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“THE POETICS OF AFFECT IN CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST POETRY”

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ABSTRACT

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“The Poetics of Affect in Contemporary Feminist Poetry”

The ambition of this dissertation is to articulate a theory of affect that works well with the innovative poetics of four important contemporary feminist poets. The introduction, “Reading for Affect in Contemporary Feminist Poetry,” gives an overview of literary affect studies and proposes a way of reading for affect in poetry. The second chapter, “Black Laughter in the Poetry of Harryette Mullen,” approaches laughter as a form of affect and explores the ambiguity of that affect through a reading of Mullen’s major collections of poetry, all of which employ puns and other double-meanings to comic effect, even while commenting upon serious issues of race and gender. Chapter three, “Language and Affect in the Poetry of Leslie Scalapino,” reads for affect in selected works of this Language poet, arguing that despite semantic indeterminacy, affect flourishes. In the fourth chapter, “Lisa Robertson’s Feminist Poetic Landscapes,” I argue that in several of her major works, Robertson challenges the figure/ground division to create a poetic subjectivity that is a feminist model of interrelatedness. And finally, in the last chapter, “SAD in the Anthropocene: Brenda Hillman’s Ecopoetics of Affect,” I further explore the ways an affective poetics can develop an ecological subjectivity that is more sensitive to human interrelations with the land. The chapters are organized to emphasize what I see as a trend toward ecopoetics in these works. The ethics of attention to and respect for difference, highly

developed in this feminist writing, lends itself very well to a consideration of affective and ecological interrelations. Together, these chapters apply an affective interpretive method to extended studies of the work of four contemporary feminist poets.

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Chapter One:

Dissertation Introduction

Reading for Affect in Contemporary Feminist Poetry

In the interdisciplinary field of affect studies, distinct approaches to and definitions of affect are emerging. The aim of this introductory chapter is to articulate the version of affect I find to be most compelling and useful for studies of affect in contemporary feminist experimental poetry, the primary texts of this dissertation. Rather than arguing against other uses of the admittedly broad term affect (there would be no sense in trying to limit the uses of a term that creates wonderful interdisciplinary constellations), I want to define a poetics of affect that works for reading contemporary poetry, as I will be using it throughout my dissertation to read the work of Harryette Mullen, Leslie Scalapino, Lisa Robertson, and Brenda Hillman, all poets notable for uses of affect that are in important ways independent of the lyric subject. My working hypothesis is that affect in poetry registers language's capacity to affect and be affected; in other words, it is language's capacity to affect the reading body and to be affected by the reader's interpretation in the enactment of a text. Affect in language, to complicate this further, is language's ability to *effect* a particular instance of reading; the reader as reader does not simply pre-exist the text's language but is shaped by it in a way that in turn shapes possible affective responses.

In order to show the specificity of this use of the term (and before further explicating this definition), I'll need to locate the tendency to focus on the linguistic

side of affect in a particular part of this emergent field. The first major distinction I want to map in the field of affect studies is between considerations of affect as a property of bodies (political, social, or biomedical bodies, for example), and the treatment of affect as a property of language. In this first broad distinction, then, I want especially to focus on a strain of theory that locates affect in language, rather than in bodies in any exclusively biological sense. Making this distinction between linguistic and bodily locations of affect is a difficult proposal, of course, since language involves an interaction between its users and the non-human code of language that both pre-exists the body and will survive it. Jacques Derrida, in “Signature Event Context,” and Denise Riley, in “Your Name Which Isn’t Yours,” notably treat language as marking the future (and even present-tense) *absence* of the body, even as the body is writing or reading. It seems then that any study of affect in language must also deal with the ways language interacts with the body (whether as presence or absence). The inhumanity of language (as the technicity at the heart of the human) is further explored in Cary Wolfe’s *What is Posthumanism?*. Nevertheless, studies that treat the body as extra-linguistic without accounting for the rhetoric and poetics of the language they are using seem less useful to me as I narrow in on how affect works in this strain of poetry.

Many studies have been done recently in various humanities (inter)disciplines that treat affect as an attitude, orientation, or mode of the body. Collections of essays edited by Jennifer Harding and E. Deidre Pribram, Patricia Clough, and Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth tend to focus on approaches to affect as bodily

phenomena without strongly considering language (its tropes, its rhetoric, its narrativity, or its poetics). And even in cultural studies this tendency to ignore texts is strong or even dominant; the role of language as such is rarely discussed, as if we can have access to bodies and drives without the mediation of language, even, ironically, as we are using language as a sophisticated technology to make bodies and affect take form as objects of interpretation in the first place. In the introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, for example, Seigworth and Gregg use language to argue that “affect is found in these intensities that pass body to body” (1) (without mediation?) and go on to note that one strain of current affect studies “can be seen in various (often humanities-related) attempts to turn away from the much-heralded ‘linguistic turn’ in the latter half of the twentieth century” (7). In the selection of essays that follow, there is indeed little consideration of the role of language in the dynamics of affect. I don’t mean to dismiss any of the rich and important work that is being done, but I wonder how the insights of “the linguistic turn” came to be emptied of affect and rejected as irrelevant to affect studies. Clare Hemmings’ “Invoking Affect” argues along the same lines that recent affect theory (specifically that of Eve Sedgwick and Brian Massumi) is too eager to leave behind the insights of poststructuralism.

There are countervailing approaches, however, that remedy this exclusion. Rei Terada’s theory of emotion in language shows how poststructuralist theory already had its own sophisticated treatment of emotion. In *Feeling in Theory: Emotion After the Death of the Subject*, she reads works by Derrida and Paul de Man in order to show that, rather than ignoring or diminishing emotion, these theorists central to the

“linguistic turn” were concerned with the emotional side of language all along. Terada argues that “far from controverting the ‘death of the subject,’ emotion entails that death” (3). Against Jameson’s argument that after the postmodern “death of the subject” there is a consequent “waning of affect,”¹ she counters that the subject has never been a requirement of, or prior to, emotion; she argues that, on the contrary, emotion plays a role in destabilizing the subject, making its lack of self-sufficiency or coherence frighteningly apparent, just as surely as it plays a role in subject formation. Jameson suspects “there is some kind of contradiction in attributing emotion, or at least strong and clear emotion, to anything other than the subject” (2). Jameson’s mistake is to treat emotion or affect as the expression from within a subject that, after said subject is destroyed by capitalist alienation from fulfilled humanism, must dissipate. However, emotion does not need to presuppose a coherent, self-identical human subject; Terada argues that “theories of emotion are always poststructuralist theories” (3), since emotion is a form of “self-difference within cognition” (3) that renders the subject an untenable construct.² The dissonance that emotion registers between experience and subjectivity makes emotion something closer to a principle

¹ In *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson analyzes the aesthetics of postmodernism to arrive at a political interpretation in which he argues that the fragmentation of the subject signals a waning of affect in which the individual is no longer able to create a sense of continuity between past and future; such fragmentation, for Jameson, means a lack of agency and of affect.

² This argument is a part of the overall project of *Feeling in Theory: Emotion after the “Death of the Subject”* to investigate the role of emotion in deconstruction despite the fact that it is “often thought to be the truly glacial part of poststructuralist theory, the realm in which the death of the subject is most deathly.” (4)

of self-*différance* than a property of a subject.³ Terada argues that, in fact, being self-identical would not feel like anything: “we would have no emotions if we *were* subjects” (4). It is only the feeling of not entirely fitting within the model of the subject that makes emotions apparent.

Terada, however, rejects the idea that we need to turn to *affect* theory in order to find a way to talk about non-subjective emotion. For Terada, affect seems often to be an easy way out, since “proponents of the subject are willing to compromise on affect” (7). Because structures of emotion are self-deconstructing rather than stable narratives or structures, she chooses to stick with an analysis of emotion. While not disagreeing with her thesis, I want nevertheless to maintain the affect/emotion distinction with the caution that it is not a simple binary, as emotional narrative structures are not stable, and affect, conversely, is not completely separable from any emplacement in narratives or subjects of emotion. It is almost impossible to map the ways the terms affect and emotion are conflated, switched, and mingled in different studies, and the distinction between affect and emotion is not important to every study employing the terms. However, I do wish to hold to the distinction as I map it onto literary techniques, as I think that being more precise with this distinction pays off in its relation to techniques of contemporary poetry. I want to maintain that, as Massumi argues, “emotion and affect – if affect is intensity – follow different logics and pertain

³ In an address given in 1968, appearing in translation in *Margins of Philosophy*, Jacques Derrida explains *différance* as the unending *deferral* of meaning caused by the *difference* (without essence) between any concept and any other used to explain it, causing a chain of differences without *telos*.

to different orders” (27).⁴ Emotions (distinguishable, numerable) have a history and philosophical tradition, and while affect (relatively indistinct, emergent, innumerable) may not be fully accounted for in the canon and history of emotions, it may signal the emergence of dissenting ways of feeling that will require narrativization in order to crystallize into new emotions. This use of affect is important for contemporary feminist poetry, as it gives a view of the poem as a workshop generating affects that may not “fit” existing emotional structures or traditions. Central to my approach is the idea that particular literary forms can be connected to affect or emotion; Lawrence Grossberg argues that “unlike emotions, affective states are neither structured narratively nor organized in response to our interpretations of situations.”(81) Unlike Massumi, Grossberg considers how affect takes form in film and literature through the subversion of expected conventions. Seeing affect and emotion as made possible in different ways by different technologies of language leaves more room for work on contemporary poetry that makes use of syntactic indeterminacy. In other words, even if the two can be placed on a spectrum of determinacy, emotion and affect can, in different ways, be linked to literary form. While the emotion of anger, for example, might be more-or-less perfectly accounted for in narrative, less determinate affects might be evoked by vagueness or disjunctive effects in literature.

⁴ Massumi’s differentiation between affect and emotion draws on Spinoza’s definition in the *Ethics* of “emotion [*affectus*] [as] the affections of the body by which the body’s power of activity is increased or diminished, assisted or checked, together with the ideas of these affections.” (III. def.3) Such powers are carefully distinguished in Spinoza from the causes or objects of the affections, which have an arbitrary connection to said affections, hence their indeterminacy and their distinction from something later theorists will call the discourse of emotion.

Riley, in *Impersonal Passion: Language as Affect*, provides another account that links feeling with linguistic theory. She insists that language is both impersonal and at the very affective core of the speaking subject: “There is a forcible affect of language which courses like blood through its speakers. Language is impersonal: its working through and across us is indifferent to us, yet in the same blow it constitutes the very fiber of the personal” (1). Her pragmatic studies of particular uses of affective language explore “How Words do Things with Us” (3) in various everyday situations. Like Kathleen Stewart in *Everyday Affects*, she focuses on uses of language that, for the most part, go unnoticed *as* language by its users; unnoticed, that is, as long as they are “working” to accomplish a goal. As a result, her source texts are very different from the ones I will be using, and while I will draw on her intense focus on language, I am interested in affective differences that can be produced by poetic experimentation with literary form.

Riley argues that the difficulty of accounting for the ways language is able to “inflect its speakers” (2) results from the fact that language is “no longer held to be hard bound in the narrows of semantic meaning, nor, as a reaction, abandoned to babbling frilliness” (2). Here she is likely referring to the poststructuralist theory influenced by Julia Kristeva, who distinguishes between the thetic (argument-making and logical) mode of language and its always co-existing semiotic dimension, the sounds and textures that make up language. Kristeva’s theory makes clear that in language neither element (symbolic or semiotic) exists independently. Both elements are always present (since language cannot exist without a material basis, and neither

can it avoid conveying meaning altogether). But one element can be more predominant in particular texts, or call attention to itself more insistently.⁵ Because the semiotic elements of language are often foregrounded in experimental or language-oriented poetry, the affects generated are less determinate than they may be in either everyday speech or in narrative, and this is the element of these works I want to examine. If this means Language poetry is “abandoned to babbling frilliness,” it can never be abandoned in this way completely, and babbling, in the context of clear meanings being opposed, can have critical implications. Babbling is the precursor to effective language use, and often has signifying aspirations, but inserted within rational discourses acts as an interruption.⁶ The “babbling frilliness,” for example, of Harryette Mullen’s poems “Blah-Blah” and “Jinglejangle” makes a pointed intervention in discourses of rational argument that have used some of her chosen (and alphabetically arranged) terms. One list, for example, strings together, “booboo, Bora Bora, Boutros Boutros, bye-bye.” (12) The alphabetical order of the dictionary has collapsed the personal/political distinction here, finding more than usual in

⁵ In the section “The Semiotic and the Symbolic” from *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva outlines what she calls “the two modalities of the signifying process,” (24) the symbolic, producing meaning, discourse, representation and logical argumentation, and the semiotic, the material trace of the embodied, pre-symbolic origins of language through sound and non-sense. For Kristeva, “Because the subject is always both semiotic and symbolic, no signifying system he produces can be either ‘exclusively’ semiotic or ‘exclusively’ symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by indebtedness to both.” (24)

⁶ In “Language Acquisition” from *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice*, Rachel Blau DuPlessis outlines her reading of Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic, explaining its importance to her own work as a feminist Language poet. Ann Vickery also documents that Language poets including Lyn Hejinian and Leslie Scalapino were reading and interpreting Kristeva and other “French feminists” as they were writing poetry in the 1980s.

common between a minor injury and a country, a political persona and a salutation. The effect is of babbling, but because the terms come from an assortment of personal or geopolitical contexts, presenting them as babble comments on the ways such words, names, and places may be treated in the media. Mullen's intervention is to present them as alliterative pure rhyme, both highlighting the semiotic element of language, and simultaneously commenting upon certain discourses.

Many studies of affect and emotion are interdisciplinary, and they quite often begin by taking a particular emotion as their object. Sara Ahmed, for example, begins with the term "happiness" and explores its etymology, history, and uses in everyday speech. Ahmed's cultural studies approach is possible with an object ("happiness" for example) that has a culture and a history, whereas some adaptation of method is needed in order to study a relatively new or unnamed affect. In *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai sets out to do just that, naming and categorizing some newly coined terms for particular affects. Ngai argues that, as opposed to what she calls "canonical" or "noble" emotions like anger (higher in a hierarchy of value), low, petty, ugly feelings like irritation are more characteristic of a state of "systemic political and economic disenfranchisement" (Ngai 12); their "flatness and ongoingness" (7) more accurately correspond to today's *zeitgeist*.⁷ She argues that postmodern feminist poets and academics have (through fear of conflict among their own ranks) lost sight of anger. However, by evading easy subject-object relations or assignments of emotion, the

⁷ By cataloguing some of the new, petty and small emotions she finds in her studies of aesthetics of texts ranging from high- to low-culture, Modernist to Postmodern, Ngai seeks to describe states of feeling symptomatic of the era(s) in which they arise.

“petty” affects have provided forms of social dissent, providing for the possibility of attachments involving ambiguity and uncertainty that go beyond identity. Instead of remaining attached to particular identity formations and tied to particular kinds of injustice for its very existence, feminist affect can form unexpected attachments (as Ahmed argues in “Feminist Attachments”⁸). Feminist Language poetry troubles the lyric form along with identity formations and “wounded attachments,”⁹ making way, and suggesting, new affective orientations.¹⁰

Agreeing with Riley and Terada that language cannot be left out of the equation in studies of affect or emotion, I will proceed to ask what kinds of analysis might be useful in reading for affect and emotion in particular kinds of poetry. One method of analysis that works well in this matter is rhetoric, the aspect of language, traditionally, that is meant to generate an affective response. It is the aspect of language that draws together *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos*. These elements of persuasion increase the tendency of language to affect and of the reader or listener to be affected. Many rhetorical devices can be seen at work in contemporary feminist poetry. In my chapter on Robertson, for example, I explore how she uses the *ubi sunt* tradition, a series of rhetorical questions inquiring as to the whereabouts of missing parties, to ask

⁸ In this essay from *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed reflects upon “the role of emotions in the politicization of subjects” (171); not only anger, but also wonder and hope, for Ahmed, play a role in how one self-defines as a feminist and forms attachments and commitments to feminism as a political movement.

⁹ This term is from Wendy Brown’s *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*.

¹⁰ Ahmed thus refers to emotions in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*.

after absent feminists. This tradition draws on all of the modes of rhetoric, using *logos* (in that it poses a logical question), *pathos* (in that it generates a sense of nostalgia or longing), and *ethos*, in that it contextualizes the reader in relation to the (missing?) others. However, rhetoric may seem to break down or become difficult to locate when grammar or logic are defied in some aspects of language-oriented poetics.¹¹

Poetics, then, becomes necessary as a way to explore how the rhetoric that inheres in thetic uses of language interacts with and is at times broken down by linguistic experimentation with the semiotic elements of language and by indeterminacy. Some theorists have begun to make links between particular literary genres, schools, or techniques and affect/emotion. Charles Altieri, for example, has made a case for connecting affect to the lyric. One of Altieri's main concerns is to defend the realm of aesthetics from incursions by ethics, and this defense takes the form of setting literary examples *against* cognitivist approaches to affect in order to show the latter's insufficiencies. While his represents an engagement with affect that takes into account poetic form, his attachment to the lyric will provide more of a counterpoint than a guiding principle for my discussions of non-lyric or post-lyric forms. Although Altieri sometimes connects states of affect to grammar, distinguishing for example between adjectival and adverbial constructions (*Rapture* 10), elsewhere his focus on language seems confined to considerations of the

¹¹ In *The Pink Guitar*, DuPlessis advances a theory of feminist formal innovation in which "The anti-authoritarian ethics occurs on the level of structure" (9) and formal innovation.

dynamics of affect (or, I would argue, emotion) felt by the psychologically complex, agential lyric subject. In fact, Altieri's discussion of adjectives such as 'happy' versus adverbs such as 'happily' tends stubbornly to leave in place the lyric subject doing things in the manner of, or being, these affective constructs. And this would not have to be the case; as Lyn Hejinian's work *Happily* demonstrates, the adverbial form of this affect can be disarticulated from a coherent lyric subject.

Affect matters for feminist poetics because, as DuPlessis puts it, "Female aesthetic begins when women take, investigate, the structures of feeling that are ours. And trying to take them, find also the conflict between those inchoate feelings (coded as resistances, coded as the thirsty animals) and patriarchal structures of feeling." (11) Patriarchal structures of feeling are altered along with poetic form in feminist experimental poetics when "those inchoate feelings," or affects, are noticed and included. Experimental writers concerned with gender create jarring juxtapositions of sentiments that help to disarticulate these sentiments from the familiar narratives they are opposing. Such experimentation holds open questions of cause and effect, and allows for a number of tones or affects to coexist in the same text. Hejinian's *My Life* is a wonderful example of the rearrangement of a familiar form, the autobiography, through experimental poetics. The book contains a number of poems corresponding to the number of years Hejinian had lived when she wrote the poems, but they do not "represent" the corresponding age.¹² While syntax is mostly maintained, a paratactic

¹² Hejinian also revised the poems of *My Life* with each new edition (1980, 1987, 2002), further exploring memory and its revisions.

sequence of sentences refuses to follow the bildungsroman narrative sequence so central to standard autobiography:

Somewhere during the transition from childhood to womanhood, a girl is likely to become interested in religion. It would be appropriate to call this not intuition but pre-knowing, or paranoia. They asked my mother to correct my views or to keep me home. Blindmen sell brooms. From hypochondria come sentences and memory. In California during the summer the shadows are very dark and cool, the sunlight hot and bright. But, because we only have seven days, the light seems to be orderly, even predictable. A pause, a rose, something on paper implicit in the fragmentary text. (55)

While this passage has begun with a sentence positing a typical biographical development in “the transition from girlhood to womanhood,” such a normative sequence is disrupted by the non sequitur of the following sentence.¹³ This disruption continues through parataxis throughout *My Life*, even as resonances develop in surprising ways among sentences. The phrase, “A pause, a rose, something on paper” is repeated in most of the poems, a stubborn bit of material resisting change or development. Elements of memory, in which the light or the “dark and cool” shadows are remembered, are disarticulated from an orderly, normative development “from

¹³ In “The Person as Chronic Text: From Lyn Hejinian’s *Gesualdo* to *My Life*,” Ann Vickery argues that Hejinian “explores the possibility of self-composition or poetic agency against the already written.” (233)

girlhood to womanhood,” with the overall effect of creating a new, feminist structure of feeling.

Such connections between formal poetic innovation, feelings, and feminism find precedent in the 1970s when second-wave feminist poets began to think about how to inscribe their feminist anger in verse. Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde are two feminist poets who argued that feminist consciousness could be created in poetry; new feminist structures of feeling would result from breaking down and changing poetic conventions. In 1972, Adrienne Rich wrote “The Phenomenology of Anger,” exploring ways women experience anger in response to injustice. Rather than dismissing anger as a personal flaw that could be therapeutically channeled into more productive venues, Rich chose to dwell on anger, analyzing how it acts as the experiential flashpoint of feminist judgment. Rich thus refused to abandon the mode of anger in favor of cool, rational deliberation upon it. She allowed anger, as the poem’s title suggests, to do embodied philosophical work and to change her poetic form. Rich’s poem came as a politically charged intervention in the early 1970s, a time when “the literary expression of female indignation, personal or collective, by women writers [was] unacceptable” (Ostriker 124). Along with other feminist poets of that decade, Rich was discovering that anger was an important political tool.

Audre Lorde, in *Cables to Rage* (1970), similarly chose to highlight anger as a galvanizing force for black lesbian feminists. An outsider in any group to which she belonged, Lorde registered this exclusion by writing in multi-genre, multicultural

forms that reflected her layered identity, cut through occasionally with direct expressions of piercing anger. In Canada, Margaret Atwood's searing collection *Power Politics* (1971) provided the feminist movement with an image of the violence of gender inequality that had been obscured by the ideology of gender complementarity: "you fit into me / like a hook into an eye // a fish hook / an open eye" (111). Some precursors to these poets of the 1970s were Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, who had made similar use of strong affect in their "confessional" poetry. Contrary to the implications of such a label, Sexton and Plath's work spoke with and for groups and not individuals. The politics of emotion are prevalent in 1970s feminist poetry; as Lorde writes, in poetry, "We can train ourselves to respect our feelings and to transpose them into a language so they can be shared. And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it" (37-8). This statement of poetics contains a set of principles: Lorde observes, first of all, that language is necessary in order to share feelings, as it is social. Therefore, feelings can become shared (and thus political) through language; but even more importantly, poetry needs to be future-directed in that its linguistic innovation needs to be aimed at comprehension by a possible, currently unknowable future audience. Feelings, according to Lorde, can change the language.

Anger was the key emotion in this dynamic reshaping of how language was to be used and shaped as a mode of oppositional consciousness. But what does anger do to language exactly? While Alicia Ostriker largely deals with anger in women's poetry thematically, she does observe an interesting phenomenon in Virginia Woolf's

writing that is pertinent to this question. Ironically, Ostriker observes, Woolf expresses disdain for feminist writing that is “‘disfigured and deformed’ by rage” (125), and yet Woolf’s own writing, so finely wrought, incites feminist anger through its own devastating rhetoric. Ostriker argues that to appeal to anger, feminist poetry tends to be polarizing: “The stronger the poems, the more emphatically dualistic they are – and the more they convey to a reader that the pattern of dualism is unacceptable” (163). Although dualism is invoked, inciting anger, it becomes a self-deconstructing dualism that makes way for new structures of feeling. Ostriker is speaking of poems such as Sylvia Plath’s “Daddy,” but the same is certainly true of “The Phenomenology of Anger,” in which the speaker’s fantasy is to focus all of her anger at one man who represents and embodies the entire patriarchal order, in a thematic or image-based channeling of affect into the clear and actionable emotion of anger.

How is this channeling of affect accomplished? Poetry provides a range of figures, tropes, and rhythmic, sound, and visual analogues for emotions. Lyric poems can construct syntactically complete situations in which the poem’s subject can attach affect to an object, grammatically, arriving at a determinate emotion. For example, in “Daddy,” the poem’s subject addresses and denounces the figure of the oppressive patriarch. In Freud and in Spinoza, emotion is affect attached to an object or cause, and in the syntactically complete lines of this Plath poem, a lyric subject attaches negative affect to this figure, grammatically the object. Language poetry experiments with removing elements of this configuration; without a lyric subject and without

determinate syntax, however, affect does not disappear, suggesting that it never depended wholly on an individual subject encountering a distinct object, but that it is an orientation, a way of being in the world and in language that can perform or enact dissent.

In other words, the thematics and the images of anger are only part of the picture. When anger enters language, it enters as an interruption, an unseemly outburst, stretching the limits of representation. This is where it tips toward affect; overflowing conventions (that themselves construct it as overflow), anger becomes something more than its tradition can contain. As Woolf rightly observes, anger deforms, and Lorde, Rich, and Atwood all embrace this transformative potential, engaging in a thorough questioning of which traditional elements of poetry to keep and which ones to discard. Lorde asks in her poem “Spring people,” “What anger in my hard-won bones / or heritage of water / makes me reject the april” (1-3), connecting her anger at her “heritage of water” (evoking both the Middle Passage and the conventional construction of women as liquid to be contained), to her rejection of the *topos* of springtime and the pastoral genre. Such traditional poetic conceits are rejected as unsuitable for her poem. Likewise, Rich, throughout her prolific career, has drawn on affects such as anger as motivation to restlessly make formal innovations, seeking forms open to a future readership.

There seems to be a shift from relatively clear (although mixed) emotions in 1970s feminist poetry to less clear, less determinate affect in 1980s and later poetry.

What this change signals, for me, is not so much a dissipation of political charge as a changed political and aesthetic theory and a changing social landscape. One reason postmodern feminists would use such a tactic is a desire to move beyond feminist identity politics as well as to avoid being associated too closely with a particular range of emotions. As Wendy Brown's "Wounded Attachments" argues, there is a danger in attaching negative feelings too strongly to particular identity formations and claims of woundedness; to do so runs the risk of cementing particular identities to particular kinds of injustice. And such stasis is not necessary; Kathleen Woodward's studies demonstrate how "new" affects can be formed in feminism, as a dynamic movement for social change, either by generating new ways of feeling or by describing frustrating social realities. She writes, "I am interested in the connection between affective experience and the understanding of relationships of power. I ask when and how certain kinds of emotional experience can lead to such knowledge and to the creation of new communities, which I understand may be imagined communities only, yet powerful nonetheless" (Woodward 30).

Even more so than Lorde and Rich, although for similar reasons, experimental feminist poetry poses a challenge to the lyric form, along with identity formations; it alters (without destroying) the lyric form and its emotional formations. In this shift away from the lyric I turn more emphatically to *affect*, or restless and unattached feeling. In the poems discussed above (for the most part) anger has been attached to political objects. In some experimental poetic techniques, however, such identifications are disrupted more fully, making it difficult to settle on a single

attachment for the restless affect that is nevertheless generated. Affect doesn't disappear or get "flattened," but becomes dynamic and recombinant, taking on an unpredictable but vital role in feminist experimental poetics. In order to demonstrate how such a theory of affect develops out of poetic practice, I now want to read Marlene Nourbese Philip, DuPlessis, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha as Language poets who work with fractured syntax to convey the "anger" and "anguish" of wrestling with language (along with the playful joy of poetic innovation). These poets demonstrate that poetic experimentation can still make use of affect "after the death of the subject," in Terada's formulation.

Philip's *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* represents an engagement with one's "own" language as colonial force, rather than as "expression" of feelings from within a subject. Philip highlights the duplicity of language:

Some people are born writing, some achieve writing and some have writing thrust upon them. My belonging is to the last group, coming slowly to accept the blessing and yoke that is writing, and with so doing I have come upon an understanding of language – good-english-bad-english, Queenglish and Kinglish – the anguish that is English in colonial societies. (11)

In "Discourse on the Logic of Language," she further elaborates this fraught relationship with her "own" language:

English

is my mother tongue.

A mother tongue is not

not a foreign lan lan lang

language

l/anguish

anguish

--- a foreign anguish. (56)

Stuttering painfully, the “subject” of this poem attempts to articulate her position in and through language. As Riley argues, language (in this case an explicitly colonial one) is at the very core of the speaking subject, and even appears to have been the origin of this one. The fact that it has such an intimate relation to the subject, however, fails to preclude that a “mother tongue is not / not” foreign to her. The line break between “not” and “not” creates indeterminacy; is this a double negative, or is it more stuttering hesitation and uncertainty? The feelings of conflict with which this subject speaks of her “mother tongue” result from the “foreign anguish” that has led to her very construction through this language. In “The Question of Language is the Answer to Power,” Philip presents a series of “lessons for the voice” in which the reader becomes a language learner, asked to voice vowel sounds and phonemes; along with these smallest elements of a new language, however, we learn a history of slavery (carried out in part through linguistic imperialism). “OH *as in the slaves*

came by “boat” (diphthongal) / AW as in the slaves were valued for their ‘brawn’. / o as in what am I offered for this ‘lot’ of slaves?” (70). Both phonetic spelling and indication of voice and breath, “OH” “AW” and “o” are atomized material elements of language acquisition. Anguish, here, is learned on a level underlying subject formation and materially making possible the thetic function of language. Anguish is inhaled with the very air that enables the language learner to exhale “o” in the course of rote memorization; the indeterminacy of this voiced exhalation is the double-edged sword of language.

Cha’s *Dictee*, like Philip’s poetry, combines the tortured language-learning notebook of a student critical, to say the least, of her own endeavors: lessons (on the muses, poetry, and history) along with speech exercises, catechisms and the standard French class exercises after which the volume is named (sans accent, registering the mistakes made in such exercises). A set of translation exercises between French and English is presented as if for the reader to complete. Some of the exercises seem to have been completed by a language learner who falters and makes mistakes; these errors open up a space for difference and even incommensurability between the two languages.¹⁴ Minor “errors” (in the context of a translation exercise) are also additions, asides, talking back. One exercise asks for a translation of the lines, “Peu a peu. Les virgules. Les points. / Les pauses. / Avant et après. Tous les avants. / Tous les après. / Phrases.” The translation reads, “Little at a time. The commas. The

¹⁴ Present in its near-absence is a repressed third language, Korean, Cha’s “mother tongue.”

periods. / The pauses. / Before and after. Throughout. All advent. / All following. / sentences.” (69) Though a plausible translation, the choice to translate “Tous les avants” to “all advent” points to the other context of her language learning, that of Catholic catechism. This “mistake” serves to locate the translator in such a context and serves as a subtle criticism of the heavy-handed tactics of memorization involved in both exercises. Another notable aspect of this translation exercise is in its self-referentiality as language. “Les points” is punctuated with exactly that, followed by “Les pauses” placed between exactly that, two pauses created by line breaks. This self-referentiality underlines the agonizing slowness of the process of language acquisition.

Cha uses the word, “*disease*” often throughout the book, relying on many possible meanings: in French, a woman who is a skilled speaker; a misspelling of “disuse” as in the line, “*Dead words. Dead tongue. From disuse*” (133); and also a misspelling of “disease.” All of these meanings constellate to support the book’s contention that languages can die from disuse. Learning one language is often tantamount to killing another by neglect, as seems to be the case for the book’s “speaker” (or, more accurately, stutterer or non-speaker).¹⁵ A diagram of the body’s vocal cords is included amongst the poems, as if to indicate the source of the problem for the would-be speaker, who “Swallows. Inhales. Stutter. Starts. Stops before starts.

