialized the Holocaust and bygone worlds of immigrant Jews), than with the networks of citation and forms of legitimation Jewish studies and academic identity knowledges introduced in US poetry. A Fulbright is not immaterial to success in the present-day poetry world, nor is the ability to pursue an impressive career in the academy. Stone breathes the air of the university with a naturalness missing in earlier Jewish American poets, who tended to resist higher education and Jewish studies programs as production sites. That naturalness comes at a cost. And the ones paying are Jewish American poets—the majority now—who come from MFA programs rather than PhDs. Their ease in a symbolic system indebted to the developments set in motion in 1968, grants them a remarkable unselfconsciousness with so-called Jewish forms and materials. By the same token, they risk the kinds of conflation and elision in *Stranger's Notebook* which makes identity identitarian. The very awkwardness and discursive heterogeneity that prevents a Hollander from achieving recognition also prevents his overreaching. He maintains identity's speculative properties. In doing so, Hollander keeps his eye on the conditions of possibility of identity poetics as such—conditions of possibility that the global financial crisis extends and ends in one paradoxical swoop.

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