¹⁵ A speaking subject occasionally appears in *Dictee*, but often speech or writing face some kind of interference. Many of the poems explore in detail the physical effort involved in producing sounds and halting speech, in which the “speaker” calls upon “saliva [to] secrete the words” (129).

/ About to. Then stops. Exhale / swallowed to a sudden arrest,” (75) somatizing her resistance to learning the new tongue. Two imperatives indicate that the language learner is receiving instructions, further alienating the speech from the speaker. The affect (mainly frustration) generated in the gaps between language and its expression are felt by the poems’ constructed reader too, as she struggles through the slow and disjointed development of language skills. Sound, likewise, is agonizingly anatomized:

Particles bits of sound and noise gathered pick up lint, dust. They might scatter and become invisible. Speech morsels. Broken chips of stones. Not hollow not empty. They think that you are one and the same direction being addressed. The vast ambient sound hiss between the invisible line distance and this line connects the void and space surrounding entering and exiting. (56)

All of these elements fail to add up to a traditional speaking subject, however, belonging instead to a gendered or marked “disease.” The “anguish” of the voicing of language is not diminished by this lack of a traditional subject, but amplified.

DuPlessis’ *Drafts 1-38, Toll*, along with her other “drafts,” presents a series of open-ended rewritings of her own poems. These poems appear in drafts in order to emphasize the provisional and indeterminate nature of their medium. Like Cha’s poetry, DuPlessis’ poems present a working-through of language that considers multiple meanings of words along with their variations. An interest, in particular, in pronouns (in relation to gender and power), means DuPlessis’ feminist critique

happens on the level of grammar. In this way, she is working in the tradition of Modernist poet Gertrude Stein, who famously declared, “I am a grammarian.” Pronouns have deep implications for agency and power; for example, “ ‘It’ doesn’t choose / ‘It’ is chosen / by the frozen one-way track of time.” (84) As simple a pronoun as “it” determines, on the one hand, a dependence on a proper noun for clarity, and, on the other, a lack of agency in being denied a human-status pronoun. Similar work with “she” and “I” dissects the elements that might have made up a lyric subject, treating them instead as elements in a playful exegesis of language. In “Draft 21: Cardinals,” DuPlessis draws attention to the physical space of a diary entry on a page:

Taken as literal.

The small words, written in pain and rage

that marked her latter

existence. That were its

guarantors. Four lines

into the inchwide day space

allotted in those calendars,

Renoir et Cie,

Plump with situational irony.

The unsolved problem, rage

of matter. Pencilled by the livid mother. (134)

“The small words” are what survive and mark the absence of the once-present “livid mother.” Like Derrida’s understanding of writing marking the absence and death of the writing body, this diary entry is considered to mark such an absence. And yet, despite this absence, “rage” is palpable. This rage is not articulated through a discourse of anger (in which we know what caused the anger or how it can be remedied), but it is no less palpable for this lack of context, felt as much by the reader as a tense silence (registered in the spaces around the short lines of poetry). We never learn the content of the diary entry, but we learn of its formal limits, the “inchwide day space” providing a poignantly constricted space for self-expression that says more about the cause of the “pain and rage” of the mother than a formal explanation could tell us. Again, it is in the gaps between feeling and language that affect takes form. The sense of constriction, contextualized by the presence of the “livid mother” and made visible by the “inchwide” space of the poem’s lines, affects the reader by creating a sympathetic feeling of constriction and stifled expression.

Katie Degentesh, in *The Anger Scale*, presents another approach to the affectively charged poem that undermines or questions the lyric subject, in this case by constructing poems beginning the language of a personality test, feeding them into a search engine, and composing poems with the results. Degentesh’s methodology is similar to that of the Flarf poets, who construct poems using search engines. The

poems of *The Anger Scale* are all given a title from the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI), a psychological test based on a long series of true/false questions, used to determine personality and psychological “fitness” for various activities. Titles such as “Criticism or Scolding Hurts me Terribly” are taken directly from the MMPI questionnaire. Degentesh has constructed the poems from paratactic lists of search results, often lines with heightened negative affect. Two lines in the same poem can address the MMPI question in exactly the opposite way. For example, in the poem, “I Loved my Father,” the two possible answers to this proposition are given and elaborated on: “I loved my father and I loved Jesus” (58) and “I hated Listerine and I hated my father.” Along with other statements in the same poem that clearly come from different personality formations, these lines display a lack of personal coherence, giving us a dispersed and contradictory set of traits in the place of a coherent lyric subject.¹⁶ Part of the MMPI involves a measure of inconsistency or “lying.” For example, if a test-taker just answered “yes” to everything, the test would detect that this is an uncooperative test-taker attempting to hide or block detection of a “true” personality (and its detection of evasiveness gets even more sophisticated than that). Degentesh’s intervention is to highlight the construction of personality and pathology in such a test. By presenting disjunctive

¹⁶ It is an interesting effect of *The Anger Scale* that the affects generated by reading about emotions are not at all the same as those named. For example, in the poem “I Do Not Tire Quickly,” the disjunctive lines “And even though I haven’t won a game yet (!!!) / the breath of life is vivid and arresting,” (11) there are two conflicting registers, one mundane, frustrated, competitive, the other poetic and full of wonder. The juxtaposition of emotional registers creates a layering of affect in which the reader’s affect becomes somewhat ironic or detached from the subjective statements.

and contradictory statements as lines of poetry, destroying coherence and verisimilitude, Degentesh highlights the clunky technology responsible for the construction of the human personality. Conclusions reach farther than just the MMPI, suggesting a theory of the construction of personae through Internet media more generally. *The Anger Scale* provides the beginning of a consideration of the digital poetics of affect¹⁷ that is suggestive of ways to read digital texts, maintaining a focus on affect even while leaving behind the illusion of a coherent, unified person speaking an emotion.

The chapters of this dissertation begin with an approach to experimental feminist poetry that considers affect as an effect of texts that are often lacking a feeling subject. While the shorter studies of poets in this introductory chapter have given a sense of the directions my readings will take, as well as an indication of the extent of the network of feminist experimental writing, each of the chapters to follow presents a more in-depth study of a contemporary poet who engages with affect in significant ways in her work.

Following this introduction, in chapter two, “Black Laughter in the Poetry of Harryette Mullen,” I discuss the role of laughter as deflationary tactic in relation to the avant-garde tradition Mullen references (or, in places, parodies or pastiches).

¹⁷ Such a poetics might take into account the affective interactions of the user with digital technologies in a way that accounts for both the extension of subjectivity and agency through such technology, and the deconstruction of said subjectivity and agency by an awareness of how it is constructed by the technology. Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto” (in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*) might provide a guide.

Mullen, along with other Language poets, is working in the tradition of Stein, as critics Elizabeth Frost, Megan Simpson, and Ann Vickery have argued. Her overt references to Stein in *Trimnings* indicate the depth of influence. Stein's motto, "I am a grammarian," is taken up by Mullen, and in her collection *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, she extends this intense involvement with language into an affective relationship with the dictionary and therefore with meaning as ordered and made possible by the alphabet. This book's epigram is taken from André Breton: "Dark words / more radiant / than onyx!"¹⁸ These "dark words," for Mullen, are dark in many senses, including affective and racial, and betray a dark sense of humor, a form of laughter closely related to anger. In the poem "Natural Anguish," Mullen plays on the connection of the word "anguish" with "language" established, as I have shown, by Philip (and to be found in other language poetry): "Every anguish is arbitrary but no one is neuter" (52) This is also a direct reference to Dionne Brand's important work, *No Language is Neutral*. Language as arbitrary, language as anguish, and language as gendered versus neuter, are all played with in this line. Nearer the end of this poem this theme continues: "Once it was illegal for we to testify. Now all us do is testify. We's all prisoners of our own natural anguish. It's the rickety rickshaw that will drive us to the brink" (52). At once silly ("rickety rickshaw") and serious, these statements show the dark side of language use. Being silenced by racism ("it was illegal for we to testify") is contrasted with an equally disabling state of affairs, the

¹⁸ Breton coined the term "black humor" when he compiled *Anthologie de l'humor noir*, in 1940 (with the "definitive" edition appearing in 1966); from the start, then, the term had a connection to surrealism and absurdity.

repetition of “testifying” to the point that it becomes emptied of meaning (“all us do is testify”). The compulsion to “testify” (think talk shows) creates a theatrical performance of racial and gendered clichés spoken by the undereducated voice of testimony (as signaled by grammatical mistakes). In this way, language is a double-edged sword.

Chapter three, “Language and Affect in the Works of Leslie Scalapino,” investigates the powers of *écriture féminine*, making a strong distinction between affect and emotion while aligning emotion with narrative form and affect with fragmentation. Scalapino’s poems construct a tension between narrative (which in the poems always seems to be incipient, in formation), and the radical felt immediacy of the present. This is a tension, in other words, between the present moment’s feelings and the pressure to narrativize or “make sense” of these affects in relating them by working through language and memory. For Scalapino (contrary to the way Language poets are often described) language is not a cold or impersonal force, but interacts with the body in an affective process. Affect also functions in her work as an indication of the prelinguistic matter that forms the material basis of language. These somatic and affective elements that inform her poetry indicate an interest in language’s affective interaction with experience. Syntactical incompleteness and line breaks are used to separate elements of affect from “normal” emotional articulations, for example, in the following lines from the poem “hmmmm”: “Consider certain emotions such as falling asleep, I said, // (especially when one is standing on one’s feet), as being similar / to fear, or anger, or fainting.” (3) This poem’s “I” or lyric

subject has proposed rethinking “falling asleep” as emotion. The process of falling asleep is not usually called an emotion, but here it is considered in affective terms, and brought into a surprising parallel with “fear, or anger, or fainting,” several of which are more canonical emotions. Anger, for example, is normally linked with being wronged by someone else’s actions, and thought to motivate action toward redress. Isolating the affect, however, from such a narrative chain, the speaker points out its similarity with the affect involved in “falling asleep,” often itself placed in a narrative chain of a person’s daily routine. Scalapino’s work with affect accomplishes a radical presentism that disarticulates experience (which includes and is shaped by language) from tradition, which she considers a force of ideology. The second half of this chapter moves on to consider Scalapino’s ongoing concern (intensified in her later work) with questioning the human/animal hierarchy by highlighting affective continuities and similarities.

Chapter Four, “Lisa Robertson’s Feminist Poetic Landscapes,” argues that contemporary Canadian poet Lisa Robertson develops a feminist poetics of landscape in her works. The chapter takes as its conceit that in Robertson’s works, affect functions as something like a landscape or cloudscape of intensities. That is, affective states are dispersed in the environment; they do not reside “in” naturalized subjects, but rather condense and disperse like clouds. Robertson writes, in “The Weather: A Report on Sincerity,” “for a long time, a cloud was not a thing.” She draws from records of early meteorology and historical descriptions of landscape painting to produce the poems of *The Weather*. Ontologically unstable and difficult to delineate,

the cloud provides Robertson a way to figure instability in other questionable objects, such as “woman” or “the human,” or, conversely, to highlight poetry’s role in condensing atmosphere into subjects and objects in a process of becoming that Brian Massumi calls “ontogenetic”. Robertson focuses on elements of weather that elude description and confound the observer, mixing affect with atmosphere and figure with ground. In the line from “Monday” that begins “The sky is complicated and flawed and we’re up there in it, floating near the apricot frill, the bias swoop, near the sullen bloated part that dissolves to silver the next instant” (10-11), the subject cannot stand apart from the sky observing its clouds, but is implicated in it. Conversely, the subject’s interrelation with the environment genders that environment and causes human qualities to bleed into the clouds, making them “sullen bloated” and constructed from gendered materials like an “apricot frill.” The flowing, paratactic lines of *The Weather* undermine the stability of objects in the landscape and move us toward an understanding of their interrelation. Similar affective landscapes can be found in other related works of Robertson’s such as *Xeclogues*. The first section of my chapter examines her collection *The Weather* through the lens of feminist and posthumanist theories of landscape. I argue that Robertson rejects the figure/ground distinction that has set masculine active figures apart from passive feminine background in traditional landscape. “Background” elements like weather and sky take over the foreground of these poems, and descriptive excess blurs the boundaries between figure and ground. The second and third sections of the chapter look at the collection *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture* in

terms of the poetic performance of walking in, and simultaneously reshaping, an urban landscape. I consider the role of movement, or “walks” in Robertson’s cityscapes. Walking through a city under construction, the poems’ lyric subject visits what DuPlessis calls “‘woman’ as a work site constructed and reconstructed in the crosswinds of political and ideological storms” (50). The “Seven Walks” poems from this collection present feminist subjectivity as co-constituted with the urban landscape in an affective exchange. In this collection Robertson uses tropes of femininity and the pastoral genre as consciously outmoded forms; decorative excess overtakes the rationalized forms of modernity in a pointed counter-modernity as delight and wonder mobilize a kind of utopian hope. Taken together, Robertson’s poems do the work of feminist *poesis*, constructing a livable feminist landscape along with the subjects that can inhabit it.

Continuing with themes developed in my reading of Robertson’s work, chapter five, “SAD in the Anthropocene: Brenda Hillman’s Eco poetics of Affect,” focuses on three collections of poetry by California poet Brenda Hillman, *Cascadia*, *Practical Water*, and *Pieces of Air in the Epic*, reading for the ways that the poems model an affective interrelation between human and environment. These three works each focus on a traditional element (earth, water, air) in order to explore its co-constitution with the human, treating the element as active, or, in Jane Bennett’s term, “vibrant matter.” In the Anthropocene, it is no longer an “intentional fallacy” to attribute human emotions to the environment or its elements. Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is used throughout the chapter as a way to conceptualize this

interrelation of human with environment in an era in which human and hurt environment are intertwined. I argue that, rather than staging a lyric subject regarding a landscape, Hillman's poems create a confusion of subject/object and foreground/background relations in which the origins of affects are impossible to determine and affects circulate, never originating clearly in human or environment. Hillman's ecopoetic practice is an example of how we can shift our understanding of our affective relationship to the environment. Writing "[f]rom my position as a woman" (*Practical Water* 34) or "from my position as the fly," (34) Hillman uses the writing technique of *écriture féminine* to model the oppositional consciousness of feminism in relation to the effective but deadly speech, for example, of a "Senate Armed Services Hearing." Linguistic experimentation can shift awareness toward an understanding of the link between "what it felt like to have been a subject" and "what it felt like to have been earth" (*Cascadia* 14) as well as what it feels like now to be indeterminately both, intertwined and in crisis.

Feminist work with affect has profound implications for subject/object relations (both in language and in philosophy) as well as for the place of figure in ground or environment (who gets to count as figure, who is part of the environment).¹⁹ Feminist poetic innovation happens in the hopes of building a linguistic model of the world that can both register dissent and work toward a new way of thinking. My dissertation charts the work of contemporary poets who are

¹⁹ Here Barbara Johnson's essay, "Is Female to Male as Ground is to Figure?" from *The Feminist Difference* informs my approach; the essay is further discussed in Chapter Two.

doing significant work in speculative feminist writing. Together, these chapters each provide different angles on the question of affect in contemporary feminist poetry. The very different affective stances taken by these poets – each in her own way an “affect alien” in relation to “official” mainstream emotional formations – take form through linguistic experimentation that deconstructs the gendered subject/object relation. Reading their work closely led me to this approach to their poetry; affect seemed so clearly a concern of theirs that I was led to find out more about how, in different ways, they were able to isolate this element, to be so *moving*, without telling sentimental narratives. How had they been able to do the feminist work of dismantling the more established literary forms that naturalize sexist ideologies, while still maintaining or even proliferating the affective intensities of literary works? The chapters that follow are written to answer these questions.

Chapter Two:

Black Laughter in the Poetry of Harryette Mullen

Slaughter house

-Commemorative plaque at UCSC Farm

... to break up the 'truth' with laughter...

-Helene Cixous, "Laugh of the Medusa," 258

I wonder whether during her time studying at UCSC, Harryette Mullen saw the modified plaque on a barn at the university's organic farm that read, "Slaughter house." I can't help but link the playful spirit of this linguistic modification with Mullen's version of Language poetry; like this sign, Mullen works at the razor edge between several opposed affective registers. Funny yet disturbing, playful yet serious, her poetry resonates with the layered affect of this sign. The person who thought to modify the plaque registered an affective difference from the original commemorative gesture, while nevertheless preserving it, making sure that laughter would coexist with a history of slaughter. My approach to Mullen's feminist poetics begins with Sara Ahmed's premise that feminism is an affective difference – as much as a strategic one – from existing social norms. Mullen's Language poetry preserves the

dominant affect to which it is opposed, even as it introduces a new way of feeling, with the effect of “mixed” feelings, or emotional indeterminacy.

Laughter is key to the mixed feelings of Mullen’s poetry, and one that has not been fully theorized; I hope to bring together a semiotic theory of affect with an analysis of its operation in Mullen’s work. Critics have certainly noticed her poems can be funny, and they widely note the prevalence of punning and other wordplay in her work. Amy Moorman Robbins points out Mullen’s “pointed comedic edge” (Robbins 356), and her work appears, quite atypically for an experimental poet, in a collection of comedic writing, *Hokum: An Anthology of African-American Humor*. She has also appeared in an anthology and on a panel, both entitled *Seriously Funny*.²⁰ But the full implications of the destabilizing affect of laughter remain to be explored in her work. What, for example, are the implications of laughing in the face of racism and misogyny, a kind of laughter suggested and induced through many of her double-entendres?

Unpredictable and potentially disruptive, laughter registers an excess of feeling in the face of the dark histories of oppression marked in language, and even a playful form of resistance. Daryl Cumber Dance writes, in her introduction to *Honey*,

²⁰ The “serious” part of the title *Seriously Funny* should be taken, well, seriously: John Bruns suggests that there is a source of generative power in “the multiple and sometimes conflicting meanings that laughter can take” (Bruns 41). Laughter should not be understood, for Bruns, as the symmetrical flipside of seriousness. Bruns raises “the possibility of seeing laughter not a reactive to power, but as altogether different, free from the terms and conditions of power so central to our cultural investigations” (Bruns 23).

Hush! An Anthology of African American Women's Humor, that, for African American women, laughter has “been a means of surviving as we struggled. We haven’t been laughing so much because things tickle us. We laugh, as the old blues line declares, to keep from crying”; she adds, “We use our humor to speak the unspeakable, [. . .] to bring about change” (Dance xxii). While working in complicated ways with notions of identity and race, Mullen’s work draws on this tradition in valuing laughter as affective dissonance through which dissenting feelings are made manifest even within the same words that cause harm.

At stake in Mullen’s work, further, is a complicated relationship to a history of the suppression of laughter in public enforced by sexist and racist social norms, on the one hand, and the celebration, on the other hand, of African American laughter as a form of primitivism, a problematic form of “othering” and exoticism despite its positive valorization. Dance describes the historical suppression of African American women’s laughter both on the basis of race, as a part of “the requirement of ‘proper’ behavior in the presence of whites” (Dance xxii) and on the basis of gender: “it was not considered ladylike to tell jokes or even to laugh too loud publicly” (Dance xxiii). Anca Parvulescu, similarly, traces a history of the prohibition and control of laughter along lines of gender, race, and class. In “The Civilizing of Laughter” she documents a history of social mores prescribing proper forms of laughter and proscribing others. Both race and gender determined that African American women’s humor, though vital to emotional survival, was to be suppressed in public, and Mullen is writing pointedly in this tradition. Shame has been used to regulate laughter, as have morality

and physiognomy, and these resonances can be heard as an echo in any laughter that comes after (defies? embraces? mocks?) this history.

Laughter, for these reasons, is far from an established or settled affect in Mullen's poetry, and I have chosen a term, "black laughter," that I think captures some of this ambiguity while highlighting the connections between race and affect at work. Referring to the portrayal of African-Americans in the 20th century as prone to irrational laughter, Parvulescu uses the term "black laughter" to describe an unsettling affect that is relevant to Mullen's work. Why "black laughter" as opposed to "dark laughter" or "black humor"? A "dark sense of humor" describes a sense of humor that involves laughing at that which most agree should not be funny. Senses of humor vary, and a pun or joke might for one person be bleak enough to be sobering, while drawing out laughter (however sardonic) in another. Perhaps the designation of a "dark" sense of humor is really about an affective difference that registers a deeper political disagreement about the object of laughter. A number of affective registers are available through which to respond to a history of oppression, and "black laughter" captures the ambiguity of affect in Mullen's work that is in part a response to these affects' histories. I share here the spirit through which Mullen is included in the anthology *Hokum* under the heading, "black absurdity"; editor Paul Beatty writes, "the funniest, and oftentimes the saddest, folks realize that if it weren't for absurdity, life wouldn't make any sense" (Beatty 299). Beatty applauds writers who are "unafraid to confront life's black imponderables. This is black humor, and I don't mean African-American black" (Beatty 300). Why not laugh about "black" subjects,

or about the absurdity of racial stereotypes? Mullen seriously challenges us with this question. She develops a layered second-order laughter in which absurdity is an outlook. More so than the term “humor,” laughter captures the instability and volatility of the balance of feelings at play in Mullen’s poetry.

Along with “black,” I would describe the laughter Mullen’s word play invokes as indeterminate and volatile. Laughter is often noted to contain not only wild joy but also to have “something to say about suffering” (Bruns xv). Mullen’s linguistic jokes invite us to make a choice that can never really be made between laughter and despair. This choice, central to the act of interpretation, means deciding between two attitudes toward one’s cultural and political context.²¹ For Ahmed, emotions are central to cultural and political life, but they are not all considered equal: “some emotions are ‘elevated’ as signs of cultivation, whilst others remain ‘lower’ as signs of weakness.” (Ahmed 3). But they can coexist in laughter, a force of indeterminacy, and the movement between one and another feeling can be generative. Ahmed tracks “how words for feeling, and objects of feeling, circulate and generate effects: how they move, stick, and slide. We move, stick and slide with them” (Ahmed 14). If in Ahmed’s terms, affects have the power to “move” us and to “generate effects,” I would add that the effect that laughter (one kind of affect in particular) produces is the volatility of the coexistence of a number of different feelings.

²¹ Henri Bergson proposes that laughter requires an emotional detachment from the object of laughter that allows something otherwise disturbing to be funny, and he connects this to a social function that laughter serves when it singles out excessive behaviors as laughable, calling laughter “a slight revolt on the surface of social life” (200)

Laughter, approached as a form of affect, is an important and pervasive part of Mullen's poetry. But what is it? Rather than a movement of the body, as it is theorized in an early physiological theory of laughter such as Laurent Joubert's *Treatise on Laughter* or Helmuth Plessner's *Laughing and Crying*, which treats these two physiological limit-states as "forms of expression" (Plessner 21),²² I want to treat laughter as an excess of affect generated by texts and connected to textual indeterminacy.²³ Helene Cixous has the poststructuralist theory of laughter that I think most closely relates to the laugh of Mullen's poetry; in "The Laugh of the Medusa," she writes,

Text: my body – shot through with streams of song; [. . .] the equivoice that affects you, fills your breast with an urge to come to language and launches your force; the rhythm that laughs you; the intimate recipient who makes all metaphors possible and desirable; body (body? bodies?), no more describable

²² D.H. Monroe's *Argument of Laughter* is an early survey of theories of laughter; Monroe sees laughter as "one of the unsolved problems of philosophy," (Monro 13) deciding it is impossible to pin down any one motivation, any common object, or "any common characteristic for the laughable" (Monro 15). For Monroe laughter is an emotion with physical elements, both "a physical phenomenon and a mental experience" (Monro 19) that provides relief from restraint and expresses an emotional ambivalence, a property I have emphasized in my readings of Mullen's work.

²³ A tradition beginning with Nietzsche and continuing through the twentieth century treats laughter as excess. Stallybrass and White, in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, discuss Bakhtin's notion of carnivalesque laughter, which "has a vulgar, 'earthy' quality to it. With its oaths and profanities, its abusive language and its mocking words it was profoundly ambivalent. Whilst it humiliated and mortified it also revived and renewed" (*Transgression* 8). Parvulescu follows Bataille and poststructuralists to argue that laughter is a passion that happens at the limits of language; it is "something that is no longer language" (Parvulescu 11). Laughter shatters and overtakes; it may be "the situation of new thought" (Parvulescu 15).

than god, the soul, or the Other; that part of you that leaves a space between yourself and urges you to inscribe in language your woman's style. (Cixous 252)

While Cixous speaks of "body," she immediately asks, "body? bodies?," registering an indeterminacy; further, she relentlessly folds bodies and desire into approaches to texts, allowing neither to be prior to the other. The Medusa is the figure, for Cixous, of the laughing woman who petrifies men: "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing" (Cixous 255). For Cixous, "to break up the 'truth' with laughter" (Cixous 258) means to deflate serious and somber patriarchal narratives of morality, the law, and the "truth," with a laugh. This is what Mullen's work does when it evokes the doubleness of laughter, including both its joy and its edge of anger.

The titles of the poetry collections this chapter explores are themselves a great demonstration of the "black laughter" that can be found throughout Mullen's work. The title of her 2002 collection, *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, is both comforting (in its suggestion of gently falling asleep while reading) and suggestive of an insider deal, a power dynamic in which the poet is "in bed with the enemy," cozying up to the dictionary in order, perhaps, to secure greater access to its symbolic power. Even "sleeping with" in the first sense suggests a move toward a dream world in which the contents of the dictionary will take on surreal immediacy on the other side of sleep. The title of Mullen's 1992 collection *S*PeRM**K*T* suggests both "supermarket"

and “sperm kit,” giving the seemingly banal, everyday image of the supermarket a sexualized and even violent undertone. Both possibilities are there, along with others, including “perm kit” (which, along with the poems of this collection, ties identity and self-presentation to the marketplace).²⁴ This collection, along with the 1991 serial poem *Trimblings* and the 1995 serial poem *Muse & Drudge*, is republished in *Recyclopedia* (2006). *Muse & Drudge* describes two ways women can be used to support the production of art, one exalted and one taken for granted, while *Trimblings* calls to mind, indeterminately, pretty ribbon decorations, clippings from newspapers, or abject, cast-off scraps. All of these titles contain similar darkly funny double-sidedness, an indeterminacy I will explore in my readings of poems from these collections.

I. *Trimblings*: The Laugh of Gertrude Stein

The serial poem *Trimblings* is a series of short, punning and playful studies of different articles of clothing that engages with literary history and genealogy through the work of Gertrude Stein. Discussing its reprinting with its companion piece *S*PeRM**K*T* in *Recyclopedia*, Mullen emphasizes the conflicted nature of her encounter with Stein: these works, she explains, “began as my response to Gertrude Stein’s simple yet elusive poetic prose. For years I had difficulty with Stein. After several unsuccessful attempts to read her, I found an entry into her work through her

²⁴ *My Nappy Roots: A Journey through Black Hair-itage* (dir. Regina Kimbell 2010) explores the deep historical and cultural significance of hair products and hairstyles for African American women.

story 'Melanctha' in *Three Lives*. I was startled by the liberties she took with the literary stereotype of the 'tragic mulatto' in 'Melanctha'" (*Recyclopedia* ix-x). After initially causing offence, it was Stein's cubist portrait of a figure with "wide, abandoned laughter that makes the warm broad glow of negro sunshine" (Stein 340) that captured Mullen's attention, leading to a "hard-won appreciation for Stein's work" (*Recyclopedia* x) and suggesting the possibility of avant-garde writing capable of engaging with cultural stereotypes productively. It was a laugh, I would contend, that won over a poet wary of the over-serious, rarified, and depoliticized treatment with which the Modernist avant-garde is often met. An example of a fragmented approach to identity, Melanctha's characterization was challenging on one level, but on another level, perfectly accessible because composed of familiar caricatures of racial identity. This was the kind of edgy yet accessible work that Mullen imported to Language poetry.

In "Modernism, or an Extravagance of Laughter," Parvulescu explores the role of laughter in Stein, beginning by placing her within the context of "a wider struggle over African-American laughter" (Parvulescu 60). The troubling question, as she frames it, is whether for Modernists, laughter was connected too closely to primitivism (Parvulescu cites, for example, Sherwood Anderson's association of laughter with the primitive or the "dark continent" in *Dark Laughter*). In counterpoint to the risk of primitivism, however, she also cites Ralph Ellison's essay, "An Extravagance of Laughter," which describes a laugh that, for Ellison, led to the realization that the question of "laughter is in fact a literary question," (Parvulescu

60) and therefore a far-from-simple object of interpretation that could open up new affective possibilities. Laughter, she demonstrates, certainly was associated with the primitive and with transgression in the early 20th century, and consequently, Melanctha's "black laughter" may be "an echo of the reader's own attachment to both physiognomy and primitivism" (Parvulescu 62). Stein, however, destabilizes these racial formations by describing a number of figures using the same motifs, across lines of gender and race, and as Parvulescu points out, "Stein's story fashions itself on an overly fictitious dialect, which draws attention to the *figure* of the African-American primitive while nonetheless exploring the formal effects of the use of dialect" (Parvulescu 62). All of these elements can also be found in Mullen's work; this kind of obviously constructed figuration provides Mullen a way of writing about race and gender within Language poetry (in the tradition of Stein) in a manner that is simultaneously playful and serious.

Stein's emphasis on the artificiality of tropes of gendered and racialized laughter is ultimately what makes her an inspirational, if still problematic, precursor to Mullen, and what makes her texts generate rewritings. Mullen explains, "I share her love of puns, her interest in the stuff of life, and her synthesis of innovative poetics with cultural critique" (*Recyclopedia* x). The poems of *Trimnings* are, however, less cryptic than Stein's, which are notoriously difficult to connect to their named objects. Marjorie Perloff notes, "Mullen keeps her eye more firmly on the object than does Stein" (Perloff n/p). Without a title, that is to say, many of Stein's poems would not obviously be "about" that titular object; in contrast, while Mullen's

poems have no title, the “object” can be deciphered by reading the poem. In fact, the poems can be read as riddles that are enjoyable to solve. Consider, for example, the following poem:

Tender white kid, off-white tan. Snug black leather, second skin. Fits like a love, an utter other uttered. Bag of tricks, slight hand preserved, a dainty. A solid color covers while rubber is protection. Tight is tender, softness cured. Alive and warm, some animal hides. Ghosts wear fingers, delicate wrists. (5)

Without the title “gloves,” this poem nevertheless can be “solved” as being about gloves (although certainly not *only* about gloves). Almost every word can be read doubly; for example, “hides” can be read as a verb or a noun to different effect. Blackness and whiteness, the poem suggests, may fit like a “second skin,” “like a love,” and yet neither is simply “natural”; both involve taking on socially constructed identities that are made to feel like an extension of oneself. In “Optic White: Blackness and the Production of Whiteness,” Mullen reads the literature of “passing” as constructing black and white racial identities through figures that are white on the outside, black on the inside, or vice-versa. Wearing “white kid” is akin to being a “white kid,” and this inner/outer indeterminacy is summed up in the final poem of *Trimnings*:

Thinking thought to be a body wearing language as clothing or language a body of thought which is a soul or body the clothing of the soul, she is veiled in silence. A veiled, unavailable body makes an available space. (62)

It is unclear, here, which layer is the integument covering or revealing (or re-veiling) which layer. The repeated conjunction “or” creates a number of interpretive possibilities. Material all the way down, identity repeatedly covers and reveals itself with thought, language, and clothing. The “second skin,” to return to the glove poem, involves a “Bag of tricks,” a “slight hand” performing a sleight of hand, suggesting that the decision between outer and inner is a matter of appearance. Wherever they may lead, all of the resonances in this poem are anchored in the images of gloves it variously evokes. It is apparent here that one of the aspects of Stein’s poems that Mullen has left behind is, as she puts it, their “cryptic code,” abandoned in favor of being able to “recycle and reconfigure language to form a public sphere that includes mass media and political discourse as well as literature and folklore” (*Recyclopedi* x), and to create a code that can be cracked through shared immersion in these discourses (rather than through what some would call Stein’s intensely private set of references).

Writing in the tradition of Stein raises questions of genealogy. Who works in the tradition of a Modernist avant-garde poet, and in what way? And how will the work of an author with a doubly marked identity who does experimental writing be grouped? Critics including Marjorie Perloff, Elizabeth Frost, Amy Moorman Robbins, Ann Vickery and Allison Cummings address these questions. Robbins writes, “‘Aesthetic apartheid’ is the term used recently by Language poet Harryette Mullen to indicate the practice, common in literature studies and syllabi construction since the birth of African American modernism, of compartmentalizing literary works

on the basis of either formal innovation or racial / ethnic representation, but rarely both at once” (Robbins 351). Such classificatory practice, an unintended result of the “culture wars,” has led both to critique and to revisionist genealogies.

As Vickery discusses as well in *Leaving Lines of Gender*, this compartmentalization is further complicated by categories like “women’s writing”; Mullen’s lines of influence are complex, registering the pressures of intersections of race and gender on literary form and genre:

Mullen gained inspiration from white academic feminists but simultaneously discovered her own experiences as an African American marginal to their project. She found in Language writing a way in which to negotiate the complexity of subjectivity and identification, using its opacity and play to develop a “mongrelized” poetics that derails gender and racial lines. (Vickery 9)

Vickery, like Robbins and others, situates Mullen’s poetic project among the multiple pressures of exclusion and categorization that face a feminist, African American, formally innovative poet. Mullen herself examines the “complex interaction of conflicting affiliations” facing earlier poets she labels “Black Bohemian Feminists in the 1970s.” (“Expression” 205) Feminist writers who were part of the Black Arts movement, she argues, were pulled between conflicting loyalties. Mullen is interested in (and can undoubtedly relate to), “how difficult it was for black women writers of the 1970s to mesh conflicting roles as artists, comrades, lovers, and sisters of the men

and women with whom they struggled for liberation” (“Expression” 229). Opposing “aesthetic apartheid,” as Robbins explains, means insisting on the innovative nature of her (and other) poets’ work and working against writing practices that would allow readers and critics to continue to reduce any non-white, non-male poet’s work to “authentic voice” (Robbins 354). Mullen’s writing practice works against such classification:

Through highly experimental writing that invokes and pointedly problematizes African American identity, Mullen troubles this false division of African American and formally innovative poetics, and she works to both reconstruct and to challenge her audiences – African American and white – to read against the grain of received notions surrounding race and identity” (Robbins 355).

Mullen expresses that she feels pulled between several audiences, wanting to be accessible, though not in a conventional way, in order to reach as many audiences as possible. Both Robbins and Cummings discuss the reception of Mullen’s work by readers and critics, and the challenges of assembling a genealogy of African American or women’s avant-garde poetry: “For poets of color coming of age since the 1970s, these artistic imperatives – to write the revolution or to write the process of linguistic revolution – have often been felt as competing, contradictory demands” (Cummings 4). Cummings addresses the question of audience that arise as poets “tackle issues of public concern, such as poverty, violence, and discrimination” by

shifting “attention from the private subject – the self or I in poetry – to the black community” (Cummings 7). For Cummings, as for Robbins, Mullen’s writing practice makes a variety of demands on readers: “the range of her references requires individual erudition as well as a variety of cultural backgrounds to decipher” (Cummings 7). For example, in the following complete poem, multiple frames of reference might be useful in solving the riddle:

Akimbo bimbos, all a jangle. Tricked out trinkets, aloud galore. Gimcracks, a stack. Bang and whimper. Two to tangle. It’s a jungle. (41)

These interwoven terms related to jewelry might come from the idiom of any of a number of different people. “Gimcracks” come from a more antiquated vocabulary than “Tricked out,” for example, and sayings get mixed up; “Two to tangle” combines “two to tango” (again, an older expression) with a more modern expression for a fight (a “tangle”). “It’s a jungle” is a way of describing the city based on the metaphoric animalization of urban residents, while “Akimbo” and “Tricked out” mark a black register. Bringing all of these registers together gives the poem a feeling of being composed not by an individual but by communities made up of a jumble of identities.

While the range of references is one way Mullen creates and invokes an audience that bridges narrow identity categories, another way is by treating writing as the assembly of scraps, or “trimmings” to be patched together, as in a quilt, or remixed and sampled, as in hip-hop. The title *Trimmings* indicates a demystified

relationship to literary history and genealogy. Both meanings, that of feminine decoration and that of cast-off scraps (of fabric or meat), desublimates the artistic process. Decoration with ribbons has seldom been treated as high art; it is associated with feminine, or lesser, craft practices. Likewise, cooking with kitchen scraps is part of an everyday, household economy, far from an exalted art. Deborah Mix investigates the workings of domestic economy in *Trimmings*, and indeed the practice of clipping and re-using the materials of poetry is an instance of household economy.²⁵ To treat borrowings from and reworkings of Stein's oeuvre as akin to creating a scrapbook is to demystify the process. The poet works with the abjected scraps of artistic production, suggests that the work of the writer is more like recycling than it is a rarified art. All of these meanings point to a reading of the serial poem as a feminist intervention in discourses about art that abject or diminish any cultural production associated with the feminine. Indeed, Mullen has suggested that she was drawn to Stein's focus on marginal and minor feminine decoration for exactly such reasons. Laughter (at "off-color jokes, borrowed and blue" (32)) is key to this demystification, cutting through layers of overdetermined identity markers with startling clarity. The following poem, about a kind of "trimming," is a good example:

²⁵ The poetics of thread, lace, and scraps has been widely adopted in feminist poetry. For example, Susan Howe's *The Midnight* "quotes" photographs of scraps of lace as readings of women's history; Howe earlier explored a major influence in *My Emily Dickinson*. In another example, Anne Carson, in "Sumptuous Destitution" from *Men in the Off Hours*, intersperses the following lines with quotations from Emily Dickinson's letters: "Save what you can, Emily [. . .] Save every bit of thread. [. . .] One of them may be [. . .] the way out of here." (13)

Decorative scrap. A rib, on loan. Fine fabric, finished at edges. Fit for tying or trimming. Narrow band, satin, a velvet strip. A ribbon wound around her waist. A glancing bow. Red ribbon woven through her, blue-ribbon blonde. For valor, a shred of dignity. A dress torn to ribbons. (51).

Ribbon imagery weaves itself throughout this meditation on the requirements and dangers of gendered identity. Wearing a ribbon “for valor” refers not to women’s own valor but to the exclusively militarized valor of men (and the implicit shaming of non-military men as cowards). The saying, “something old and something new; something borrowed, something blue” resonates in sinister ways in this poem. “A rib, on loan” is something borrowed. Both a ribbon, and the marker of Eve’s debt to Adam, this identity marker is only on loan from an originator of identity. As well, “on loan” and the tearing and sewing together of fabric evoke the association of arts born of economizing such as quilt making with African-American culture. “A glancing bow” suggests both being seen, or “glanced” at, and being struck (a “glancing blow”). The decoration that ensures public visibility and social coherence also risks the opposite, “A dress torn to ribbons.” As well, the phrase “Fit for tying” can suggest that a ribbon is suitable for tying a bow, or that a person is “fit to be tied,” or angry and agitated. The word “wound” has a double meaning, innocuous or violent, as does the phrase “a shred of dignity.” These puns, and more, weave throughout this poem. Funny and sinister, they evoke the mixed emotion of “black laughter” by tying a violent image to a pretty one, and in the process tying the most intimate forms of self-fashioning to the history of women’s oppression. Ironically, I have taken a “patchwork” approach to

interpreting this collection, but there is something lost in reading it in pieces. As a whole, the collection works as a series of puzzles to work through, overwhelming the reader with the sheer volume of sumptuary terms as if piling on bolts, scraps, and ribbons of fabric. There is something delightful about this excess that counteracts the more troubling undertones of some of the pieces, resulting in the indeterminacy of the laughter the collection evokes as a whole.

II. *S*PeRM**K*T*: An Affective Rorschach Test

Refreshing spearmint gums up the words. Instant permkit combs through the wreckage. Bigger better spermkit grins down family of four. Scratch and sniff your lucky number. You may already be a wiener. (*S*PeRM**K*T* 94)

This funny (even silly) poem from the series *S*PeRM**K*T* suggests two possible (mis)readings of the Wheel-of-Fortune-esque challenge that presents the word “supermarket” with hidden letters. The words “spermkit” and “permkit” are placed among the merchandise of the supermarket in which all of these “food” poems are set. Resonances of the sexualized imagery through which commodities are made desirable and sold as solutions to abjection pervade this and the other poems of *S*PeRM**K*T*. The kind of laughter these poems might evoke is a function of the way each double meaning is interpreted. Or, perhaps, more accurately, laughter is a result of the very impossibility of that decision, spilling over in an excess that echoes language’s own excess of meaning, echoing in memory to become a second-order laughter at our impossible situation within a consumer society.

The compositional character of this collection is based upon the composition of the supermarket, which in Mullen's hands becomes a place where we can adopt absurdity as an outlook and laugh at our own appetites and behavior. The disposition of goods becomes a grammar, and *S*PeRM**K*T* Mullen undermines the emotional "truth" of advertising and consumer culture that sells gender and racial stereotypes along with merchandise. The following poem is a description of the functions of a supermarket (read, as well, "the market" in the "super-sized" sense):

Lines assemble gutter and margin. Outside and in, they straighten a place.
Organize a stand. Shelve space. Square footage. Align your list or listlessness.
Pushing oddly evening aisle catches the tale of an eye. Displays the cherished share. Individually wrapped singles, frozen divorced compartments, six-pack widows all express themselves while women wait in family ways, all bulging baskets, squirming young. More on line incites the eyes. Bold names label familiar type faces. Her hand scanning throwaway lines. (*S*PeRM**K*T* 65)

Each function of "the market" is opened here to a double meaning that lays bare the regulation of consumers that is taking place under the banner of free choice, or desire. In a self-reflexive line, this poem refers to the "throwaway lines" of a barcode that it both reproduces and criticizes. Our activity as "consumers" of the poem can be that of "scanning throwaway lines" or it can be recursive, returning to the lines in a double-take, seeing multiple meanings, in a more careful poetic scansion. The way that the "market" can "Align your list or listlessness" can be brought to the fore, made into a

conscious rather than semiconscious process. One might then “Organize a stand” in an altogether different sense than intended in the supermarket. References to textuality and print throughout this poem (“gutter and margin,” “type faces”) draw attention to the textual construction of the labels and ads in a supermarket and encourage a point of view in which the desire to buy is replaced by a desire to interpret and to find double meanings to replace the bossiness of the ads’ overt messages.

The gendered marketing of products comes to critical attention in these poems, with a kind of dark humor that might connect, say, “the spongy napkin made to blot blood” which “soaks up leaks that steaks splayed on trays are oozing” to a “picture of feminine hygiene” on another kind of packaging (*S*PeRM**K*T 71*). What Carol Adams calls the “sexual politics of meat” is here on prominent display. The marketing of cleaning products, likewise, makes use of and produces the gendered social uses to which they are often applied.²⁶ The following lines describe a woman’s experience with cleaning products, and it is not the satisfied perfection of commercials:

²⁶ Studies of the portrayal of women in advertising differ on the question of how much commercials reflect a social reality (that women do more housework) and how much they influence, create, or are oblivious to social reality. Either way, there is a persistent pattern in advertising: men bumble and spill things, while women clean. Jessamyn Neuhaus’ *Housework and Housewives in Modern American Advertising: Married to the Mop* traces a history of the gendering of cleaning advertisements that demonstrates the persistence and resilience of the problem.

In specks finds nothing amiss. Rubs a glove on lemony wood. But the gleam
of a sigh at spotless rinsed dish. Spots herself in its service, buffed and
rebuffed. Shines on the gloss of bird's eye drop leaf maple tabletop. Pledges a
new leaf shining her future polishing skills. The silver dropped at dinner
announces the arrival of a woman at a fork. She beams at a waxing moon.

*(S*PeRM**K*T 80)*

A moment of reflection in this poem begins with a literal reflection in the gleaming
clean dishes and tables a woman (maid?) should find satisfying, according to
marketing. The “gleam of a sigh” indicates a shift in perspective in which a woman
suddenly sees “herself in its service,” that is, in the service of cleanliness and cleaning
products, rather than being their master (also, an accessory to a table service). It is
unclear whether she is “at a fork” in the road, ready to pledge a “new leaf” by taking
control of her life, or whether these promises of renewal come from the very language
of advertising itself, selling Pledge in place of meaningful change. In addition to the
gendering of these products, the racial iconography becomes apparent: “Ivory says
pure nuff and snowflakes be white enough to do the dirty work. Step and fetch
laundry tumbles out shuffling into sorted colored stacks” *(S*PeRM**K*T 85)*. Racial
stereotypes based on dialect and even a suggestion of segregation are built into the
iconography of laundry soap, reflecting that the marketing assumes (correctly?) that
most laundry will be done by women or domestic servants. Segregation, likewise, is
built into the very iconography of white (coded as pure and clean) separated from
“colored stacks” on laundry day. In exactly this way, the supermarket is organized to

class and to sort, and Mullen's intervention is to trace a transversal path through its classificatory system. There is no neutral position within this *S*PeRM**K*T*, and all you can really do is laugh along with the knowing and wry humor of these poems.

III. *Muse & Drudge*: Splitting with Laughter

chained thus together

voice held me hostage

divided our separate ways

with a knife against my throat (*Muse & Drudge* 111)

Muse & Drudge, even more than Mullen's other works, makes clear that laughter has a kind of doubleness that splits the subject in two. The lyric poet becomes both singer and sung, a "two-headed dreamer / of second-sighted vision" (*Muse & Drudge* 174). Mullen explains of the serial poem's composition, "When I wrote *Muse & Drudge*, I imagined a chorus of women singing verses that are sad and hilarious at the same time. Among the voices are Sappho, the lyric poet, and Sapphire, an iconic black woman who refuses to be silenced" (*Recyclopedia* xi), brought together in a split genealogy that links the poet to two traditions. The double-edged sword of her punning wordplay has an effect some have connected to double

consciousness,²⁷ allowing a voice, a laugh, to be “sad and hilarious at the same time.” Parvulescu traces the doubleness of African American laughter to the “laughing barrel joke”²⁸ (also discussed by Dance), which she retells thus:

There is a small Southern town in which Negro freedom is so restricted that Negroes are not allowed to laugh in public. Because, however, they do not seem to be able to control themselves like rational beings, the town provides them with huge whitewashed barrels labeled FOR COLORED into which any Negro who feels like laughing should place his head. (Parvulescu 73)

The joke then turns into a circular one, so to speak, in which the absurdity of the laughing barrel causes more laughter in the original laughers and in the passers-by, making it impossible to determine who is laughing at whom, and even the origins of the laughter. Like Diogenes’ “tub” that he rolls around Athens to poke fun at the seriousness of citizens’ self-regard, this laughing barrel encourages levity in the passers-by. The indeterminacy of laughter’s source and intent, in this racially constructed context, means that the laugher “has acquired ‘by habit’ the power of rapid ‘self-division’ necessary to laugh at oneself. That power is called double consciousness. One indeed laughs until one ‘splits’” (Parvulescu 76). Mullen’s imagined “chorus,” while recalling a classical tradition connected to Sappho’s role as

²⁷ Double consciousness is the term coined by W.E.B. Du Bois to describe the psychological effect of having both an African descent and a European education and upbringing; it has been applied since to other forms of divided identity.

²⁸ The laughing barrel is an image from African American folklore that takes the subversive possibilities of laughter seriously; often either located on a plantation or in a segregated town, the laughing barrel was a failed attempt to segregate laughter.

lyric poet, also recalls the tradition of the “laughing barrel joke”; the laughing barrel becomes more like an amplifier than a muffler for “Sapphire, an iconic black woman who refuses to be silenced” (*Recyclopedia* xi).

In her article on the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, Mullen explains some of the reasons for double consciousness in African American poetry, which is often split between dialect and polished standard English, because of the dual pressures on poets to be authentic and yet accomplished. As a critic, Mullen values the multiple voices that poetic double consciousness affords. However, Mullen’s poetry itself challenges W.E.B. DuBois’ concept of double consciousness, because it highlights the semiotic dimension of language rather than the psychological. She gives us doubleness that is not related to consciousness, but more like point and counterpoint. Song and counter-song, music and voice, her work is lyrical without a lyric subject. Unlike double consciousness, “Mullen’s treatment of doubleness as constitutive instead of symptomatic acknowledges the claims to subjectivity that are at stake in these identity-based fractures. Moreover, constitutive doubleness provides a model for imagining a social climate of both/and-ness in which all difference can flourish” (Huehls 20). *Muse & Drudge* requires “simultaneous or doubled readings” (Huehls 21) rather than a choice between readings. Her puns ask us “to keep at least two meanings in mind simultaneously” (Huehls 22). The poem includes “topical references to subculture and mass culture, its shredded, embedded, and buried allusions, its drift between meaning and sound, as well as its abrupt shifts in tone or emotional affect” (qtd. Perloff n/p). Like her other work,

Muse & Drudge continues Mullen's work with experimental, destabilized language while also exploring in depth the inherent instability of identity. Mullen accomplishes this through her radical juxtapositions of culturally distinct African American female subjectivities, figured through altogether new linguistic and stylistic arrangements. She conspicuously avoids any return to notions of an authentic black vernacular, relying instead on what she calls a 'mongrel' and multi-voiced' language to comment on the indelibly hybrid nature of identity formations and on the uses of such identities in speaking for tradition and community. (Robbins 355)

Cummings, too, calls the serial poem "a polyglot mix of black, regional, and commercial American expressions, urban slang, Spanish phrases, proverb, and high diction. Mullen calls the poem 'quatrains of blues songs and jumprope rhymes, composed of recycled representations of black women'" (Cummings 24). Because of this polyglot poetics, she argues that "Mullen is particularly suited to speak to varied audiences, given her life in transit between different communities" (Cummings 26). Taught in the university classroom, her poetry requires audience participation to contribute knowledge of localized dialect. Such acts of interpretation involve active participation, and it is always an option, the poem cautions, to "pretend you don't understand," that you "can't read my crooked hand / decode these cryptic notes" (*Muse & Drudge* 167). The lack of a clear speaking subject might be experienced as the source of confusion and misunderstanding, "missing referents murking it up / with clear actors lacking" (*Muse & Drudge* 110).

The possibilities of interpretation, though, are as large and various as the audience: “you could look me up / in your voluminous recyclopedias” (*Muse & Drudge* 166). This is a rather hopeful notion of collective literacy. Group literacy, for example, might help in reading the following poem:

pot said kettle’s mama

must’ve burnt them turnip greens

kettle deadpanned not missing a beat

least mine ain’t no skillet blonde (*Muse & Drudge* 105)

The “pot calling the kettle black” is combined here with a reference to an African folktale, and the kettle tells a joke in which the shallowness of the “skillet” is, for the deeper kettle, akin to the shallowness of a “bottle blonde”. These cultural references derive from a number of sources, and all have to come together to explain this poem’s joke. Another side of such word play can be seen in this poem:

slave-made artifact

your salt-glazed poetry

mammy manufacture

jig-rig nitty gritty (*Muse & Drudge* 163)

Salt-glazed pottery, a handcrafted item of aspirational consumption, can be “misheard” in the phrase “salt-glazed poetry,” which associates a calculated

preciousness with the craft of poetry. The invisible labor of the “drudge” (as opposed to the muse) is seen here in the label “mammy manufacture,” the “d” dropped from “manufactured” by dialect. The poem made by the invisible labor of the drudge is a “slave-made artifact”; perhaps the muse is no less a slave to its creation. Huehls writes of such resonances in Mullen’s poetry,

Just as words haunt each other in Mullen’s puns, slavery echoingly haunts the memory of contemporary black culture like a restlessly present absence. To make slavery’s violence subsumable by and equivalent to the slave’s body, the slave traders and owners needed to suppress a counterexcess, the surplus, living humanity of the body. (Huehls 30).

This excess is the laugh.

The following poem anticipates Mullen’s move toward the babble, or the semiotic element of language that will feature in several prominent poems of *Sleeping With the Dictionary*:

mutter patter simper blubber

murmur prattle smatter blather

mumble chatter whisper bubble

mumbo-jumbo palaver gibber blunder (*Muse & Drudge* 155)

In *Sleeping With the Dictionary*, such lists will be blown up into entire poems and become a poetic method, amplifying not only the sounds but the voice, even the laughter, of the dictionary, and of language itself. This babble evokes the element of language that Kristeva calls the semiotic; Kristeva connects the chora both to a pre-linguistic state and to “the laughter of the mother” (Parvulescu 15). We access chora through laughter: “Our bursts of laughter are a memorial to the chora. The mother in us laughs again” (Parvulescu 15).

Despite its connection to textual indeterminacy, laughter evokes sound. It is sound yet not quite voice, emphatic yet affectively ambiguous; its meaning and its objects remain volatile. Much has been written on Mullen’s (along with other Language poets’) dismantling of the lyric “I” along with the “voice.” Mullen’s opposition to authentic gendered and racialized “voice” is accomplished through a disruption of aesthetic judgment. What is “voice” in written language, after all, but an after-effect of an aesthetic judgment about authenticity of origin made by the reader? Mullen complicates such decisions, disrupting easy attributions of singular “voice” in any of her poems and thus throwing into question the existence of “voice” in any written work, along with the motives that lead readers and critics to perform such readings. She muses,

What’s amazing about writing is its ability to travel beyond the range of a single voice. I’ve never been too concerned with cultivating a singular voice or style. What interests me right now is the possibility of pushing the

boundaries of identity to create a more inclusive, heterogenous, and interactive text. (Dargan interview 1016)

Along with voice, she resists singular identity: “Mullen uses puns to give substance to the indeterminacy of the diasporic political field and to offer a picture of black cultures that resists identity-based modes of representation” (Huehls 22-3). In her approach to voice, she does what Mae G. Henderson calls “speaking in tongues,” that is, speaking for and as a number of identity groups at once. Henderson writes, “What is at once characteristic and suggestive about black women’s writing is its interlocutory, or dialogic, character, reflecting not only a relationship with the ‘other(s),’ but an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of self that constitute the matrix of black female subjectivity” (Henderson n/p). Such a “heteroglossic” or “polyphonic” approach has implications for affect, and I want to explore what happens to affect and emotion when the lyric “I” no longer seems to be the singular “speaker” of a poem. Consider the following stanza in a poem about “the essence lady” who wears her “irregular uniform” of identity as uncomfortably as a “pinstripe kente”:

am I your type

that latest lurid blurb

was all she wrote

her highbrow pencil broke (133)

In this stanza, “I” appears as a question about both identity and text. Rather than a speaking subject, the “I” here is made up of language, of “type” and is nevertheless affectively charged, appearing within this anxious question of appeal and attachment (“am I your type”).²⁹ As I have established in my introduction, Rei Terada’s case for the non-coincidence of emotion with speaking subject (and indeed the possibility that emotion consists exactly in the difference between subject and subjectivity) means that an analysis of emotion/affect in this poetry will not involve establishing any kind of reified subject with intentionality and emotions. Emotion, in Terada’s terms, is evidence against the coherence of the subject, as it often breaks up any narrative connecting coherent subject to event to object, to action. Emotion also introduces the doubleness that in Mullen’s work, as I’ve discussed, describes a dividedness within that interferes with the illusion of the subject’s coherence. The subject in Mullen’s work is thrown into question by its doubling; both muse and drudge, “she just laughs” (“Muse & Drudge”131) at attempts to create singular identity.

IV. *Sleeping With the Dictionary*: Every Trick in the Book

Like the dictionary, or like sections of Roland Barthes’ *Pleasure of the Text* and *A Lover’s Discourse*, the poems of *Sleeping With the Dictionary* are arranged

²⁹ Robbins notes that Mullen thus departs from Language poetry: “In a twist on the Language movement’s overstated prohibition of markers of subjectivity, Mullen invokes a present-as-absence speaker to speak back to this primary tenet of Language writing while simultaneously registering a deep distrust of the dominant culture’s reception of the embodied African American female subject in particular.” (Robbins 355-6) Like the “I” in question in the line “am I your type,” the speaker is “present-as-absence” in the sense that it is not entirely absent but is thrown into question.

alphabetically. This arrangement signals at the outset that, in the tradition of Language poetry, language is in charge as an organizing principle; here Mullen's connection to Language poetry is clearest. As prominent Language poet Hejinian writes in admiration of words, "Even words in storage, in the dictionary, seem frenetic with activity, as each individual entry attracts to itself other words as definition, example, and amplification" (Hejinian 51). Language poets love the matter of language itself, and work with it as medium, subject, and object of thought: "Language itself is never in a state of rest. Its syntax can be as complex as thought. And the experience of using it, which includes the experience of understanding it, either as speech or as writing, is inevitably active – both intellectually and emotionally" (Hejinian 50). And yet, the love of language in *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, as Mullen points out, is inspired not only by Language poetry, but also by African American traditions of word play, along with many other sources. Mullen's exuberant list of sources and techniques includes the following:

My poems often recycle familiar and humble materials, in search of the poetry found in everyday language: puns, double entendres, taboo words, Freudian slips, jokes, riddles, proverbs, folk poetry, found poetry, idiomatic expressions, slang and jargon, coinages, neologisms, nonce words, portmanteaus, pidgins and creoles, nicknames, diminutives, baby talk, tongue twisters, children's rhyming games, imitative and onomatopoeic formations, syntactical and grammatical peculiarities, true and false etymologies, clichés, jingles, and slogans" ("Imagining" 202).

The inclusivity of this list, its embrace of multiple sources and registers, might be tied to an African American tradition, described by Dance in the following equally exuberant list:

The literature, popular culture, and folklore of African American women reflect their love of musical, rhythmical language; their tremendous range of tonal inflections; their delight in rhyme, colorful metaphor, and simile, and pure sound; and their affinity for verbal play and name-calling. You will also observe that when African American women are joking around, they often slip into an idiom that is uniquely black, one that includes a propensity for double negatives, double comparisons, verbal nouns, and repetitions. In addition, our vocabulary is made interesting by black slang expressions, jive talk, stock phrases, and a few obscenities, as well as frequent biblical allusions and quotations. (Dance xxxiii)

However, it would be a mistake to attribute Mullen's love of word play to a singular tradition; in her critical writing, Mullen has connected a love of double meanings and the sounds of language to the mixing of cultures and languages in the lives of many North Americans and in the work of bilingual authors. Mullen writes, "From this ideologically contested space of linguistic difference, error, mutual incomprehension and antagonism, these bilingual authors have the potential to construct what might be regarded as a third language" ("Silence" 5). The "third language" she identifies "frequently incorporates what, in standard dictionaries of English and Spanish, would

be labeled as slang, argot, colloquialism, or nonstandard usage; or what is often excluded from dictionaries because it is generally excluded from written, as opposed to spoken, discourses” (“Silence” 5). Influenced by Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic element of language, Mullen notes that “such elements include nicknames, diminutives relegated to ‘baby talk,’ the speech of children, and other intimate or familiar speech, nonstandard codes of subordinated minority cultures, folk references, obscenities, curses, as well as onomatopoeia, such as ‘!zaz!’ and ‘rrr, rrr, rrr” (“Silence” 5-6). These semiotic elements have “emotional resonances and intimacies” (“Silence” 7) that are important to the effect of the text.³⁰

To address the reasons the dictionary takes the lead in providing materials for the poems, Mullen insists that this happens in a dreamlike process, truly through the “sleep” of the dictionary:

I am curious about the “unconscious” of language, suggested by the various indirections of metaphor, metonymy, euphemism, periphrasis, and taboo word deformation. I am equally interested in the materiality of language itself, the physical presence of words and letters on the page, so I am fond of word games, such as acrostics, anagrams, paragrams, lipograms, univocalics,

³⁰ In this study of Sanda Cisneros’ work, Mullen argues that “Cisneros’s use of irony, humor, inversion, parody, deliberate transgression and strategic revision of cultural scripts, problematizes ethnic authenticity” (“Silence” 15), further complicated by challenges to gender codes. Mullen’s reading, here, of Cisneros’ eclectic “third language” might be applied to her own work, keeping in mind the theoretical implications of the mixed registers and affects and their dismantling of stable “cultural scripts” including those of identity.

tautograms, charades, homophones, spoonerisms, and palindromes that draw attention to the manipulable properties of letters and words. I like the possibility of scrambled words and syntax, of secret or alternative meanings, of words hidden within other words, as in equivoque, cryptograms, and cryptomorphic riddles. Solving such word puzzles models the activity of different readers decoding and comprehending alternative messages from the same text. (“Imagining” 203)

Another expression of this approach to language as generator of unconscious meanings in *Sleeping with the Dictionary* is to be found in the collection’s titular poem, which calls the dictionary “my silver-tongued companion, whose lips are ready to read my shining gloss” (67); the dictionary is a “dense lexicon of lucid hallucinations” (67) that provides the “hypnagogic trance of language” (67), allowing new “possibilities” to emerge.

The poem “Why You and I” refers to the fact that the letters Y, U, and I have been left out of the alphabetical list of poem titles.³¹ Like an Oulipo experiment, the loss of these letters has consequences, clearly, for the possible meanings of the text.³² However, unlike much of Oulipo, this loss is strongly inflected as a message about social injustice very much set in our own time and place. The poem begins: ‘Who

³¹ Johanna Drucker explores the elements of letters and typography as the material conditions of poetry in *Figuring the Word: Essays on Books, Writing, and Visual Poetics*.

³² Oulipo (short for *ouvroir de littérature potentielle*) is a literary movement begun in the 1960s in which new works are generated through the use of constrained writing techniques, often using rules of composition such as lipograms or palindromes.

knows why you and I fell off the roster? Who can figure out why you and I never passed muster on our way out yonder?" (78). This poignant question about being left out demonstrates the power of language to shape inclusion or exclusion. Omissions, however, do not always mean forgetting. In the poem "Elliptical" we are uncomfortably asked to fill in the blanks: "They just can't seem to . . . They should try harder to . . . They ought to be more . . . We all wish they weren't so . . . They never . . . They always . . ." (23). Finishing the sentences, or for that matter identifying the pronouns' references, the poem implies, is an integral part of forming stereotypes, and it happens on the level of the pronoun and sentence structure. Like Stein's famous declaration, "I am a grammarian," Mullen here demonstrates the power of sentence structure to shape our understandings of the world and of others.

The poem "jinglejangle" truly allows the dictionary's alphabetical arrangement to order its lines; it begins "ab flab abracadabra Achy Breaky Action Jackson airy-fairy airfare / Asian contagion analysis paralysis Anna banana ants in your pants" and then continues through the alphabet in a similar manner. This list of terms made of rhyming pairs of words draws on many references from popular culture, some offensive, some silly, some enjoyable or aesthetically distasteful, depending on the audience. This poem's tendency toward the semiotic element of language is further emphasized in the poem "Blah-Blah," the "h" line of which includes some sounds of laughter: "Haha, harhar, hear hear, heehee, hey hey, hip-hip, hoho, Hsing-Hsing, hubba-bubba, humhum" (12). The laughter here is generated by the incongruous and silly terms themselves, and their alphabetical arrangement

interferes with any illusion that humor must originate from within a comic speaking subject. These words, their sounds and their referents arranged according to the arbitrary ordering of the alphabet, produce their own comedy despite the absence of a comedian. Donna Haraway argues that humor can derive from “the world’s independent sense of humor,” showing us “the world as witty agent,” (Haraway 593) and such wit is on display in these lists of words, sounds and things.

In embracing this notion of language as material with an independent sense of humor, I differ from readings that favorably oppose embodiment to Language poetry. The material aspect of language is not a guarantor of authenticity of origin; nor is sound the same as a voice originating from a body. Jessica Luck argues that “Mullen’s insistence on the fully embodied nature of poetic creation offers a helpful complication of current theories of Language-oriented poetics built on a poststructuralist foundation” (Luck 360). I don’t think, though, that poststructuralist theory precludes materiality, or that Mullen insists on a “fully embodied” model of either composition or subjectivity; this view misses the key aspect of Mullen’s Language poetry, that it calls attention to the semiotic. Luck advances a theory of embodied emergence in poetry; she cites Riley on viewing the writer as more of an editor than originator; “the poetic interpreter of the inner voice is possessed not only by its semiotic signs but also by its sonority” (Luck 362). But perhaps the interpreter is not the singular poet, but the multiple and varied readers, including but not limited to the author. The semiotic element, in other words, does not only possess the “creative” poet in the process of composition but pervades the work on the level of

language. Luck's focus on "the act of poetic creation" (366) leads her to the conclusion that "The poet's role of 'dickering' with the dictionary implies a kind of give and take, a combination of mastery and being mastered by the linguistic corpus of her companion. Yet this bargaining is also a transaction of and within the flesh" (Luck 376). Such a focus on authorial agency and attempted mastery misses the key point that poet, reader, and poem are all *effects* of the text, all part of the web of textuality. Both materiality and affect, rather, are integral parts of the unfolding of a text. Indeed, in quoting Mullen's interviews on the topic of her own work, I have cited another text, rather than appealing to a fount of embodied authorial authenticity; bringing one text into juxtaposition with another text alters each text, hopefully in a productive way that can bring new aspects of each to light.

Huehls has an approach that I think helps better explain the independent agency of language that is on prominent display in Mullen's poetry. Huehls likens the constraints and determinations of language to those of culture, and the paradoxical multiplying power of wordplay to a similar phenomenon that can happen within social constraints. Mullen's puns "provide an epistemological model for identifying a nonequivalent surplus in all acts of exchange – a surplus that suggests that a given word, object, or body always exceeds itself" (Huehls 30); he adds,

Instead of dwelling too heavily on either term of an oppositional relation, the pun performs relationality itself, finding potential in the ostensibly empty space between the terms. The pun has the capacity to signify with

simultaneity, to resist essentialized readings, to reveal suppressed facets of signification, and to demonstrate how an apparently dominant term is always inextricably bound to that which it dominates. (Huehls 45)

Locating indeterminacy in language, bodies, and things, this theory of signification treats the pun as the prime example of the power of language's self-difference. The pun (often seen as a laughable, trivial comic device) is at the root of language's power to overturn the "dominant" terms in language.³³ The following poem, "Natural Anguish" makes use of puns and locates affect firmly in the realm of language, allowing double meanings to take on the charge of the poem's mixed affects:

Every anguish is arbitrary but no one is neuter. Bulldozer can knock down dikes. Why a ragged bull don't demolish the big house? The fired cook was deranged. On the way back when I saw red I thought ouch. Soon when I think colored someone bleeds. The agency tapping my telephone heard my pen drop. Now I'm walking out of pink ink. We give microphones to the voiceless to amplify their silence. The complete musician could play any portion of the legacy of the instrument. My ebony's under the ocean. Please bring back my bone (sic) to me. Once was illegal for we to testify. Now all us do is testify. We's all prisoners of our own natural anguish. It's the rickety rickshaw that will drive us to the brink. (52)

³³ In Freud's theory of puns in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* is that they cause a "short-circuit" when they bring together two ideas within the same word, and that this overturns conventional propriety, creating a pleasurable outlet or release through laughter.

This complex poem interweaves dialect and song with references to slavery, to the theory of the subaltern, and to a number of other texts that locate affect in language. The first sentence of this prose poem echoes Dionne Brand's "No Language is Neutral," while the off-rhyme of "language" with "anguish," recalls lines from Philip: "language / l/anguish / a foreign anguish" (Philip 58). Another Language poet, DuPlessis, also makes this connection in her work, which uses alphabetical ordering to similar effect. Anguish rhyming with language makes clear that language use is a double-edged sword. Such mutation of language is happening everywhere in this poem, and the power of language to shape reality, and to produce real pain, is apparent in the observation, "when I think colored someone bleeds." "Color" and "red" are spliced in the word "colored," a painful word that here has the power to cause "someone" to bleed. The song, "My Bonnie lies over the ocean" is morphed into a reference to the violence of slavery: "My ebony's under the ocean." While giving "microphones to the voiceless to amplify their speech" is a matter of the subaltern not being able to speak (and this is also the subject of the book's opening poem, "All She Wrote"), language is a mixed blessing, as no one has sovereignty over its use. The irony that "Once was illegal for we to testify. Now all us do is testify" is the irony of being forced into certain "authentic" modes of expression that are constraining, and not necessarily better than silence. "We's all prisoners" of the requirement for authenticity of expression, of the requirement to speak the "natural

anguish” that appears to come from within, but that is spoken through us by language, as Riley theorizes in *Impersonal Passion*.³⁴

The way out of this “prison” of singular, authentic meaning, as my chapter has argued, is through laughter. Its indeterminacy of affect, its ability, in other words, to mix pain with pleasure, irreverence with witness, and joy with sorrow, is both a source of resistance and a source of generative power. For these reasons, it seems to me, Mullen embraces humor, puns, and other forms of linguistic excess that have the power to evoke laughter.

I turn next to the work of Leslie Scalapino, another Language poet with a very different approach to language and to affect. As Ann Vickery argues in *Leaving Lines of Gender: A Feminist Genealogy of Language Writing*, even as seemingly specialized a category as “feminist Language writers” contains a wide range of poetic styles and concerns. Compared to Mullen’s concise, witty, and aphoristic style, Scalapino’s work seems sprawling, durational, and relatively difficult. While the two poets share a level of indeterminacy, Scalapino’s indeterminacy is due less to clear double meanings, and more to a vagueness of syntax that interferes with the production of unitary meaning to begin with. Affect, thus, has a very different connection to language in her work, and the next chapter investigates this relation.

³⁴ Riley’s linguistic theory of affect explores how the very core of the affective subject is made up of language (through internal dialogue as well as speech) a fact that can prove alienating but that charges language with affective connections.

Chapter Three:

Language and Affect in the Poetry of Leslie Scalapino

In my previous chapter I explored the powerful and unsettling role affect – in the form of laughter – plays in Mullen’s poetry; in this chapter I read a broad selection of Leslie Scalapino’s work (written from the 1980s to late 2000s), finding other unsettling affects, such as grief and pain, to be central to her disjunctive approach to poetics. In the halting, hesitating and careful articulation of thought, language, and description in her work, affects proliferate. As does Mullen, Scalapino models an affective relationship to language, and while she shares a feminist orientation to experimental writing, Scalapino explores the ways affect unsettles normative constructions of gender and species. Affect is important enough to her poetics that, in an exchange of letters with her friend, collaborator, and fellow feminist Language poet Hejinian, Scalapino debated the question of how much anger, pleasure, and pain should inform their writing as they were collaborating on a project. While one of Hejinian’s touchstones in the debate was her reading of Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain*, Scalapino’s real-life experience of excruciating chronic back pain provided her context.³⁵ The debate ultimately led to the agreement that, as Hejinian

³⁵ In this chapter I will be drawing upon the correspondence between Hejinian and Leslie Scalapino housed in Scalapino’s archive at the University of California, San Diego. These two major Language poets had a long-standing friendship and working relationship and their letters provide a record of debates about many major issues

put it, “I too see (physiological/psychic) pleasure and (physiological/psychic) pain as inseparable.” (MS 668.19.3) Perhaps, Scalapino suggests, though writing cannot provide direct access to the feelings of another, affects can still be present in language, in indeterminate and layered forms; pleasure and pain are inseparable and likewise one can be “Sad. Happy. At once.” (MS 668.19.5)

I want first to consider how Scalapino fits into the school of writing I here call feminist Language poetry. Conflicting motives abound in as self-conscious and self-historicizing a group of writers as the San Francisco Bay area Language poets (working roughly from the 1970s to the present), but feminism is a major orientation for a subset of this group. As Megan Simpson explains, despite what Elizabeth Frost calls the lack of a “clear political content, a strong personal voice, or a stance of witness” (qtd. Simpson 132), “Nonetheless, Scalapino’s poetics of perception demonstrates a political viability that is inherently feminist” (132) in that “the personal and the political are inexorably intertwined as the very fabric of perceived reality in her poems” (133). Scalapino is often called a feminist Language poet, and has defined her own work in this way at times with various caveats, as this is far from an uncontested grouping.³⁶ In “disbelief,” an article that recounts her connections to

facing them as women and poets inside (Hejinian) and outside (Scalapino) the academy.

³⁶ Given the problems of including Scalapino (and other feminists) exclusively in the Language school, some other options have been explored in studies and anthologies. Elizabeth Frost, in *The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry*, delineates a tradition of she traces to Modernist avant-garde writer Gertrude Stein. The label has the advantage of making literary-historical connections that are often absent from Language poets’ self-characterization. Frost describes the logic of an alternative

Bay Area Language poetry, she writes of the poetic school, “The early and mid ‘80s was the height of San Francisco Language writing as a communal movement when the idea was articulated of a ‘collective’ syntax eschewing the identity of the individual writer” (“disbelief” n/p).³⁷ As with other Language poetry, Scalapino’s work is written in a mostly non-lyric mode,³⁸ often lacking a lyric “I” and mixing disparate discourses so as to confuse any attribution of origin in a reified “individual.” Such poetics have been both practiced and expounded by a set group of practitioners including Barrett Watten, Ron Silliman, and Hejinian, among others. Scalapino argues that her work in this period is “in dialogue with – as if the other side of the coin of – purposes of a ‘collective’ syntax” (“disbelief”). The “other side of the coin” of a collective is not a reified individual, as one might assume, but an interrogation of the grounds for believing that one can be an autonomous individual author in the first

historiography: “I enter the theoretical dialogue concerning avant-gardism for two reasons: first, to reveal the tensions that arise among women poets who seek to articulate a radical feminist vision in a context or rhetoric established by existing avant-garde groups; and second, to reveal the resulting search for a feminist avant-garde lineage that might establish an alternative history for their poetics” (Frost xiv). Putting the work of these feminist poets in such a lineage has the advantage of looking beyond their exact contemporaries and considering literary-historical precedent in investigating gender through linguistic experiment. Such links to literary history are also explored at length in the online journal *How2*.

³⁷ Another way to place Scalapino’s work is with other “linguistically innovative poetry by women,” the term Maggie O’Sullivan uses in her study. This term has less historical resonance than Frost’s, which, however, may be appropriate, considering the anti-patriarchal (and thus anti-patrilineal?) politics of many of these poets. It’s hard to imagine poets less likely to consider themselves (or to fit) within a patrilineal or even matrilineal model of literary influence, antagonistic or otherwise. Perhaps linguistic innovation (in the interest of finding better ways of inhabiting language) doesn’t really fit in a lineage, but is best thought of as a break altogether from models of literary influence rather than from particular literary traditions.

³⁸ There are some exceptions to this tendency, including parts of *Considering How Exaggerated Music Is*, for example.

place, able to choose whether or not to join a collective such as Language poetry, as if language itself (and one's social being) were not always already collective. Language, she notes, is "*interior and entirely from the outside at once*" (*Public World* 27; emphasis in original).

Hejinian describes the Language school in the following socio-historical terms: "The coming together of the poets who are now associated with the Language school in the Bay Area began more or less coincidentally in the early 1970s, but all of us had been involved in some degree of political activism during the Vietnam War, and we came to poetry with political, or social, goals in mind" (*Language of Inquiry* 171-2). In addition to having some shared political goals for their work, Language poets, according to Hejinian, share an awareness of, and interest in, French poststructuralism (as another Left intellectualism) and its insights into the fact that "Anything made of words – including a literary work – is socially constructed and socially constructing" (*Language of Inquiry* 170). A rigorous commitment to this principle allows the poets to engage in what would, in other contexts, appear to be formalism, with the radical political goal of crafting new understandings of social formations on the level of language. While they shared an opposition to war with many social activists of the time, for example, these poets believed that it was essential to reject the forms through which war's ideology was expressed in order to challenge its hegemony, rather than to oppose it through like terms, which would just create another "war" of words. Scalapino points out in an interview with Anne Brewster in the Journal *How2*, "We're always at war: the worlding of writing and

reading.” (n/p) Language poets, as Scalapino explains, opposed opposition to such a degree (including, for the feminist contingent, gender opposition), that they sought to create alternatives to it. In one such alternative, “Can’t is ‘Night’” takes a stance that utterly rejects participation in narratives that naturalize inequality, both inside and outside an account of the Gulf war, working to defamiliarize or “destroy that language” that gets called “‘our’ language” (*It’s go* 212), even as it justifies and explains casualties of a war without popular support.

This school of poetry has recently produced a “collective autobiography” in which Hejinian participated, called *The Grand Piano*, a ten-part series that challenges the notion of the author as individual (although the series does not do away with it altogether; authors are identified throughout *The Grand Piano* with initials). Such a project indicates the degree to which these poets want to contest the model of writer as isolated individual and concentrate instead on how subjectivity is constructed in language, using a shared set of codes. Scalapino, however, did not participate in the “collective autobiography,” and her absence from the project, whether or not it was deliberate, highlights some of the very real differences she had with the group. She strongly objects to the prescriptiveness, for example, that led Ron Silliman or Bob Perelman to urge poets to write in what she calls a particular kind of “uniform syntax (dictated by men).” (*Public World* 25)³⁹

³⁹ Ann Vickery documents numerous exclusions such as the ones recalled by Scalapino here in *Leaving Lines of Gender: A Feminist Genealogy of Language Writing*; this volume makes the case for a separate grouping for the feminist

Rejecting the implicit definitions of “community” underlying other Language poets’ notions of collective writing, Scalapino insists, “Activity is the only community. The conservative gesture, always a constant (any ordering, institutional and societal) is to view both activity and time per se as a condition of tradition. As such, both time and activity are a ‘lost mass’ at any time” (*Impermanence* 3). This radical position resists any reification of tradition through narrative. Just because things have been done in one way traditionally, in other words, does not mean that they need to continue in a smooth narrative of development. Instead of forming obvious historical narratives, events are discrete and have no one determinate relation to one another: “There’s no relation between events and events. Any. They are separate” (*Impermanence* 16). Lacking a natural ordering, events get linked in ideological ways. As a feminist, Scalapino wants to contest any notion that social hierarchy at the expense of women (among the many hierarchies she rejects) is “natural” and to rescue experience from the clutches of tradition: “There is no cause or effect [. . .] So occurrence is not hierarchically ordered” (*Impermanence* 23). This

Language poets. Feminist Language poets include: Joan Retallack, Susan Howe, Lyn Hejinian, Rae Armantrout, Carla Harryman, Fanny Howe, Tina Darragh, Hannah Weiner, Bernadette Mayer, and Leslie Scalapino, among others. Vickery argues that these poets face a double exclusion. Vickery notes that these poets tend to get excluded from “women’s poetry” anthologies for being too experimental and at the same time from studies or anthologies that want to cast Language poetry as having a very specific poetics and political bent. Ron Silliman, in particular, has been criticized for his choices in *In the American Tree* (1986), which seemed to overlook work by women Language poets that didn’t follow the political and poetic programs of male Language writers. Scalapino is treated as suspect for seeming too “lyrical” or “subjective” for the school of poetry.

new way of modeling events in writing works as an analogy for rearranging the social order. She writes of one of her own works,

hmmmm is a feminist work, by not proceeding as doctrine – it does not accept social custom. Doctrine would integrate social description as acceptable, rationalized exchange (even integrating articulating sexism into acceptable “dialogue” about sexism). I wanted experience as “reading” that is “outside.”
(*R-hu* 83)

For Scalapino, the rejection of social custom produces a radical insistence on the constant and ongoing present, a difficult thing to convey in writing. Her poems tend to describe events in a way that interrupts narration and thus dislodges events from commonsense notions of cause and effect, always insisting on their relay through language and memory. For example, in the long poem *It's go in quiet illumined grass land*, the words, “outside rose” are repeated many times, interspersed within a fragmented narrative (as if clipped from a newspaper and further clipped into pieces) of a homeless woman’s murder. As the words “outside rose” are repeated, “outside” flickers between noun and adjective, just as “rose” flickers between noun and verb, an indeterminacy positioned in pointed contrast to normative operations of narrative as information. To refuse to re-narrativize the event of the murder in the typical form is to refuse to explain or to explain away an unacceptable event that the poem, instead, dwells upon in a more disjunctive fashion. Megan Simpson writes, “Scalapino acknowledges that her intentions in rejecting these representational values are

feminist” and constitute a refusal to treat “inequality and suffering as someone else’s problems, or as the fault of victims” (Simpson 133). In making the landscape come to the surface, confusing figure with ground, Scalapino’s intervention in the story of the murder of a homeless woman is to undermine the operations of statistics and expectations through which lives are countable and some lives count more than others. Moreover, the landscape of the poem is lyrical, hushed, beautiful; it is closer to the Arcadian setting of a lyric poem than to the flattened landscape (the “where”) of news reporting.

As I have noted, Scalapino is often included in the Language school of poetry, as an experimental late-20th/ early 21st century Bay Area writer who is explicitly concerned with the workings of language. However, she takes a different formal approach from other Language writers, focusing less on word play and double-entendres and more on the relation of language to experience and to affect. Her poems situate themselves in the web of language and perception that makes up experience, in a kind of ongoing, constantly unfolding present, describing a second-order consideration of events through language and memory. There are features of her work that fit the style and concerns of Language poetry: many of her lines are syntactically incomplete, using quite a few gerunds and/or progressive-tense verbs (indeterminately), giving a sense of being in the middle of experience, but also reflecting on it at a distance. What Scalapino calls “Syntactically Impermanence” is

an unsettled quality of her writing that undermines narrative tendencies.⁴⁰ However, her primary concern seems to be with affective experience, which involves but is not limited to the play of language; in this she stands in contrast to most accounts of the Language school. Because she does not feel that experience can be adequately explored through linear narrative, she orients the reader in an indeterminate and shifting relation to thought and action, memory and emotion.

Scalapino's work blurs the boundaries between poetry and theory, or even philosophy, and her works that are "about" her own or others' writing are difficult to distinguish from her poetic works.⁴¹ This blurring is deliberate; Scalapino argues that "Poetry in this time and nation is doing the work of philosophy – it is writing that is conjecture" (*Impermanence* 19). Her poems situate a shaky poetic subject in the middle of an experience/perception that she struggles to convey in language, in all of its temporal and interpersonal complexity. Simpson, in *Poetic Epistemologies*, writes, "Leslie Scalapino seeks to engage her reader in a lived exchange or confrontation with language. . . [She] has been preoccupied in her work with the problem of the relationship between perceiver and perceived, knower and known" (Simpson 124).

⁴⁰ The adverbial form, "Syntactically," indicates that a state of impermanence suffuses more than syntax, while here modeled in syntax. "Syntactical impermanence" would limit the implications of impermanence to syntax.

⁴¹ Her work has been described as philosophically-oriented. Megan Simpson's study demonstrates the degree to which philosophical questions guide the work of feminist Language poets, who investigate the implications of the gendering of language and philosophical traditions. This is perhaps the best way to account for Scalapino's poetic and political differences from her contemporaries. Scalapino is primarily engaging in a form of feminist philosophy, a project that involves an embodied and yet language-oriented investigation of her own place in the world, including her own orientation in space, time, and memory.

However, in line with Scalapino's political concerns, such a philosophical concern does not remain merely formal; embodied and questioning, Scalapino's fractured poetic subjects find themselves on unstable ground. Far from a "reification of self," as Watten has claimed, such an unsettling of self causes a "blurring of subject and object distinctions, even reversals of these positions" (Simpson 124-5). For example, in the poem "Seeing the Scenery," Scalapino writes, "I was a mountain in the same way / one has boulders or trees. How would this explain, I wondered, / whatever emotions such as affection, cruelty, or indifference I feel?" (*Considering* 16). While these lines may appear to be written in a lyric mode, the lyric "I" is questioning its own emotions, as though separated from them by the relay of memory and language. Further, she is describing herself as if she is a landscape. The blurring of the subject/object distinction, here, leads her to wonder how and where to locate emotion, a question raised in much of her work.

Despite its break from the kinds of conventional emotions that unfold as a familiar plot or a poetic epiphany unfolds, Scalapino's work takes affect seriously. In the following passage from her poetic and chronologically complex autobiography (*Autobiography and Zither*) she gives a layered account of emotion:

Emotion is one's being in any instant – it seems to be – it moves with force, then is outside – a state through which one has passed. A thought is a similar state, unknown to one, not more stable. Thus to be within (the act of) constructing doctrine (either emotionalism or rationalism) as one's basis is

delusory “authority” – just as being in the appearance of sequence of events, or one being in or reconstructing passionate emotion. (*Autobiography* 19)

A few things about this passage speak to Scalapino’s larger project and to some of the difficulties of interpreting her work. First, she argues that a “thought” is “not more stable” than emotion, and that both are “unknown” (not available to knowing, or to consciousness?) As experience, thought/emotion can be distinguished (but not finally separated) from the process of making sense of it in language. In order to stay true to what, at the time, is “one’s being in any instant,” it is necessary to distinguish between the feeling of being in a “state” and later deciding what that state was and what its causes and effects may be. Constructing a “doctrine” of “emotionalism or rationalism” is necessary in order to read or interpret one’s “state,” but it distorts the actual occurrence, which is an indeterminate complex of feelings and conscious and unconscious thoughts. Constructing thought or emotion in narrative (“sequence of events”) falsely links it to a single determinate sequence of cause and effect, whereas causality is actually multiple and indeterminate. Temporality complicates this formulation, further, and while emotion “is one’s being in any instant,” this instant, as it is thought, is apprehended through the distinct instant of writing, as well as the instant of reading. And yet maybe it is never independent of writings and readings, ongoing elements of experience. Such temporal complexity is disorienting. Perhaps no writer takes more seriously or insists more rigorously on the constant present of writing/reading.

Another way to think about Scalapino's resistance to any doctrine that would delineate the boundaries of emotion versus reason is to consider that she is talking about affect, as opposed to emotion. As I've established, contemporary theories of affect have often found it useful to distinguish between emotion, which has a canon and a literary and philosophical history (Ngai) and affect, which, in comparison to emotion, is relatively inchoate. Ahmed can write a "cultural politics" of emotion, for instance, because it takes discursive form, has a history, and can be contested in the realm of the political. I may feel an affect, such as agitation, and may have at my disposal an emotion, such as anger, that can provide a discourse through which I can explain this feeling and seek redress. The fact that I explain my agitation in socially intelligible form (as emotion) means that I link it to a narrative and historical chain of cause and effect, but it brings along with it an ideology. What if instead of explaining the affect through the conventions of an emotion, we stay with the trouble? Affect, on its own terms, is difficult to account for. While emotion is discursive, affect dwells uncomfortably outside of established discourse, hovering at its boundaries and remaining dissonant with established terms of the social or the political, yet able to generate new forms that can enter into discourse and change it. In other words, I would suggest that it is productive sometimes to admit to not knowing the source of feelings, suspending cause and effect judgments long enough to rethink the social theory that has produced convenient explanations. I see this as the radical potential of affect in Scalapino's poetry. Scalapino takes care to distinguish between "emotion that's convention" (*It's go* 213) and the very real play of affect in the fractured

accounts of events as she presents them. Scalapino's poetry involves relatively unattached (though powerful) affect, as distinguished from emotion, which has conventions of representation. A reluctance to construct or inhabit identities or narratives, along with a related cautiousness about making truth-claims has been argued to result in a rejection of direct political (or ideological) speech in this work. Though it is of a different order, affect cannot avoid being read, to some degree, in contrast to a particular history and canon of emotion, nor can it avoid being placed in political context; therefore, experiments with language and affect have a political function as counterpoint. Reconfigurations of affect in Scalapino's work and that of other feminist Language poets disrupt dominant discourse, as has been argued of formal experimentation in general (Simpson, Hejinian, Vickery, Armantrout). The relative indeterminacy of affect in Scalapino's work indicates to me that as-yet-indistinct structures of feeling are emotions in the process of being articulated with new notions of cause and effect. In other words, affects are indeterminate and multiple simply because, in this work, relations are being taken apart and remade. Because of their temporal complexity, Scalapino's poems have layers of affect that cannot be easily identified and separated, but that work in tandem, to unsettling effect, as if to recapture and hold on to a moment before a feeling gets defined and narrativized, even while engaging in those activities. She explains (of the collection of poetry that I will consider at length in this chapter) that,

Considering how exaggerated music is is a collection (1975-1982) of works that were very hard to write – because they were under heavy emotional

pressure, and were very understated as the means of withstanding that, and conveying it. Yet conveying the emotion is not what they were (are); it was as if a reed instrument blowing dual notes at once – in which if the instrument *is* emotion, one wonders (I was wondering) what emotion is itself.

(*Autobiography* 33-4)

The agrammatical nature of these sentences prevents the completion of a theory of emotion. The resistance to grammar is a resistance to finishing a thought, a thought that may in fact not be finished without doing damage to its speculative nature. There is no conclusion to the line of thought that begins by proposing an analogy to “a reed instrument blowing dual notes at once.” The sentence wanders away from the logic of grammar that would ask for a conclusion to a clause. Subordinate clauses pile up without a framework. According to the beginning of this line of thought, emotion is (perhaps) not the *content* or *referent* of language, but an *instrument* that sounds “dual notes at once”. And neither are these notes referential; instead they provide intonation and orientation. One kind of affect generated by these agrammatical lines is the discomfort at their incompleteness and the desire to complete thoughts grammatically. An “as if” calls for a comforting “it were.” The difficulty of reading such open-ended structure is the difficulty of interpretation itself. Intelligibility differs by degree with levels of grammaticality, and agrammatical writing simply highlights a disturbing indeterminacy that is always already present in language.

The following passage shows how Scalapino applies this emotional indeterminacy to an episode in her poetic and nonlinear *Autobiography*. Here, Scalapino considers a moment of layered and conflicting affect that takes place now in her memory: a girl had been hit by a train and killed, and Scalapino remembers being a girl traveling with her family in India seeing this scene:

The entire village of adults stood by the embankment all in a line shaking as bending appearing to be laughing because the gesture of laughing and weeping were the same. Later, knowing it was manner of “extreme” emotion of crying, I asked my father They were laughing? He said No, it appears to be the same but they were expressing grief. I took note interiorly later also that they were demonstrating strong emotion for a little girl. This indicated a difference between what people said occurs at all [in society] and what occurs in fact. (*Autobiography* 3).

This recollection (like the “reed instrument blowing dual notes” that is emotion) takes the form of a layering of two incommensurate emotions, a layering of multiple different experiences of affect in a single account. Emotions clear to others were opaque to the narrator, a confusion she maintains in her layered recounting. Laughing and crying could not be further apart in meaning, and yet here they are brought together based on shared gestures, involuntary bodily spasms, seen from a distance. The scene (one important enough to Scalapino that she repeats it elsewhere, in the poem “In sequence” [*Considering* 109]), unfolds, as Scalapino as a girl learns the

correct interpretation of emotionally inflected gestures. Before being told the correct interpretation, she is able to remember trying to interpret these gestures and working with a theory that multiple overlapping emotions can coexist for different participants (with different stakes) in one moment or scene. At the same time as she learns the socially acceptable interpretation of the gestures of mourning from her father, Scalapino apprehends that affects can run counter to official cultural beliefs, indicating their feminist potential. Although girls are not subjects in full possession of rights and having very little social power (any power they have is as proto-women), a girl's death has caused contortions of grief in a whole village. In noting this disjunction, Scalapino indicates the potentially subversive powers of affect; it is able in this case to overturn gender (and age) hierarchies. And this is one of the major objects of Scalapino's experimental writing; she explains,

My focus is on non-hierarchical structure in writing. For example, the implications of time as activity – the future being in the past and present, these times separate and going on simultaneously, equally active [. . .] suggest a non-hierarchical structure in which all times exist at once. And occur as activity without excluding each other. This is unrelated to social power (it can possibly transcend it) but is related to social intelligibility at some time.

(Impermanence 3)

Though “unrelated to social power,” “non-hierarchical structure in writing” can nevertheless transcend social power by undermining “social intelligibility,” the

substratum of agreed-upon meaning that facilitates social power and that is made possible through normative grammar and emotion. The momentary unintelligibility of the affects of the adults in the remembered scene contains the potential to turn social hierarchy on its head; an unimportant member of society, a girl, is mourned uncontrollably (despite her lack of “real” social power), and the observer of the scene, another girl, sees an unsettling potential in emotion that she will later (now) use to investigate her very being in the world. And further, as Ahmed explains, these emotions do not even originate in the self, but “come before us” and are provided by our connections with others and what they tell us:

emotions are what move us, and how we are moved involves interpretations of sensations and feelings not only in the sense that we interpret what we feel, but also in that what we feel might be dependent on past interpretations that are not necessarily made by us, but that come before us. Focusing on emotions as mediated rather than immediate reminds us that knowledge cannot be separated from the bodily world of feeling and sensation. (*Emotion* 171)

An intense focus on the workings of language should not be assumed to produce emotionless writing. For, as Terada and Riley have argued, subjectivity and its emotions are formed as well as interrogated in language. If the subject (as linguistic construct) were self-identical and perfectly in synch with creaturely life, no emotions would be generated to indicate any kind of tension between experience and language. Recognition of emotion is recognition of experiential excess missing from

the subject's account of itself, forced as it is into identity categories. In *Impersonal Passion*, Riley identifies the paradox that "Language is impersonal: its working through and across us is indifferent to us, yet in the same blow it constitutes the fiber of the personal" (Riley 1). Riley avoids the usual antithesis "between language as speaking us, and our status as freely choosing users of language" (Riley 3). Instead, "There is a tangible affect in language which stands somewhat apart from the expressive intentions of an individual speaker; so language can work outside of its official content" (Riley 5). Scalapino's feminist Language poetry, despite (or because of) its focus on language in deconstructing gendered subjectivity, is full of affective intensities.

The element of affect, I believe, has been neglected in readings of Scalapino's work for two reasons: one, because the affects involved are what I would describe as "difficult" – difficult to categorize and difficult to explain – and two, because the work is not usually overtly "about" emotional states or situations. These are not, in other words, poems that place a speaker in a situation of emotional epiphany. Instead of asking how this poetry is "about" emotion or how it has emotional content, my chapter reads for the poetics and rhetoric of affect in Scalapino's work. Although it has been neglected, affect is an interesting and complicated question to explore in work that can, at first glance, appear "flat" or coldly analytical. While Scalapino has been labeled too "confessional" or emotional by other Language poets, she can ironically seem coldly formalist in relation to more expressive women's poetry outside of the Language school. For example, the lines from the poem "hmmmm," "I

feel sleep / in me is induced by blood forced into veins / of my brain” (*Considering 3*) might seem dispassionate, even clinical. But in another sense the lines explore the feeling of falling asleep in minute detail. Far from dismissing or minimizing affect, Scalapino and other feminist Language poets are doing something new with it, challenging the emotionality/rationality divide that has plagued feminism, as Ahmed outlines:

The response to the dismissal of feminists as emotional should not then be to claim that feminism is rational rather than emotional. Such a claim would be misguided as it would accept the very opposition between emotions and rational thought that is crucial to the subordination of femininity as well as feminism. Instead, we need to contest this understanding of emotion as “the unthought”, just as we need to contest the assumption that “rational thought” is unemotional, or that it does not involve being moved by others. (*Emotion* 170)

Scalapino’s poetry and theoretical prose (which are formally virtually indistinguishable) perform exactly this refusal to separate “rational thought” from emotion, and in keeping with the poetics of the Language school, she uses techniques such as repetition, syntactic fragmentation, and parataxis to generate affect in ways that cannot be completely explained by the vocabulary or by the thetic element of the work (when this is present). Language poetry is often, like post-structuralism, mistakenly understood to privilege language and to set it apart from feelings; Hejirian

reports in a letter to Scalapino, for example, that in a 1991 *American Book Review*, Fred Moramarco accuses Language poets of having scorn for any writer who puts “feelings ahead of syntax” (MS 668.17.11). This view of Language poetry is typical, and it displays the assumption that feelings and syntax are like oil and water, mutually exclusive concerns. However, Scalapino’s work is in fact quite affect-driven, even as it is intensely interested in language. She writes in a letter to Hejinian, “I do not separate emotional matter from the ideas of my writing and the nature of writing” (MS 668.19.5). Language’s affective dimensions are not destroyed when disarticulated from complete syntactical units and from narrative in her work. Further, affect, amorphous and uncertain, is used to challenge hierarchical constructions of both gender and species in work that is formally non-hierarchical, often confounding the rules of grammar, placing clauses, for example, in indeterminate relation to one another rather than in clearly subordinate or dominant positions, a technique that works as an analogy for her social theory. Likewise, the indeterminacy of affect in her writing provides a means of dissent from dominant emotional formations that correspond to set social forms,⁴² making way for feeling otherwise, that is, for new ways of understanding affective interactions in the world.

I want to note another feature of the use of affect in Scalapino’s poetry: its species nonspecificity. Affect need not remain exclusive to the human. I will consider

⁴² Such “emotional formations” might be anything from sentiments that lend themselves too easily to commercial use, to the limited range of socially acceptable feelings expressible by and about mothers or children, such as the kind of hope deployed in the discourse of “reproductive futurism” as Lee Edelman outlines in *No Future*.

the implications of this species ambiguity in several poems, a concern I think was present all along, at least implicitly, in much of her work but becomes increasingly apparent in later work. Indeed, along with gender, another major hierarchy that affect undermines in Scalapino's work is the human/animal hierarchy.⁴³ In the following passage Scalapino explores an instance in which split subjectivity is experienced through a nonhuman other:

I experienced continual vicious attacks on myself from myself – as one being nothing ever – until finally I had a dream of a huge dog tracking me as I fled through vacant buildings, it continually reappearing stalking to kill me, at which I woke realizing the dog was myself, that I was going after myself and that my mind was taking care of me, telling me to stop doing this, while *being* myself. Amazed in seeing the mind as phenomena, and that it cares for oneself as if lovingly. (*Autobiography* 14)

The “I” that begins this passage is cast in a radically passive role, able only to experience suffering, or “vicious attacks on myself from myself.” This radically

⁴³ Scalapino writes, “*So far, the idea of the dog’s bark is simply the way I have found to describe a man’s sounds.* (*music* 14) What I want to ask of this theory of affect is how it relates to one discourse in particular: humanism. I want to raise the possibility that affects can fail to line up with properly “human” emotions; this possibility exposes a fault-line by demonstrating that our feelings have never fit neatly with the discourse of humanism. If, as Terada has argued, affects are not felt by subjects but felt as the friction between feelings and the linguistic construct of the subject, why then would affects in any way require a *human* subject? Kathleen Woodward has explored such a possibility in “Sympathy for Nonhuman Cyborgs.” If, as Haraway establishes, following Latour, “we have never been human,” it can be added that we have never “felt” human either.

disempowered “I” is not the agent or subject *of* the attacks, but is subject *to* attacks by the self (itself the *object* grammatically). From a position of such weakness, the passage’s “I” finds strength and even love in the most unlikely place: the mind’s ability to figure itself as both a dog attacker and as a self fleeing the same dog. As an “animal,” the dog is not a full subject or agent, but in this dream, ironically, the dog is the most powerful figure. The speaker’s confrontation with the dog enables her to see the mind’s layered complexity; as split subject, the speaker both attacks and defends herself. This phenomenon is so difficult to describe that grammar needs to be contorted in order to account for the workings of the mind wavering between subject and object: “it cares for oneself.” Such divided agency is similar to the feeling of being able to witness but unable to intervene in world events; Scalapino writes, “I approach writing from the standpoint of watching what is happening, reading about it, seeing it; in other words, grappling with the phenomenon of these public events from the perspective of being ‘helpless’ in the huge sweep of it” (Brewster interview). She writes, in other words, from a position of non-sovereignty. This tendency is an especially pronounced concern in *The Woman Who Could Read the Minds of Dogs* and *Instead of an Animal*, two chapbooks collected in *Considering how exaggerated music is*, in which human thoughts and experiences are described in disconcertingly clinical terms, and connections are made between human behavior and that of other animals.

Scalapino explains in her *Autobiography* that her collection *Considering how exaggerated music is* was written during a difficult emotional time, experienced as

another kind of powerlessness. This collection contains a number of “series” poems that consider human behaviors alongside those of other animals, blurring the idiom often used to make such a distinction. Around the time that her mother was in a serious car crash, she began to form a connection with socially marginal and rejected animals: “Dogs began to do odd things when I walked by – following me across Berkeley – beginning to dance in disturbance at me – or run rising to nip my jacket – the [above-cited] dream of the dog tracking me recurred” (35). This collection approaches the feelings belonging to common (though not canonically emotional) experiences such as falling asleep or riding a bus in a way that rejects human exceptionalism in the realm of emotion, reaching for other species’ emotional expressions to explain human ones. In the poem “hmmmm,” “certain emotions such as falling asleep” (note the indeterminacy; there is no discourse of “falling asleep” as an emotion; it is not usually considered an emotion) are understood through empathy with nonhuman animals. While falling asleep (temporarily leaving conscious social existence), the subject speaks in sheep tongue as well as human language:

Consider certain emotions such as falling asleep, I said,

(especially when one is standing on one’s feet), as being similar

to fear, or anger, or fainting. I do. I feel sleep

in me is induced by blood forced into veins

of my brain. I can’t focus. My tongue is numb

and so large it is like the long tongue of a calf or
the tongue of a goat or of a sheep. What's more, I bleat.

Yes. In private, in bed, at night, with my head
turned sideways on the pillow. No wonder I say that I *love* to sleep.

(*Considering 3*)

The collection in which this poem appears explores not only the sensation of “certain emotions such as falling asleep” but also the fraught interpersonal encounters that happen between the poems’ speakers and other humans, often focusing on gender relations. People growl at each other on buses, mark their territory, and generally “act like animals” in the poems. These encounters are described in terms taken from the discourses of science and nature shows. People are “the mating couple,” (64) “the adult male,” (66) or “young females” and “immature males,” (61) for example. The poems tend to deal with affects that are antisocial or taboo, rather than in any way normative as emotions. The subject of the poems is often of indeterminate social status and even species.

As a discursive form, emotion is fraught territory for those policing the boundaries between so-called animal and human. In order to hold these categories apart, humanist thinking has had to insist on proper and improper feelings in humans toward each other and other animals, and conversely, to insist that nonhuman animals cannot feel emotions, despite evidence to the contrary. Meaningful emotion is one of

the many abysses popularly maintained between humans and “animals” (the term, as Jacques Derrida argues, that is in itself the worst “crime against animals”).⁴⁴ But, as any member of a companion species knows, the rigid separation of species along lines of emotion doesn’t work. Humans often share strong affective bonds with other species, despite the persistence of human exceptionalism in this arena. The same “pet owner,” for instance, who might insist that a pet does not share a language, and by extension cannot communicate a determinate emotion, will intuit that that pet shares affects with her (in both the sense that they have affects in common and that these can be conveyed). The above passage from “hmmm” illustrates that sometimes another creature’s expression of affect seems, as Scalapino puts it, to offer “simply the best way [. . .] to describe” an experience like falling asleep in which human agency slips away to be replaced by a non-sovereign creaturely state.

In a more recent work, “Floats Horse-floats or Horse-flows” (2007), Scalapino further challenges the human/animal boundary as a hierarchy that enables and even produces violence, violence that spills over to hurt both sides. This internet-published long poem is a meditation on species-based violence, and is centered around the concept of “alexia,” which Scalapino explains as a kind of “word-blindness” in which “unknown words create a future.” One of the main uses of “alexia” in the poem is in the fluctuation between the use of the term “dag” and “dog” to describe a creature

⁴⁴ In an interview with Elisabeth Roudinesco, *De quoi demain... Dialogues* (translated by Jeff Wills in *For What Tomorrow... A Dialogue*), Derrida discusses, among other crimes against animals, the crime of the term “animal” itself, setting aside, as it does, one species as ontologically different from (and superior to) all others.

who appears in different parts of the poem, first introduced thus: “a dag is walking on the road alone.” The “dag” (dagger? dog? we don’t really know this creature) is witness (as is the reader) to casual violence and disturbingly unmoored events. “Powder monkey” is another species-ambiguous figure in the poem, somewhere between a nonhuman and an expendable dehumanized boy with a dangerous role in war (explosives). Somewhere near the middle of the poem we first encounter the corpses: “The flattened space of the five hundred corpses found in the thin light night plateau, skinned there maintains itself. Mind or the outside, both there is a bliss – without affect, which is the appearance of emotional state and behavior; none (of oneself) existing there. Or anywhere” (“Floats”; n/p). Suspended in this moment of witness, we do not know the species to which these corpses belong. Perhaps we assume they are human, due to the (wavering) species of the “powder monkey,” a recurring figure who seems to situate the scene in a narrative of war.

Not until much later in the poem do we get a suggestion that these corpses belonged to antelope:

Four hundred corpses once had run shot from racing jeeps in the silver beams at night. Exposed in the soft beams at night the black jeeps are the source of silver air there. Either. Running small antelopes in the eye of the Tibetan patrolman who is tied – from the barreling jeep – he’s in the barreling jeep – the poachers then, after skinning the corpses in the silver light, shoot him tied. (“Floats” n/p)

Explanations of this episode emerge in the course of the poem; we learn that the Tibetan patrolman is barely paid for his work and helpless against poachers; we learn the socioeconomic factors that have led to a state of affairs in which antelope skins are worth more than the endangered animals themselves (“They’re lives being slaughtered to extinction”), worth more than the life of the patrolman. But we do not learn this in a coherent narrative sequence. The poem preserves momentarily the pure experience of seeing the corpses, while recoiling from any attempt to “make sense” of such a scene. And such rejection of explanation as insufficient extends to the attribution of emotion to any of the many perspectives involved in this scene: “Pain is an invention we’re making as sensation is limitless and open, in blackness or pool of white light also” (“Floats” n/p). Any viewpoint, in other words, through which the reader tries to make sense of affect related to this scene misses something in the service of intelligibility, which would be an underlying requirement for the articulation of a species hierarchy.

Posthumanist thought rejects human exceptionalism in the realm of emotion. Just as the above reading of “Floats Horse-Floats or Horse Flows” has shown, it is possible to unmoor emotion from the discourse of human exceptionalism through disjunctive writing, and another method Scalapino uses is to borrow terminology from the scientific description of “animals” to describe the feelings of her speakers. The poems often refer to human behavior in terms usually reserved for zoological description. In many ways, the descriptions of the behavior of humans often referred to as “the male” or “the female” recall Charles Darwin’s treatment of emotion in *The*

Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals.⁴⁵ Darwin, arguably the first and most radical theorist of the posthuman, approached emotion as a phenomenon that can be conveyed through the same types of facial expressions and postures in a range of species, and Scalapino explores the odd effect of describing human emotion in these ways. Remember Scalapino's description of the "adults" along a riverbank "all in a line shaking as bending appearing to be laughing because the gesture of laughing and weeping were the same" (*Autobiography* 3). Far from a heartless description (though it may seem "dehumanizing" in the negative sense in traditional humanist analysis), Scalapino's investigation of emotion here involves describing its signifying gestures (however unconsciously performed), much as Darwin does. Such a blend of "scientific" description of human and nonhuman animals with the literary is often found in Scalapino's work. She frequently describes people as sounding or looking like other animals in certain attitudes. The investigations of both of these writers treat

⁴⁵ Darwin's work on emotion was further elaborated in later physiological theories. William James and Carl Georg Lange developed a theory of the emotions (in the 1880s) responding to Darwin's *Expression*; in *The Emotions*, they follow Darwin's lead in studying emotions as material, organic phenomena possessing "objective qualities" (*Emotions* 37). James argues that the emotions deserve more study in "brain-physiology," as they have been neglected (perhaps because they are considered too subjective for study) in favor of the brain's "cognitive and volitional" (*Emotions* 11) functions. Here, Scalapino would agree; recall her argument against establishing a "doctrine" separating emotion from thought process. James argues, "emotion dissociated from all bodily feeling is inconceivable." (*Emotions* 103) Emotions, in other words, following the insights of Darwin, *are* their expression. Silvan Tomkins, too, maintained the material basis for the affects; in the volumes of *Affect Imagery Consciousness*, he develops a theory of the affects that considers them bodily mechanisms that amplify initial senses or feelings in order to motivate action. Scalapino's poetry can be placed in this tradition of exploring affect as a physiological and linguistic process.

human emotion as the experience of an organism in its web of material and signification. Simpson writes, of the long poem “Instead of an animal,” “Scalapino complicates the perspective by shifting the point of view between first and third person and by playfully interchanging male and female gender characteristics as well as human and animal traits among the people who variously occupy the shifting positions of subject and object within the poem” (*Epistemologies* 125). The implications of this unsettling of the subject/object distinction are profound: “The effect is that the reader’s own position is at stake as well. By this, the midpoint of the poem, we are all animals” (*Epistemologies* 125).

Another aspect of posthumanism is how humans come to understand themselves as a species in an environment, and especially in her later work, Scalapino begins to move toward an ecological consciousness. The poem “Seeing the Scenery” demonstrates a reading of body as landscape that destabilizes the figure/ground distinction:

Satisfied this morning because I saw myself

(for the first time) in the mirror as a mountain. I mean by this

I “saw the scenery” in myself. Whereas I had pores

and veins and a brain, I was a mountain in the same way

one has boulders or trees. How would this explain, I wondered,

whatever emotions such as cruelty or indifference I feel?

And I knew no matter how careful one is,

pebbles and grains *will* be modified put in human form. (*Considering* 16)

In this poem, the unsettled subject finds herself on shaky ground. The word “one,” for example, changes reference depending on whether the focus is on figure or ground in the poem. It can be a pronoun attached to mountain, or it can be “one” in the general sense of “anyone.” What shifts here is the distinction between landscape and body, organic and inorganic. The “human form” that she insists “*will*” emerge from this landscape is clearly made of the landscape. This effect of blurred boundaries between human/nonhuman and figure/ground is what happens when experimental Language poetry engages in philosophical investigations. Or, as Scalapino writes, “The self is a guinea pig” (*Phenomena* 22).

I think that this proposition, “The self is a guinea pig,” typifies much of what I’ve been trying to say about Scalapino’s work. In contrast to some other Language poets (although in harmony with the work of Hejinian, for example), Scalapino has maintained the importance of a critical investigation of the self. This investigation has led her to propose that the self is not only experimental (“a guinea pig”) but also that it is an animal as much as it is a (test) subject (“a guinea pig”). While Scalapino uses techniques derived from Language poetry’s insistence on drawing attention to the surface, play, and infidelities of language, she has done so with the implicit critique of the gendered human subject as a major concern.

In “Eco-logic in Writing,” an essay published in the year she died, Scalapino began to consider what her own writing had had to do with the destabilized self in relation to the environment. Appearing in *The Eco Language Reader*, her essay marks a new way of thinking about the relationship between ecology and Language poetry. While on the one hand, writing is always a part of the surrounding world, and Scalapino doesn’t “have difficulty with the notion of conceptually placing together one’s own language and the actions in the outside world,” (60) – a notion central to ecological thought – she finds that there is even a deeper connection in some of her work to how she feels and thinks about the environment. In seeing environmental destruction while traveling in China, her writing registers the affect: “I was grieving for mountains, land, and water, whose destruction there (in China) utterly transforms the entire world (not just China) – neither grief nor writing altering this.” (64) The poem she discusses in “Eco-Logic in Writing” as being most concerned with ecology is “Resting lightning that’s night”; in this poem the role of affect could not be more central to Scalapino’s poetics, and her disjunctive form of writing registers a fractured relationship to the land. The poem begins by setting a scene of hellish environmental destruction:

the land is paired as single – as people

-- fish and birds in one’s hell

--paper mills – steel factories

destroying – only – rubble – 1.2 billion living

(to them)

if Arcadia occurred where *is* it now? *when?* If it isn't

now what use is it?

(*It's go* 203)

These lines produce many of the effects and affects I've highlighted in Scalapino's work throughout this chapter. To begin, the lines have the effect of leveling one woman's experience with any outside account: the report that "the / ferocity wasn't visible apparent (to them)" is cut through with a large space (like an adapted caesura), marking a blind spot in discourse. Secondly, affect circulates in these lines, restlessly unattached to any singular subjectivity. The terms "scathing" and "cruel" go unattached to nouns, leaving open possibilities, and the searching questions that end this passage are touching in their immediacy. The lines bespeak an uncompromising desire for an Arcadia that would have to be "now" or else "what use is it?" This impatience is the affect of a consciousness committed to the radical present, but at the same time refusing most accounts of it. In the chapters to come, I will trace this move toward ecological subjectivity that begins in Scalapino's later work and becomes more important for later feminist eco-poets working in the tradition of the Language school, specifically here Lisa Robertson and Brenda Hillman. I will turn next to the work of a poet who takes the simultaneous appeal and impossibility of Arcadia as central to her project of creating feminist landscapes in poetry. Lisa Robertson's poetry might be read as a long and passionate letter in response to the question, "if Arcadia / occurred where *is* it now?"

Chapter Four

Lisa Robertson's Feminist Poetic Landscapes

I. Redrawing landscape in *The Weather*

*The sky is complicated and flawed and we're up there in it, floating near the apricot frill, the bias swoop, near the sullen bloated part that dissolves to silver the next instant bronze but nothing that meaningful, a breach of greeny-blue, a syllable, we're all across the swathe of fleece laid out, the fraying rope, the copper beech behind the aluminum catalpa that has saved the entire spring for this flight, the tops of these a part of the sky, the light wind flipping up the white undersides of leaves, heaven afresh, the brushed part behind, the tumbling. ("Monday," *The Weather* 10-11)*

What would it mean to create a feminist poetic landscape? As in the skyscape above, it would mean smudging and blurring the lines that have been drawn to set the universalized human figure apart from the landscape, making the latter a passive backdrop and the former a coherent subject uniquely capable of meaningful action. It would mean exploring the ways affects circulate outside of the subject. It would mean exercising a rightful suspicion of the figure/ground distinction, having seen the feminine too often aligned with the passive side of this hierarchical dichotomy, providing the backdrop, behind-the-scenes support, and raw materials for the action

figures that count.⁴⁶ The poetics of landscape can provide a powerful tool for thinking feminist change because landscape “doesn’t merely signify or symbolize power relations; it is an instrument of cultural power” (Mitchell 1). I argue that Canadian poet Lisa Robertson redraws the concept of the landscape (broadly defined, often focusing on the sky and the weather) from a feminist perspective, using affect to significantly trouble the figure/ground distinction as it is aligned with gender.

Robertson’s 2001 collection, *The Weather*, is arranged as a series of prose poems named after sequential days of the week; each poem in some way combines meteorological and painterly description with a feminist consciousness of the subject’s affective interconnection with a landscape.⁴⁷ In the above passage from the second “day” poem of *The Weather*, “Monday,” we do not stand apart from and observe the landscape; “we’re up there in it,” making up its clouds, its textures and emotions. This poem’s landscape is made of the same materials (“the apricot frill, the bias swoop”) with which human identities and genders are fabricated; its moods and emotions are tangled up in our own. In this landscape, no human subject stands out as figure against a background, but subjectivity is interwoven with description of clouds

⁴⁶ Barbara Johnson has explored the tendency in textual landscapes to align the background with the passive feminine and the figure with the active masculine in “Is Female to Male as Ground is to Figure?” from *The Feminist Difference* (London: Harvard University Press, 1998): 17-36. Teresa De Lauretis, as well, in “Desire in Narrative” from *Alice Doesn’t*, has an analysis of the feminine as the landscape the male hero must traverse.

⁴⁷ It is worth noting that in French, *le temps* means both time and weather, and the overlay of days of the week with weather draws upon both meanings.

and trees.⁴⁸ We affect and are affected by the “sullen bloated” sky, and share motivation and intentionality with the trees: “the aluminum catalpa has saved the entire spring for this flight.”

Here, John Ruskin’s warning against the “pathetic fallacy”⁴⁹ is deliberately flouted as affective boundaries between supposedly unfeeling backdrop and sentient human being are transgressed. Personification (as ontological metaphor) is too one-sided a term for what’s happening in this passage; anthropomorphism, which attributes human motivations, emotions, and characteristics to “nature” without necessarily forming a figure of a “person” in the process, is a more capacious term that might begin to account for what is happening in this passage. As feminism’s critique of the universal human subject finds common interests with posthumanism, a return to the question of anthropomorphism seems called for. In anthropomorphism, human characteristics are bestowed upon the nonhuman. This bestowal is an ethical outreach as much as it is a reach for more effective language; Emmanuel Lévinas treats giving the other a face as an ethical outreach.⁵⁰ But in giving the nonhuman human traits, those very traits appear strange; they are singled out, examined, distorted, made uncanny by their attachment to the nonhuman. Giving the other a face (or any other “human” characteristic) is no one-way exchange; as Robertson writes in

⁴⁸ The poetics of Gertrude Stein might be thought to provide precedent, along with her suggestion in *Lectures in America* that a play might be thought of as a landscape.

⁴⁹ The term “pathetic fallacy” was coined by John Ruskin in his 1856 work *Modern Painters*, and refers to the mistaken attribution of *pathos* to inanimate objects.

⁵⁰ This Levinasian ethical regard is discussed in relation to animals by, among others, James Serpell in “People in Disguise: Anthropomorphism and the Pet-Human Relationship” in *Thinking with Animals*.

a later poem, “The face moves across the human” (“Utopia/” 82-90) as the human forms itself with/in the landscape.⁵¹

Turning to one of Paul De Man’s exemplary literatures for a moment, I’ll borrow a line from William Wordsworth to reconsider what it means to anthropomorphize the nonhuman: in his 1807 landscape poem “I wandered lonely as a cloud,” Wordsworth’s heart famously “dances with the daffodils” (Wordsworth 305-6). The figure works both ways; the human takes on daffodil qualities and vice versa. Wordsworth’s memory, or “inward eye,” as the poem calls it, in remembering the daffodils, imbues them with the artistic/meaning-making capacity of dance. In a rigid sense dance might be treated as a human practice, but the figure gracefully extends the capacity beyond the human. In extending this capacity to a nonhuman other, the human mind (or “inward eye”) finds that *it* can dance, too. Wordsworth in this way *anthropomorphizes his own mind* at the same time that he anthropomorphizes the nonhuman; conversely, he others his own mind at the same time that he embraces the other as human. Anthropomorphism, therefore, can be thought of as a becoming-with others that challenges the ontological status of all parties involved, a co-constitution of figure and ground that blurs their boundaries. As exemplified in the line, “The sky is complicated and flawed and we’re up there in it” (*The Weather* 10), Robertson begins with this shift in thinking the human and further

⁵¹ De Man writes in “Autobiography as De-Facement,” (67-82) “Prosopopeia is the trope of autobiography, by which one’s name [. . .] is made intelligible and memorable as a face. Our topic deals with the giving and taking away of faces, with face and deface, figure, figuration and disfiguration.” (76)

heightens the unsettling effect anthropomorphism has on the human and the nonhuman alike.⁵²

For, as Robertson's line "I am an animal I don't know" ("Palinodes" n/p) suggests, we may not know what it is we bestow on nonhuman others when we bestow humanness upon them. The unsettling effect of anthropomorphism is symptomatic of uncertainty at the heart of the notion of the human. An effect of anthropomorphism is to call attention to the uncertain status of the "anthro-" side of the equation; unlike metaphor, anthropomorphism cannot work as an exchange between equivalent terms. In "Anthropomorphism and Trope in Lyric," De Man takes issue with Nietzsche's listing of the term along with metaphor and metonymy as a trope.⁵³ Unlike a trope, further, anthropomorphism has no object to "turn into" another, since the human subject cannot make of itself an object. The subject of the lyric, that is, cannot attain the self-knowledge that would allow for the bestowal of a determinate human form onto a separate nonhuman entity. We would need to know

⁵² This process might be thought of as a "becoming with" others, as discussed in Haraway, *When Species Meet* (16). Vincianne Despret also discusses "knowledge as a "becoming with" (297) in *Our Emotional Makeup*.

⁵³ For De Man, anthropomorphism is "not just a trope" (a twist or turn of meaning, a substitution of one term for another) because it is an actual "identification on the level of substance" that "freezes the infinite chain of tropological transformations and propositions into one single assertion of essence." (241)

the human as object (impossible from within) in order to know what it means to make something else an honorary human.⁵⁴

In *The Weather*, our self-understanding is situated within such indeterminate and shifting boundaries that human qualities bleed into the landscape, as the landscape bleeds into the human, without the rigid separation of two objects that would be required to form a trope. In lines such as “We suddenly transform to the person. The hills fling down shadow; we fling down shadow. The horizon is awkward; we fling down shadow” (*The Weather* 37), it is unclear how human “we” are, we whose actions and movements appear to be initiated by the “hills.” “We” are not already, but can “transform” into “the person.” In a traditional explanation of anthropomorphism, the “flinging” action or movement would be considered a human capacity that has been falsely (but poetically) attributed to the hills, since nonhumans cannot be considered to have agency. But in this line (as in the rest of the poem “Wednesday”), the semicolons set up parallel clauses that make causality and agency waver. Robertson’s landscape takes seriously the ontological challenges of anthropomorphism; it appears much less like a trope in her work than, for example, in the Wordsworth poem above, and much more like a challenge to whatever a human subject was in the first place, if we ever thought we knew. Instead of a stable “I” wandering “lonely as a cloud,” the multiple subject wanders, lonely, as a cloud.

⁵⁴ In *The Open: Man and Animal*, Giorgio Agamben investigates the biopolitical implications of the process of “anthropogenesis,” which “results from the caesura and articulation between human and animal.” (79)

Robertson goes further than any of De Man's exemplary poems in foregrounding anthropomorphism as self-deconstructing figuration; her work with landscape in *The Weather* challenges the ontological certainty of the elements of the landscape being anthropomorphized along with the subject doing the anthropomorphizing. Such a challenge to settled ontologies and figurations of the human comes from a commitment to feminist poetic practice, one called for by Donna Haraway in her fantastically-titled "Ecce Homo, Ain't (Ar'n't) I a Woman, and Inappropriate/d Others: The Human in a Post-Humanist Landscape." Haraway calls for a "self-critical practice of 'difference,' of the I and we that is/are never identical to itself," and thus for a setting aside of the "Enlightenment figures of coherent and masterful subjectivity, the bearers of rights, holders of property in the self, legitimate sons with access to language and the power to represent, subjects endowed with inner coherence and rational clarity" (*The Haraway Reader* 48). Leaving behind such a flawed model of subjectivity will require the production (or *poesis*) of a new model, however, if its critique is to have any effect. It is worth quoting at length the case Haraway makes for the vital importance of figuration to feminist change:

Feminist theory proceeds by figuration at just those moments when its own historical narratives are in crisis. Historical narratives are in crisis now, across the political spectrum, around the world. These are the moments when something powerful – and dangerous – is happening. Figuration is about resetting the stage for possible pasts and futures. Figuration is the mode of

theory when the more ‘normal’ rhetorics of systematic critical analysis seem only to repeat and sustain our entrapment in the stories of the established disorders. Humanity is a modernist figure; and this humanity has a generic face, a universal shape. Humanity’s face has been the face of man. Feminist humanity must have another shape, other gestures; but, I believe, we must have feminist figures of humanity. They cannot be man or woman; they cannot be the human as historical narrative has staged that generic universal. Feminist figures cannot, finally, have a name; they cannot be native. Feminist humanity must, somehow, both resist representation, resist literal figuration, and still erupt in powerful new tropes, new figures of speech, new turns of historical possibility. (47)

Robertson’s *The Weather* answers this call for feminist figuration; a look at the book’s central concerns will show how strongly feminist theory guides her reading of the poetics of weather (weather being a concept at first glance neutral and at second glance deeply gendered), and her simultaneous refiguring of its poetic landscape. In “The Weather: A Report On Sincerity” and in an interview, she explains that on a research trip to Cambridge, her work in the archive and her observations of the small talk of fellow researchers led her to investigate “the rhetorical structure of English meteorological description” (“The Weather” 79). In this intertextual feminist reference to Woolf, Robertson situates her research as a site-specific work of archive-based writing, and explains how such a situation led to the insight that descriptions of weather and land were deeply gendered and connected to

discourses of nationalism. British cultural imperialism employed (on two of its more obscure fronts) meteorological description and landscape painting, in order to naturalize its point of view.⁵⁵ After examining such texts, Robertson argues that the seventeenth- to nineteenth-century British project of producing normative (“neutral” and “universal”) descriptive language through which to establish the study of weather as a logocentric science (meteorology), rather than the literary matter it had been, involved excising all decorative, feminine poetic language from the description of weather. Standard terminology had to be established in order to study phenomena reliably.⁵⁶ The observer had to be standardized as well, reduced to a single reliable viewpoint, and so his emotional excesses and follies had to be minimized.⁵⁷

Robertson became interested in the quirks of early “observers” of the landscape and their attempts to excise persona flaws and establish an objective viewpoint. She was also interested in elements of the landscape that created problems for and resistance to this nationalist project by eluding description and confounding the observer, mixing up emotion with weather in ways that render indeterminate the direction or source of affect.

⁵⁵ W.J.T Mitchell calls landscape “a social hieroglyph that conceals the actual basis of its value. It does so by naturalizing its conventions and conventionalizing its nature.” *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002): 5.

⁵⁶ In *Strange Weather: Culture, Science, and Technology in the Age of Limits*, Andrew Ross approaches these questions from the standpoint of “a cultural critic examining not only the power and authority of the claims made for science and technology” (8) in discourses of weather, along with “sublegitimate, alternative, marginal, or oppositional” (9) discourses that pose “challenges to these elite languages in popular and alternative cultures” (9).

⁵⁷ In a side-note, today’s “wacky” weather reporter persona is possible because personal objectivity is no longer required, having been replaced by the objectivity of satellites and computer images.

Clouds posed one such challenge: “Clouds presented a specific formal difficulty to description and nomenclature – if [. . .] the relation between objects and words should be equivalent, economical, the cloud challenged the propriety of this equivalence since its appearance as a thing was so ephemeral. In fact for a long time a cloud was not a thing” (“The Weather” 5). The ontological instability of the cloud provides fertile ground for the resurgence of an abjected (feminine, emotional) poetic language (“the apricot frill, the bias swoop”) into the purportedly neutral description of meteorology. Robertson mines the archives for such affective overflows of poetic language, recovering a disavowed uncertainty about the objects that count in weather or in landscape. During the project of stabilizing meteorological description, nineteenth-century scientific observers of cloud formations could not avoid using poetic diction, and Robertson notices that proto-meteorologists even seem to *identify* with their objects of study: “I can’t help but read into these accounts a marvelous identificatory excess” (“The Weather” 7).⁵⁸

In a kind of backdrop to these flourishes, a notion of descriptive ongoingness is built into the concept of the weather report, and *The Weather* elevates that notion to an all-pervasive aesthetic. The atmosphere of the poems of *The Weather* is the repetitive description of weather and landscape, interspersed with the lyrical excesses quoted from nineteenth-century naturalists’ obsessive attempts to observe and report. Robertson’s landscapes are made of unstable, ephemeral quasi-objects, mostly clouds,

⁵⁸ For more discussion of the figuration of clouds (in this case, in visual arts), see Hubert Damisch’s *A Theory of Cloud: Toward a History of Painting*.

that constantly subvert scientists' attempts to isolate them as objects of dispassionate study.

Robertson does more, in other words, than merely highlight and critique the naturalizing function of the supposed neutrality of descriptions of weather; she goes further than to point out the historical gendering of the divide between subjective “pathetic fallacy” of the lyric and the purportedly objective description of the empirical. Using the scraps of antique discourses, she fashions a new garment. Her project is one of feminist figuration, in the sense that she uses worn-out discourses to construct more livable poetic habitats:

Part of what I want to ask of the rhetoric of weather, is what other ideologies may it absorb? May I cause the weather to absorb the wrong ideologies? The issue is not to defamiliarize the language of weather, but to appropriate its naturalizing function to a history, an utterance, which is delusional insofar as it is gendered. A wild dream of parity must have its own weather and that weather will always have as its structure an inexhaustible incommensurability.

(“The Weather” 10)

The poems of *The Weather* distribute human qualities and agency across the landscape, inspired not only by such a tendency in the meteorological source texts but also by a feminist desire for a livable landscape based on a “wild dream of parity.”⁵⁹

⁵⁹ This phrase echoes Adrienne Rich's *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* and *The Dream of a Common Language*.

Robertson appropriates the antique genre of the pastoral to refashion the landscape, but this is not done without caution about the violence historically masked by the genre. In “How Pastoral: A Manifesto,”⁶⁰ Robertson acknowledges that “pastoral Utopias have efficiently aestheticized and naturalized the political practices of genocide, misogyny, and class and race oppression.” And yet, she argues, “I consider that now pastoral’s obvious obsolescence may offer a hybrid discursive potential to those who have traditionally been excluded from Utopia” (“How Pastoral” 278). This strategic appropriation of the genre suggests that critique is not enough, that figuration of possible futures is required as well; “Consider that the imaginary generates landscapes for political futures. To people these landscapes with our own desires and histories, we must implement pastoral as a seedy generic artifice and deny it the natural and hegemonic position of a political ideology” (278).⁶¹ Much of “How Pastoral: A Manifesto” is taken from the shorter “How Pastoral: A Prologue” which begins the earlier collection *XEclogue*. In both of these deployments of the pastoral genre appear the following lines: “In a deep sleep, my ancestress tells me a story: ‘Ontology is the luxury of the landed. Let’s pretend you ‘had’ a land. Then you ‘lost’ it. Now fondly describe it. That is pastoral. Consider your homeland, like all utopias, obsolete” (“How Pastoral” 277 and *XEclogue* 1-2). The power of the pastoral to create an illusion of ownership of an ontologically stable land by an

⁶⁰ “How Pastoral: A Manifesto” is a short statement of poetics explaining Robertson’s rationale for her writing practice.

⁶¹ Much of Robertson’s work has concerned a reworking of the pastoral; *XEclogues* (1993), for example, is an extended exploration of the pastoral mode, working with and against Virgil’s paradigmatic pastoral text.

ontologically stable subject is the source of the exclusions the genre has masked historically,⁶² but the clear obsolescence of the genre indicates its potential to be redeployed ironically in a feminist utopian figuration of landscape. In Robertson's redeployment of the genre, it remains suspect enough, denaturalized enough, and yet appealing enough, that it can plausibly be read as ironic or sincere, or as wavering in between. The very possibility of sincerity is one of the most interesting aspects of Robertson's project; the possibility, that is, of the joyous inhabitation of a genre so completely ironized that it somehow surpasses irony to be refashioned into the materials of lived experience.⁶³

Robertson's use of feminine imagery can be viewed in this light, as a semi-ironic deployment of "seedy" (shabby and yet fertile) trappings of bygone utopias to fashion counter-utopias in resistance. "Monday" employs such "seedy" gendered materials to describe a landscape. Painted landscapes often use realist techniques to encourage us to forget they are made up of canvas, paint, and frames, but describing the sky using the language of fabrics ("the apricot frill, the bias swoop" [*The Weather* 10]) calls attention to the material construction of landscape, its framing and

⁶² William Empson, for example, argues in *Some Versions of Pastoral* that pastoral "though 'about,' is not by or for" (6) the people; neither, I would add, is it by, about, or for, women, who were not its lyric subjects and could claim no ownership of the land.

⁶³ Robertson's self-professed interest in sincerity (in "The Weather: A Report on Sincerity") stems perhaps from a *desire* to exit the "temporal predicament" de Man describes in which "Irony divides the flow of temporal experience into a past that is pure mystification and a future that remains harassed forever by a relapse within the inauthentic." (*Blindness* 222) Searching instead for a way to sincerely inhabit the present moment is therefore a way to link past to future.

fabrication. An “apricot frill” would not be out of place on a tacky prom dress, so the use of the term to describe the most sublime part of landscape, the painted sky, undermines the gendered high art/low art distinction. The use of feminine labor and materials to construct the loftiest aspect of landscape makes visible the often-hidden labor (including affective labor) that goes into the artifact of the European landscape painting (the weaving, the stretching and priming of the canvas, the gardening, the performance of the picturesque by the land and ladies).

As discussed above, Robertson locates emotional excess in the early meteorologists themselves, but she also provides her own twenty-first century feminist emotions as the “outbursts” amidst the painterly description in the poem “Tuesday.” A passage from that poem shows how neutral-toned description of a painting or a sky is interspersed with emotional diction, all homogenized to some degree by the punctuation:

All cloudy except a narrow opening at the top of the sky. All cloudy. All cloudy. All cloudy. Except one large opening with others smaller. And once in the clouds. Days heap upon us. Where is our anger. And the shades darker than the plain part and darker at the top than the bottom. But darker at bottom than top. Days heap upon us. Where is Ti-Grace. But darker at the bottom than the top. Days heap upon us. Where is Christine. Broken on the word culture. But darker at the bottom than the top. Days heap upon us. Where is Valerie. (18)

The meditative pace of repetitive descriptive language sets a tone that softens what might otherwise read as “outbursts” into a melancholy ritual lament for “our” loss of anger, along with the loss of famously angry feminists. Rather than performing the emotional trajectory of anger (identify a source of anger; act angrily; resolve the problem), these lines ask in a melancholy tone what has happened to prevent the very possibility of righteous anger. The ideology of weather’s ongoingness and “objective” neutrality seems to have dampened, but not smothered, the possibility of emotional outbursts, transforming anger’s loss into melancholy. The feminists enquired after are hauntingly figured as both present to mind and absent at the same time. This partial naming resists representation by giving only first and not last names, marking them as missing, exchanging ontology for something in-between being and non-being, or “hauntology.”⁶⁴ They are not available as fully present subjects, and their first names are scattered to the winds, liberated of patronymics.

Along with twenty-first century feminist melancholy, another set of source-texts for “Tuesday” is the *ubi sunt* tradition in poetry, a genre that repeats the question, “where are...” followed by a list of the lauded, famous dead. One notable example of the genre, François Villon’s “Ballade (des dames du temps jadis),” [“Ballad of the ladies of times past”] can be heard to echo in this poem’s refrain. Villon’s poem, with a similar (proto-) nostalgia, intersperses inquiry after dead or absent historical or mythical women with meditations on mortality. The refrain of the

⁶⁴ This term is coined in Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994).

poem, “Mais ou sont les neiges d’antan?” [“Where are the snows of yesteryear?”] can shed light, perhaps, on the rhetorical nature of Robertson’s questions, and explain the lack of question marks. The absence of punctuation, in other words, underscores that these are rhetorical questions. We know the answer; they are gone, like the snows of yesteryear, absorbed into the landscape (as “Tuesday” not only suggests but performs). The absence of these feminists along with their/our anger is far from neutral though; while they have clearly helped to shape the landscape, we wonder, where are their successors? Invoking these feminists does more than to memorialize their contributions; it gives them an honorary presence, if only as a place-holder, in the present and in possible futures. The *ubi sunt* tradition has another modern incarnation in the practice of invoking dead or jailed revolutionaries at the beginning of assemblies, giving them an honorary presence in the collective process. In all of these manifestations, *ubi sunt* performs a kind of political mourning.⁶⁵

Calling out to those absent may seem at variance with the relative calm and patience of cloud descriptions in “Tuesday.” Within such a landscape of descriptive neutrality, it may seem strange that emotion survives and even proliferates; this combination might be said to create an elegiac landscape. The sheer number of repetitions of terms of cloud description (“The clouds lighter than the plain part and

⁶⁵ While here anger and mourning are responses to the loss of feminist heroines, the emotions have also been important to AIDS activism; in “Mourning and Militancy,” Douglas Crimp discusses the politics in the AIDS activist community of the slogan “Silence = Death,” arguing against the imperative always to turn mourning into anger. The recitation of the names of the dead on the AIDS quilt is also reminiscent of the recitation of names in this poem.

darker at the top than the bottom” [22]) may have something to do with this, but it’s worth pausing on the question of how emotions can pervade a poem without a clearly defined subject to feel them. These poems suggest that longing, melancholy, despair, and fleeting joy can exist without an “I” as their subject. As I’ve discussed in my introduction, Rei Terada remarks on “the fact that destroying the illusion of subjectivity does not destroy emotion, that on the contrary, emotion is the sign of the absence of that illusion” (Terada 157). Terada advances a poststructuralist understanding of emotion as a form of “self-difference within cognition” (3) that renders the notion of a coherent subject predicated on cognition untenable. Emotion, in other words, registers a dissonance between experience and the subject, opening up a gap between how things feel and how they are supposed to feel. This literary theory of emotion explains how “Tuesday” can invoke nostalgia for anger so effectively without dramatizing a subject position.⁶⁶ The poem’s dispersed subjectivity in no way hampers its emotional force. The regular repetition, for example, of the phrase, “Days heap upon us,” (18-22) conveys a sad sense of time passing, even without staging a particular subject moving through time.

Such a rethinking of the relationships among emotion, language, and the subject seems integral to the very medium of landscape: “Landscape exerts a subtle power over people, eliciting a broad range of emotions and meanings that may be difficult to specify. This indeterminacy of affect seems, in fact, to be a crucial feature

⁶⁶ The affect of language and its relation to subjectivity is also explored by Riley in *Impersonal Passion: Language of Affect* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

of whatever force landscape can have” (Mitchell vii). Robertson picks up on the connections between feminist theories of the subject and those implicit in the medium of landscape, further heightening landscape’s challenge to the agency and even integrity of the active figure. *The Weather*, in short, is an experimental feminist cloudscape that redraws the lines between figure and ground, subject and object, past and present. Despite such destabilization, or perhaps because of it, emotions take over, becoming agential, without always originating in active subjects or even in the present, as I will argue in the next section.

II. Taking feminist subjectivity for “Seven Walks” in the urban landscape

Here, on the clipped margins of the century, in our regalia of mud-freckled linens, and with our satchel of cold provisions, we needed to prove to ourselves at least that although we had no doubt as to our lyric or suspended status, we were eager to be happy. We wanted to be the charmed recipients of massive energies. Why not? Our naïveté was both shapeless and necessary. We resembled a botched alfresco sketch. (*Soft Architecture* 233-234)

In the previous discussion of *The Weather*, I’ve argued primarily that the figure/ground distinction is blurred in the poems’ pastoral landscapes, with a resulting destabilization of fixed ontologies and emotional boundaries. In Robertson’s collection of essays and poetry, *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*, the construction of the lyric subject using inner/outer or

public/private metaphors, notably in relation to emotion, are reconfigured as well. In the collection's varied deployments of "Soft Architecture,"⁶⁷ the public sphere is domesticated and "decorated," while the private sphere is invaded by the public properties of history and language. The urban landscape in her work becomes ambiguously private (decorative, feminine, domestic) and public (the domain of political struggle) as these categories continue to be challenged in the feminist tradition.⁶⁸ In the collection's "Seven Walks" series of poems, it becomes clear that "inner" life is an effect of public structures of emotion and generic conventions. In contrast to the painterly pastoral landscapes of *The Weather* (whose source texts are "English meteorological description," from BBC shipping forecasts to Wordsworth), the "Seven Walks" are performances of the *flâneuse* walking in urban and peri-urban spaces, poeticizing the landscape.

Performing a plural lyric subjectivity that she calls the "lyric class" (*Soft Architecture* 232, 233), Robertson writes, "As the lyric class indeed we pertained to all that was lapsed or enjambed. Even our pathologies were those of a previous century" (233). The application of the terms "lapsed" and "enjambed" to figures walking in the landscape heightens the effect of their existence as linguistic and

⁶⁷ In this section I discuss the "Seven Walks," while the next section explores the term "Soft Architecture" in greater detail; essentially it is a playful term to describe Robertson's site-specific writing that considers the architecture of Vancouver in the broadest sense, including the role of "soft" materials used to decorate and personalize spaces.

⁶⁸ This argument is advanced by Joan W. Scott and Debra Keates in *Going Public: Feminism and the Shifting Boundaries of the Private Sphere*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004.

historical constructs. This diction disrupts any sense of realism. The notion that emotions can be historical, or anachronistic, rather than originating in the contemporary subject echoes in much of Robertson's work; for example, "The emotions that alighted on us were not all contemporary" ("Palinodes" 7).⁶⁹

"Seven Walks" performs a series of experiments in walking through urban landscapes as a plural poetic subject highly sensitive to the ways that these landscapes motivate and direct peregrinations. The passage excerpted at the beginning of this section describes a picnic in the park. In it, the picnickers become scenic accessories, part of the "botched alfresco sketch" that one can imagine seeing as a work in progress while strolling in the park. The picnickers are part of the scene of the park, even while simultaneously experiencing the scene. A botched sketch might be one that confuses the lines separating figure from ground by altering conventions of realism; it might, for example, be an allusion to the impressionism of Claude Manet's "Dejeuner sur l'herbe," a painting that was derided at the Paris Exhibition. The scene of this picnic is overtaken by the historical resonances of the landscape. Antique diction paints the scene; "cold provisions" are carried along, perhaps, for a nineteenth-century stroll in the park, but the picnickers' "lyric or suspended status" means that they belong to the placeless place of the utopian or the timeless time of the literary, haunted by historical diction. One reads poetry or historical fiction in the park, and the park takes on the character of the literature being read there, becoming a

⁶⁹ The historicity of emotion is explored in studies drawing on Raymond Williams' notion of "structures of feeling" and in the work of Sianne Ngai, Lawrence Grossberg, and Frederic Jameson, among others.

place that figures from many times can inhabit at once. Robertson suggests that there is no outside to the historical and cultural resonance of such spaces: “as we strolled through the park to accomplish our speculations always we wondered – were we inside or outside the diorama?” (*Soft Architecture* 239). A diorama is a landscape constructed for popular entertainment (like a park); it sets the scene in which we stroll, and we become part of that scene; like it, we are a mix of cultural construct and materiality, both scene and experience at once. Its use of landscape painting layered with three-dimensional elements gives it a lurid, low-art feel that suffuses the scene of the city park with its popular appeal. Walking in a park, we suspect that every possible layer of it is somehow simulacral. Such indeterminacy is a property of landscape itself; as Mitchell characterizes it, landscape is “both a represented and presented space, both a signifier and a signified, both a frame and what a frame contains, both a real place and a simulacrum, both a package and the commodity inside the package” (Mitchell 5).⁷⁰

This and the other “Walks” can be thought of as performatively produced landscapes in the tradition of Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, Louis Aragon’s *Le Paysan de Paris*, or Michel de Certeau’s “Walking in the City,” but with a feminist difference. Robertson is clearly continuing the work of Benjamin’s encyclopedic

⁷⁰ Indeed, in Robertson’s work, one could use “environment” sometimes interchangeably with “landscape” because of the collapse of the nature/culture distinction. I will further explore the implications for ecopoetics in the following chapter.

project of critical historiography and poetic social documentation, which he explains thus:

Empathy with the commodity is fundamentally empathy with exchange value itself. The *flâneur* is the virtuoso of this empathy. He takes the concept of marketability itself for a stroll. Just as his final ambit is the department store, his last incarnation is the sandwich-man. (Benjamin 448)

In Benjamin's disjunctive collection of literary and philosophical approaches to the city, the affective state of the *flâneur* plays a crucial role, as also seen in Baudelaire. Benjamin's *flâneur* feels an "intoxication of empathy" as he strolls that gives him insight into the life of the urban landscape (Benjamin 449). He is affected by the place in which he strolls, losing his self-direction to the movement and flux of the city's constant exchanges and transactions. Of course, it has been pointed out that aimless wandering requires leisure time, and hence a certain class status. In her continuation of Benjamin's project, Robertson brings gender to the equation, and with it other ways to empathize with the commodity that don't necessarily require class or gender privilege. After all, while a leisured *flâneur* may have the free time to circulate aimlessly as a subject, perhaps women (*especially* those lacking proper control of their time) might have an easier time empathizing with the commodity instead. As Luce Irigaray argues in "Le marché des femmes," ("Women on the Market") society is founded on the exchange of women, who have been figuratively and often literally circulated in exactly this way, as commodities, whether as prostitutes, wives, or

fashion objects; men as active subjects have exchanged women as symbolic tokens of value amongst themselves (Irigaray 167-185). To wander in the city as *flâneuse* is to call attention to the unequal levels of power over free time and movement in the urban landscape directing the movements of different bodies differently.⁷¹ While the figure of the business man, overly concerned with his perpetual busy-ness, is, for Benjamin, the inhabitant of the city least aware of its surfaces (perhaps because the city extends the power of such a subject, always ready-to-hand for his use), a marginalized person walking in the city might be the most able to see it, to see its flawed surfaces, precisely because it is not working for her and seldom allows her to believe she acting in complete freedom. Taking the concept of marketability for a stroll means both being the subject of, and subject to, the market, “Like free and not-free went walking” (Robertson “Palinodes” 5).

Given this history of figurative (and often literalized) oppression Irigaray outlines, why would feminism benefit from empathy with the commodity? Isn't the “progressive” thing to do to acquire the status of leisured subjects ourselves? Why not insist that women are agents, rather than objects, of exchange? This is what some forms of liberal feminism may argue, but such a strategy forfeits an understanding of our co-constitution with others around us that can be gained from feminist history.

⁷¹ In “The Invisible *Flâneur*,” Elizabeth Wilson argues that the *flâneur* is a mythical, self-deconstructing figure of male identity that “never really existed,” and that there could never be a female *flâneur* for this reason, despite the fact that the domestic sphere and the public sphere were never completely separate spheres. Janet Wolff, however, in “The Invisible *Flâneuse*?” considers the figure of the *flâneuse* as a possibility, having the potential to negotiate between public and private spheres.

This co-constitution applies to all subjects-in-the-making, and it better accounts for subjectivity than a notion of a self-made and self-identical subject with endless freedom to choose whatever he wants to do in the malleable and passive world around him. The use of feminine, nonhuman, and other abjected or outmoded elements in Robertson's "Walks" calls attention to the non-universality of poetic figures and their determination of and by their environs.

Another related approach to the poetics of walking in the urban landscape comes from Certeau's "Walking in the City," in which he argues that the everyday practice of walking in the city is a performative poetic practice of walkers, "whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban 'text' they write without being able to read it. [. . .] The paths that correspond in this intertwining, unrecognized poems in which each body is an element signed by many others, elude legibility" ("Walking in the City" 128). Certeau values this capacity of walking in the city to foil the plans of the city's architects, its investors and urban planners. Everyday people, who, after all, have to live there, can make the city confusingly dense with multiple levels of meaning and multiple intentionalities, confounding attempts to marshal the city's energies into development projects. Robertson's "Seven Walks" can be seen as the transcription of such a practice of walking into poetic practice, or the recognition of walking *as* poetry, taking into account the disjunctive and partially subconscious form it would take. But as I argue of Robertson's relation to Benjamin's *Arcades Project*,

walking in the city in the garb of gender makes a difference.⁷² Robertson makes use of what she deems the obsolete but persistent tropes of femininity as a specifically feminist resistance to the plan of the city's architects:

As a tactically uprooted use, deployment of the obsolete could cut short the feckless plot of productivity. When capital marks women as the abject and monstrous cyphers of both reproduction and consumption, our choice can only be to choke out the project of renovation. We must become history's dystopic ghosts, inserting inconsistencies, demands, misinterpretations, and weedy appetites into the old bolstering narratives: we shall refuse to be useful. ("How Pastoral" 280)

Here Robertson argues against aiding in the thoughtless or "feckless" pursuit of "productivity" as defined by a capitalist and sexist society; such productivity would entail the reproduction of the status quo. The tactic she advocates deploying is that of inhabiting the city in anachronistic or unproductive ways, becoming, in relation to such "productivity," "dystopic ghosts" who "refuse to be useful" to a "plot" we oppose. Walking in the city as a citizen for whom the streets are so familiar and useful as to be invisible is one thing; haunting the city streets in the guise of a woman, from within a marked category that has never described an autonomous or self-

⁷² And such a garb is not a constant nor is it always a choice; as Riley argues in *Am I That Name*, "it's not possible to live twenty-four hours a day soaked in the immediate awareness of one's sex" and yet when walking, one can be hailed into an awareness of one's gender, "positioned antagonistically as a woman-thing, objectified as a distortion" (96, 97)

enclosed human subject, is another thing entirely. It involves awareness of the construction of the urban landscape by the powers of its major and minor architects; it involves awareness, too, of the determination of one's legibility by others, in terms that cannot escape the system of gender.

Robertson's use of the trappings of femininity in her "Walks" calls attention to the gendering of the walker in the landscape (and of the landscape itself), disrupting the neutrality or non-specificity of the *flâneur*, while retaining from Benjamin a sense of the affective motivation and direction of the *flâneur/flâneuse* by the city, *by* others. This then, is not the "generic universal" human subject, nor, importantly, does the figure repeat the gestures, shapes, or representation of the traditional subject. The empathy of the wandering consciousness of Robertson's walkers in the city with objects of exchange does not reduce them to "literal figuration," as simple objects of exchange themselves; they maintain the self-difference at the origin that resists such an equation. Walking in the city, applying poetic attention to the failed utopian landscape, while trying to empathize with and "notice the economies that could not appear in money" (250), might be like this:

There we were, nudging the plentiful chimera of the foreground, maudlin and picturesque in our rosy waistcoats and our matinal etiquettes – please? – of course – if only – my pleasure – dawdling into the abstract streets. Or let us say that we were the scribbled creatures who received the morning's pronouns

and applied them quixotically to our persons. Perhaps morning simply helped us to feel somewhat pertinent. (227)

The urban landscape produces the halting movements of the “we” of the poem. Pronouns, as shifters, are open to an unstable set of connections, and “we” might be any collection of subjectivities. But far from being passive in relation to the environment, the multiple subject is involved in a process of textual production as well; even though they are received as public givens, the “morning’s pronouns” need to be applied to one’s “persons” in a self-fashioning and meaning-making process. The “plentiful chimera of the foreground” and the “scribbled creatures” confound figure and ground to make up a shifting urban landscape. The “Seven Walks,” one for each day of the week, are part of a larger project called “Soft Architecture,” to which I now turn, a project of feminist figuration that moves beyond critique and makes quite apparent that an awareness of the subject’s construction by received pronouns emphatically does not have the effect of inhibiting the poetic production of new figures.

III. Fabricating feminist figures and landscapes through “Soft Architecture”

Robertson has written catalogue essays for exhibits of art and architecture that she has attributed to the “Office for Soft Architecture,” some of which appear in this collection, and all of the poems and essays of this collection in some way advance the project of the “Office.” But what is “Soft Architecture”? In the liner to the collection,

the Office's mandate is described thus: "to construct propositions and reports for the advancement of a natural history of civic surface." This collection is made up of site-specific and occasional works (inasmuch as connection to a site is possible in a printed text). Its introduction locates its composition in a particular city and time:

The Office for Soft Architecture came into being as I watched the city of Vancouver dissolve into a fluid called money. Buildings disappeared into newness. I tried to recall spaces, and what I remembered was surfaces. Here and there money had tarried. The result seemed emotional. I wanted to document this process. I began to research the history of surfaces. I included my own desires in the research. In this way, I became multiple. I became money. (1)

In writing site-specific and occasional works (based in the constantly shifting cityscape of post-Expo '86 Vancouver) a multiple subject emerges, capable, like the *flâneur*, of "empathy with the commodity." This entails not simply becoming an object of exchange, but becoming "like money" in the same sense that landscape is a "medium of exchange between the human and the natural, the self and the other. As such, it is like money" (Mitchell 5).

Recalling Certeau's attribution of performative resistance to the practice of walking in the city, it is important to note that "Soft Architecture," in contrast to the relatively determinate practices of conventional architecture (typified, for example, in the Haussmanification of Paris), comprises multiform, under-the-radar tactics that

work as resistance to the logocentric power of property development. The practice of “Soft Architecture” encompasses multiple media, including scholarly essays, studies, manifestoes, photography, sociology, and more, often in some combination. Walking in the city, as for Aragon or Certeau, is a performative and productive action: “We walked through the soft arcade. We became an architect.” (13) Architects, in this usage, are not simply the practitioners of a profession that involves planning from on high, working from abstract to concrete while abjecting as much as possible the material contingencies of everyday life. Instead, “Soft Architecture” works with the textures and fabrics, the flawed and fraying surfaces, and the affects of the everyday: “We note that the holy modernism of the white room is draped and lined in its newness by labile counter-structures of moving silk, fur, leather, onyx, velvet.” (14) The term “counter-structure” indicates that the decorative project of “Soft Architecture” is an oppositional practice, aiming to slow the progress of triumphalist narratives represented here by the “modernism of the white room”. While such a “counter-structure” can usefully be explained in relation to Benjamin and Certeau, it can equally be placed in the tradition of the feminine decorative arts, or the affective labor of homemaking, as a form of counter-modernity.

Decorative excess, in “Soft Architecture,” works as a counter-tactic to the reproduction of a coherent, efficient, and rationalized modernity by the *logos* of urban architects. The “Office for Soft Architecture” engages in decorative landscaping with a difference; decoration leaves behind its secondary, low-art, crafty role and takes over the foreground, as in an Henri Matisse painting. Decoration becomes a force of

architecture, not secondary to but subversive of its plans. Domestic labor is the force of change in the poetic fabrication of everyday life. In the arguably counter-modern tradition of Gertrude Stein's "Tender Buttons," excessive domestic materiality clogs the text, impeding instrumental readings. Description of surfaces becomes an end in itself, rather than subordinate to action and event.

"Soft Architecture" is a decorative practice akin to landscape production, and it doesn't need to be done by a human agent; "*Rubus Armeniacus: A Common Architectural Motif in the Temperate Mesophytic Region*" treats an invasive species of blackberry bush as an urban architect that "insistently makes new hybrid architectures, weighing the ridgepoles of previously sturdy home garages and sheds into sway-backed grottoes, transforming chain link and barbed wire to undulant green fruiting walls, and sculpting from abandoned cement pilings Wordsworthian abbeys" (127). This undesirable, unsanctioned species has left its garden enclosure to become a force of change in the city, as the photographs that begin the essay attest.⁷³ The clean lines of peri-urban architecture, the garages and fences, are not only swagged and decorated, but are weighed down and eventually overcome by the blackberry bushes, turned into anachronistic and out-of-place architectural forms resembling "Wordsworthian abbeys." Economic decline and neglect in parts of Vancouver left behind by gentrification, in this essay, produce their own forms of resistance to modernization, operating without conscious design as a decorative counter-structure.

⁷³ For another photographic documentation of what could be called "Soft Architecture," the improvised dwellings and gardens of homeless communities, see Diana Balmori and Margaret Morton's *Transitory Gardens, Uprooted Lives*.

Although they are wrought by the power of money to transform parts of a city and neglect other parts, the blackberry bushes are as active in shaping the city's architecture as the most assiduous urban planners. The blackberries act rhizomatically to advance the agenda of counter-modernization; Robertson writes, "If architecture is entombed structure or *thanatos*, ornament is the frontier of the surface" (127).

Robertson contrasts the decorative and productive excess of the blackberries to the design principle advanced by Ruskin that would involve the "subordination of decoration to structure" (129).⁷⁴ An invasive pest becomes a force of *poesis*: "*Rubus Armeniacus* is an exemplary political decoration, a nutritious ornament that clandestinely modifies infrastructural morphology. Here affect invades the centre [. . .] *Rubus* shows us how to invent. This is the serious calling of style" (130).

Recognizing that landscaping is a force of ideology, Robertson considers an unanticipated byproduct of the nineteenth-century importation of exotic species to North America to be a source of anachronistic, out-of-place resistance to projects of modernization.

Other minor, decorative, and counter-modern architectural forms feature in this collection: shacks, fountains, reclaimed industrial sites, scaffolding, and an Arts and Crafts house all represent fabrications of everyday resistance. Rather than shedding the outmoded garb of historical surfaces, Robertson revels in these surfaces. In "Value Village Lyric," a poetic essay with a photographic component, she explores

⁷⁴ Ruskin advances a theory of the proper relation of decoration to materials and structure in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) and elaborated upon in his three-volume treatise on the art and architecture of Venice, *The Stones of Venice* (1851).

the historical, ideological, and social resonances of a used clothing emporium where “modernity greets the rag trade” (215). Robertson notes the strange temporality of clothes that were once modern fashion, but now exist as a disjunctive record of the past: “Here, theories are cheap. Cast-off Being dangles from the racks. Under the harsh, flat light of fluorescent tubing, all labels and movements converge in a convenient and accessible archive. This is the mirror image of the avant-garde: like an unraveling shawl, it recedes from its economy” (215). The abjection, or the “collapse of the ideal” (216) caused by the discarding of these clothes (along with the identities and personae they once formed) brings them all together into something like a museum of past decades’ fashions. Visiting this museum allows the poet to make something new out of the artifacts of failed inventions: “we luxuriate in the unoriginality of our desires and identities. They are clearly catalogued. They unravel back to a foundational boredom. The proliferation of failures resides for a moment on the frayed surface. In the tedium of failure we glimpse the new” (218). The poet’s role in this archive is not to determine the origins of the text/files, but to use them to construct the conditions for livable futures: “From random documents of uncertain provenance, unstable value, and unraveling morphology, we produce new time.” (218)

Perhaps because of Robertson’s invocation of Benjamin, some critics have tended to approach her work from a Marxian standpoint, inquiring to what degree the poetry functions to carry out an interrogation of capitalism. Indeed she shares with Benjamin a critique of the category of the aesthetic as naturalized ideology, as well as

a concern with the powers of everyday life. But as I've noted, Robertson significantly reworks Benjamin and Certeau through a feminist and even posthumanist practice, and her concerns seem to have as much to do with constructing a feminist poetics as with anti-capitalist critique. In an interview, Robertson says that she is interested in exploring "not only the Marxian sense of socially constituted subjects, but additionally – sonorously, inhumanly constituted material subjects. What of the subject is always inhuman?" (Fierle-Hedrick 53). Recognizing the difference that dwells within and alongside socially constructed subjects enriches her work, moving into the realm of feminist and even eco-poetic figuration.

Several critics have related Robertson's feminism to her poetics; Jennifer Scappettone writes, for example, "If the current matrix is the universal solvent of capital, Robertson's strategic feminine essentialism has to take a different form from Luce Irigaray's: it isn't morphological but situational" (Scappettone 73). Robertson herself in an interview expresses more of an affinity for "experimental feminism" (Fierle-Hedrick 46) than for avant-gardism for its own sake; she carefully lists a number of women experimental writers from Vancouver to counter the self-canonization of an all-male school of experimental writing in that city. Even setting aside the question of strategic theoretical orientation or school of poetry, I would argue that Robertson's poetic oeuvre can be treated as performing the work of feminist philosophy. Her method of writing is usually to begin, she explains, with a research question or concept arising from feminist concerns, and to proceed through close attention to language to do formal poetic experimentation. Robertson's poems

perform the affective work of *poesis*, acting as feminist worldings that reorient us in language.

Landscape, in particular (urban or rural) is deeply unsettled and rethought in her work. And through landscape place, the subject, and the feminine are rethought as well. Robertson's poetic landscapes complicate many of the gendered divisions that have structured landscape: public/private, inner/outer, self/other, and figure/ground. Description and decoration take over, displacing action, plot, events and making room for a recursive feminist figure: "Landscapes are not eras; they never finish / Because it doesn't finish I can be present" ("Palinodes" 10). The "I" that can be present is not a traditional figure of the feminine. Femininity, while used consciously as a trope, overflows the bounds of its possible uses in traditional figuration; the landscape, the pastoral, and the feminine refuse to be deployed as material for use by triumphal narratives. In the refusal of hierarchical structure (and the consequent privileging of ongoingness and decorative excess), the poetics of these works construct livable feminist habitats. Not much "happens" in Robertson's landscapes. And yet something takes place. Feminist subjectivity, I would suggest, *takes place* (in the sense both of happening and claiming space as place). A feminist figure emerges with/in a new landscape.

In my reading of Robertson's poetics I've hinted toward the ways in which I think Robertson develops a model of ecopoetics. Jonathan Skinner and many others

have defined ecopoetics as a form of “house making” in language,⁷⁵ and Robertson’s concern with the interrelation of domestic economy and the outer world arguably make her a practitioner of ecopoetics. Her focus on nonhuman agency in the construction of landscapes and cities further aligns her work with ecopoetics, and in the following chapter I hope to demonstrate more connections between feminist poetics and ecopoetics in the work of Brenda Hillman, connections I hope will recall similar moves in Robertson’s work as well.

⁷⁵ Jonathan Skinner writes in the inaugural issue of his journal *Ecopoetics* (2001) that ecopoetics engages “with more-than human life” as well as the “materiality of language,” and that “the first source needs to be outside, starting from our houses or cities out into whatever, especially whatever immediately, surrounds us.” (106)

Chapter Five:

SAD in the Anthropocene: Brenda Hillman's Eco-poetics of Affect

There was a hurt that lay between two colors.

a shade not resolved in the mind

because it is the mind. ("Dioxin Sunset," *Cascadia* 24)

These lines illustrate what I propose to call Brenda Hillman's eco-poetics of affect, a poetics I will anchor to the simultaneously environmental and affective concept of SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder). To the range of uses of affect in feminist poetics I explore in this dissertation, Hillman's work introduces an environmental subjectivity. As in Robertson's work, Hillman's use of affect serves to disperse subjectivity, and in this case, calls attention to the interwoven harms to environment and person in the Anthropocene.⁷⁶ While Robertson is interested in the weather as part of the fabric of human life, however, Hillman is interested in the disordered weather of climate change and the ways it tears the fabric of human life.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ This term, coined by Paul Crutzen and now widely accepted, describes the period of geological history in which humanity registers as a geological force. In "The Oedipal Logic of Ecological Awareness," Morton explains, "Quite simply, this is the period in which human history intersects decisively with geological time." (7)

⁷⁷ Morton notes the different role weather now plays in daily life: "Global warming is palpably weird – gone for instance is the phatic, world-establishing conversation between strangers at a bus stop about weather, because in any weather conversation, someone will either mention global warming or try not to. [. . .] A gap has opened in between these raindrops falling on my head and the invisible yet real actions [. . .] of climate change . . .] The *weirdness* of global warming is precisely its reality but its incapacity for being located as constantly present. It defies the metaphysics of

Subjectivity is unsettled in both poets' works, but the interrelation of subject and world leads to more unsettling affects in Hillman. In the above description of a sunset, "a hurt" appears "between two colors." This "hurt" is an affect rather than a determinate emotion because it is not "resolved in the mind"; it remains vaguely blended with colors and even with "the mind" itself in a kind of synesthesia, not yet "resolved," narrativized, or made sense of (affect and emotion, as Brian Massumi argues, in this way "pertain to different orders" [Massumi 27]). A negative affect, "hurt" may indicate a harm being done *by* something in the environment, dioxin, *to* the environment, but there is only an apprehension, not a complete knowledge of the kind or extent of this "hurt."

My introduction has proposed a definition of poetry as language with a heightened capacity to affect and to be affected. The affective potential of poetic language can include a capacity to affect and be affected by things and by the environment. Poetic language is an attunement to things and to environment that can be helpful in understanding an era of increasingly intense interrelation of human and environment known as the Anthropocene. In the Anthropocene, human populations have become a geological force and it has thus become difficult to separate human actor from passive environment (as the above passage suggests), a distinction that may once have seemed *relatively* clearer. I agree with Marcella Durand's following characterization of the role of poetry in this changed environment:

presence, but not in a way that encourages us to think that reality is simply a (human) construct." ("Oedipal Logic" 14)

Things have changed since the last burst of ecological poetry in the 1960s and 1970s, and I use the word things partly in the sense that the French poet Francis Ponge used it: exterior non-human objects neglected as subjects, that when concentrated on intensely, can yield extraordinarily lucid writing. Traditional nature poetry, *a la* the human-subject meditating upon a natural object-landscape-animal that is supposed to function as a kind of doorway into meaning of the human subject's life, is no longer possible. 'Appearing to serve a personally expressive function, the vocabulary of nature screens a symbolic appropriation of the Land. Her cut sublimity grafts to the Human,' says Lisa Robertson. Nature has changed from a perceptually exploitable Other – most easily compared to a book to be decoded by the (human) reader – to something intrinsically affected by humans. We ourselves are the wilderness destroying the very systems of which we were a part, in a role we utterly do not understand. (Durand 116-7)

As Durand's formulation suggests, Hillman shares a sense with Robertson that rather than looking for resources to be metaphorically exploited ("a perceptually exploitable Other") a poet needs to abandon the (gendered) concept of Nature and resolve that "The world is not raw material for humanization" (Haraway 593); contesting this definition of nature as passive backdrop involves finding a materially-grounded poetics that demonstrates how this has never been a full or satisfactory account of the world. This chapter contextualizes Hillman's poetry within this same set of concerns as Robertson's, while remaining sensitive to the very different styles, themes, and

approaches of the two poets. Hillman has been called a “lyric postmodern” poet (Shepherd), as has Robertson.⁷⁸ More than Robertson’s, however, Hillman’s work is concerned with entropy, with disordered and disintegrating systems (whether emotional or environmental). While Robertson is interested in the role of weather in shaping subjectivity, Hillman is interested in our shaping by the disordered weather of climate change, noting, for example, in *Practical Water*, “Unusually warm global warming day out” (5). For Hillman, the realization of our interconnectedness with the environment is less utopian (ironically or otherwise), than forced upon us by our role in climate change. Hillman repeatedly stages attempts at healing or wholeness that remain unsuccessful in light of the equally damaged environment in which healing might take place. As such, she is very much a poet of the Anthropocene.

SAD provides a strong figure amongst our available “semiotic technologies” (Haraway 579) for understanding “our” place within the Anthropocene. While Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD for short) appears in the DSM IV (as a specifier of a Major Depressive Episode), my intention in invoking it as a way to read Hillman’s poetry is certainly not to treat it as a pathology through which to understand the author, but rather as a way to conceptualize how the poetry approaches the affective situation of the human in his/her environment in the Anthropocene. I will be making use of SAD as one of the possible “material-semiotic fields of meaning” (Haraway

⁷⁸ Stylistically, Hillman’s work draws more on the disjunctive methods of Language poetry than Robertson’s, and I feel that Robertson fits more neatly within the “lyric postmodern” label. Scalapino is another poet who could be thus labeled, and the differences amongst the three poets’ styles indicate that there is a wide spectrum of effects produced by a fragmenting of the lyric subject.

Species 588) through which to read fractured subjectivity, and it is worth beginning with a look at how it is constructed as a disorder. SAD is defined as a pattern of depression thought to be caused by an inordinate sensitivity to seasonal changes (in light or in temperature, for example). As with many “disorders,” one might ask what the “normal” state of affairs could possibly be in which a living organism would remain unaffected by changes in its environment. Nevertheless, on a relative scale of imperviousness, those with SAD are said to be quite sensitive to seasonal changes, to a degree that can be disabling. People with SAD (or who *are* SAD, to follow the persistent punning of headlines) are more susceptible to being affected by the environment. Today, however, disordered affect might be the more sensitive or appropriate response to seasonal changes that are increasingly out-of-order. What is the non-pathological or appropriate response to a silent spring? To violent and unpredictable weather patterns? To the flooding of a coastal city? Perhaps the disordered response is the appropriate response to environmental destruction. Disordered seasons can cause disordered affect.

And the disorder goes both ways. I want to explore the term in another possible light; SAD might also be used to describe the state of the environment itself in the Anthropocene, and the environment, like people with SAD, may in fact have a heightened sensitivity to the pressures of human population. The ability to affect and be affected belongs to people in/and their environment, and both sides might be considered disordered in the current state of affairs. In poems like “Dioxin Sunset,” above, harm is distributed and difficult to isolate on the side of either people or the

environment, since they are intertwined and both at risk. For example, a Spanish mission, for Hillman, is found in an area of California where “the earth’s throat was sore” (24), as if the earth itself had formed a wound where human histories have collided; exceeding the pathetic fallacy (as I’ve discussed in Robertson’s work), this statement distributes hurt amongst people and the earth.

Hillman has addressed the affective intertwining of human and hurt environment intensively in her most recent series; she has written three of an intended four collections of poetry, each modeled on one of the elements: earth, air, fire, and water. The elements, in these collections, are treated not as passive or inert matter through which life can move and take form, but as active, or “vibrant” matter. Jane Bennett theorizes matter as having vitality; she explains, “By ‘vitality’ I mean the capacity of things – edibles, commodities, storms, metals – not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (Bennett viii). This is the theory of matter underlying Hillman’s approach to the elements; in focusing on earth, air, fire, or water, she allows each element to take on agency and to form the linguistic and physical environment in which actions are made possible or meaningful. In this approach, then, language itself is part of “vibrant matter,” and “Things are material, specific, non-self-identical, and semiotically active” (*Species* 250). Working, like Bennett, with the theory of lively matter advanced by Bruno Latour, Haraway explains, “Never purely themselves, things are compound; they are made up of combinations of other things coordinated to magnify power, to make something

happen, to engage the world, to risk fleshly acts of interpretation.” (*Species* 250).

Also in a Latourian mode, Timothy Morton argues that things are, like and through language, “self-assembling sets of interrelations in which information is directly inscribed [. . .] nothing but relationality, deep down” (Morton “Queer Ecology” 277).

I argue that this understanding of matter is operating in Hillman’s poetics.

Cascadia (earth) employs “geological syntax” to layer personal rifts, faults, and depressions with geological ones; *Pieces of Air in the Epic* breathes lyric into spaces between lines and words of the epic genre; and *Practical Water* uses flowing syntax and “hydraulics” to explore California’s geography and history. More than conceits, the elements become organizing principles that determine the form of the poems. Hillman’s use of the elements is a way of letting the environment “in” to the poems, blurring the inside/outside distinction in the process. Calling our attention to the material structure of lines of poetry, as many of the poems do through unconventional spacing, attunes the reader to the environment in the form of sounds, structures, and space. Far from producing classical symmetry, Hillman’s use of the four elements draws attention to the contamination of each by the other, and of all by non-classical elements such as dioxin and gasoline.⁷⁹ Hillman works with a theory that affect belongs equally to the nonhuman world. What Bennett calls “affective catalysts,” which can include all things, matter, even language, are all involved in the production of affect; she explains, “This power is not transpersonal or intersubjective

⁷⁹ These two familiar chemicals are, sadly, familiar enough in their relation to the earth and to the body that they have come to stand for all pollutants, some of which are lesser known.

but impersonal, an affect intrinsic to forms that cannot be imagined (even ideally) as persons [. . .] Organic and inorganic bodies, natural and cultural objects (these distinctions are not particularly salient here) *all* are affective” (Bennett xii). In highlighting how we are made up of and surrounded by the elements, Hillman creates a poetics that demonstrates an openness to being affected (often depressed) by the environment, rather than deploying its elements in the service of a transcendent meaning, as Romantic poetry is often considered to do. Poetry is a medium that heightens the openness of language to things and to environment, as well as the ability of language to affect and to be affected by its elements.

Writing within a language-oriented poetics of environment, and not always in a lyric mode, Hillman fits into a more recent movement of ecopoetics (inaugurated in 2001 with Jonathan Skinner’s journal of the same name), as opposed to a tradition of Romantic or post-Romantic nature poetry. Ecopoets are not a self-proclaimed school of poetry, but tend to distinguish themselves from nature poets based on their interest in foregrounding the constructed or linguistic element of poetry (always of course present, but somehow not as important to nature poets interested in mountaintop epiphanies). Evelyn Reilly, for example, notes that ecopoets are influenced by the feminist experimental poetry and theory of Lyn Hejinian and Joan Retallack, and defines ecopoetics as something that happens “as poets participate in realizing the full implications of our position as language-using animals in a world composed of interaction” (Reilly “Eco-Noise” 261). At a recent conference at Berkeley on Ecopoetics (in February 2013), Hillman said that she found disjunctive, Language-

influenced writing to suit both daily life and western geology. Even more generally, such writing suits a time of ecological crisis in which continuities are being severed (through loss of species and biodiversity for example) and interconnections both become apparent and need to be rethought and remade.⁸⁰ The influence of feminist Language poets is indeed pronouncedly apparent in Hillman's work, and she is able to draw on a long tradition in feminist experimental writing in the service of forging an eco-poetics. This line of influence demonstrates that when feminist Language writing pioneered ways of deconstructing male/female, inner/outer, and nature/culture divides, it also opened up ways to write about the self/environment divide, hence the influence of this work on eco-poetics.

I. *Cascadia*: Shaky Ground, Shaken Subject

"Physical earth reveals itself as persons" ("The Shirley Poem," *Cascadia* 36)

The first installment of Hillman's elements series, *Cascadia* (2001), uses what she calls "geological syntax" (a layered, halting, deliberate syntax) to explore how language, humans, and the earth are mutually shaped and shaping. This collection ranges across the geography and geology of California, exposing prehistoric and historical layers that have built up to create its physical and ideological terrain. Hillman uses figures of earthquakes, faults, mining, agriculture, and toxins to explore the geological interrelations of humans (including the poetic subject) and the land.

⁸⁰ Eco-poetics, a relatively new term first developed and refined in Jonathan Skinner's journal *ecopoetics*, is defined by near consensus in contrast to Nature poetry, as having more interest in language and showing the influence of Language poetry.

This interrelation, here, cannot be mistaken for any kind of utopian notion of harmony or balance; poetic subject and interrelated land are troubled, unstable, and wounded. Morton argues that ideological effects such as the appearance of “natural” harmony can be effects of time scale: “Things only look as if they fit, because we don’t perceive them on an evolutionary or a geologic time scale” (“Queer Ecology” 279). Ideologies involving manifest destiny and the California dream can tend to appear as natural features of the of the landscape in California; “geological syntax” exposes the faults in this kind of thinking. Hillman thus contrasts alien and inhuman time scales with daily, all-too-human time scales, in order to de-naturalize our relation to the land.

A striking effect of relating lived experience to geology is that temporalities collide. *Cascadia* (named after the sea that once formed much of California) imagines inhuman biological and geological time scales. The earth is addressed, for example, in the lines, “After a million years you drew a breath // Paused till it seemed more accurate / Not to” (“Moths Walking Along” 67). In these lines, the addressee is granted the capacity to pause, to breathe, and to decide on its own movements. If the earth here is being addressed as “you,” a traditional way of reading these lines would be to label them an example of anthropomorphism and move on, having “read” the poem by identifying the trope. However, as I have discussed in the previous chapter, de Man’s discussion of anthropomorphism demonstrates that the trope is far from a settled, one-for-one exchange, and more like an unsettling set of ontological questions. The ontology of human and that of supposedly inanimate thing are

destabilized in the trope, ultimately demonstrating the indeterminacy of both terms. In this case, the address to a “you” who can pause for “a million years” casts the addressee as a different kind of being, as if an evolving species were able to maintain a single consciousness and decide when to act on a geological or evolutionary time scale. Addressing the earth in this way leads to a transformation in thought and temporality for the poetic subject as well as for the anthropomorphized earth.

The poem “Sediments of Santa Monica” illustrates how profoundly the poetic subject is recast in relation to geological time. The poem takes as its intertext Matthew Arnold’s 1867 “Dover Beach,” a canonical English poem known for its assessment of its own historical time through a contemplation of the landscape. An informal version of a glosa, a poetic form that repeats verbatim and then expands upon lines of an original poem, “Sediments” intersperses italicized lines from “Dover Beach,” “*Ah love let us be true to one another*” (*Cascadia* 3) with its own lines, with the effect of fragmentation and careful reworking:⁸¹

Ah love The century

Had become a little drippy at the end

⁸¹ In *Hologram: A Book of Glosas*, P.K. Page describes the glosa as “the opening quatrain taken from another poet; followed by ten-line stanzas, their concluding lines taken consecutively from the quatrain; their sixth and ninth lines rhyming with the borrowed tenth. Used by the poets of the Spanish court, the form dates from the late 14th and early 15th century. It has not been popular in English.” (9) *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry & Poetics* calls the glosa “any poem expanding on the theme presented in the opening stanza and usually repeating one or more lines of that stanza.” While Hillman is not using this exact form or meter, she borrows from the glosa the notion of incorporating a well-known line of canonical poetry into one’s own poem and thinking through or reworking its premises.

We're still growing but the stitches hurt *Let us be*

True to one another for the world (3)

This line never allows the prepositional phrase “for the world” to be completed in Arnold’s manner. Rather than determining the world to have “neither joy, nor love, nor light / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain” (Arnold 33-4) as in “Dover Beach,” Hillman’s glosa leaves this line hanging, in indeterminate relation to “us” whose “stitches hurt.” Should we be true to one another “for the world,” (for its sake?), or has the line been cut off due to the open-ended question of what the world is or does? Hillman’s glosa departs from Arnold in that it does not stage a scene of human viewers beholding the “world” pensively through a window, from above, but distributes watching, affect, and agency: “A left margin watches the sea floor approach // It takes 30 million years / It is the first lover” (*Cascadia* 3). Compared to Arnold’s “Ah love,” (29) addressed to the beloved who is exhorted to “Come to the window” (6) and view the scene outside framed by it, the “first lover” here is the sea itself. No longer the object of contemplation invoked by the human lover in his plea to the beloved, the sea has the agency and the feelings of a lover, but acts in geological time. “A left margin” (*Cascadia* 3) here does the watching, immediately drawing our attention to the book itself, to the directionality of a reader’s gaze.

Such attention to the space and material of the page is an example of what Morton calls “ecomimesis,” a term he defines thus: “Ecomimesis involves a poetics

of *ambience*. Ambience denotes a sense of a circumambient, or surrounding, *world*' (Morton 33). And the surrounding world, as Morton goes on to argue, involves the page itself in its material presence:

Notice how the black marks on this page are separated from the edge by an empty margin of blank paper? When ecomimesis points out the environment, it performs a medial function, either at the level of content or at the level of form. *Contact* becomes *content*. Ecomimesis interrupts the flow of an argument or a sequence of narrative events, thus making us aware of the atmosphere "around" the action or the environment in which or about which the philosopher is writing [. . .] This undermines the normal distinction we make between medium as atmosphere or environment – as a background or "field" – and medium as a material thing – something in the foreground. In general ambient poetics seeks to undermine the normal distinction between background and foreground. (Morton 38)

Ecomimesis, then, is an intensification of the arguably ever-present dynamic of language in which it "lets in" the environment and makes clear that the subject's interior is permeable, because formed by, the supposed exterior, the environment. Like Hillman's poem, "Dover Beach" involves allusions to human history and complex reflections upon moods and emotions that change with the zeitgeist; however, Hillman's glosa highlights a difference in the degree of separability of viewer from viewed. Rather than Arnold's Victorian figure contemplating the

seascape outside of the window in a way that keeps viewer separate from viewed landscape, the directionality of the gaze is mixed up, confounding the background/foreground distinction: “A left margin watches the watcher from Dover // After the twentieth century these cliffs / Looked like ribbons on braids or dreads” (*Cascadia* 3). Traits normally used for human self-fashioning are used in the description of the “cliffs.” A distinctly twenty-first century, postmodern mixing of sublime and ridiculous, of viewed landscape and human tourist, results. There can be no cosmetic clearing of the beaches of human presence for detached contemplation, as the human population has become thoroughly interwoven with the conditions of observation and even with the physical characteristics of the beach (including the rising sea levels and temperatures and the plastic that washes ashore). And affect is correspondingly confused; how to feel, exactly, about the human-saturated aesthetic of “these cliffs”? Although this separation of viewer from viewed landscape (or of culture from nature) has never been complete or absolute, it is one that seems even less tenable in the Anthropocene.

“El Niño Orgonon” uses another form of “geological syntax,” casting the ocean in an agential role in relation to language and climate change: “the ocean has decided to rearrange / its syntax” (4). The horizon of the visible and thinkable world, in this poem, is produced in a material-semiotic process in which language is indeterminately mixed with the “outside” world: “A horizon is a / type of sentence unmaking syntax” (4). Weather in disarray can only be written as a “sentence unmaking syntax”; ecomimesis involves recognition of environmental systems in

disarray by allowing them to participate in authoring such disarray: “Weather taught / you to write funny. When it stops / being wrecked, we’ll write normally” (5). Climate change can be approached as syntactical rearrangement, but at the same time, Hillman reminds us of the role of human actions in climate change: “They could have / turned off air-conditioning as they climbed / the hills, we could have been // less comfortable in hotels” (5). Responsibility for climate change is thus linked to a technology that Hillman wants us to notice; in other words, failing to notice the source of coolness in a room as coming from an air conditioner allows a person easily to continue to contribute to climate change. Calling attention to air conditioners is akin to calling attention to the technology of language in that such a move makes it more difficult to allow it to hide or naturalize unequal relations. Relational action that works against climate change will involve, first, recognition of the active role things and technologies like language play in any such change.

The central figure of “El Niño Orgonon” is “El Niño” or “the boy,” indeterminately both a (human?) child and a way of figuring an out-of-the-ordinary weather pattern, while “Orgonon” refers to a vitalist theory of a universal “life-force” or “orgone energy” proposed in the 1930s by psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich. While his theory is disregarded today, there is a sense in which his theory remains, for example, in meteorology when it relies on figurations like “El Niño” to conceptualize weather patterns as motivated as if by a kind of life-force.⁸² However, “El Niño”

⁸² The term El Niño was first used by Peruvian fishermen in the late 1800s and referred to the warm current appearing off the coast of Ecuador and Peru around

remains figural in this poem, and Hillman's form of materialism corresponds more closely with Bennett's contention that "impersonal affect or material vibrancy is not a spiritual supplement or 'life force' added to the matter said to house it. Mine is not a vitalism in the traditional sense; I equate affect with materiality, rather than posit a separate force that can enter and animate a physical body" (Bennett viii). Hillman models a form of material vibrancy that is not supernatural, like the one that Bennett outlines; rather than a spiritual life-force, "El Niño" is a construct involving both figuration and material changes, that is credited with mobilizing climate change. In this poem, Hillman adds to this meteorological understanding of "El Niño" by figuring the agency and motivation of the environment through its co-constituted inhabitant, a literal and figurative boy who poignantly "wants his ocean to stop melting" (5). "El Niño" is both weather and child, so interrelated that "the boy plays insane / music in its [the weather's] head" (5). "El Niño," the boy, is SAD; he is both made up of a disordered weather pattern (a seasonal disorder), and equally he is in a state of affective disorder as he mourns the losses that he creates and entails.

Another way of figuring tensions, conflicts, and fractures within both the land and the human subject is through the figure of the fault line. Faults are explored at length as anthropo-geographical sites of tension in "A Geology" and "Cascadia," which bookend the collection, both based on California road trips. In the long poem

Christmas. Perhaps thinking of the weather pattern as a kind of life force derives from the fact that it was originally tied to the livelihood of people who depended on understanding the currents for fishing. Drastic shifts in weather pattern can undermine the conditions upon which life comes to depend.

“A Geology,” a modern-day road trip follows travelers who are quitting drugs and seeking healing as they range over the terrain of California, encountering its history through its geology. Observation of features developed in “geological time” is layered with the immediacy of the feelings of addiction and recovery. In Morton’s analysis of the poem, geology and the addiction narrative are inseparable; “It is impossible to determine which layer has priority,” or which layer is, “to use a geological figure, the bedrock.” (*Ecology* 42) For the addicts, “What it felt like to have been a subject” (“A Geology” 14) is a faint memory; they realize in a number of ways that the drugs have more agency than they do. The drugs are described as quitting them. “What it felt like to have been a subject,” further, is echoed in the last line of the long poem, “What it felt like to have been earth” (14). The earth, in other words, may have felt whole and separable from “a subject” with a sense of integrity; as that integrity has crumbled in the self-unmaking of addiction and recovery, the “earth” becomes affectively mixed up with the fragments of the former subject in another instance of SAD.

Hillman is aware of the problem of the overuse of the language of earthquakes as metaphors for emotional upheaval; in “A Geology” she notes wryly that it is “Tempting to pun on the word fault” (14). Risking and ultimately avoiding the cliché and moralism that might have come along with the term “fault,” she develops the full implications of this link between geology, affect, and language, ultimately rejecting metaphor in favor of a more literal material link between earth and language. The fault, after all indicates the place where a geological event caused geological time to intersect with human-scale time (note the resonance here with the Anthropocene).

California's fault lines are treated as composing the land: "There are six major faults, there are skipped / verbs, there are more little / thoughts in California" (8); "A california // is composed of moving toward, away, or past; a / skin is not separate; a poem is // composed of all readings of it" (10). The metaphorical overlaps with a gesture toward the literal; the land literally composes itself, independently of human design by movement "toward, away, or past" its own parameters. This material process is only encountered through the fold of language, in which "composition" involves the figural; however, "composition" here recognizes an agency and even authorship other than human. In these lines, California's fault lines give it the agency to compose and to construct the verbs, the thoughts and the syntax of the poem, which is "composed of all readings of it." The way in which the land composes itself by moving "toward, away, or past" determines the ways we can move through it, and lays out the range of possible readings and interpretations:

The number of faults in middle California

is staggering – that is, we stagger

over them till it's

difficult to follow our own. Each tremor

is the nephew of a laugh – ("A Geology" 12)

Tremors, emanating indeterminately from the body or from the earth, are a form of affect in that they are not only of dispersed or indeterminate origin, but they are felt

before being folded into interpretation. The “nephew of a laugh” is some kind of affective state, but not part of any kind of clear emotional narrative. A kin to laughter and its aftershock, this new affective state begins in the earth and travels through the body, as affect, not yet available to conscious interpretation. We ask, “did you feel that?” before we decide whether we have felt an earthquake or whether it is “just us.”

Fault lines and fractures are represented pictorially in the breaks through and between words in the poems. “Hydraulic Mining Survey” is laid out like geological layers. It has a section printed sideways that seems to be about mountaintop removal: “Whole cliffsides moved in salmon paths” (8) is printed sideways. This manmade fault line is shown pictorially, as is the following one from the poem “Cascadia”: “The *I* caused flagrant slipping / *Sing sank sunk* in the Something-ocene” (55). Here Hillman hints at the question of the Anthropocene (as a new and debated designation, the “Something-ocene”), while again relating linguistic to material shifts in the earth.⁸³ In “Pre-uplift of the Sierra” the fault line is figured as a “palm being read” and as a “heartline,” (46) both metaphors that attempt to read lines in the body or in the earth to tell the future (when will the fault slip?) and indicators of feelings that remain below the surface and not in the subject’s control. Through these fault metaphors depression takes on both affective and geological senses; when “A piece of the left margin slipped under the sea” (50) the earth becomes depressed, as is further brought out in the lines, “Yes by marking on white / The mindless happiness // Yes

⁸³ Some initially maintained that the current geological era is the late Holocene and that there has not been enough of a change to warrant naming an epochal shift; hence “Something-ocene.”

then a crater of yeses / A mindless mindless depression” (51). Mindlessly, the earth sinks, depressed, and feels SAD.

Along with faults, another layer of the earth that concerns Hillman is the layer of toxins and pollution in the atmosphere and biomass that, though human-made, have become a problem of geological proportions. A toxin or contaminant in the environment is “matter out of place” to an even greater degree than dirt (to echo Mary Douglas’ formulation).⁸⁴ Bennett calls for more attention to these matters: “My aspiration is to articulate a vibrant materiality that runs alongside and inside humans to see how analyses of political events might change if we gave the force of things more due. How, for example, would patterns of consumption change if we faced not litter, rubbish, trash, or ‘the recycling,’ but an accumulating pile of lively and potentially dangerous matter?” (Bennett viii) “Dioxin Promenade” is among the poems of this collection to grapple with the inhuman timeframe as well as the “lively and potentially dangerous matter” of environmental pollution. Environmental toxins in the earth (especially dioxin), Styrofoam, plastic, and oil are all treated as problems for any potential for balance that may have been promised by a theory of the elements. In elemental theory, health of the body and the land can be achieved through the right balance of earth, air, fire, and water, putting the elements in their proper place and in proper relation.

⁸⁴ While treating dirt as “matter out of place” highlights the culturally relative nature of the “matter” of dirt (which can be composed of almost anything), the categories of toxin and pollutant, too, exist in *relation* to the species and ecosystems they harm; they are not otherwise distinct elements.

In this poem Hillman implies that such balance cannot always be achieved, and that metaphorical comparisons of toxins and pollutants to states of the body don't work. The poem attempts a simile and fails: dioxin is "like" dance steps, "but dancesteps / won't build up over time" (22). Although it is not "like" the body, dioxin "likes" the body: "Dioxin / likes breast milk" and it "stays in a body // seven years, a lump forms in / the friendly tissue near her heart" (22). Similes work in sinister ways in the poem's understanding of environmental contaminants. Again, temporalities collide, as the human scale of the body, so ready to hand, fails to provide a relation to or an understanding of an element relatively new to the environment.

In "Dioxin Promenade," as in "Dioxin Sunset", dioxin cannot be "resolved" in the body any more than it can be "resolved in the mind". It cannot be broken down and eliminated quickly enough, but builds up in a process similar to the building up of mercury in the ecosystem or of CO² in the atmosphere. Dioxin's long half-life interferes with and changes the life-span of an organism, making the question, "What is the half-life of having one?" (46) (i.e. having a life) difficult to answer. And the illnesses caused by elements like dioxin lead to a melancholic question: "or you life tired of being cured // How many layers / Of giving up are there" (25).

The "half-life" treated here thematically, further, takes form through stanzas structured as if by such principles as geological layering and the breaking down of form over time. For example, the following lines demonstrate the form taken by "geological syntax":

It's appropriate to discuss features when we speak of California,

daylight's treatment of a sudden

movement in rock. It pretended not to mind. You

passed him on the path. Miocene lava

smiled as it ordered the darker

color to sit down. (9)

These lines proceed slowly, layered like the solid strata of rock that betray a “sudden / movement in rock”; sudden, that is, on a geological scale, yet slow from a human perspective. It is the contrast between the intimate account, woven throughout this poem, of the excruciatingly slow process of quitting smoking and geological time that brings into focus the temporality of change in the earth's crust. The concept of a “half-life” is also modeled in the way the lines begin with a more completely formed part of a sentence and then break down into parts of a sentence. Here we can witness a kind of half-life of phrases in which the breakdown of the sentence opens gaps that create indeterminacy. The gaps also contain fragments of the personal, like intrusions in rock that bring one temporality into focus through contrast with another. The movement between highly personalized and depersonalized observations brings the two temporalities into focus through jarring contrast. At the same time, affect refuses to stay put on one side of this division. “It pretended not to mind” and “Miocene / lava smiled” in an affective transfer that unsettles the normal division of observing subject from observed landscape, allowing a contrast between human and geological

temporalities. “A Geology,” further, is a long poem of seven pages, and the duration of its unfolding seems important to the play of temporality it is able to create.

Another use of the temporality of the “half-life” in a contemplation of the permanence of environmental pollutants, “Styrofoam Cup” has as its intertext John Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” The full poem, quite short in contrast to “A Geology,” reads:

thou still unravished thou

thou, thou bride

thou unstill,

thou unravished unbride

unthou unbride (21)

Keats’ ode is famously a meditation on permanence and impermanence that takes as its central image an urn painted with figures seemingly frozen in time by the immortalizing power of art; the poem addresses the frozen figures on the urn with a mixture of envy and pity. “Styrofoam Cup” might be thought of as the palinode to Keats’ ode, retracting many of its terms.⁸⁵ The palinode is a form that has been thought to possess a magical power to retract the harm done by a prior statement;

⁸⁵ The *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry & Poetics* defines the palinode as “A poem or song of retraction; originally a term applied to a lyric by Stesichorus (early 6th c. BCE) in which he recanted his earlier attack upon Helen as the cause of the Trojan War. [. . .] Any ritualistic recantation may loosely be called a palinode” (“Palinode”).

such magical powers are being invoked in “Styrofoam Cup,” in a desire to heal the environment by “taking back” our wishes for and creation of a virtually immortal substance, Styrofoam. This poem’s wish is for *decomposition*, for the ability to “unbride” one particle from another. Just as the “bride of quietness” (both the figure of the bride and the urn itself) in Keats’ ode remains “unravished” throughout the centuries, the pure, bridal white of Styrofoam remains eerily “unravished” by the earth and the elements. Another container meant, ironically, to be disposable rather than cherished in a museum, the Styrofoam cup is unable to return to the earth, frozen in shape permanently, despite its abject nature, only slowly releasing its chlorofluorocarbons. Poet Don McKay writes of plastics, “We inflict our rage for immortality on things, marooning them on static islands; and then, frequently enough, we condemn them as pollutants. Why are the fixed smiles on Barbie Dolls and Fisher Price toys so pathetic?” (McKay 20-1). In order to revoke this curse we have cast in and on plastic, Hillman incants, “unthou unbride.” Following in the tradition of environmental poetry that uses incantation (think of Ann Waldman’s lines, “I bind the ash-tree / I bind the yew”) this poem attempts to cast a spell that will undo Keats’ invocation of immortality, of which Styrofoam is a logical extension. Instead of an invocation/apostrophe (o thou), here we have a plea/command revoking the apostrophe: “unthou.”

Rewriting “Ode on a Grecian Urn” has implications for gender relations as well; the eternally pursued female figures on the urn (the “maidens loth”) remain frozen within a patriarchal dynamic in which the possibilities are limited to “maiden

loth” or bride, without possibility of changing such a social order (an order that becomes timeless through its inscription on the urn). To rewrite the poem is to put these figures back into motion, to restart the possibility of change, to suggest that these gender relations are not timeless after all, but historically bound. Hillman uses the figure of the bride further in considering female agency and lack thereof in a number of poems in this collection. By revoking the timelessness of the Styrofoam cup, and by implication, the urn to which its timelessness is linked, this poem asks for a decomposition, a return to the elements, in which a female figure might decouple (“unbride”) herself from an implied narrative and re-enter the changing world.

As in the above case of address and its revocation, a series of poems in *Cascadia* use tropes of mining and territory claims from the California Gold Rush to explore gendered subject formation and its undoing. Historically women are seldom treated as agents in the Gold Rush, more often playing supporting roles. Addressing this gap in history, “Her Gold Rush” is a fragmentary poem that further works with the notion of the “bride” developed in “Styrofoam Cup”; the term “debride” (32) for example, echoes “unbride”; the feminine subject is asked to uncouple herself from her status as bride, perhaps, but the double meaning involves disfigurement. “The Shirley Poem” is based on letters written by one of the rare women to participate in the Gold Rush, “Dame Shirley.” In this poem, the wedding ring is both a material thing derived from the exploitation of the earth through mining, and a symbol of the analogous status of the bride as property to be claimed. At the same time, gold is “the best earth” (39) that can be found and extracted, and it retains a connection to the

earth: “It was a common habit for / miners to bury their money (Re-bury?)” (39). Feminine identity, through the symbol of the wedding ring, materializes out of the earth as a by-product of such claims: “from inside / the claim, a mineral-self leaks out” (38). Approaching history as a process of digging for lost or buried women changes the process of writing as well as the conceptualization of the body: “Reconceiving bodies, we call them ‘veins.’ / (We write in ‘a similar vein’)” (37). Body, geology, and language are intertwined, and “The change in a woman’s body / is the change in a california” (40). Here, the move from name to generic, “a california,” aligns the land with another unnamed resource, “a woman’s body.” While Shirley’s writing is available as a woman’s account of the Gold Rush, it is never the “mother / lode” (37) of meaning that could fix identity. Resisting narratives in which “woman” becomes “bride” and then “mother,” “The Shirley Poem” explores what it was for a woman to take on the traditionally masculine role of prospector. However, in an interesting turn of phrase, Shirley’s figuration of herself, as Hillman highlights, is not as a prospector, but as a literary resource to be exploited; in one passage, she admits to stealing a “comparison” from another writer, but offers “a hundred of *mine* / to pay for it’ (*italics hers*)” (43). She offers her own words to future writers for them to mine as a resource, underlining the risk posed by attempts to excavate historical writing to find women; it is exactly this excavation (anticipated here by Shirley in advance) that continues to align women and their words with nature, as resources rather than as agential prospectors. The excavation itself continues to figure women as analogous to the land. By understanding the earth – and words – as made up of

vibrant matter, Hillman redeems such a move, avoiding the problem in which woman-as-earth remains mute, passive resource. Shirley writes *as earth, as resource*, and thus the background/foreground distinction is rendered inoperable. The vibrant, active, earth addresses the reader.⁸⁶

Such a mapping of the nature/culture divide onto female/male as an analogous and related hierarchical dichotomy has long been a concern of eco-feminists, and Hillman demonstrates an eco-feminist approach to the gendering of the land in this and other poems in *Cascadia*. Considering the form eco-feminism might take, Plumwood notes, “It is usually at the edges where the great tectonic plates of theory meet and shift that we find the most dramatic developments and upheavals” (1). A shift happens when the theoretical paradigms of ecology and feminism collide, and new ways of understanding the earth become available. What does such an approach to geology teach us in *Cascadia*? In the Anthropocene, we are ourselves a geological force, and so what we learn from geology comes not only in the form of metaphor, but also, simultaneously, as self-discovery; we are the elements that we are made up of, including language, particles of earth, sediments from ancient rivers. Unpacking layers of human meaning and layers of geology, however, never gets us to stable ground, a lesson learned in the many attempts to excavate layers of the material and the semiotic in gender; neither underlies or fixes meaning for the other. As Hillman

⁸⁶ Here this poem aligns itself with Margaret Atwood’s “Backdrop Addresses Cowboy.”

puts it, “A geology can’t fix itself. Nor can description” (“A Geology” 11). It can, however, and does, move us deeply.

II. *Pieces of Air in the Epic*: What is (the) Matter?

I held its breath:

air coming from half-states

it has visited where

dread meets ecstasy’s skid-mark (“Wind Treaties” 21)

Hillman’s second collection in the elements series takes air as its subject and motif. Following *Cascadia*’s focus on the element of earth, *Pieces of Air in the Epic* highlights a much less concrete material element. The collection develops an ecopoetics of affect in the sense that it *lets in* the surrounding element of air and explores the ways it can stir “half-states” of affect, motivating shifts in feeling nearly imperceptibly, as the subtlest of elements, the negative space surrounding other things. Even more than in her other collections, here Hillman works with what Morton calls ambient poetics, throwing into question the “normal distinction between background and foreground.” (Morton 38)⁸⁷ Hillman argues that “Earlier thinkers thought of air / As a mist not a context” (13) and she searches the archives for its

⁸⁷ As discussed earlier in this chapter, Morton defines ambient poetics as involving attempts to invoke the “circumambient, or surrounding, *world*” (Morton 33) in poetry, attempts that inevitably return to the fold of language.

presence, much as Robertson uses the archives of weather and clouds to undermine normative background/foreground distinctions. This search (in negative space) requires an adjustment of vision: “I looked below / the air behind the paintings” (58) and “I made my eyes pointy to look at air in / corners” (58). Even when unacknowledged, air hides in the negative spaces of the epic, both literary form and material book (the collection’s title and some of its poems refer to Homeric epic), making up the very space in which forms like the epic are able to “take place.” As the title suggests, the collection also concerns itself with poetic genre. Air, in relation to the more solid or concrete epic genre, comes to be aligned with lyric, the principle of music, song, and breath. In highlighting this element, Hillman pauses the epic, refusing to let its triumphal narratives unfold smoothly. Instead of action and plot, the lyric moments, the stillnesses, the spaces between words come to the foreground. We become aware that air has material content; made of gases and particles, it is the locus of a lively interaction of elements, as in the following passage:

There

There is

A river that would drink water

An earth that would walk dirt

A fire that would singe flame

In that air (44)

Why make the air visible? Perhaps no traditional element is more often relegated to background, or negative space, than air. For this reason, striking effects are achieved by making it visible, tangible, audible – noticeable in some way – in poetry. The lyric, since its inception, is thought of as based on breath (through meter, rhythm, and even theories of poetic inspiration), and therefore its use here introduces breath and air through poetic form. Motifs in this collection include breath and singing – in which air is expressed outward or drawn in – and fabric, material, fibers, threads, which form the material structure to hold the “pieces” of air.

The previous chapter argues that Lisa Robertson brings the backdrop into focus in the foreground as she reconsiders the place of the lyric subject in her environment, ultimately blurring background/foreground boundaries in an affective transfer. Val Plumwood explains that nature has been traditionally defined “as passive, as non-agent and non-subject, as the ‘environment’ or invisible background against which the ‘foreground’ achievements of reason or ‘culture’ (provided typically by the white, western male expert or entrepreneur) take place” (Plumwood 4). Thus Robertson’s project can be thought of as driven by a feminist desire to denaturalize these oppressive hierarchies. As Johnson and others have noted, consigning the feminine to the ground against which figures can appear is one way that gender ideology is encoded in aesthetics; the aesthetic work of making the background visible is a feminist poetic project. For these same reasons, Hillman too foregrounds the background through her focus on air and breath.

A work that shares in this project and that is therefore quite closely related to *Pieces of Air in the Epic* is Juliana Spahr's *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs*. In it, Spahr develops an awareness of negative space at a meditative pace: "There is space between the hands. / There is space between the hands and space around the hands. / There is space around the hands in the room" (Spahr 5). Like a mobius strip, the space around becomes the space within; the poem develops through a slow, expanding series of repetitions to include the environment within the breathing individual:

as everyone with lungs breathes the space between the hands and the space around the hands and the space of the room and the space of the building that surrounds the room and the space of the neighborhoods nearby and the space of the cities and the space of the regions and the space of the nations and the space of the continents and islands and the space of the oceans and the space of the troposphere and the space of the stratosphere and the space of the mesosphere in and out (8).

In the tradition of Gertrude Stein, whose repetitions are not repetition but insistence, and who adds layers to her writing slowly like sediments, Spahr develops this sense of continuity between outer space and inner space through a meditative but insistent series of iterations. This awareness of what might have otherwise been ignored as negative space involves a focus on the air's particles, its existence as matter, as "nitrogen and oxygen and water vapor and argon and carbon dioxide and suspended

dust spores and bacteria mixing inside of everyone with sulfur and sulfuric acid and minute silicon particles from pulverized glass and concrete” (Spahr 9-10). These last particles, the vaporized detritus from the events of September 11th (referred to in the poem’s date/title) are simultaneously politically meaningful on a large scale and (sickeningly) minute enough to be incorporated invisibly through the air, causing harm to the lungs.

Spahr and Hillman, in invoking air in this way, are also writing in the tradition of Waldman, who, in “Makeup on Empty Space,” (a poem I’ve earlier compared to Hillman’s “Styrofoam Cup”) makes environmental pollution visible by festooning “empty space,” or air, with feminine decoration. Waldman, rather than covering up ugliness, uses makeup joyfully, as paint rather than cover-up, to make things *more* visible. She chants, “Look what thoughts will do Look what words will do.” Words and thoughts, for Waldman, move us “From nothing to speaking of empty space,” and have the witchy performative power to bind, or fix, the material world and to mitigate harm:

I bind the ash tree

I bind the yew

I bind the willow

I bind uranium

I bind the uneconomical unrenewable energy of uranium

dash uranium to empty space. (131)

Both Spahr and Waldman use poetic invocation to unlock the lively material powers contained in air or “space,” and they do so as an intervention in political conflicts that impact the environment. Hillman’s focus on “air in the epic,” similarly, is a poetic intervention in war and conflict as theorized through the epic form. The action or plot of epic poses action figures against the backdrop, the air. The air, like the sea, in itself “has no plot” (13). And yet air, in the form of wind, is only to be ignored by epic heroes at their peril; Odysseus is held captive or moved along in his adventures by wind, and the still air delays Agamemnon’s voyage to Troy, as “Iphigeneia waits for winds to start” (8). The daughter to be sacrificed represents the feminine principle in epic, matter sacrificed to action or plot. Goats, similarly, are depicted as such a material sacrifice: “the goats have been sacrificed” (24) in an exchange of a nameless animal for a singular agent at the center of a plot. The epic has implications today: “You look outside the classroom where construction trucks find little Troys” (8). These “construction trucks” mobilize material in the construction of war’s plot and its history. In a series of “Nine Epyllions” for the Iraq war, “The air inside a war” (44) breathes for a moment as the lyric poems pause the action or plot of war. “As you enter the moving aura of the epic,” (46) the plot can tend to sweep matter up into “action’s air collection” (10). But like the center of a hurricane, the “Center of the epic” (46) is still. It is a form of Seasonal Affective Disorder to allow the still air, the doldrums, to take over and stall the “action” of the epic.

In “Air in the Epic,” a poem whose setting is the teaching of Homeric epic in the classroom, we encounter the “line structure changed” (8) to make way for spaces and pauses; the poem is divided into columns and the right column has more “air” or space between the lines. Air can so easily fade into the background that the right column relies on the more tightly spaced left column to make its spaces visible, as in the following excerpt:

For centuries people carried the epic	
inside themselves. (Past the old weather	stripping, a breeze is making some
6 th -vowel sounds yyyyyy that will side	
with you on the subject of syntax	as into the word <i>wind</i> they
go. A flicker passes by: air	
let out of a Corvette tire.)	Side stories leaked into the epic,
told by its lover, the world.	(8)

In these lines, the air and the wind make themselves heard through onomatopoeia and through interaction with normally unnoticed materials such as weather stripping, introducing not only sound but also space between words. In this way, “Side stories leaked into the epic,” by virtue of its material and affective grounding in the world. “The epic” is ambiguously genre, form, and literal book; it features in this poem both as a book carried into a classroom by students, and as an intrusion within the lyric. The triumphal march of the epic war story (Homeric epic and the poem’s larger background context of the Iraq war) is interrupted by these “side stories” that work like countervailing winds. The contrast between epic and “side story” is marked not only by the spaces between and in the middle of lines, but also by the disjunction

between the language of the contemporary and the antique, a contrast set up by the situation of teaching Homeric epic in a contemporary classroom while world events that inform discussions of war include the Iraq war. This opens up a gap that lets affect flourish.

Ecological crisis, like war in epic, causes winds that we ignore at our peril, winds that seem like the anger of the earth or like a warning: “On the under-mothered world in crisis, / the omens agree” (8); we are “between / history and an endish / time” (11-12). Dominant ideologies made possible by the epic treatment (and whose “history” has led us to this “endish / time,” the Anthropocene) can be found everywhere, as can denial of the role of wind and air: “Their / president says global warming doesn’t exist. / Some winds seem warmer here” (8). What can we learn when we notice the element of air and its qualities, allowing “disordered” thinking to overtake us, allowing affect to be directed by the weather, the seasons, the air? Air’s ephemerality is a caution against going too far with notions of concrete, self-identical presence that earth, for example, can encourage us to accept; instead, air teaches us, counter to common sense, that “Nothing is self-identical. We are embodied yet without essence” (Morton “Queer Ecology” 277). Air can only be seen in its relation to its surrounding elements, and yet it is often where things are happening: “in / the summer air around / each thought, something is / built and avoided” (32). Air is clearly not any kind of commonsense matter, but it is matter that moves us and mobilizes relationality.

III. *Practical Water*: A Political Ecology

“propitiatory / dawns make emotions matter” (“Pacific Ocean” 26)

Practical Water (2009) brings together water and environmental politics, a connection that feels entirely and ironically natural in California. The setting of this collection, California, has been both physically and culturally shaped by what is fittingly called “Water and Power” in Los Angeles, a term that can be understood not only to designate a department of local government, but also to indicate the close relation between water and power in the broadest sense in a state that struggles to distribute scarce water resources fairly, amounting to an ongoing “water war” in which local ecosystems frequently lose out. As with Hillman’s other work, many of the poems of *Practical Water* are site-specific works set in California, and they center on politically contentious uses of water, including struggles over the control of local waterways. The long poem, “Hydrology of California: An Eco-poetical Alphabet,” explores the waterways of California much as *Cascadia* explores the roadways and geological formations of the state. Our own dependence on water implicates us in the politics of its distribution: “You drink gallons of it you know you do” (85). Hillman writes, “Mulholland / stole her water/ L.A. poets knew it power rhymes w/shower / poor Mojave River & Earth will know the source” (94) and photographs incorporated

throughout the poem show the thorough implication of human with water in the shaping of the state of California.⁸⁸

Another poem forms a poetic intervention in the poet's local politics of water use: titled "Request to the Berkeley City Council Concerning Strawberry Creek" (76), and subtitled "(after George Herbert)," the concrete poem forms the shape of the letters BS (one letter on each facing page).⁸⁹ Either the colloquial accusation of "bullshit" hurled at a political rival, or more pleasantly B for Berkeley, S for Strawberry Creek (and the S has an extra curve, making it resemble a stream), the poem's shape echoes its content, namely a contestation over who owns letters and by extension language. Language is treated as an ecosystem in *Practical Water*, and like water in California, its distribution is treated as a political decision about the flow of power. A long string of initials is listed, each initial appearing along with the "s" of ownership, standing for claims individuals make on local waterways, and the students and writers of Berkeley are set within their enabling natural spaces: "We swear by the seven / creeks of Berkeley, as by our poetry" (76) (the space between "our" and "poetry" forms a hole for the letter B's shape). The "petition" of this letter is initialed

⁸⁸ The California water wars, begun in the late 1800s and arguably ongoing in different forms, have usually involved disputes over water use between urban centers and farming. William Mulholland's aqueduct, completed in 1913, was a flashpoint for the water wars, diverting water from the Owens Valley and causing a crisis for farming in that area. See Chan and Olin, *Major Problems in California History*, or, for a fictional treatment, the film *Chinatown* (1974).

⁸⁹ The Strawberry Creek Daylighting project involves petitions and volunteers in an effort to bring the creek aboveground, rather than allowing it to remain routed through pipes, in order to improve local ecology. See the Data Collection Study prepared for the City of Berkeley by Wolfe Mason Associates (1999) on the logistics of daylighting Strawberry Creek.

by those “who write little or much, in water as in poetry” (76). Their claim is an affective one: “Some have a moment of mood when they stand on the bridge / near the U.C. Life Sciences Building” (77); ultimately, the separation of public/political systems like the economy from supposedly “inner” or private emotions is rejected: “economy & strains of longing come from the same / place” (76). This place, Strawberry Creek, is a contested terrain, and Hillman and her “co-signers” stake their claim to it based on an affective and nonetheless collective affinity.

Hillman’s affective approach to place, here, amounts to what Bennett terms “political ecology.” Bennett argues,

the bodily disciplines through which ethical sensibilities and social relations are formed and reformed are themselves political and constitute a whole (underexplored) field of “micropolitics” without which any principle or policy risks being just a bunch of words. There will be no greening of the economy, no redistribution of wealth, no enforcement or extension of rights without human dispositions, moods, and cultural ensembles hospitable to these effects.

(vii)

The “moment of mood” that Hillman links to Strawberry Creek is in this sense part of a “political ecology” or a structure of feeling (“human dispositions, moods, and cultural ensembles”) that underlies and makes possible meaningful political action. In the political poems of *Practical Water*, Hillman performs an inhospitality to mainstream politics by denying the meaning-making capacity of “a bunch of words”.

While letters are used in the Strawberry Creek poem to petition for “daylighting” and to initial a claim, letters and their sounds are denied their normal use for politicians, taken apart into their smallest units so that they cannot be used to “make sense” and advance an argument. What Julia Kristeva calls the semiotic element of language (the pre-symbolic order underlying language’s capacity to produce meaning) is brought out in the series of political poems that comprise part II of *Practical Water*. In an essay beginning this section, “Reportorial Poetry, Trance & Activism: An Essay,” Hillman argues that her role as a dissenting poet in a political setting is to go into a trance and take notes:

Reportorial poetics can be used to record detail with immediacy while one is doing an action & thinking about something else. Experience crosses over with that which is outside experience; the unknown receives this information as an aquifer receives replenishing rain. [. . .] I recorded notes in Washington while attending hearings & participating in actions to make the record collective & personal. Working with trance while sitting in Congressional hearings i recorded details into a notebook. If bees can detect ultraviolet rays, there are surely more possibilities in language & government. (33)

Reminiscent of the writing of Scalapino, Hillman’s reportorial writing here tracks multiple streams of consciousness at once, while interfering with the streamlined clarity of the proceedings. Attunement to other forms of experience here means

reaching through simile and metaphor for modes of feeling such as those of the “aquifer” or the “bees.”

In the poem set “In a Senate Armed Services Hearing,” Hillman records, “From my position as a woman / i could see / the back of the General’s head, the prickly / intimate hairs behind his ears” (34). In a form of ecomimesis, she records the smallest peripheral details in the scene: “Filaments rose from the carpet as the General spoke” (34). The politicians are denied the transcription of their *logos*, as “letters issued / from their mouths like *General I’d be interested / to know*, some of the letters regretted that” (35). Hillman feels that her role is to block the “progress” of the proceedings: “i forget who asked what isn’t even / in the same syntax of this / language i’m trying to make no progress in” (35). The strategy of interfering with *logos*, or the ability to make sense, leads to breaking down speech into syllables: “The punctuation falling from your eyes its eyes their eyes his eyes / is merging with uh.. uh.. uh.. uh.. uh.. as he explains / the Pentagon budget” (43). Poetic civil disobedience consists in withholding the magical spell of language, which “Refused to spell. Till all the letters stopped / in astral light, in dark love for their human ones” (36). The power of spelling (in both senses) is halted, out of love. Hillman draws on the concept of *écriture féminine* when she notes, “i’ve read that women in remote

villages in China / invented script men couldn't read" (39).⁹⁰ The political poems are in a form of *écriture féminine*, holding language and letters back from use in *logos*.

Letters are reclaimed, however, and become a source of power in the poem "Enchanted Twig": "The diverted creek sounds sad so maybe i better / take our dowsing stick out to the field, for our Y will / pull & find buried water" (7). The letter Y (upper case) is the "dowsing stick" called upon to help in seeking out "buried water." Another group is called upon to join in a protest: "We miss / our mother. Dear mother, daughter, pilot, poet, sister, / student, teacher, waitress, worker, water girls & girlie men, don't do / their war" (8). A feminist call to (in)action addresses these allies, asking that instead of engaging in "their war," we "squint our ears to the babble" (9) of brooks, refusing phallogocentric uses of language and tuning in to the semiotic. Importantly, these poems connect the semiotic to affect, as connections become possible that exceed instrumental uses of language.

"Pacific Ocean" develops *écriture féminine* further, cultivating the semiotic element in its poetic form; extra space between words, as seen in *Pieces of Air in the Epic*, here give a sense of waves as well as clouds: "A verbed set of dolphins scallop on by toward San Diego (Hi / Rae.) A cloud goes by, puff-, parallel to economics. Puff-puff." (29). The poem betrays its aim of evading logocentrism in

⁹⁰ A concept related to Kristeva's notion of the semiotic, *écriture féminine* is a mode of writing that inscribes female difference in language, first advanced by French feminist theorists Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Monique Wittig, among others, in the 1970s. *Ecriture féminine* aimed to oppose prevailing "logocentrism" that encoded gender inequality in language use.

the slip: “otters’ skins near Pt. Lobos – (almost wrote logos)” (27). In order to escape from logocentrism, the poem repeatedly explores the potential of affect as a link between self and ocean: “i went to the ocean, my hydrogen host, was greeted in the negation of the moment finding itself; put my hand to the surface & felt // the surface of emotion” (24); “To feel emotion underneath emotion (a fertile dread / had mixed with ecstasy, not delight such as delight // in nature but of nature – a brew, a brink – ;)” (24). Here, the layering of emotion “underneath emotion” build up a textured account of affect, and even emoticons (non-linguistic, pictographic indicators of affect) make an appearance. Tears and laughter appear in the lines, “An ocean has no summary in tears” (27) and “The tide was low & safe. Lots of low laughing to draw emotion in” (29). Neither tears nor laughter are fully articulated as emotion, remaining indeterminate affective states, “as if between emotions / there were livelier half-states” (18). Attention to these “half-states” can “induce in human bodies an aesthetic-affective openness to material vitality” (Bennett x), and, like Seasonal Affective Disorder, such attention originates in the environment rather than in the agential human subject.

The affective connection with the ocean is not a utopian retreat to pre-oedipal “oceanic feeling,” however, but links the subject of the poem with a sense of impending doom based on an awareness of the harm being done to the ocean: “It is a long time before they’ll ruin you dumping phosphates” (25); “you are not ‘endangered’ yet” (26); “it is a while before / they’ll ruin you” (26). The ocean is composed both of the classic elements and manmade ones from “Methane to carbon”

(28): “plank & plankton in minnows through plastic six-pack”(28). In the Anthropocene, these manmade elements have so filled the ocean that there are islands of tiny plastic pellets in what was once the ocean’s doldrums, now its dead zone. And this is the thoroughly depressing new ocean into which the subject wades:

Removed my hat, my shoes. China’s. Removed China’s shoes.

Socks. Removed China’s socks. Shirt from the Philippines,

hair thing form Korea; rings. Europe’s rings. Took off my

rings & walked in – (27)

Removing layers of clothing produced by exploited human labor, however, does not get us back to an originary, uncontaminated connection with the ocean. The cleansing power of the ocean has been drawn upon by so many humans that the ocean is saturated with the human, at least as much as we are made up of it.

At the same time that the ocean is saturated with human and political meaning, it is of all the elements the most intuitively connected to embodiment for animals made up, after all, of more than 50% water. Focusing on water creates a visceral and affectively-saturated sense that “Life-forms are liquid [. . .] life-forms constitute a *mesh*, a nontotalizable, open-ended concatenation of interrelations that blur and confound boundaries at practically any level: between species, between the living and the nonliving, between organism and environment” (Morton “Queer Ecology” 275-6). *Practical Water* demonstrates that “It’s hard to be water [. . .] but

you must” (6). Requiring no shift in perspective at all, really, our being water is not an option. Being water in the Anthropocene is “hard” indeed, and it can make us suffer from SAD.

This chapter has advanced a reading of Hillman’s poetics of affect that demonstrates how an ecological consciousness takes form in poetry. Hillman’s approach to writing is clearly influenced by the feminist Language poets in that her emphasis on disjunction works against logocentrism and against lyric formations that would normally subordinate women to the supporting role of background or object. Weather and climate (both profoundly changed by human activities), likewise, are no longer relegated to supporting roles, but become the source of affects that move us. Seasonal Affective Disorder has provided a model through which to understand the confusion of the directionality of affect that results when the active human agent is no longer understood to be the sole source of emotion, guaranteeing its origin and meaning. Instead of traditional accounts of emotion, a feminist consciousness suffuses the poems, modeling a way to be and live in the world differently.

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